

Branko Gradišnik

zemljazemljazemlja

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Branko Gradišnik (1951–)

The fantastic, especially the fantastic realism of Latin American authors, came into vogue in Slovene literature as well as the other literatures of Yugoslavia in the 1970s. The foremost Slovene practitioner of this style is Branko Gradišnik, who works both as an independent author and together with Emil Filipčič as the coauthor (under the joint pen-name Jozef Paganel) of satiric fiction. The original version of this story, entitled “Zemlja” (“The Earth”) appeared in Gradišnik’s volume *zemljazemljazemlja* (Ljubljana: Mladinska knjiga, 1981). Subsequently, however, the author altered the story quite extensively, on the basis of the English translation he himself had prepared. In his own words: “I wrote the original version of the story [...] somewhere around 1978. During the eighties it was translated into English. I was not happy with the translation and decided (around 1986) to translate it anew, but in the process of doing so found out that it was also the story itself that made me uneasy—that I had left it behind in the meantime. So I succumbed to an impulse to rewrite it completely—in English. I never submitted my version anywhere but sometimes wondered what was to become of it. At last I as much as forgot about it. This year I received a request from Dr. Cooper regarding the previous English translation and the copyright. The story slipped back into my memory—and I offered the revised translation instead. He seemed to be pleased, until he found out, during the final stages of preparing the anthology, that my “Oeopath” was based on a different version of the original Slovene story. Since the anthology was meant to be bilingual—which I was not aware of at the time—the good doctor was again obliged to inquire. I explained and offered, lacking any better solution, to translate my English story back into Slovene, so that the two versions would finally match. He graciously gave his assent. Although Heraclites was right, this time I resisted the temptation to change anything.” For his part the editor is most grateful to Mr. Gradišnik for allowing us to publish both the Slovene and English texts here for the first time.

Meopat

Tole pišem v popolnem miru, sprijaznjen s sabo in z neznanskimi možnostmi, ki jih nalaga življenje. Čuti me ne varajo več: ob komolcu me čaka kozarec sladkega južnega vina, po nartu mi lazi muha, oljke tresejo svoje veje v hlidu. Tako je, tako je, in kot skozi dremež lahko slišim kopalce, ki si kličejo doli na obali. V zraku je nekaj, kar napoveduje nevihto pred večerom, mogoče mrčavost glasov, ali belina neba, negibna in tiha, ampak dovolj časa je, mislim, da zapišem v zgodbo tisto, kar je bilo nekoč res, pa čeprav se zdaj zdi privid. To je zemlja, moj planet, moj migljavi svet, ki se brez zatikanja pelje v prihodnost: travnik, zdaj orumenel od škržatjega struganja, pozneje moder v somračju, kopičenje oblakov, prš prvih sunkov burje, radostni vrišč nalagalcev na kres, ki tečejo v zavetje svojih šotorov, čistoča opranega zraka, mežikanje kresnic in prihod svita.

Ni še dolgo, ko sem se v povsem drugačnem popoldnevu vračal iz pisarne, držeč se hiš, da me ne bi uročili mnogi pogledi in dotiki. Vseeno si nisem mogel kaj, da ne bi videl stare gospe, ki jo je malone povozil tih avtomobil. In potepuškega psa, ki je čakal na zeleno. In križemgledega pometača, ki se je priplazil iz svojega nočnega zaklonišča in si je zdaj prizadeval, da bi nabodel in pobral in spravil v svoj dvokolesni smetnjak zmečkano rjavo ovojnico. V tistem hipu so se skozi okno zanemarjene podstrešnice razlegli tako siloviti zvoki, da sem prepoznal napev, ki se je prebijal skozi promet, in tudi če sem ga po sto korakih spet pozabil (drži, štel sem korake), sem še vedno vedel, da se ima zgoditi nekaj neogibno neprijetnega. Zavil sem v točilnico in si naročil konjak. Tam je bil neki starec. Spet in spet je skušal dvigniti kozarec k ustom—roka se mu je premikala kot obsedena, preveč trzavo za robota, preveč mehanično za človeka—in pijača se je nazadnje razlila prek tal, potopljena v plasteh gostečega se mraka. In ko sem hotel srkniti, sem zavohal v svojem kozarcu sled scaline, bodisi zato, ker mi je pet tednov abstiniranja pokvarilo voh ali pa zato ker sem pozabil, kakšen je v resnici vonj konjaka. Ali pa je bil oni drugi, ki se je pravkar opotekel iz stranišča. Pomislil sem, da bi eno pokadil, obenem pa že začutil naval strahu, češ da mi bo zdrsnila izmed prstov. Silovitost tega strahu je bila pretirana onkraj vsake mere. Bil je mrtvični strah poljske miši, ki jo zaloti švist nočnega ptiča. Bil je... Bil je strah... Strah sam. (Zdaj lahko uporabljam prispodobe, sedeč med oljkami, takrat ko sem jih potreboval, pa jih ni bilo blizu.) Naposled sem pijačo odložil, ne da bi jo načel, in sem odkorakal ven, ampak na pragu sem obstal

Oeopath

I'm writing this in utter peace, reconciled with myself and with the enormous possibilities life imposes. Senses cannot deceive me any more: it's a glass of sweet southern wine awaiting me at my elbow, it's a fly crawling over my instep, it's a breeze that the olive-trees are quivering their twigs in. Yes, yes, and I can hear, as if through a drowse, bathers calling to each other down at the shore. There's something in the air that announces a tempest by nightfall, maybe it's the haziness of sounds, or the white of the sky, immobile and quiet, but there is time enough, I think, to jot down into a story all that was once real, even if it now seems an illusion. This is the earth, my planet, my world, shimmering, smoothly moving into the future: the meadow, now yellowed by the cicada grating, later blue in dusk, the piling of the clouds, the swish of the first sprays of the gale, the joyful screams of fire-kindlers running under the cover of their tents, the pureness of the washed air, the flicker of fireflies and the coming of the dawn.

It isn't so long ago when, on a completely different afternoon, I was returning from the office, walking close to the houses to evade the spell of the many eyes and touches. Nevertheless, I couldn't help seeing an old lady nearly run down by a silent car. And a stray dog waiting for the green light. And a cross-eyed street-sweeper who had crept out of his usual night cover, trying to pin and pick up and store into his two-wheeled dustbin a crumpled manila envelope. At that moment, such powerful sounds reverberated from the window of a derelict attic that I could recognize the tune breaking through the traffic, and even if I forgot it after a hundred steps (yes, I was counting my steps) I still knew something inevitably unpleasant was about to happen. I swerved into a bar and ordered a glass of brandy. An old man was there. He was repeatedly trying to raise a glass to his mouth—his hand moving as if possessed, too jerkily for a robot, too mechanically for a man—and the drink finally spilled over the floor, drowned in layers of deepening gloom. And when I wanted to sip, I smelled a trace of urine in my glass, either because five weeks of abstaining had spoiled my sense of smell or because I had forgotten how it really smelled. Or maybe it was the other man, just staggering out of the toilet. I thought of smoking a cigarette, but then I felt a surge of fear that it would slip through my fingers. The intensity of this fear was exaggerated out of all proportion. It was the immobilizing fear of a field mouse caught by the swish of a night bird. It was... It was the fear... The fear itself. (I can use similes now, sitting among the olive-trees, but they weren't around when I needed them.) Finally I put the untouched drink aside and walked out, but at the doorstep

in rekel: 'Kako naj rečem, da se me ne tiče? Kako naj vem, da ne bom nazadnje kot klavrn pijanec, ki se mu živčevje ne bo odzivalo? Da me ne bo povozil avto? Povsem izvedljivo je, da lahko še vedno postanem oče. Se bom takole znašal nad njim, nad svojim sinom?' Gledal sem izprano žensko, ki je sunkovito vlekla za rokico jokajočega otroka, da bi ga odtrgala od prometnega znaka pred menoj. Kam sta namenjena? K zdravniku? K zobarju, ali na cepljenje? Ali pa gresta samo pomerjat obleko, kupovat čevlje, ali na obisk h kaki neprijetno ljubeznivi tetrici z zlatimi kočniki? Otroci so tako negotovi, oklepajo se svojih telesc, nihče se jih ne sme dotakniti, nihče poseči v tisto, kar se jim zdi, da so. Stal sem tam in z roba derečine opazoval zoprni prizor. Nazadnje je odtrgala otroka in ga zvlekla skozi vhodna vrata na moji desni, kjer sta na vogalnikih čepela dva kamnitna levčka. Zazdelo se mi je, da otrok pošepava. Še vedno sem gledal za njima, vprašal sem se, ali sta namenjena k ortopedu, ko sem začutil mrgolenje pogleda na tilniku, kjer mi je kožo kar skup vleklo. Hitro sem se ozrl in se srečal z neomajnimi, bledimi očmi sivolasega moškega pred naslednjo izložbo. Stal je prav tako nepremično kot modne lutke za njegovim hrbtom. Kaj je v meni, kar je pritegnilo njegov pogled, tako kot je otroška kljubovalnost pritegnila mojega? In kaj v njem ga je nagnilo, da me opazuje tako, kot sem jaz opazoval otroka? V negotovosti sem stopil pod obok med levoma. Vhodna veža se je potapljala v sladko-kislem zadahu po scalini in videl sem zemljevid njenih slankastih, prekrivajočih se plasti pod nogami. Naredil sem dvajset korakov skozi vežo, nastlano s papirčki in pomarančnimi lupinami, proti seznamu stanovalcev na nasprotni steni, ki je s svojimi zlatimi črkami na črnem steklu obetal bolj ugledno notranjost, ampak ko sem stopil še bliže, sem videl, da je steklo prašno in pomazano in napočeno. Vsi ti učeni poklici, odvetniki in arhitekti in zdravniki splošne prakse, so se izselili in prepustili prostor cenenim krojačem in nogavičarkam in učiteljicam klavirja, katerih lepenkaste, ročno tiskane napise, pričvrščene z risalnimi žeblički, sem opazil zdaj, ko sem bil že prav zraven. Kje je otrok? Ali se še joče? Slišal sem samo promet tam zunaj. Zavil sem v desno in stopil skozi zelena nihajna vrata. Zadaj sem našel manjšo vežo s stopniščem, ki se je vzdigovalo v desno. Na levi sta se stene držali dve vrsti pisemskih predalov, povečini vlomljenih ali zijavih, nekaterih pa počrnelih od zažgane pošte. Vedel sem, da tukaj nimam kaj iskati, ampak občutek dolžnosti me je primoral, da sem prebrskal predale. Navadni, prečrtani ali zbledeli priimki. Opolzki grafiti. Star, porumenel časopis, stlačen v škatlo. Nekaj nepobranih terjatev stanovanjskega podjetja. Predalov je bilo šestnajst. Ko sem prišel do zadnjih dveh, sem na skrajnem koncu veže opazil ozko stopnišče, ki je držalo navzdol. Tam je bil še en lepenkast izvesek, postrani

I paused and said, "How can I say it's none of my business? How do I know that I won't end as a wretched wino whose nerves won't respond? That a car won't run me down? Some day I could still become a father, it is quite feasible. Would I wreak my anger on him, on my son, like this?" I was watching a worn-out woman jerkily pulling a crying child by the hand, trying to tear him off the traffic sign in front of me. Where were they heading? To the doctor? The dentist, or for a vaccination? Or were they going just to try on some clothes, to buy shoes, or to pay a visit to some unpleasantly loving auntie with golden molars? Children are so unsure, they cling to their bodies, nobody is to touch them, nobody to reach into what they feel is them. I stood there and watched the unpleasant scene from the edge of the rush. Finally, she tore the child off and dragged him through the gate at my right, where stone lions were squatting on a pair of cornerstones. It seemed to me that the child was limping. I was still looking after them, wondering whether they were headed to the orthopedist, when I felt the ripples of someone's gaze on the contracting skin of my nape. I quickly threw my glance around and met the steady, pale eyes of a grey-haired man in front of the next shop-window. He was standing as still as the mannequins at his back. What was the thing in me that had attracted his gaze in the same way the child's recalcitrance had attracted mine? And what was in him that made him look at me the way I had looked at the child? Uncertain, I stepped under the arch, between the lions. The entrance-hall was drenched with the sweet-sour smell of urine and I could see the map of its salt-like, overlapping layers under my feet. I made twenty steps through this hall littered with paper and orange peels, towards the directory at the opposite wall that promised, with its gold letters on black glass, more respectable interior further on, but when I came near I saw the glass was dusty and smudgy and cracked. All those men of learned professions, lawyers and architects and general practitioners, had moved out, leaving the place to cheap dressmakers and hosiers and piano-teachers whose cardboard, hand-written signs, thumbtacked to the wall more to the right, I perceived now, upon coming closer. Where was the child? Was he still crying? All I could hear was the traffic outside. I turned right and went through a green swinging door. Beneath, I found a smaller vestibule with stairs running upwards to the right. To the left, there were two rows of letter-boxes on the wall, mostly broken-in or gaping, some blackened by burnt-out mail. I knew there was nothing I could find there, but my sense of duty made me go through the boxes. Ordinary, criss-crossed or faded names. Dirty graffitos. An old, yellowed newspaper stuck into a box. Some uncollected council bills. There were sixteen boxes. When I came to the last one, I perceived a flight of narrow stairs at the far end of the vestibule. They led downwards. There was another cardboard sign, tacked askew to the flaking

pribit na luskinasto steno, in njegova rdeča puščica je merila dol v mračno klet na dnu stopnic. Pod puščico sem zagledal italijanski priimek, pod njim pa je bila čudna beseda, glede katere sem sodil, da naj bi predstavljala zdravitelja te ali one baže.

RAPATONI

MEOPAT

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Ko sem se približal, sem videl, da je napis diagonalno natrgan. Nekatero črke in številke so očitno manjkale. Meopat—kot vzkrík tuje, grške ali mačje žalosti. Prav lahko da je otrok tam, že pomirjen od meopatove kure. Ko sem se spuščal po stopnicah, sem obotavljivo skušal dopolniti besedo, ampak njen začetek je zvenel preveč brezprizivno, da bi mu znal pridati kak pomen. Najbrž bi bil v kleti, na Rapatonijevih (ali Trapatonijevih) vratih našel drug napis, ki bi vse razjasnil, ampak malo pred iztekom stopnic sem zgoraj zaslišal lahne korake, ki so na lepem obstali. Takrat, po doleg trenutku napetosti, ko mi je leva noga še vedno visela v zraku nad predzadnjo stopnico, z desnim zapestjem pa sem se rahlo dotikal stene, me je dokončno zapustila prisebnost. Videnje, v katerem me v tem klavstrofobičnem prostoru zaskoči sivolasec in me stisne v primež med vodenim pogledom in meopatovimi vrati, je bilo tako silovito, da se nisem mogel ustaviti niti potem, ko sem planil mimo dostavljača, ki se je pred pisemskimi predalčki praskal po temenu, in se pognal na ulico, na kateri, kakor sem odkril z enim samim zamahom oči, ni bilo več starčevega pogleda.

Žene ni bilo doma. Navadila sva se bila živeti vsak zase oziroma nikoli se nisva navadila živeti v paru. Zaposlena je bila pri Rdečem križu, tako da je lahko vedno ušla zdoma. Sicer pa, kaj zaboga naj bi sploh počela doma, kjer so jo pričakali samota in nepomita posoda in umazanija, ki so jo po podu puščali moji vrtni škornji, in večni prah na pisani garnituri otroškega pohištva, ki nama ga je za poroko podaril zaletav stric in ki sva ga z enako nepremišljeno vnemo namestila v eni izmed sob, tako da še vedno nisem imel knjižnice? V zadnjih letih sem popoldneve preživel v vrtu zadaj za hišo in okopaval, prirezoval, plel in cepil. Rad sem se dotikal prsti, jo gnetel, toplo in nekako živo. Rad sem opazoval klitje nezavednega življenja, ki je prihajalo iz nje v odzivu na sonce in vodo in moje dlani. Včasih sem si predstavljal ženo, ki me opazuje skozi modrikasti mrč večera,

wall, and its red arrow was pointing towards the gloomy basement at the bottom of the staircase. Under the arrow I saw an Italian name, and underneath there was a strange word, presumably denoting a medical practitioner of some kind.

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Coming closer, I found out that the sign had been torn. Some letters and numbers on the left side were missing. Oeopath—like an outcry of foreign, perhaps Greek sorrow. It could well be that the child was there, already becalmed by the oeopath's cure. Going down the stairs, I tentatively tried to supplement the word, but the agglomeration of its initial vowels was too strange to graft any sense on it. I suppose I would have found another, clarifying sign in the basement, on Rapatoni's (or Trapatoni's?) door, but only a moment before getting to the bottom of the stairs I heard someone's easy steps from above coming nearer and then stopping short. It was after this moment of suspense, with my left foot still poised in the air above the penultimate step, with my right wrist gently touching the wall, that I finally lost my composure. The vision of the grey man descending upon me in this claustrophobic place and cornering me between his watery gaze and the oeopath's door was so frightening that I couldn't stop even after I had rushed past the delivery boy scratching his head by the letter-boxes, and plunged onto the street devoid, as I found out with one sweep of my gaze, of the old man's eyes.

My wife wasn't at home. We had become accustomed to live each for ourselves, or better, we had never got into the habit of living as a couple. She was an employee of the Red Cross Society and thus she could always get away from home. Yes, what in the world was she to do at home, where she was received by solitude, and unwashed dishes, and soil left on the floor by my garden boots, and eternal dust on the junior set of gay-coloured furniture which a rash uncle had given us as a wedding present and which we, with equally imprudent eagerness, had put into one of the rooms, so that I still had no library? During the last years, I used to spend my afternoons in the garden at the back of the house, digging, trimming, weeding, splitting. I enjoyed touching the fresh, soil, kneading it, warm and somehow alive. I enjoyed watching the budding of the unconscious life coming out of it in response to the sun and water and my hands. Sometimes I imagined my wife looking at me through the bluish haze of

skrita za kuhinjskim zastorom, in se sprašuje, kako lahko zapravljam čas sklonjen nad to čudaško, samotarsko opravilo, tako da nič več ne napredujem v službi, da nič več ne stremim. Ko pa sem se potem umaknil pred nočnim hladom v hišo, sem našel kuhinjo in stole prazne, zavesi razmaknjeni, obaro na mizi mrzlo. Ni mi bilo zares mar, kajti do vsega tega je prišlo tako počasi in nezaznavno, da se je zdelo naravno kot staranje samo; bilo je veliko lažje od solz, krčev, loputanja z vrati in potlačenih misli iz prvih let. Zato se mi je prazna hiša zdela normalna, dokler nisem pregledal pošte in med običajnimi računi in bančnimi obvestili odkril dve pismi. Tisto modro je bilo frankirano, vendar nisem znal razbrati zabrisanega žiga. Drugo je bilo navadna nezalepljena ovojnica, naslovljena name z ženino lično pisavo. Kot se spominjam, sem bil za hip presenečen tudi spričo dejstva, da sta se pisavi na pismih tako zelo razlikovali. V vsaki šoli velja isti lepopisni kanon, kako pa je potem mogoče, da si grejo pisave pozneje tako zelo vsaksebi? Predpasal sem se in si nataknil škornje.

V travi se je lesketalo zadnje sonce. Sosed je zalival svojo trato in na koncu pršivega curka tam nad živo mejo sem zaslutil mavrico. Usedel sem se na klop, pobral izpod nje vrtne škarje in odrezal rob žigosanega pisma. Napisal ga je bil že davno pozabljen prijatelj; vrnil se je iz tujine in me je obveščal, da se bo ustalil v bližnjem obmorskem letovišču. Bil je šegave volje. Omenjal je nekatere pripetljaje, o katerih nisem nič več vedel. Klical me je po vzdevku, ki toliko da sem se ga še spominjal. Na dnu prve strani sem zamižal in mu skušal videti v obraz, vendar sem si priklical samo izprani obraz starca sredi lutk. Menda se je v tistem trenutku zgodilo, da sem se do konca zavedel spremembe. Petnajst let poprej nisem imel hiše, ali avta, ali vrta, ali žene, ali starin. (Zbirala jih je pač ona. Uslužbenka Rdečega križa si lahko izposluje vstop v vsako stanovanje, na podstreho ali v klet vsakega starca.) Prijatelj ni nič vedel o moji ženi ali o nerojenem otroku, niti o mojem vrtnarstvu, niti o prepirih s sosedom, ki je kar naprej zalival trato ob nepravem času in odmetaval odstrižene vejice na mojo stran žive meje. Niti o strahu, češ da postajam alkoholik, ali o plešasti lisi, ki se je širila na mojem temenu, ali o temnem znamenju na moji roki. Poznal je nekoga drugega, nekoga, ki sem ga v tem času pozabil celo jaz, mladeniča, ki je, ko je preživel poletne počitnice v prav tistem letovišču, ki ga je omenjalo pismo, obiral turiste, ko je z njimi za denar igral brzopotezni šah.

Sem še razmišljal o tem, medtem ko sem bral ženino kratko sporočilo, da se ne vrne več? Vsekakor: prav v tistem trenutku je bilo, da sem se drugič zavedel spremembe. 'Vsi se spreminjamo,' sem rekel. 'Pismi kakor da nista

the evening, hidden behind the kitchen curtain and wondering how could I spend my time bent over this queer, solitary work, no longer advancing at my job, no longer striving. But later, retreating from the night cold into the house, I found the kitchen and the chairs empty, the curtains parted, the stew on the table cold. I didn't really care, because all this had come to pass so slowly and imperceptibly that it seemed natural, like the process of ageing itself; and it was much easier than the tears, convulsions, door-slamming and suppressed thoughts of the early years. Therefore the empty house seemed to me normal until, going through my mail, I found two letters among the usual bills and statements. The blue one was stamped, but I couldn't decipher the smudgy postmark. The other one was a plain unsealed envelope, addressed in my wife's tidy handwriting. As I remember, I was briefly surprised also by the fact that the handwriting of the letters differed so much. The same calligraphic canon is applied in every school, but how is it then possible that our writing gets so varied afterwards? I put on the apron and the boots.

The last of the sun glistened on the grass. My neighbour was watering his lawn and at the far end of the spraying spurt, over the hedge, I suspected a rainbow. I sat down on a bench, took out from under it the garden-shears, and cut the edge of the posted letter. It was written by a long-forgotten friend who had returned from abroad and was now informing me that he was settling down in the near-by seaside resort. He was jocular. He mentioned some incidents that I knew nothing about. He called me by a nickname that I hardly remembered. After the first page, I closed my eyes and tried to see his face, but I could recall only the washed out gaze of the old man among the mannequins. It was probably in that moment that I became totally aware of the change. Fifteen years ago I hadn't had a house, or a car, or a garden, or a wife, or antiques. (Yes, she was a collector. A Red Cross official can get access to every home, into every old man's attic or cellar.) My friend knew nothing about my wife or the unborn child, nor about my gardening, nor about the quarrels with my neighbour who kept sprinkling the grass at wrong times and throwing his cut branches over my hedge. Nor about the fears that I was becoming an alcoholic, or about the bald spot spreading on the top of my head, or about the dark naevus on my arm. He knew someone else, someone even I had forgotten in the meantime: a boy who had once thrown a dustbin into a shop-window, a youth who had, spending summer holidays in the very same resort the letter was now mentioning, fleeced the tourists, playing quickdraw chess with them.

Was I still thinking about this while reading my wife's short message that she wasn't going to come back? Certainly: it was precisely in that moment that I felt, for the second time, the change. "We all change," I

v zvezi. Kot da sploh ne bi bil živel v enem kosu.' Pogledal sem svoje dlani: hrbet je prekrivala nagubana koža. Ne, ne nagubana – samo čez in čez prekrižana s kanalčki med porami. Po modrikastih, nabreklih venah spodaj je plala kri. Preobrnil sem zapestji in tudi tu zagledal žile, le da bolj nežne, bolj rahle, pa tudi koža sama je bila bela in gladka. Datum na uri me je spet spomnil časa, odpel sem si jo in jo spravil v predpasnikov žep. '13. aprila 1986 me je zapustila žena,' sem rekel. 'Trinajstega aprila sem še zmeraj star štiriintrideset let. Čudno.' Naredil sem nekaj korakov po trati. Zavelo je, drevje je zašepetalo. Z zvonika mi je v zenico poblisnila sončna šipa. Zdražena, mokra zemlja je močnejše zadišala. Sosed je zdaj obrezoval bršljan na steni svoje garaže. Ni se dalo reči, da življenje ne bi teklo naprej. Nasprotno, bila je pomlad, bil je prelepi čas tik pred somrakom. Ker nisem hotel storiti česa prenačelnega, sem vzel lopato in šel za vogal h kupu hlevskega gnoja. Prejšnji večer, ko mi ga je pred vrtna vrata stresel kmet, je bilo pretemno, da bi ga prepeljal do gredic. Začel sem ga nakladati na samokolnico.

Potem sem se na lepem zavedel teme okrog sebe. Je mogoče? Sem se tako izgubil v mislih? Sem tako dolgo tuhtal? Ampak o čem? Kakšne vrste misli? Kaj počnem vse te ure na svojem vrtu, sredi spečega predmestja? Nad rožnatim sojem centrskega neba se je temno vzdigoval zvonik, nem in pokončen. Začutil sem hrapavo težo lopate. Potipal sem po uri, jo izvlekel izpod škarij v predpasniku, jo nesel pred oči. Nisem mogel razbrati številke. Drevje je še kar šepetalo. 'Ampak kaj zaboga šepeče, ko se takole priklanja in pregiba?' Začutil sem mehko pod nogami, podplati mojih škornjev so bili zdaj tako občutljivi, segel sem dol, zajel v dlan in si nesel k ustnicam grudo sveže, vlažne prsti. Dišala je po cipresah. Vedel sem, da žene ni doma. Negibno sem stal in kazal hiši hrbet. Tu pa tam je porožljala veriga sosedovega psa. Po zraku so se spreletavali netopirji. Slišal sem lahko, kako prhutajo s krilci. In pa pobesnelo brnenje nočnih metuljev. Tleskanje kljunov ali čeljusti. Prsti so mi krepneli, še vedno sprijeti okrog grude. Ura v zvoniku je odbila deseto. V bobniču mi je tenko zapiskalo. Zemlja mi je hotela nekaj povedati. 'Ne gre drugače,' sem rekel nazadnje. 'Ne vem, kdo sem, vem pa, da nisem, kar sem bil.' Bilo je, kot da sem iz obsidiana, kot da sem votel, kot da prihajam od drugod. Je tisti, ki je nekoč živel v mojem telesu, razbijal šipe in šahiral, še premogel toliko moči, da me je posvaril, da me je klical nazaj – da je klical nazaj sebe? Vrt okrog mene je bil tako čuden, hiše naokrog so bile tako čudne. Nekje spodaj so spale mravlje,

said. "The letters don't seem to connect. As if I wasn't living in one piece at all." I looked at my hands: their backs were overlaid by wrinkled skin. No, not wrinkled, just criss-crossed with tiny canals between the pores. Through the bluish, bulging veins underneath the blood was flowing. I turned my wrists over and saw the veins there too, only softer, more delicate, and the skin itself was white and smooth. The date on my watch reminded me of time again, I unclasped it and put it in my apron pocket. "My wife has left me for good on the thirteenth of April, 1986," I said. "The thirteenth of April, and I am still thirty-four. Strange." I made a few steps over the lawn. The breeze came up, the trees whispered. From the belfry a sunny windowpane flashed into my pupil. The excited, moistened earth smelled stronger. My neighbour was now trimming the ivy on his garage wall. One couldn't say that life wasn't going on. On the contrary, it was springtime, it was the beautiful time just before twilight. Not wanting to do anything reckless, I took a shovel and went behind the corner to the pile of stable manure. The previous evening, when a farmer had left it in front of the gate it was too dark to transport it to the garden beds. I began to load it into the wheelbarrow.

Then I suddenly became aware of the darkness all around me. Was it possible? Could I have been so lost in my thoughts? Had I pondered so long? But about what? What kind of thoughts? What had I been doing for hours in my garden, in the middle of the sleeping suburb? Over the pink gleam of the downtown sky the belfry stood dark, mute and upright. I began to feel the coarse weight of the shovel. I fumbled for my watch, took it from under the shears in my apron, brought it in front of my eyes. I couldn't decipher the digits. The trees were still whispering. "But what on earth are they whispering, bowing and bending like that?" I felt a softness under my feet, the soles of my boots were now so sensitive, I reached down, scooped with my hand and brought to my lips a clod of moist earth. It smelled of cypresses. I knew that my wife wasn't at home. I stood motionless, keeping my back to the house. From time to time, the chain of the neighbour's dog rattled. Bats swooped through the air. I could hear their wings flapping. And the frantic buzz of night moths. The snapping of beaks or jaws. My fingers were growing stiff, still clutching the clod. The belfry clock struck ten. There was a thin whistle inside my ear-drum. The earth was trying to tell me something. "There's no other way," I said at last. "I don't know what I am, but I know that I'm not what I used to be." It was as if I were made of obsidian, as if I were hollow, as if I were coming from elsewhere. Did the one that had lived in my body before, breaking window panes and playing chess, still find enough strength to warn me, to recall me, to recall himself? The garden around me was so strange, the houses around were so strange. Somewhere below, ants were sleeping,

ličinke so živele svoja življenja, krt se je zganil, zgoraj pa kilometri in kilometri neba ... Rastline so se stegovale z listi in se obenem oklepale zemlje s koreninicami. Vse je bilo živo. Sredi tega tihega, nevidnega klitja in mrgolenja sem z gotovostjo vedel: neznano bitje je prevzelo mojo podobo in zasedlo moj prostor pod soncem, moje delovno mesto, toploto mojega telesa, šelest suhega listja pod mojimi stopali, zbadanje snežink na moji koži, moj pogled na zvonik, moj glas njegovega zvona, vse, vse. Je bil to razlog, zakaj sem gojil rastline – ker je od mene ostala samo še rastlina? V temoti sem čutil meglenice, meglice oblik, mreže ovijalk, sprepletene bambusje, džunglo, ki je vdirala. Rastlinstvo je bilo pradavno, bilo je začetek; in zdaj, na koncu, so se vse te lilije, perunike, orlice, resedice, cinije, lipovke, vinike, potonke prepuščale premišljeni vrtnarjevi ljubezni in ga izsesavale! Se hranile z njim! Jaz pa? Tisti prejšnji jaz, ki se je očitno še vedno mudil tu, drugače jaz ne bi stal kot odrevenel, kot da so mi stopala vkoreninjena – kaj naj stori on vpričo tako nemogočih misli? Naj gre na policijo in jih skuša prepričati, da je postal rastlina? Naj se usede v temni kuhinji in čaka na mojo ženo, vedoč, da se ne bo vrnila? Misli so mi vznikale kot gobe, grmičaste in mišjesive in dlakave.

Ko sem populil, poteptal ali polomil vse grmovje, vse cvetje, ko sem odlomil veje češnjama in bukvi, sem nazadnje obstal v migljajih kresa, ki sem ga naredil iz vejic in vej in fižolovk in ročajev orodja. Nozdrvi mi je preplaval vonj po žganem mesu, vendar ni prihajal od mojega ognja. Slišal sem štrce oddaljenega smeha. 'Tu nekje blizu imajo pozno vrtno zabavo,' sem si rekel in si predstavljal, da lahko izmed prasketanja in cvrčanja smodeče se vegetacije razločim ženin razvneti glas. 'Meopat.' Ne more me slišati, kdorkoli že je. Nihče me ne sliši. Sosedova hiša je bila temna. Zaslišal sem tiho brnenje neznanega bitja. 'Zgodilo se je nekaj strašnega,' sem rekel in potegnil s škarjami po zapestjih, da sem prerezal kožo, pod katero so tekle modre žile. Vsaj kri se je zdela resnična in živa. Poleg mene je bila gnojna kopa, šibko se je risala pred steno. Ulegel sem se nanjo. Gnoj je bil topel, kakor da bi bil kdo ležal na njem tik pred mano. Čigava gomila je to? Moja? Ali žene, ki je za vedno odšla? Vse manj sem čutil toploto, vame se je selil mraz in spodrival kri. Nazadnje, ko me je začelo tresti, sem začutil, kako iz mene poganjajo kapilare, kot koreninice, in se obupano zakopavajo v gostoto zemlje.

Zdelo se je zelo dolgo, preden so me odpustili. V resnici je minilo samo sedem mesecev. Rastline so se mi medtem še velikokrat razodele. Njihov

larvae were living their lives, a mole stirred, and miles and miles of sky overhead... Plants were reaching out with their leaves, clinging to earth with roots. Everything was alive. Among this silent, invisible budding and shifting I knew for sure: an unknown creature had assumed my appearance and taken my place in the world, my position at work, the warmth of my body, the rustle of dry leaves under my soles, the sting of snowflakes on my skin, my view of the belfry, my sound of its bell, everything, everything. Was this the reason why I cultivated plants—because it was only a plant that had remained after me? I sensed, in darkness, nebulae, mists of shapes, webs of creepers, jointed bamboo stalks, a jungle moving in. The vegetation was primeval, it was the beginning; and now, at the end, all these irises, columbines, resedas, zinnias, lilacs, vines, peonies surrendered to the thoughtful love of the gardener, sucking him dry! Feeding on him! And I? The former I who evidently was still lingering on, or otherwise I wouldn't be standing now as if I had become lignified, as if my feet were rooted—what was he to do in presence of such impossible thoughts? Should he go to the police and try to make them believe that he had become a vegetable? Should he sit in the dark kitchen and wait for my wife, knowing she will never come back? My thoughts were springing up like mushrooms, shrubby and mouse-grey and villous.

When I had uprooted, trampled or broken all the bushes, all the flowers; when I had torn off the boughs of the cherry and beech trees; I finally paused in the flickers of the bonfire I had made out of twigs and branches and beanpoles and tool-handles. The smell of burning meat permeated my nostrils, but it wasn't coming from my fire. I heard spurts of distant laughter. "There must be a late garden party somewhere around," I told myself, imagining I could discern my wife's excited voice above the crackling and hissing of the smoldering vegetation. "Oeopath." He couldn't hear me, whoever he was. Nobody heard me. The neighbour's house was dark. I heard the soft whirr of an unknown creature. "Something terrible has happened," I said, and drew the shear-blade across my wrists, cutting the skin under which the blue veins ran. At least the blood seemed to be real and alive. Beside me was a pile of manure, faintly outlined against the wall. I lay down on it. The manure was warm as if someone had been lying on it only a moment before. Whose mound was this? Mine? Or my wife's who had left forever? I felt the warmth less and less, the cold settling into me and replacing the blood. At last, when I began to shiver, I felt capillaries sprouting from me as root-hairs, desperately digging into the thickness of the earth.

It seemed a very long time before they let me out. Actually only seven months went by. During that time the plants often revealed themselves to me. Their rustling kept me awake during summer nights, and in the

šelest me je spravljal pokonci v poletnih nočeh, in jeseni sem pod okenskim napuščem uziral listje, razpokano do neberljivosti. Na obposteljni mizici je v vazi vzplamenela vrtnica. Izmed kock v tlaku notranjega dvorišča me je pogledavala regratova lučka. Često sem začutil nujo, da bi odgovoril, vendar nisem spregovoril in se ne zasmel in ne zjokal. Nekega dne v novembru, ko je žena tiho sedela ob mojem zglavju in opazovala moj molk, sem naletel na čudno misel. 'Ne bi si bil prerezal žil, če ne bi bil neki ostanek v meni še verjel v Rdeči križ,' sem malone izrekel, presenečen ne toliko nad mislijo, ki je bila prav tako naključna in zmešana kot vse, kar mi je segalo v glavo tiste mesece, pač pa nad dejstvom, da se ji je posrečilo narediti vse skupaj tako nedolžno in logično in celo radostno. Še vedno mutast sem stegnil roko, prijel ženo za dlan in si položil njeno kupo na obrito teme. Njen dotik je bil hladen in nepopustljiv, polnil me je z občutkom vode, ki narašča, in zavedel sem se, da nisem več tiho. Voda mi je narasla do oči in sedel sem pokonci in na glas jokal, ona pa me je božala.

Sedim za tole zasilno mizo, prekrito z od vina popacanim prtom, in neizurjena kazalca mi iščeta črke na pisalnem stroju. Navsezadnje le ni bilo nevihte. Sonce še vedno zahaja, vendar ni isto. Dva dneva sta minila, odkar sem začel pisati. Hiša poleg avtokampa je najina, zamenjala sva jo s tistim prijateljem, ki mi je pomagal sprožiti življenje. Spokojno je, popoldne sem gor ni tako veliko kampistov. Skoraj vsi se gnetejo na plaži, kot da bi molili vodno boštvo. Vdihavam zgodnje poletje. Seveda, zaželeno je razumeti, videti, kaj kaj pomeni, ampak zdaj se mi zdi, da je bolj pomembno, kakšne so reči po občutku. Žena v kuhinji ropoče s posodo. Posvojila bova otroka. Kopalke me režejo v pas, zdravila so me precej poredila. Je pa neka druga posledica mojega zdravljenja, katere sem lahko bolj vesel. Ne vem kako, ali od zdravil ali od šokov ali kratko malo od tega, da so mi pobrili glavo, ampak nekako so mi na pleši začeli spet rasti lasje. Mehki so in puhasti. Vem, da je zaradi tega moja zgodba cmerava, ampak ne morem pomagati. Sam sem postal cmerav. Meopatija, tako sem sklenil poimenovati te čustvene izlive. Rad si zamišljam tistega moža, meopata, kako sedi v temni sobi in s prstnimi konicami razznava drgetave hliptaje svojih pacientov. In to je to.

Vidim otroka mojega novega soseda. Rjava, temnooka in mršava kukata proti meni izza debla v oljčnem gaju. Mogoče čutita v meni tujost, podobno njuni. Bom še kdaj kaj napisal? Se ima zgoditi še kaj? Z vrtnarjenjem se ne ukvarjam več, a še mi pošepeče drevo, mrmot dežja na listju še roti ali ukazuje. In vejica vzdrhti, oliva cepne, kobilica skoči, luč

autumn, I used to find their indecipherably cracked leaves under the window sill. A rose caught fire in a vase on my bedside table. A dandelion blow-ball looked at me from between the cobblestones of the inner yard. Often I felt the urge to answer, but I neither spoke up, nor laughed, nor cried. One day in November, when my wife quietly sat at the head of my bed, watching my silence, I stumbled upon a queer thought. "I wouldn't have cut my wrists had not a residue within me still believed in the Red Cross," I nearly uttered aloud, surprised not so much by this idea which was just as circumstantial and crazy as everything that crossed my mind during those months, as by the fact that it had managed to make everything so innocent and logical and even joyful. Still mute, I stretched out my hand, grasped my wife's hand, and placed its cup on my shaved head. Its touch was cool and sustained, charging me with a feeling of rising water, and I became aware that I wasn't silent any more. The water had risen up to my eyes and I sat up and cried aloud and she caressed me.

I'm sitting at this makeshift table, covered with a wine-sprinkled tablecloth, my inexperienced forefingers searching for letters on the typewriter. There was no tempest after all. The sun is still setting, but it's not the same one. Two days have passed since I began writing. The house beside the camp is ours, we swapped it for ours with the friend who had helped me set my life in motion. It is peaceful, there are not many campers up here in the afternoon. Nearly everybody is thronging along the beach as if worshipping a water deity. I breathe the early summer. It is desirable, of course, to understand, to grasp the meaning, but I think it's the feeling of things that is more important. My wife is in the kitchen, banging the dishes. We are going to adopt a child. My bathing trunks cut across my waist, I got quite fat from the drugs. Well, there is another aftermath of my treatment that I can be more pleased with. I don't know how, whether from drugs or from the shocks or from the sheer act of having had my skull shaved, but somehow my hair started to grow over the bald spot. It's soft and fluffy. I know it makes my story sappy, but I can't help it. I myself have become sappy. Oeopathy, that's what I've decided to call this outpouring of sentiment. I like to imagine this man, the oeopath, sitting in his dark basement room and deciphering, with fingertips, the shuddering sobs of his patients. And that's all there is to it.

I see the children of my new neighbour. Brown, dark-eyed and skinny, they peep from behind a tree in the olive grove. Perhaps they sense in me a strangeness similar to theirs. Shall I ever write anything else? Is there something else yet to happen? I don't indulge in gardening any more, but still a tree occasionally prompts me, the murmur of the rain on leaves still implores or demands. And a twig shudders, an olive drops, a grasshopper

šine izpod srebrnkastih lističev. Še me kliče nečloveška zemlja: tedaj se vzdignem in stopim nekaj korakov po steptani, skoraj v opeko prežarjeni ilovici. Tla pod bosimi stopali so tako vroča in tako negibna in moja žena pride zdaj iz hiše in objameva se, tako da ji gledam čez ramo v zaliv in prek rta proti naslednjemu in tako naprej, čez zalive in rtiče, vse tja do obnebjja, in ona me boža in mi pravi, da je vse v redu, jaz pa strmim mimo ničelne točke obzorja, sluteč zemeljsko oblost, dokler mi solze ne zameglijo privida.

jumps, the light skips from under the silvery leaves. Still the inhuman earth calls me: I get up and make a few steps over its trampled, cracked surface, sun-baked almost into bricks. The ground under my bare feet is so hot and so still and my wife comes now from the house and we embrace each other so that I gaze over her hair at the bay and beyond the cape towards the next one and so on, over bays and capes, all the way to the horizon, and she strokes me and tells me that everything is all right, while I stare past the zero point of the horizon, sensing the earth's roundness until tears blur my vision.