

## Landscape

As I walked across Charles Bridge, I was feeling good, downright festive. I hadn't felt like this for a long time. I gave myself up to the feeling. The bell of St. Vitus', in the Prague Castle, was just beginning to strike five o'clock in the afternoon. The bell's voice, aristocratic, royal, imperial, spread down across the roofs of Malá Strana, all the way down to the banks of the Vltava, and settled on its dark gray surface. And on me too it settled, in me too it rang.

It was growing dark. Autumn, nearly winter. It was lightly drizzling. Nineteen sixty-seven. In two weeks, just before Christmas, I would turn forty. Not long ago it had made me sick to acknowledge this. Now, however, I had the same impression I had had many years before, that everything lies before me. It was not just an impression. I found the drizzling pleasant.

I stood exposing my face to the breeze and to the light sprinkle of the rain, and I believe I was smiling blissfully. Several people looked at me. It's possible that among the turning heads were statues on the bridge. I wouldn't be surprised. After all, we have said a thing or two to one another, my good, aged saints. Even stone can feel someone walking by with resolute steps, someone carrying within him a good decision. Such a man walks well, lightly, festively.

It was plain and simple. I go to the end of the bridge, and then I walk along the Kampa, and in the Vrtbovský Garden I greet the dampened profiles of the Braun statues and then say to Olga:

“Olga, here I am. I will go away with you.”

I ran down the steps to the Kampa. The curves of the baroque façades shaped in me a mood of harmonious ornament. The wind propelled toward me the last leaves from the locust, plane, and linden trees. With the help of a bamboo pole, a beige figure right out of a Jan Neruda tale was lighting the gas streetlamps. I watched him for a while. My city, which I would soon forsake, has its little miracles, its everyday liturgy. I stood piously, as at a ceremony.

Inside each glassed-in, cast-iron lantern hangs a white, circular mantle, and there a gas flame flickers. You pull on a ring below the lamp, the gas spreads around the rim of the filament, the lantern flares up and hums quietly, singingly. The bright register of an organ. How many times when I was a boy did I shinny up a Malá Strana lamppost so that I too could light a gas lantern and it could shine for me alone! But what I did was senseless, because I always lit them in the afternoon. By evening they were already lit.

Driven by the flow of the Kampa's Čertovka Canal, the millwheel turns with just as little sense as the world. For a moment I stood and listened to the water sloshing and gurgling through the wooden slats of the wheel. Long ago the mill was a place for grinding. Now it is some sort of warehouse. At such a lovely spot, there should be a pretty dwelling or a pleasant tavern, but I won't get worked up over it.

I stopped outside a forecourt of the Church of St. Mary Under the Chain. The romanesque cathedral burned down in the Hussite Wars. Like everything else, it burned down for nothing. All that remained were two square stone gothic towers and a portal. They restored the church in the baroque style, and its large courtyard allows the viewer a good, airy distance. Go inside! Growing in the forecourt, whose upper

regions are demarcated by the buildings of the Knights of Malta, is a bed of hydrangeas. The wonderfully ancient rainfall has soaked the huge, flowered heads of pastel panicles well beyond their prime. Every year I have come to this forecourt to pick a bouquet of autumn hydrangeas. This year I forgot. I will pick a single hydrangea and bring it to Olga.

I always pick the hydrangeas before the first frost comes. I dry them until papery and they last the entire year in a vase without water. Many times, ten times perhaps, Jarmila was with me when I picked them. I am amazed at how vivid are the sentimental memories of a long past love. But I must look ahead. Hydrangeas grow elsewhere in Europe. The memories I can bring along.

The forecourt is carefully swept by the sexton's wife, whose age is beyond estimation. I recall the woman from my childhood: tiny and bent. She had the face of a countess. She swept the forecourt during the First, the so-called Bourgeois Republic, and she swept it when the Germans occupied Prague during the war. After the war, two or three years of problematic democracy, and now we've had nearly twenty years of the communist regime and she goes on smiling just like the time I said:

"It is so nice, the way you tend the hydrangeas."

"All I did was plant them," she said. "These flowers are tended by our Lord God. It is He who gives them rain and sunlight, and you will come again next year to pick some."

This time I picked a single hydrangea for Olga and said to myself: Olga, I am picking it for you and I am picking it now without thinking of Jarmila.

From a nearby home for the blind came the sound of piano music. I looked toward, I gazed at, the music, I let my imagination go, and I and my single hydrangea went off to the Vrtbovský Garden.

Before ringing at the door of Olga's studio, I greeted the Braun statues on the terrace. I was resolved, and that was that. It was almost dark now, but in the distance, in the fog illuminated by the final reflections of the sun, still beautifully unmistakable, was a full view of the Old Town's spires. They say there are a hundred.

One of the statues smiled at me. Was it only one? Yes, it was Miládka who smiled at me. That short, pointy nose and that chin shaped affectionately like a filly's reminds me of her face, and the silhouette of her body, equally baroque. Her powerful body, lavishly curved, yet with delicate limbs and the most slender of fingers. I will go say farewell to Miládka at Prague Central Station. Olga is different, Olga is tall and slender, nearly as tall as me.

Jarmila was small, tiny, but why am I talking like this – was? Why do I tell myself that she was tiny, as if a toy? Jarmila still after all invariably is, on her own in what is still after all this city. Only for me has she become the past that I have already begun to forget, and will until I've forgotten completely. Not that completely. Several fossilized gestures will remain, largely aesthetic in content, and from time to time I will gratefully return to her in the gallery of my memories.

I must also say farewell to Jarmila, calmly and amicably. I will not flee, I will not run away from anything, at least not from myself or the shades of my loves. I am only going abroad.

But I keep standing here immobile, a statue among statues, sharing their calmness and even their most calm resolve: We statues will remain standing and you will go. You will first go across the terrace, you will climb the steps to the garden cottage, and you will ring at Olga's door. Everything will play out precisely as you've imagined.

The door opened. I was dazzled by the light. Olga held out her hand. Despite the light I found her hand and took it, and for an instant I saw Olga upside down. It wasn't something crazy or inconceivable; it was just that at that moment my heart stopped, and a distinct wave of warm air from the studio, thoroughly saturated with the smell of turpentine, poppyseed oil, and beeswax, grasped my anticipation and turned my stomach just as upside down as her. I could hear water thrumming its way through the gutters overhead.

So does love arise.

A moment's flip-flopped sight, and forever we are different.

The first time I saw Olga was every bit as intense. Of course, it had its prelude. Or perhaps I'm exaggerating a bit. Nothing really happened. Just the recording of my feelings about the landscape through which a train was passing. Once I wrote you, Olga, that you, dear, are my landscape.

Nowadays such trains don't run anymore, they don't puff and wheeze along anymore, nor do they whistle. Nowadays express trains whizz back and forth, powered by oil or electricity. I will take such an express train to Paris with Olga.

We are going just before Christmas. The day before or the day after my fortieth birthday. I hope there'll be snow on the line between Beroun and Zdice. I would like that. I will be sitting across from Olga, by the window, but at the same time I will be standing on the snow-covered mountain above Knížkovice and I will be watching the train there in the distance traveling westward. It pierces my heart, as always, when I see a train traveling through a landscape, yes, dear Olga, even a train more technologically advanced.

I am standing on a snow-covered field, and something is pulling away from me. I am pulling away, and I see someone standing on that field. Something, someone is relinquishing it.

It makes me sad. I would much rather be in the forest at Svata and then further on, at Křivoklát. I'd be better off there, even this evening in the autumn rain. Should I turn right around and go to the station?

Don't worry, Olga, my decision is firm. I am already sitting with you in your studio, and in a few weeks I will be sitting with you on the Paris express. I hope that we will be sitting by the window.

Right away I'll show you that, thank goodness, I have all my papers and they're all in order. By the way, don't you think it's comical, and that after a thousand years or so no one will willingly believe, that traveling from one European country to another European country could be such an enormous problem, and for me such a fateful decision?

I have not chosen between East and West. I have chosen between myself and Olga. It is a personal matter. Nevertheless I must cross the border between East and West, and I know that I will enter another world. Reds are everywhere – I smile, of course, but to some extent, geographically speaking, it may be said scrupulously that, on the whole, from here all the way back to the Pacific the world is substantially red, and from here to the Atlantic the world is problematically white. Our Lord God and several presidents set their hearts on the dividing line going precisely and without any sort of shading along our finely forested border. But why get worked up over it.

It was across those forested hillsides that people used to escape to the West and be shot at. Then up went a continuous barbed wire fence, and they had to dream up very complicated ways of getting themselves out. Now it is simpler. Government offices are just moderately tiresome, and by lining up for a bit, everything may, on the whole, be easily arranged. So, for example, I will travel to Paris on the basis of

a personal invitation certifying that I will be provided for during my stay. Out there, you can't change Czech crowns into dollars. But my acquaintances understand, of course, that they won't have to give me breakfast. It's a mere formality. Even the official from whom I requested an exit permit understands that the invitation is just a matter of form. All I had to do was show her the stamp on the French envelope. She didn't even want to look the letter over. But my plan to stay out there, that nobody can know, that would not be taken so liberally. If someone were to denounce me, they would shoot me at the border, from the train. But nobody knows, except Olga.

My friends and I have discussed emigration a great deal over the past twenty years. It was one of the principal themes of our endless and hopeless discussions. To stay? To leave? Which is better? Which is worse? To lose home and gain freedom? And it goes without saying that we also explored the question the other way around: but what is freedom and where is home?

We were definitely not active opponents of the Czechoslovak communist regime. But neither were we Communists, that is, party members, and that made our lives rather difficult. The moral and pragmatic burdens of such a life led many people to seriously consider going abroad. For me, however, such a step never seemed real. Very simply, I was never attracted to anywhere else.

When Olga told me that she was going abroad for good, I grieved. At the same time, I was afraid that, out of principle, she would still want to discuss her departure, that she hadn't absolutely decided, and that I wouldn't have anything to add to all those endless discussions. But Olga had firmly and unequivocally decided. If she had felt any uncertainty, it's not something she would have even brought up.

Olga paints with the same utter certainty and mastery. If I were a painter, I would long and doubtfully circle around my conceptions. Olga is different. For her there is no space between conception and spot of color, not even room for a slip of paper; there's just her graceful gesture. I don't recall her spoiling a single canvas during the twenty years I've known her. She experiences her paintings in advance, to perfection, and she composes out of her imagination with the same casual ease I bring to cracking eggs.

"It's marvelous how I enjoy my work," she would say. "You can't imagine how I love getting up in the morning."

I don't recall ever loving to get up in the morning. I've only ever liked getting up Sundays and holidays, and even then it's been quite a while. And yes, there were my student days. Of course Olga, she walks down the corridor, bolts down some eggs, sets up her easel, and starts right in. Some people are lucky. But why get worked up over it.

Me, every morning I have to clock myself in or check in with the guard at the entrance, using the pencil attached to the spine of his attendance book. It's hard to say that I'm actually bored. I'm good at losing myself in my work; it comes handily, but not at all like hers. A Marxist philosopher would say that I am completely free, because I comprehend my boredom. I comprehend that I have to make a living. I am careful with my money, I have a decent spatial imagination and I draw easily. And of course I don't grumble. Architecture is a good calling, but I haven't been successful at crossing the border from the region of drudgery to the world of creation. I don't get to take shots at the goal. I carefully fulfill the assigned tasks and compliantly place apartment units in pre-designated holes on pre-determined plots of land.



I have not managed to implement any of my own projects. Between me and implementation, between my projects and buildings, there are always so many obstacles I am unable to surmount.

Between me and Olga, finally, there are no obstacles. Because I was able to decide with such certainty. Between us there is only time, spread before us like a continent. That time is behind us – our youth – but I have the feeling that the most important time still lies before me.

Olga has been present in my imagination from the first moment I saw her. To me, her image turned upside down. In me, it became fixed forever like my native landscape. And by the way, Olga, don't you recall my telling you that you, dear, are my landscape?

So first the prelude, but nothing really happened. I simply observed the landscape and the train approaching me through it. What occurred twenty years ago was not actually an occurrence. I simply saw Olga for the first time. Although it was a bright afternoon, the tow of the blue spectrum of night colors carried me with it like the incoming tide, like the outgoing tide. An overwhelming feeling cast me onto a foreign land, which for two decades I have explored in my thoughts, and it dragged me down to unknown depths of my imagination. The old Czech proverb goes: Love is born in the eye and descends to the heart.

The year nineteen hundred and forty-seven, late summer. I have been studying architecture for two years. Still full of hope and enthusiasm. Before the beginning of the winter semester I am going to see Štěpán at the Hrádek rectory.

My mother was a deeply pious Catholic. God's in his Heaven and all's well with the world, is what I inherited from her. With all the naïveté of childhood and with all the searching of adolescence, I enjoyed looking after this inheri-

tance, but one day I had to bid it farewell. When I stopped believing, I found a good friend. He was a Catholic priest.

Štěpán did not try to win me over, he did not challenge my doubts. From the landscape of childhood, which was biblical and liturgical, he lovingly led me into the landscape of adulthood, which is plain and aesthetic. As if the Lord God, to whom I'd said farewell, wanted to reward me for the depth of my childhood piety by placing in my path an angel, who said: Don't be afraid of being on your own.

Štěpán served in a country rectory near the southern Czech border. I hitchhiked there. I sat in the back of a pickup truck that was carrying baskets full of apples. An apple-scented journey through the landscape, that was the prelude.

A warm breeze. Indian summer ruled over the bright, contrasting colors: red, gold, green, and blue. In vain I tried to count the fishponds that reflected the sky and the low, painfully white farmhouses. Lanes along embankments marched by. Here and there teams of horses slowly strutted down them. Gliding above a wayside cross a stork, perhaps an angel.

A young man still very much enjoys visiting cemeteries and pondering death as if a distant, promising prospect of the future. Do you remember? There is a church in a southern village called Brloh. On a limestone plaque in the wall of the church, carved in empire cursive, are the lines:

Have mercy on me,  
At least you, my friends,  
For I have been touched by the hand of the Lord.

Back then, when I was carried away by the scent of apples, I was touched by the warm hand of the landscape, and the thought of death was pleasant. Surely I wanted to be buried here, alongside the road, or there at the foot of that

church which after hundreds of years had taken on the likeness of a person of both genders. Slender stone shafts, a swelling, always pregnant dome. Czech romanesque and Czech baroque. But a twenty-year-old architecture student thought: what? Czech baroque and Czech romanesque? Yes, but better romanesque and baroque in the Czech lands.

Bodies lowered into graves in a land with tradition do not lie in nothingness. They lie in history and they are history themselves. Stone walls overgrown with briars, spirea, and elderberries, bones for whom no one is alive to pick flowers anymore. The names on their tombstones washed away by rain, but I am with you, my friends. Now and forever ours is the kingdom of the landscape, amen. You see, Olga, what we will have forsaken.

But back then I didn't know this, I was just looking out over the southern Czech landscape, the plains, from the back of a pickup truck. The scent of apples was intoxicating me like incense when as a child I went to church. I wanted to make a blessing, but with what words and with what gestures? And so I observed.

This is the kingdom of my landscape: She rules with kindness and does not incite the fabrication of colossal myths. Silently and imperceptibly, as only trees can, she towers over her own horizon in the form of solitary lindens, and from their compressed rings is carved a Madonna in the image of the mother of God, based on a painting, the painting of a beloved woman, based on a feeling.

Peaceful, as if painted once and for always. A delicate smile on slender lips. A landscape with lyrical disregard of European dogmas, which nevertheless define her, but in her own way and with a provincial charm, whose deficiencies are transformed into the mystery of character. Chastely, beneath scarlet and cobalt, gold-lined drapery, which so much resem-

bles clouds, and beneath clouds that so much resemble the drapery of gothic statues, she appeals to the longing to rest on her hills with their graceful names: Džbány, Libín, Bula, Čihadlo, Klet', Mahelník. I have in me a relief map of the time I've spent with these most special of words, and it has been the beautiful destiny of their names to fall on these small, isolated, unchanging hills and mountains. I have in me, Olga, a relief map of your body, which my fingers had not yet grazed. Nor yet had my fingertips minded. I was passing through the landscape.

And through that landscape rides a train. In the distance it is still tiny. Don't toys forever remain a part of the way you view objects? And from a distance, aren't you yourself a speck of a toy from the engineer's point of view, as he watches from his smoking, approaching locomotive? You have to intersect. Converge. Who or what will get there first? Him and his train? Me and my truck?

If the railway barrier were to have fallen just a second later, or if the driver of my tumbledown truck were to have gotten out of it just the tiniest bit more speed – and it certainly wasn't for not trying, every nut and bolt of it shook – we wouldn't have had to stop so short at the crossing, and the apples and I would have made it to the other side. Perhaps all I would have done is look round and wave to the engineer, and everything would be different. I would not be sitting here with you now in your studio, once again intoxicated by the smell of evaporating turpentine, poppyseed oil, and beeswax. I love that smell.

“Olga,” I said, “that picture on the easel is upside down.”

“You're right,” said Olga, and she went to the easel and turned it rightside up. “I look at a picture upside down to see if its elements are in their right places.”

“Yes, I understand that,” I said.

“Why don’t you become a painter?” Olga asked. “You observe like a painter. I think that, as a painter, what you see, you experience. Light, shadow, spots of color you add in and take away, and then there is the miracle: preserving a round world in a rectangle. I don’t know of a greater pleasure or a greater freedom. Between the painter’s conception and the picture there are no obstacles. Between project and building lies an entire mountain.”

Between project and building lies the societal regime and an entire mountain of bricks. Or as you say, Olga, patron and material. And I would like to level that mountain of bricks a bit and square things a bit with that society, but I don’t have what it takes. It would only get me worked up. Would I like to paint? Yes. Certainly. Perhaps. Possibly. I don’t know. I don’t believe I have the talent. And what is talent without certainty? Pointless ambition.

“But Mikuláš,” said Olga, “I like you just as you are, not any other way. What I need is a normal person. Two painters under one roof, cheek to cheek, would make this place a great big asylum.”

“So you think I’m a normal person,” I said. “Through and through. Thanks a bunch.”

“Be thankful!” said Olga. “It’s your greatest talent and art, and my certainty. I’m afraid of people something’s always gotten into.”

It’s true, Olga, nothing’s gotten into me for a long time now, but I don’t know if that is any sort of art, to cut myself off, to break away, to be all on my own. It’s been a long time now since I shed all ambition and consigned my talents to reverie. The most important thing by far is for me to go to a forest, walk through it, along forgotten paths, my hands in my pockets, and study the architecture of branch and blade. I no

longer strive. I live a plain life and I have only one requirement: that my life be aesthetic.

The world I live in is ugly. Banality, kitsch, and decay engulf city, village, and field. Doesn't it seem to you that we reside in a dust heap? But fortunately I know some paths and unbuilt spaces where I feel fine, and that's enough. The Old Town, Malá Strana up to the Castle, architecture that gardens disembody. The deserted deer parks around Křivoklát Castle. The kingdom of the southern Czech landscape. A good book, a good painting, a bit of music and a bit of wine.

On my walks I have often wondered whether the freedom I found has flattened into indifference. Sometimes it seems that I'm merging with the architecture of branch and blade's beautiful indifference. And the apathy of snow that rustles as it thickly falls, this too you must know. Often I let myself fall in step with the music of the snow, but because I am a pedestrian, I return home. Then I take a book to bed, a love story, always a most plain and simple one: between the eternal me and the eternal you lies an invincible piece of dying body.

Olga smiled at me. What is more beautiful than this: a smile you've known for twenty years, always just as dear. The lamp's glow reflected in her eyes, which were now dark blue, like spots of amethyst. In the gutters the rain thrummed sonorously, like a harpsichord, and a gust of wind made the window panes tremble. Papers' dog-ears shuddered. And through her windows came the draft of the blue spectrum of night colors, like then, although then it was a bright afternoon.

We are stopped before the barrier, the pickup truck, the baskets full of apples, and me amidst their scent. The truck still jerks and twitches, and one of the apples feels like rolling off onto the oily floor. I catch the apple and hold it in my

hand. Meanwhile the train passes between the barriers, and whistles. Three short and one long. I wave and the engineer salutes. As, of course, he should. This custom is reproduced even in the world of toys: before the station stands the stationmaster in a blue uniform, watching the local go by. He is holding a red flag, as is fitting.

Back then, they still had train cars with open platforms. I liked to stand on those platforms and lean against the rail. I felt like I was on a balcony that was passing with you through the landscape. Now, possibly forever, we are enclosed inside the car. They say it's safer, considering the greater speed. But I won't get worked up over it.

The old-time train clickety-clacked quite slowly down the track. On the platform of the final car stood Olga. I did not yet know her name, but she must long ago have had a place in my field of vision, like a nearby mountain whose name too I surely do not know.

Although fortunate to be seated there in the abstract, late-afternoon landscape, enthused with what I observe and intoxicated with the concrete bliss of the apples' scented cloud as it carnally couples with the shadowy smoke of the passing locomotive, I am in despair. In a quandary. Quick, what should I do? Cry out? Jump from the truck and throw my body in front of the train? Run off after it?

What do you do at such a hopeless moment full of such good fortune? You throw the apple you happen to have in your hand, and you follow its arc.

Of course, it is possible to calculate it – the speed of the train and the arc of the apple – but it would require a complex equation, and I have the feeling someone solved it long ago.

Olga smiles, possibly at me, possibly at the flying apple, and she catches the apple with both her hands, like a ball. I

will forever remember her smile, her face, and the spot of violet in her eye.

It is still a bright afternoon. The smoke of the locomotive idles about the entire area, ephemeral but thick. The undulating dusk of the acrid eclipse is broken by a ray of sunlight, which becomes vividly fixed in my vision.

And then the barriers go up. It's so normal. The pickup truck wiggles its hips before the crossing, and I jump down onto the tracks and watch the receding train. You are standing on the platform in a long white dress. The train is going off with you; that is not so normal.

If I had been photographed at that very moment, the picture would likely have caught my gesture. I would love to take a look at it. A hand reaching? A person in motion? A figure struck with awe? A body frozen in astonishment? A man on his knees, ear to the rail? Does the law of the resonance of a material reaching one's ears along a rail include the pit-pat of your heart?

Idle thoughts: it's far away already. All I can see now is a little box in the middle of rails receding to their vanishing point, then nothing but a dot at the base of an elongated pear of smoke. It's behind me now, even if, as I watch the disappearing object, it is before me now and forever. And I know that it is the beginning of something, a beginning so perfect it encompasses its end. And I know that I will return to the beginning again and again, and that it will always astonish me anew, like every time shift: it's autumn again and time to turn on the heat; it's dawn again, and you can see I'm no longer asleep; the first snow has fallen now and the last has melted; my hair is going gray, have you noticed, Olga?

For another moment I remained standing between the rails. I stand there to this day and you ride off carefree as the Lord God on a wheelbarrow. Please, grant me one wish: let's



ride to France together. Relieve me of my memories and lead me not into the temptation of loving the image of your receding figure more than your approaching age.

In the gravel beside the tracks, like a tropical chapel, stood the white cube of an electrical transformer. In the hot, trembling air, in the intense sunlight, it seemed as imaginary as you. The transformer hummed. Even the gleaming rails vibrated like strings – seeming to have not the nature of iron, but the granular nature of resin – surely out of fear that they would take to the air with the parched fragrance of chamomile, which flowed over the ditch from a faintly lavish field of herbs. A sea of flowers was mad with pollination and with bees that invisibly composed an accompaniment to the voice of the transformer. The scent of honey was narcotic.

What oath am I swearing with my hand, still perhaps reaching southwest? Ave! I said, yes, Ave, I love you and never anyone else, I will love you from this moment on with all my heart and all my soul, now and forever, amen.

In the sand a shard of glass sparkled across the entire spectrum. A small bell tinkled. The monstrosity of the sun descended into a poplar. And out of the poplar white down. It was possible that something would come from the opposite direction, and I was suddenly frightened by the perilous position I was in. And surprised at the way I'd vowed, adjured, incanted. When I finally abandoned the crossing, I had the feeling that I was someone other than I'd been a moment before. I'd fallen in love, and I was surprised at how certainly I knew it. I realized proudly that it was a beautiful state and that I intended to hold it regardless of whether I ever again saw the being who'd brought it on.

But had this one passing being alone brought on this strange state of permanent excitement? Wasn't she part of a

picture, and wasn't that picture part of an atmosphere, part of which I too was?

It was a picture. A picture already many many times turned over in my memories, in my consciousness, so that again and again I am convinced of its perfection. I assure you, Olga, that all of its elements are in their right places.

Back then, people didn't travel by car the way they do today. I had to foot it for several hours. The local that had passed through was the last one of the day.

My shoes comically squeaked. I slipped them off and walked barefoot. Above me the golden evening had already taken its seat, and from the west the front of nighttime was approaching. I've always liked to watch the day rotate through each of its periods. You can hear the tones that correspond to each.

Somewhere a bell tolled. Somewhere someone was unrelentingly pounding a hammer against a scythe. A drake landed on a fishpond and shoveled water. A stubble field burst, shooting water out of sprinklers. A rifle went off twice on the other side of a grove of pines. The train's echo wafted through the labyrinthine nightfall, on a wave of air already laden with dew. It is going from somewhere to somewhere, its route unseen. I hear a periodic clatter, and when through the velvet filter of distance the whistle sounds, it pierces my heart.

I am still standing by the wayside cross. Wilt thou permit me to pray here, our Father who art in heaven, but in whom I no longer believe? Before this shrine, I would like to recite a few words whose source lies in the traditions of my childhood. Hail Queen, full of grace, I am with thee, blessed among rivers and the blessed land of thy life.

I arrived at Hrádek after dark. The bright rectory greeted me with open arms. I was looking forward to dinner. As I stepped into the entry hall, there, coming through another

door, was Olga. With both hands she was carrying a bowl of apples. She was carrying the bowl pressed softly against soft breasts.

I must confess to you, Olga, that it seemed like I'd expected this, like it had to happen, as if already somewhere someone had premeditated it, and now it had been theatrically arranged. So I didn't feel at all surprised. I would swear that you too were not amazed. But the pyramid of apples wobbled and one of them rolled off.

That's why, once again that day, I had to catch a falling apple. And I did. I placed the apple back into the bowl and put my other hand beneath it, as if telling it not to tremble. Beneath the bowl I felt your hand.

Over the past twenty years I haven't once been forced to reach like that in order to catch something. Not even a pencil that felt like rolling off a table. On many occasions I've walked through a fruit orchard and, with thoughts of you, have observed the perfect architecture of ripening fruit. Whether it's hanging from a branch or already lying in the grass. Not a single apple has felt like breaking off so that I can see it fall. I don't remember ever seeing that happen, and yet it happens all the time. Believe me, I would run and catch it before it hit the ground, even if between me and the tree there was a fence and half a hectare of garden.

When, much later, I told you about this, and in detail, I was ashamed. Isn't it comical? Isn't it preposterous? But you just smiled and said:

"I too could describe in detail the picture of your appearing at the rectory that evening. I could draw it. The refraction of the shadows made by the candlelight on the table. I could draw it for you in detail. How you came up to me and how you caught the apple falling out of the bowl I was carrying. What you said when Štěpán introduced you to

me and when he introduced you to Václav. Our double portrait reflected in the mirror. If we were to remove the mirror's glass surface from its frame and plunge it into some imaginary developing solution, it would be possible, even after all these years, to peel from the glass the silver foil on which we were recorded."