

AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF A CORPSE

SIGIZMUND KRZHIZHANOVSKY

Introduction by

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SEAMS

I. MAN IS TO MAN A GHOST

EVERYONE can forget. Everyone—but the one forgotten. That has stuck in my head: from temple to temple. I know: I've been expunged from all eyes, from all memories; soon even panes and puddles will stop reflecting me. They don't need me either. I don't exist—so much so that no one has ever said or will ever say about me: He doesn't exist. That is why I cannot forget. Walking past shopwindows and spur stones, I often hear children's whistles cheeping cheerlessly after me: Go 'way! Go 'way! But I can't even do that—how can someone who doesn't exist go away? I've never worn an invisibility hat; mine is an ordinary old fedora with a drooping brim. Even so, even when people look right at me, they don't see me; even when we bump shoulders, they merely mumble something without looking up. I only dimly remember what a handshake feels like, that pressure of palm against palm. And only very rarely, when my steps have led me to a distant graveyard, to the headstones among which it is so easy and peaceful to muse, only then do I see words calling to me: "Passerby" and "Stop." And I do stop; sometimes I even sit down by a cross and iron fence and converse with those who never reply. In essence, we are the same—they and I. I stare at the nettles growing up over them, at the matted blades of dusty grass—and I think: we.

Today it's a bit windy. The cold keeps squeezing through the seams of my ragged coat. The sun has nearly set. Ahead is another long, black, chill night. I wear my problem, in essence, on my sleeve: seams coming undone and disgorging the rotted-through thread

inside—unseemly. And all because I am neither “here” nor “there” but in a between—in a seam. Perhaps the old coat constricting my shoulders, if it can no longer warm me, can at least remind me: seams.

Indeed, the only way I can write is bit by bit, in a break—along a seam. My thinking, too, feels short of breath: inhale—exhale, exhale—inhale. It’s hard to finish a thought. Take today. I sat down on my usual bench on my usual boulevard and looked about. People were walking by—mincingly and swaggeringly, from right to left, from left to right, in ones and twos, and in groups. First I thought: Who are they to me and who am I to them? Then I just stared. On they went, mincingly and swaggeringly, from left to right, from right to left. Again I thought: Man is to man a wolf. No, that’s not true, that’s sentimental, lighthearted. No, man is to man a ghost. Only. That’s more exact. To sink one’s teeth into another man’s throat is at least to believe—and that’s what counts—in another man’s blood. But there’s the rub: Man ceased to believe in man long ago, even before he began doubting God. We fear another man’s existence the way we fear apparitions, and only very rarely, when people glimpse each other in the gloaming, do we say of them: They’re in love. No wonder lovers seek out a nighttime hour, the better to envision each other, an hour when ghosts are abroad. It is amusing that the most optimistic of all philosophers, Leibniz, could see only a world of discrete monads, of ontological solitudes, none of which has windows. If one tries to be more optimistic than the optimist and avow that souls have windows and the ability to open them, then those windows and that ability will turn out to be nailed shut and boarded up, as in an abandoned house. People-monads, too, have a bad name: They are full of ghosts. The most frightening of these is man.

Yes, blessed are the wolves, for they believe at least in blood. All against all—that should be the object of our long and hard journey, and only when . . . But now my thoughts have become confused and my pencil has stopped, as though stuck . . . in a seam.

2. BREAD WITH METAPHYSICS

Last night was colder than expected. It's only the beginning of August, yet the first fall frosts are already here. I have a rheumatic pain in my knees. And I'm a bit feverish. One of these evenings I'll huddle against the back of a bench, and come morning I won't get up. Some shivering woman with an unsold night on her hands or else a drunk, whose bleary eyes have confused dreams with reality, will sit down beside me—with the dawn glimmers—and ask for a light. I won't reply. Peering under the brim of my hat, he'll ask again—only a bit more quietly and tentatively... Again I won't reply. I'll go on sitting there, icy knees clenched, stiff fingers in coat pockets, and white pupils hidden in the shadow of my hat. No doubt it will be rather difficult to unbend me—the usual case with corpses.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. At present I can still move, see, and hear, and at moments even try to think. True, I only try: As soon as I begin, I collapse; try again, and collapse. My brain must be short of fluids, my body of warmth and food.

My daily allowance is ten kopecks. No more and no less. I must keep within the coin's confines. Like it or not. Every morning, as soon as the sun has twitched back Moscow's black, star-tattered cowl, I begin trudging through my day. Again and again. In shop-windows I see huge fish, their flat tails flush against the glass, profusions of fruit, pyramids of tins, sealed bottles of shimmering alcohol. I stop at almost every window: All this is for me; both for me and for others too, of course, but only within the limits of my ten-kopeck coin. I turn to face the street, spokes spinning by, springs lazily swaying—women's eyes through net veils, flickering glints and shadows; a soft whoosh of wheels whisks them past to some elusive where—past and past. I clench my teeth and I think: "That's right, all this is mine as well as theirs. But only within the limits of my ten-kopeck coin. Patience—you'll get your share of the earth. Width—from shoulder to shoulder; length—from crown to soles; and for now you have the cheer of your own tiny sun, the diameter of a ten-kopeck coin."

I do not go in the plate-glass doors of shops; I try not to hear the whoosh of wheels and not to see what can only be seen. On reaching the Iverian Chapel, where the ancient gates overarch hawkers' trays, I unclasp the disk dimly gleaming in my fist, and in a minute have exchanged it for a sandwich, an ordinary sandwich of two small white palms, with grains of red caviar stuck to the butter inside. That is all I can afford. Then, having found an out-of-the-way bench, I open my bread diptych and—first one half, then the other—swallow it all, neatly catching the crumbs. Have you ever had to tinker with a cheap pocket watch? It tends not to stay wound for very long, and if the watch is over the hill and the gear teeth are worn down, it stops more than it runs. Even so, every time you wind the spring, it tries to tick, at least briefly, and move its hands. Then look, it has stopped again. That's how it is with my brain: I wind it as you would a cheap pocket watch; I poke a sandwich between my teeth—and lo and behold, in my head there's a ticking, and the hands jerk forward. Gear tooth by gear tooth, phrase by phrase—a metaphysical something starts up. Then just as suddenly it balks, sinks back, and I sit empty, as if I had no pulse and no "I." Bear in mind, these jottings will work like that: sandwich—metaphysics—sandwich—metaphysics... So many ten-kopeck coins, so many worldviews.

3. PURVAPAKSHIN

This name wound up in a notebook of mine years ago. I remember I was rummaging through English editions of ancient Indian texts, copies of the Vedanta and the Sankhya, commentaries and compilations, when I came across it: Purvapakshin. The Purvapakshin seems never to have existed, yet who of us would have the right to say "I am," if not for the Purvapakshin? This man-myth was invented by Indian casuists for the sake of constructing antitheses. Builders of systems came and went—one after another. So many builders, so

many worlds: Each one—be it Vyāsa or Patanjali—brought with him his “yes.” And each one, having relinquished his “yes,” returned to death. But the man-myth Purvapakshin never died, if only because he was never born; he never said “yes” to anything or anyone because his name means “he who says ‘no.’” A defender of antitheses, the Purvapakshin objects to everything always: treatise after treatise, millennium after millennium. Therein lies this man-diagram’s sole existence: to trump every “yes” with his “no.” For me too the immemorial Purvapakshin is the non-dialectical personification of an Indian rishi. I can almost see and keenly sense him here beside me on my evening boulevard bench: Wrapped in ragged, many-colored stuffs, his stubborn bony brow bowed, he unpurses his thin, shriveled lips for the sake of a single, brief-as-a-blow “no.” Oh, how often have we—elbow to elbow, the Purvapakshin and I—on these noisy Moscow boulevards, amid the clangs and whirlings, the rush of lights and shadows, raised up over all of this, again and again, our “no.”

Yes, I am drawn to him, indeed I almost love him, him alone perhaps, this man who does not exist, with his “no.” I want to squeeze my temples between my palms, draw the whole world into my consciousness, and brandishing my “no” like a hammer, object to everything: smite what is above, below, and all around; strike near and far. This is my one happiness, however fitful, however sick: overturning all verticals; extinguishing the imaginary sun; entangling the orbits and the world in worldlessness.

I cannot make this life, which walks over me, other than it is or altogether nonexistent, and even so—I object; we object: the Purvapakshin and I. We do not want clockwork days; we do not want lives insured by State Insurance; we do not accept the ideas ironed into newssheets neatly folded in four; as in the days of the emperor Ashoka, so now, in this time of tsarlessness, he says and I repeat, he asserts and I concur: “no.” A persecuted and half-dead pauper, I cannot overturn all things, the houses that have sunk into the ground, all the lived-in-to-death lives, but I can do this: Overturn the meanings. Let the rest remain. Let it.

4. DNP

Ever since people first acquired letters, they have been trying to make something out of them. A person immersed in letterizations is called a writer. I'm like other people: Every time I try to make something out of the alphabet, it collapses—there it goes again. These days I don't write for anyone. But once upon a time I did occasionally show my words to other people. To professional appraisers of lines who either bought them or returned them marked: DNP. That means: DO NOT PRINT, DOES NOT PERTAIN.

I confess I too had to discover the whole bitter meaning behind that three-letter DNP. I remember the first time I, a little fearful, my heart racing, delivered a manuscript—from palm to palm—and a briefcase clicked metallically shut over it. I had to go back many times for the answer; this cost me a whole series of conjectures, whereas my appraiser had needed just three symbols: DNP. I remember how those symbols kept hopping about in my eyes, hanging by an associative thread: DNP—GDP—GNP—DNP. All this seems silly to me now, but at the time it was simply pitiful; yet this too I, the one forgotten, refuse to forget. Over this too I set my “no.”

So many of us do not pertain and must be “returned.” So many of us have been crossed out and pushed aside. I don't know where our literature is: in bookshop windows or in wastepaper baskets. In any case, people who believe in the bookshop window don't believe in it too much. Given the pittance of my per diem, I can have only the covers: I notice every Monday when the bookshop window changes its paper skin. I try to guess what's inside—inside the uncut, smoothly pressed pages—then I wander on, from window to window, amassing grim forebodings. Where these come from, I don't know. I don't work with a paper knife and glimpse literature only through glass. But one can learn something even from the covers. From the periphery, one can draw radiuses to the center. Sometimes I come across a crumpled newspaper on a boulevard bench. Sometimes next to me, on the same bench, a man is reading a book. But

having smoothed out the lines of the crumpled sheet, I always find the same old thing, the same old thing, about the same old thing. And on the face of the man buried in his book, I always see the same gray reflections and bored creases round the mouth. Then the reader (I've often observed this gesture) suddenly jerks back from his open book, lays it facedown on the bench beside him, looks at me, the passersby, the trees, the puddles, and whatever else—and in his eyes, through the ripple of the lines read, I see: DNP.

I feel no envy and no regret. But sometimes I do try to imagine all those manuscripts that have shot ahead of me, that have managed to swap their own ink for a printer's. If in the past writers looked for themes in their inkwells, close at hand, in and around themselves, now they don't look at all: Themes are assigned. Any writer, if he's conscientious, may draw up his own Reference Table of Themes. Having allotted the Specialist, Émigré, and Worker each a column subdivided into a) party member and b) nonparty member of the intelligentsia—who has been: i) jammed into a class, ii) forced out, etc.—the penman may, purely mechanically, using the formula for calculating combinations of n , obtain between thirty and forty plots. For some reason I think it's thirty-nine.

If you hang this schedule of ideas from a hook under the fly-specks—and . . . Then again, you may as well hang yourself: No. 40, the last theme. And if you juxtapose . . . then . . . but now my thoughts have become confused. I'm seeing gray-yellow spots. I can't go on. Can't—

5. PONDERING THE *PANTALYK**

What a strange machine: My jaws have only to finish chewing a bit of bread and meat—and again the emptiness contains *something*. Again between my temples—rising and falling, falling and again

*Sense, meaning, order. (Russian)

rising—there is a stubborn and ineradicable thought. Or rather, a paroxysm of thought. Today my brief twenty-minute something found me by a high white wall with names half plastered over and immured: MARAT—ROBESPIERRE—GRACCHUST (*sic*: our own homegrown Gracchust, not in a toga but in gray broadcloth and bast shoes). Hiding behind those solid bricks are the last, somewhat old-fashioned-sounding shots. Not so long ago, shots were fired everywhere at everything. Now they've been gagged, driven into a stone enclosure, and forced to make do with a round practice target twenty inches in diameter.

Sitting on a bench on Prechistensky Boulevard with one ear cocked, I like to listen to the tamed shots with the look of a connoisseur. In resonant, staccato words they recall—as do I—the days that have died: *was* knocks again and again at the door of *is*; the metallic voices behind the stone wall are echoed by myriads and myriads of others. I listen, and ghosts crowd round me—I, who am now no more real than my memories, who am more imaginary than the imaginings that come to me and want to exist.

Yes, crudely put, those years, so recent and already *those*, pulled the *pantalyk* out from under us all, the familiar *pantalyk* that was so convenient for the not too alive and the not too dead. Points of view, all topsy-turvy, streamed past our eyes in strings of visual points. But then, when the days had done spinning like spokes, that absurd, ridiculous *pantalyk* was again underfoot. The actual meaning of this silly word that has thrust itself under my pencil is none too clear to me: It may come from *παντα** and *λευκος*.† If so, that means we were first knocked out of omniphlegmia, then sucked back into it. Who knows, perhaps the cycles of epochs are due to life's shifts now from blood to phlegm, now from phlegm to blood, and then all over again. History is forever spinning, now inside fiery arteries, now slowly, drop by drop, along the cold ducts of lymphatic systems. Everyone

*All. (Greek)

†White. (Greek)

has the right to speak for himself, so here I sit, inside a vast, lymphatically cold and slimy *after*, following the crooked flight of a gigantic boomerang: first forward—then up—then backward and down.

6. MINUS 1

With each dawn I get up from my bench and, stretching numb legs, plunge through the fog, along the tracks. Trundling toward me, steel clanking against steel, come groggy trams. Empty as yet, through their rime-covered windows I see the bare backs of benches. I stop beside a green-lighted panel and let pass—floating out of the fog into the fog—a caravan of clattering emptinesses. The empty metal cars, stopped by the green lights, judder to a halt. A second or two goes by; you might think that someone was getting on or off. But then a bell jangles, and the steel-encased emptiness, having set that emptiness down and taken it back on board, again rumbles off into the dusky daybreak.

Little by little, now in one window grinding through the gloom, now in another, hunched, shivering shapes appear. But I'm no longer part of that. Turning away, I set off through the thinning fog to meet another long and hungry day.

People whom Moscow has tried in its courts and banished from the city are said to have been sentenced to "minus 1." No one has passed sentence on me: 0-1. I am still here, in the hodgepodge and hubbub of the capital. Yet I am fully and firmly aware: I have been banished forever and irrevocably from all things, from all joys, from all truths. Though I walk, look, and listen beside others settled in this city, I know: They are in Moscow and I am in minus-Moscow. I am permitted only the shadows of things; things are beyond my reach; coins skipping from palm to palm give me only their thin, high-pitched tinkle; I am allowed encounters and conversations only with the emptiness that early-morning trams, bells jangling

through the gloom, let carefully on and off; all the doors open to others are closed to me, while everything behind them is almost transcendental.

I may only watch, hugging the wall at an evening crossroad, as someone, as numberless numbers of all sorts of someones turn lights on and off in their windows, lower and raise blinds; I may only watch as more and more someones, pushing and pulling entrance doors, come out and go in: They are expected behind theater curtains, behind bed-curtains.

Yes, I am a resident of minus-Moscow. This city, from which I have yet to be banished, in which I still have my quadrature and my rights, is a city not of things but of reflections. Into it, as into the watery depths, have tumbled all the overturned surfaces, shapes, and "covers" of things. If I am a man who can have only minuses, I try to believe in minuses. It will do me no good, you see, no good at all to repeat after others: Things cast shadows. No, in my minus-city, in my ghostly, minusy little world, only minus-truths make sense—only facts that have fallen on their heads. Therefore, shadows cast things. That's right, and no one disputes this in my excluded-from-the-world world. I manage as best I can among my minuses and shadows; cut off by closed doors, I cross them out with the thought: If from that other world I may have nothing but surfaces, shadows, lies, and covers, then I have the right to suspect that inside all those covers are lies and that all their things are shadows of my shadows.

It's strange, the streets of Moscow resemble unraveling stone seams. Hmm. So I've been dropped into a street seam; so I will have to live and die in a minusy, excluded, and outcast little world. I accept that world, and I will wind through all its seams wherever they lead.

7. STOLEN SOLITUDES

For everyone, reality is in one's self. Yet every "I" is sewn into a "we"; from individuals—however loosely stitched together—comes a society, a kind of unit composed of solitudes. The strangest paradox of

all is a city, connecting the unconnecting. Here the need to be alone nearly coincides with self-preservation: People survive so as to buy from each other, at a cost of ceaseless labor, the chance to be without each other. People hoard the coins from their art, their work, their thieving so as to acquire walls. In the countryside, far from human congeries, their solitudes are not protected, not bounded by walls, and so open to attack; in the city, they are organized, hidden behind blinds and walls, kept under lock and key, properly defended. Man, however, must be not only without man but without God; the tenet of divine omnipresence violates his right to solitude; that unblinking eye fixed on his life, peering through its mystical triangle as through a prison-cell peephole, must be removed. Hence the distinctive urban atheism of beings who, after a long day of rushing about among questioners and observers, of struggling frantically to break away from "we" to "I," crave at least a few minutes of complete isolation, out of sight and reach of everything without. Thus does the silkworm, when its time has come, creep away in anxious search of stillness, soundlessness, so as to wrap itself in its cocoon. A city, too, consists of anxious creepers and a system of discrete cocoons, its only purpose. And of course a city is most city-like not at midday but at midnight, not when it's all clamors and clanks but when it's all hush and dreams: Only a deserted street with dead, rayless windows and rows of shuttered doors can fully explain a city. Yes, we can only live back to back; everything—from the small children on an urban boulevard slapping together their separate cities of sand and clay, to the corpses in suburban cemeteries lying in graves separated from one another by iron fences—everything confirms and corroborates this thought.

I remember once, as I was pacing up and down the crooked camber of a side street before dawn, I heard first footsteps, then someone's measured muttering. The footsteps broke off but the muttering continued. I walked toward the sound. By a gray stone pile, still hazy in the half-light, stood a man with his back to the wall; his legs wobbled, while his head looked as if it would come unscrewed from his coat collar. He did not notice me or the dead stone surround and, as

if inscribed in an inviolate magic circle, went on rocking and raptly repeating: "God, thank God, doesn't exist. Thank God, God doesn't exist."

This sounded like a declaration of solitude. Walking past the drunk, it occurred to me that the only thing that still interested me was following human solitudes, solitary souls who were trying—with comic ineptitude and tragic obstinacy in the thick of this human hive—to inscribe themselves in their own inviolate circle. As my hours of leisure were long and many, I decided to devote myself unstintingly to stealing solitudes. That's right. Indigence and indolence always incite one to sin: to steal solitudes.

However, my very first experiments convinced me that hunting for city solitudes was an extremely difficult and painstaking task. City dwellers, used to maneuvering among ears and eyes, deftly elude observation and never allow one to infiltrate their "I." I would have to develop a special technique, an ability to come up from behind, so to speak, to combine celerity with stealth. After several failures, I realized that I must start with simple situations and only gradually work up to more complex ones. So then, one day, walking past a blind old man, his wooden cup poised to catch the obliging coin, it struck me that here was a suitable subject. I stopped ten paces away and, eyeing his stern weather-beaten face and corrugated brow, considered the advantages his blindness gave me. After a few such encounters, I happened to catch sight of his retreating back, stooped and slowly rocking: He was walking along, tapping the cobbles with the tip of his long stick and listening for strange sounds. We were near the city outskirts. I decided to pursue my subject. Together we advanced—the stone-tapping stick and I—past squat wooden houses, slowly, step by step, through the city gates and out along a road that wound away to a quarry. Two hundred yards ahead was a pond overhung with soft whorls of willows. The old man's stick went on poking about in the dust. Lessening the distance between us with noiseless steps, I followed behind. Suddenly he cocked an ear—and listened. To the complete hush. Somewhere in the distance a locomotive hooted. Then silenced. The blind old man turned from

the road into the high, dusty grasses and, jabbing the ground, sat down. I went on standing there, watching: a human solitude in the palm of my hand.

My subject now produced a small bundle from inside his dirty smock, unknotted the ends, and began jingling coins. "And that's all," I thought with chagrin, preparing to disturb the stillness and be off. But just then the lines round his dead eyes twitched, his lips broke into a sly smile, and he began a strange game. Putting stick and bundle aside, he suddenly lay down, flat on his back, placed his palms together with fingers interlocking and pressed them to his chest. Then he relaxed his face, let his toothless jaw go slack, and rolled up his dead pupils. Only now did I understand: The old man was playing, with glee and cunning, at death. It hardly matters how one discovers how different people amuse themselves inside their closed, magic-circle-inscribed solitudes. I found the scene somewhat repugnant, and I knew there was no more to it, but still I stood there without moving. Every thief, no matter what he's stolen, has a horror of being caught. The clatter of a cart lumbering up from the quarry released my footsteps—and I hurried back to the city. This episode did not put an end to my pursuit of city solitudes, though I did promise myself and them one thing: never to entrust these stolen essences to a pencil. Even this one here. I'll keep them inside me: It's safer.

8. A CONVERSATION ABOUT FOOTSTEPS

I did not know that I could speak. Yet today I did, for the first time in many months. The first time. Not just a half word, a rejoinder, a question (that had happened before). No, this was a veritable conversation, the recording of which will require a good ten pair of quotation marks. Of course, only chance could have compelled me to speak and be spoken to. It happened this way. Walking down Strastnoi this morning, I decided to cross over from the sidewalk to the boulevard. Two huge cauldrons of smoking asphalt stood in the

road, blocking my way. A long steel spoon, turning lazily in the black goo, was kneading the asphalt paste. The old asphalt, foot-worn and even torn in places, lay in cracked rolls by the raggedy sidewalk. A wind was wafting the acrid blue-gray smoke toward me. I averted my face and at that moment saw, a step away, a pale slip of a girl peering through the smoke at the squelching asphalt slop. In the crease between her long thin eyebrows, in the slight trembling of her lips, as if mouthing words, I divined the solitude whose meanings I had so long sought. I quickly took a few steps back, the better to observe her. She went on standing in the blue smoke, as in the smoke of a censer, lightly and bravely inscribed in the moist morning air and as seemingly unaware of me as of the workmen whose backs and aprons bustled between the two cauldrons. This went on for perhaps a minute. Then she suddenly looked round—and our eyes met.

"We're both observing: I, the smoke; and you, me. Why would you do that?"

"Why would you?"

"I agree to answer first. But my answer is long, and this won't wait."

She glanced down: Only now did I notice tucked under her elbow a shabby satchel with unraveling seams, its rough leather pressing indifferently against her bare arm.

"Then tell me on the way." I surprised even myself. How could I have said that?

She wasn't the least bit angry, no—on her lips, making her nostrils quiver, was a smile.

"Well, I was just wondering—you'll think it's silly—how many footsteps there are in an asphalt cauldron. Understand? How many footsteps? Moscow is full of people walking somewhere. Like the two of us now: walking along, then 'goodbye-goodbye'—and that's it. Whereas our footsteps—I mean our footprints, until the first wind or broom—will remain. Think how many, many footprints have been trampled into the asphalt, footprints on top of footprints, till they've worn holes through to the ground. Then both footsteps and asphalt are dumped into a cauldron and stirred with a steel spoon, as in a folktale—in folktales, you know, they practice witch-

craft with footprints and even cut them out. So now listen: If every once in a while, once in a lifetime, say, everything that man, that people had trampled underfoot, sullied, sinned against, and lied about could be swept up into a pile and thrown into a furnace and burned, you understand, burned, so that it all went up in smoke, then life could begin again. From the beginning."

She tripped along, heels pattering, with scarcely a backward glance. It was all I could do to keep half a step behind.

"I'm right, aren't I?"

"I'm afraid I don't believe in footprints. Man..." And yielding to a sudden flood of long-suppressed words, I began to speak my mind: "Man is to man either a wolf or a ghost. To live as a wolf means to take everything, even the footprints, to devour every last trace. As for ghosts, they flare and fade in tracelessness..."

We walked along, now slowing, now quickening our step, turning up this street and down that, and, gazing at the rhythmic motion of her shoulder, I went on and on about the two formulas between which one must choose: either man is to man a wolf, or man is to man a ghost.

When I finished, I saw turned toward me the same innocently smiling face.

"I go in here," she said abstractedly, ascending an entrance step (now our heads were level).

Then, after a brief pause: "Maybe so. But there's a third formula, if that's what you want to call it: In the end, you see, man is to man... a man. Why are you missing two buttons? Right here—on your front: You'll catch cold. I tell you what, come tomorrow, only a bit earlier, to the bench opposite the cauldrons—and I'll sew them on for you. Otherwise..."

With that she vanished behind the door's cut-class panes. I was left alone. My heart was pounding unusually hard—it must have been the fast walk—and distinctly in my temples. Through the plates of glass, fantastically fractured in their facets, a marble staircase blazed white. Outside, flanking the door, were white and yellow squares.

"Where had she gone?" I scanned the squares, and they replied: BOOKKEEPING COURSES. KINDERGARTEN. PAINLESS TOOTH EXTRACTIONS. DRESSMAKER. SKIN DISEASES. EXPERIMENTAL READING ROOM. SEAMLESS SHOES. USING THE TEN-FINGER SYSTEM.

9. ANOTHER CONVERSATION: ABOUT CALL NUMBER 176

This morning just after dawn I was waiting on the appointed bench. Through the boulevard's gold September leaves I eyed the two round cauldrons. They were empty, and the blue smoke that had introduced us, its work done, was gone—as if it had never been. The boulevard, still shivering and only half awake, was slowly accumulating footsteps. First to trail by was a trio of waifs who might have passed the night with the asphalt and footsteps in one of those cauldrons. Then—at odd intervals—hawkers slung with wooden boxes, sleepy boys yet to begin crying their newspapers, workers, and a policeman just come off duty. After that—women wrapped in shawls carrying large bottles and canisters, also office clerks, their caps pulled low and elbows sticking out of their pockets. I began to look more closely. There she was, hurrying my way; on reaching the bench, she sat briskly down beside me.

"Now then. Unbutton your coat." She placed her dilapidated satchel on her knees and, while her fingers were busy fishing out needle and thread, a thimble, and a pair of sturdy horn buttons, I managed to descry, screwed into the satchel's limp leather, a small metal D.

Then for three or four minutes, my eyes half closed, I heard nimble nails darting to and fro over the front of my miserable coat, heard her soft, close breathing, and the thread break twice. Then the satchel clicked shut and, looking up, I saw stern, intent eyes.

"The buttonholes are fine. Try buttoning the buttons. Good. Now answer me this: Why were you watching me yesterday? Well?"

Somewhat confused and abashed, I began "to explain": I told her about my hunt for solitudes, about my attempts to breach the circles in which all city people are inscribed.

She listened, looking away now and then and tapping the metal D with a sharp fingernail.

"I see. But where is it easiest for you to assail our poor solitudes? Where and when are they most vulnerable and defenseless? If this is your profession, as you put it—you are a strange man—then—"

"There are no set rules. Though certainly the beginnings and ends of days afford more chances than the middle of the day. Perhaps because, in the first case, people haven't yet entered into the day, while in the second, the worn-out 'we' breaks down of its own accord into 'I's.' In short, it's best to search around dawn, near the line between dreams and reality. Where are solitudes most discoverable? Let me see, usually on the periphery of a city since the need to be alone acts centrifugally—in relation to a city's convergent centripetal force. Or else at train stations. People sitting on their bundles, or clutching a suitcase, are also good subjects: no longer here and not yet there. And not overly aware of the eyes around them. If your hunt takes you through the metal turnstile—after those departing—out onto the platform, there you'll see connected sorting cars marked SOFT (black letters on a yellow ground) and HARD (black on green). Now picture this: Seated on the benches in the hard cars are what I call soft solitudes, warmed by lyricism, inscribed in either sorrow or joy, while in the soft cars, separated from each other by raised panes of glass, sit the silent solitudes I call hard. This again is not a rule, only a working hypothesis."

I glanced at my now-silent companion. Her face with moist lips half parted seemed touched with the faint impress of some still-hazy dream. Her eyes were gazing past me, into the distance. Seizing the moment, I said, "Yesterday, after you went in the door, I was left with the nameplates and I spent a long time trying to guess—"

Her eyes turned reluctantly back. "Try again."

"Honestly, I don't know. A kindergarten—hardly. The ten-finger—"

"You're close. You've almost got it. Guess again."

I shook my helpless head.

"It's really nothing very interesting: I work in a reading room. I catalogue books using the decimal system. Do you know what that is? Soon I'll give it up."

I smiled. "Of course I do. It's a system that allows you to hang all things and meanings on ten hooks and give each thing a number."

"You mustn't laugh. It's not at all that silly. With three or four numbers you can find anything you want. It's very convenient; everything has a call number. Name the call number and it's yours."

"Hmm. Then does love have a call number?"

"Just a minute: The class would be 1, and the division would be 76.176—there you have your... But why did you ask me that?"

She flushed a deep red; her long eyebrows met in a single line. I waited. Then she got abruptly up. I too got up.

"No-no, you mustn't come with me. Someone's waiting for me at the crossroad. Goodbye."

I sank obediently onto the bench and watched her whisk away, without looking back, in among the autumnal rust-covered trees. When I opened my eyes I saw lying on the bench next to me a white paper packet. I carefully opened it: two small palms of bread with ham inside—a sandwich. Something excruciatingly sweet rose in my throat. I pulled my hat down over my eyes: No one must see.

10. DR. SCHROTT

When people abandon a person, they are replaced (very easily) by non-people. I mean to say: When a person is excluded from facts, he is included in phantasms. I've already mentioned the Purvapakshin. But sometimes one figment wasn't enough for me, so for conversation and companionship I invented Dr. Schrott. The real Dr. Schrott lived somewhere at some point, but I never knew him. I first heard of him from an odd fellow whose abundant good health compelled

him to take constant cures. Dr. Schrott, he said, had invented a panacea: a hunger cure. I had no use for it at the time, but when my circumstances suddenly changed and I switched to a ten-kopeck regimen, I dug up Dr. Schrott (forgotten at the bottom of my memory like an inflatable pillow folded in six and buried at the bottom of a rucksack), unfolded him, and blew him up to size, so to speak, to capacity. Now I had only to close the air valve and make use of my phantasm. Materializing Dr. Schrott was no trouble; excessive reality and solidity did not become that fanatic of not eating (his cure called for two foodless days the first week, four the second, six the third; then in reverse order—four, two; and again four, six, and so on). After a few tries by my imagination, I sensed him and allowed him to exist: Dr. Schrott was somewhat taller than average, with graying strands combed over his bald, knobby crown. Through the lenses of his metal-rimmed spectacles stared a motionless pair of tightly screwed-in eyes. His sunken yellow cheeks were clean-shaven and cased in a tight starched collar; his evenly breathing ribs were buttoned into a black redingote; his wiry legs laced into tight top boots with double soles; his long fingers wrapped round a dark-wood cane. At first we met mainly in dreams, but later on we also met outside of dreams. Wherever and whenever we met, the worthy Dr. Schrott would touch my palm with his bony fingers and inspect me from head to toe.

"Temples more drawn. Aha. Very good. Thinning of the neck—excellent. Irregular heartbeat, you say? Um-hmm. Now. Pulse. Fifty-six. Bravo! You're on the road to recovery. It's been an honor."

Tipping his tall top hat, Dr. Schrott would turn his narrow, black back to me and, evenly swinging his long wiry legs, melt away, until we met again.

I mention him now, my old companion of many long days, because the time has come for us to part. Forgive me, my dear, edifying Schrott, for today I shall open the little valve that keeps you in existence. I shall let all the reality out of you, as one lets the air out of an inflatable travel pillow because, you see, my station is next.

Yes, I needed my ghosts—they honestly did what they could—until I met a person. Yesterday, when I, full of new meanings and an audacious hope, walked out to Petrovsky Park and, huddled under a canopy of pine needles, tried in vain to fall asleep, I summoned the Purvapakshin and Dr. Schrott: to say goodbye. Instantly, without opening my eyes, I could see: They had come; they had come and sat down beside me. Not a leaf rustled beneath their footsteps; the air did not stir. Still with my eyes closed, so as to see more clearly, I turned first to Schrott.

"I hate to disappoint you, but I've gone off my regimen: Today I ate *two* sandwiches. My pulse shot up: It's almost normal." (He shrugged.) "And look at these—two buttons: against colds. The most marvelous buttons: They radiate warmth. Who knows? Perhaps it's not really September. You're pursing your lips, I see, and frowning. Even so, I have opened the little valve and am depriving you of your reality. I no longer need the help of ghosts. See these hands? Ten fingers: I'll put them to work. I'll switch from brain to brawn; soon I'll have a pulse of seventy-two, ruddy cheeks, and a straight back. I need this because . . . But you wouldn't understand. Now don't let me keep you: Off you go, right back to nothingness."

With that I turned to the wise Purvapakshin. His bearded face was muffled up to his eyes in the folds of his flowing cloak.

"Oh, noble rishi, I am a man who must have at least one 'yes': Not from you, of course, you have none. Will you also say to this 'yes': 'no'?"

He was silent. Only his cloak, fragrant with thousands of years, betrayed his even breathing. Having heard me out, he rose majestically. The leaves did not rustle beneath his footsteps, the air did not stir with the fluttering of his cloak as he receded into the darkness, entered it, and became like it.

That night, until the loomings of dawn, I rethought all my thoughts. Come morning I returned to the city, to a gray-blue day clad in dew and chill, with a firm decision: All footsteps must go into the furnace. With the lid on. The merriest phrase I know is "From the beginning."

II. SOFT AND HARD

Serves me right, completely right. Philosophizing fool. For two days now I've been sitting here in a stupor. Perhaps a pencil will help: I'll try to untangle fact after fact, line by line. Mistake: I banished my ghosts too soon. It began the next morning, with my return to the city. I waited in the same place on the same boulevard. The morning hours passed. She hadn't come. The warm midday was approaching. Still sitting on our bench (I remember these details exactly), I unbuttoned my coat and suddenly realized that she had also sewn two phrases firmly into my mind: "Someone's waiting" and "Goodbye-goodbye."

"Coincidence," I said to myself, and resolved to be more patient. The next day was Sunday. There was no point even waiting. Walking down the early-morning Sunday streets past boarded-up windows, past windows obscured by blinds and gratings, it struck me that this was like that ideal city I had tried so many times to imagine, but which no longer interested me. I needed that tiny metal D—the hard mystery it concealed—more desperately than any problem or worldview. Another day passed: Again she did not come. I decided to act more boldly, to go to the Experimental Reading Room: They would tell me what had happened to her. If she were sick, or . . . But she who? I could name only the one initial, D. All the same, after some hesitation, I found the door surrounded by little squares and was on the point of opening it when the plate-glass facets suddenly showed me to myself: a pitiful wraith from whose shoulders hung a ragged coat; with tufts of unshaven beard beneath hollow eyes. I stood for a minute on the stoop, then went quietly away: Until tomorrow; I would wait one more day. To conquer my emotion, I decided to wear myself completely out and, having walked a long, broken line of side streets, came out onto 1st Meshchanskaya. The street's straight course looked sufficiently exhausting. Head down, hands in pockets (and footsteps on top of footsteps), I plunged ahead, on and on. The glowing clockface at the Vindava Station

stopped me. Skipping from numeral to numeral, my mind described a circle and another third of a circle: Sixteen hours until our meeting. Patience. A moment later the meeting took place. Two figures drove by in a horse-drawn cab: a man and a woman. The woman was she. The droshky swept round the entrance circle and stopped at the station steps. Watching closely, I stole up from behind: Yes, it was she. The two gave their things to a porter and hurried up the steps. I followed. The ensuing scene probably took between five and eight minutes. It's strange that in that time, though the station lamps were burning brightly, I never managed to see her companion's face. I don't know why. They walked through the station hall and slipped out onto the platform. I automatically walked up to a green box, which just as automatically swallowed my ten-kopeck coin. With a platform ticket in hand I continued to march mechanically after them. Down the length of black asphalt past connected cars. Cars marked SOFT—HARD—HARD—SOFT. I saw them, but they didn't see me. Here was a remarkable sort of solitude: a tandem solitude. They seemed joined at the eyes as they stepped, shoulder to shoulder, into their shared circle, which no third person could enter. I didn't even try. Copper banged against copper: once (I); then, again and yet again (they). Buffers clanked, and the train unsheathed the tracks. The platform emptied. I walked past a dismal row of iron holes for spittle and cigarette ends. A minute later I was again striding—hands in pockets, head down—down the long, straight course of Meshchanskaya.

12. METAPHYSICS WITHOUT THE BREAD

A machine swallowed my last coin. Now my brain is without its winding mechanism; my thoughts will have to feed on themselves. I suppose that's why, in place of syllogisms, there's a scarcely logicalized murk. Well, perhaps it's better that way: Who knows what's under the murk, at the bottom. The congestion of city things and people is

a torment to me, their constant obtrusion unbearable. Every building bores into you with all its windows. Though my weak and erratic heart is a hindrance, I've somehow managed, with breathing spells, to walk the whole endless length of hospital façades down Kaluzhskaya, around the stone square of Donskoi Monastery, past the old knackeries, and out along the field road, all the way to the Andreyev ravine. There's not a soul to be seen, and at the bottom of the ravine is a peaceful hush. Overhead are fleecy clouds; off to the left, wisps of blue smoke: They must be burning trash at the scrap heaps.

My thoughts keep jerking back from the facts, both from *was* and *will be*: It is so pleasant to rest in abstractions, in the breaks from all that.

Right now I'm trying to concentrate on the problem of pain. Our sturdy peasant language calls a sick person—if he's all pain, he's mighty sick—a "person-in-pain." The person-in-pain is identified with his pain. Proceeding from this, as from a logical *y*, you naturally arrive at the construction: Pain is the existence of a person-in-pain; therefore, for him nothing exists but his pain. The only conceivable way to anesthetize the consciousness of pain, whatever its content, is to cut away that content (the pain in the person-in-pain), to drive it out. Thus the necessity of an outside is deduced; the reality that was in the "I" is objectified in space and time. "I am in pain" becomes "my pain is greater than me." But what pushes pain away? Pain. A basic reflex, endemic both to frogs under vivisection and to the human mind, is to repulse pain, to cut the pain off or be cut off from it. The beast that plucks a thorn from its paw and the mind that builds space and time so as to be able to hurl its pain away—to enpast and enspace it—are exercising the same will in different ways. Thus the mind, gradually ridding itself of its original illness, is gradually taken ill with the outside world, with the pain expelled from within. But as the pain is externalized, the metaphysical person-in-pain, who gives up his only existence (pain) in being cured, is cured, in essence, of himself; fear of pain (which creates its objectification) and fear for one's existence (self-preservation)

restrain each other; the remainder of the pain, what has not withered without or been cut away, is commonly called "the soul." A propos, I've just remembered: When Leibniz, the inventor of optimism and the legend about the best of all possible worlds, became ill, his obliging mind instantly devised a machine—a cunning construct of clamps, screws, and wooden laths—to deaden the pain. Whenever the pain invaded his thinking and prevented him from writing about the harmony of monads, Leibniz, aided by a manservant (so his secretary Eckhart tells us), would apply to his person those specially made braces—of wood and iron—and order the screws tightened: The laths would clamp the pain, and the optimist would go on with his work. That machine to clamp pain is, in essence, a model of the world invented by Leibniz. Loosen the screws, release the "I" from the complex chain of things gripping it, and the unclamped pain will again swell and spread, destroying the preestablished harmony, faith, and all that comes after. This process, which first acted centrifugally and then paused ("I"), now turns in the opposite direction: The person-in-pain, cured by the objectification of his pain, sensing objects in the outside world as foreign and not being ill with them, begins to want so-called truth. Cognition is the return of things to their original existence: pain. Clearly, for the person-in-pain, cognition is possible only in very small doses, for to increase one's existence with the contents of the cognized is to multiply one's pain, to reattach the rotted-off part to the half-healed wound. Skepticism in a world of people-in-pain determined to cultivate cognition must rely not on the paucity of cognitive powers but on the enormity of the pain that stands between the world and cognition and makes the latter unbearable.

Then again, what if I were to call them back? Call back all things—from the stars to specks of dust—and let their pain inside me. But people-in-pain are small and cowardly: One person-in-pain has only to fall in love with another, has only to invite another person's pain inside his own, for there to be that fear, that reflex that jerks the paw away from the stinger. No, don't. Don't sting me.

13. THE PAWN ON THE D-FILE

I'm afraid to go back to the city. If someone were to push me now, to elbow me—I'd fall down and be unable to get up. I'm better off here. It's been two days; I'm still at the bottom of the ravine. Only sometimes, when people appear, I creep away to the Tatar graveyard nearby. It's nice there too because you can't see the city: The city is somewhere in the distance, beyond the edge of the ravine. Only train whistles intrude; if not for them, it would be completely restful.

Oh, I almost forgot: Yesterday I had a visit from Dr. Schrott. My thanks to that eccentric. It was nearly evening: I was sitting among the squalid Tatar graves, tin stars and crescents poking up above the nettles, and was about to doze off, when suddenly there he was, looking just the same—eyes screwed tight, long wiry legs. He came up to me, pressed a shaggy ear to my heart, and listened.

"Hmm, uh-huh. Now. It's not a Muslim graveyard you want—"

I interrupted: "Tell me, Schrott, can one wound a wound?"

He chewed a pensive lip and hovered over me for about a minute.

Then his narrow black back flickered away through the tin stars and crescent moons. Too bad. I wanted to tell him about the pawn. I tried to call out, but my voice was gone.

The story of the pawn is this: One day, I don't recall when exactly, I happened on a demonstration game of chess. I simply cannot remember when. Wait, why am I talking about chess? Oh, yes, the pawn, the pawn on the d-file. So then, dead silence, like the silence in this graveyard; people massed by the barrier, all eyes on the board. Two players hunched over the board. Carved figures inside the little squares. And not a sound: behind the barrier, at the board, on the board. I'm a poor judge of positional chess. As I recall, the only piece that interested me was a tiny pawn clad in glossy black. As if to break free of the game, the pawn strode two squares over the front line to stand alone and isolated among empty squares. The game was being played on the king's flank, gradually concentrating on the f-file. Attack—counterattack. Then suddenly, in response to a jump by

white's knight to cover white's exposed f3, black, as if meaning to lose a tempo, advanced its seemingly forgotten and doomed pawn on the d-file: The little hop-o'-my-thumb strode boldly from black square to white, leaving itself open to attack. Now only a diagonal move by black's queen might defend it; but the queen, as if on purpose, stepped aside, leaving the pawn on the d-file in mortal danger. My heart, silly as it sounds, began to beat faster, as though that black hop-o'-my-thumb were somehow necessary and dear to me.

Another exchange of moves. Now not only my eyes but the eyes of everyone silently jostling behind the barrier were fixed on the d-file: The black waif, as if in a mortal lassitude, again took a step forward. For the last time. One more step would have crowned the pawn. The player playing white (oddly, I never did see his face) delayed, tapping the edge of the board with a calm fingernail, then pounced; the black waif flinched in the grip of his thin, tenacious fingers; the fight for the d-file was over.

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