

HEIMITO VON DODERER

Divertimento No. II

Dedicated to Mote

*Translated by
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1.

Let's entertain our listeners this time by introducing them to Herr Jentsch, a man of thirty-five.

Yes, this is how our life streams onward, like water over a dam; let them hold it fast who can. . Always the last few years grown yet more bright and close and fluid; much can still be altered, shifted of what those years were meant to carry as their names forever. . Even so, the rest a shard, a shred, a sweep, and then suddenly the black void tears open; what had so easily glided, seeped, little by little trickled and gathered has grown so terribly solid; the face of life, till now always looking ahead, abruptly turns the other way, and out of its eyes comes a look no mortal can bear; look here, this was how how your life was; the whole of it anything but provisional: yet once, frozen in its course, there it stays fast in time gone by, more sturdy than a crag on a mountain. . He (Jentsch) had been given everything else, and so he of course had caught these images, too, drifting so quietly past, as they rose up from that place of reposition (whatever one they dwell in); when one sharpens a broken pencil point, for instance, or when there's a terrible smell from the porters lodge, or when one puts on evening wear again; it goes pretty much like this . . .

. . . never mind, just put your heads in the sand a while, though this is the second time tonight I cant make sense of this crap on my salary, who else would be drafting letters for them after hours because the managing director cant write a decent German sentence but never mind, just put your heads in the sand a sand a, veranda right, yes, the big mountain, the Stiftenberg; I wasn't any more than eighteen at the oldest, then we came back down after our hike that room out onto the veranda, nobody else was in the house; Martha . . . To be able to have feelings like that again . . . as if in a new light, a world made a whole different way . . . Id better write more clearly or no telling what nonsense shell slap together tap-tap-tap on her typewriter tomorrow.

And off they float, drawing onward, ever and ceaseless, myriads, a stream, we don't notice them small as they are and at forty a man will think about a pair of purple sock holders he wore when he was fifteen: it all moves quickly; in keeping with hidden laws, everything comes in its right time and then is gone once more.

And there grows up, unfathomable but yet emerging out of these deeper grounds, some thing we know by name, the nameable support and scaffold of a life, and in this growing up there arises a sweetness almost oppressive, as in the face of the bride (here, now, resting on a bench adrift in time) or perhaps a child's head.

Jaroslav Jentsch: thirty-five, married, three children, one girl, two boys; his friends or enemies have of course attached handles to the object, grips to be able to lift it properly whenever occasion arises to talk about it: Jentsch oh yes, the

associate director at Kneipers, really cute children, do you know his wife? ? He's a nice man.

The city sank down deeper into summer, so that men were almost used to walking around with their shirts a little damp all the time. . During this season, Frau Jentsch would be away in the country with the children, in the mountains not too far from Vienna; a little later, Jaroslav's mother-in-law would usually travel out there to be with her daughter. . When Jentsch took this obese and fairly clumsy woman to the train station this time, he became aware of a small detail about himself: his mother-in-law voiced a few words of regret about how he had to stay in the hot city now without Marietta (his wife), without his home-cooked midday meal.

The words shed spoken were still afloat before him as he left the South Station from the departure side and took the burden of the sun's heat back onto his shoulders by stepping out of the shade. . Occurrences that in actuality take place at distinct intervals grow compressed in memory, no longer differentiated as discrete events; instead, one is more likely to be struck by some sporadic departure from the norm hence Jaroslav immediately knew, the instant his mother-in-law commiserated with him in the manner described, that he wasn't taking it the way he'd always done before (half with a friendly attitude, because she was a good woman on the whole, half with the thought, What am I supposed to get out of what you're saying? ? That's why Marietta's out in the country, after all, while I have to stay here by myself!). . He knew more, too he recognized now for the first time that any heed he might have paid to her words the summer before had been purely external.

No, being alone like this in the summertime didn't put him into a bad mood any more; in fact, almost the opposite was the case, so there didn't exist any legitimate claim on his part for sympathy, and he couldn't really respond on the inside to any expression of it.

These kinds of trivial thoughts had put him into a totally absorbed state, and so he'd walked quite a way along the street without really taking notice. . The rest of the afternoon and the whole evening were free now, with no time frame, no obligations; in fact, his work was all finished for the day, which was unusual. . Jentsch crossed the street and went into the garden above the Belvedere. . There was that sheet of water extending to the palace, which opened its wings out left and right as the sun rose up behind it. . Children were there, women on benches, tiny baby carriages gently rolling back and forth, sunshine, and it could be clearly made out that the whole scene was elevated, above the mass of the city. . He just stood there whiling away some time, agitated by nothing, smooth and relaxed, hearing the hum of the street from a distance it was very pleasant. . Then he thought about a few of his friends, some older, some younger singers, actors; Jentsch enjoyed maintaining social contact with groups like these, so distant from his own path in life (he was very well liked in those groups, too; he showed a certain amount of deference, and once in a while he'd let somebody

talk his ear off). . He now decided to go for a walk and later on to visit a particular café; maybe he'd bump into somebody there.

The heavy revolving door swept him into the café, into the green-painted box full of heads and ladies hats; Jentsch stood there, blocking a waiters path. . He turned his ear to all the chatter, disappointed, and began threading his way among the tables, all fully occupied, while looking around to see if maybe a face he knew then somebody tugged his arm. . Turning around, he now realized that he'd been standing the whole time right next to a table at which several of his friends were sitting; they let out a burst of laughter when they saw he'd caught on. . Moost, a singer, picked up an empty seltzer bottle and presented it solemnly to Jaroslav, with a gesture of invitation, as if it were a tankard filled with beer. . Order him a cognac instead, stingy, someone cried. . Jentsch had meantime made a place for himself in the circle around the marble table while the conversation kept breezing and sailing along. . A man about forty, whose temples, fine as parchment, seemed worn away with pensiveness, resumed a talk evidently interrupted earlier he'd been giving about Tiepolo.

Jentsch felt as if he were immersed in oil; nary an obstruction, nary an agitation. . He was awash in a pleasant physical feeling, not a bump anywhere. . He recalled how much pleasure it had always given him as a boy on the ice-skating rink to let the surge, the sweeping motion run its full course down to the slowest possible glide; he didn't seem to be aware, meanwhile, that he'd just leapt back twenty years and produced out of his body a living image from those days. . What he was expecting, however, was that something would step in to give an aim to his restful state of solitude; but nothing did in fact step in, except for some young man he didn't know who emerged through the revolving door with his hands buried deep in his pockets and came walking up to their table. . Jentsch indifferently observed all the greetings and then gave his name, listening with astonishment as he did so to a brief tapping inside his left ear that sounded exactly as if someone were pounding a drum in the distance. . Across the table, people were bending over an illustrated magazine the newcomer had produced. . You should turn that into a novel, Stangler, someone now said to him, but he didn't answer. . I'm telling you, a novel, the first man, with a head like a vulture, started again, and it would go like this a young man and a woman, they've just Oh, shut up, let out Moost. . It was only at this point, though, that everyone actually began paying attention to the topic. . Jentsch suddenly heard someone mention the name of the small town W.; it was his home, the place where he'd spent his childhood, his early youth, and all his free time during his student days. . For the moment, he kept completely silent, not even saying anything when people now began asking, Where is that, anyway? ? Does anybody know? He stayed like a turtle inside its shell, not letting anything draw him out but nonetheless waiting with great alertness. . Not everybody at once that wont work! people were saying as they all bent their heads over the table. . Somebody read it out loud! The man who'd been speaking about Tiepolo before and had

been quite indignant about the interruption now took up the newspaper and began.

Township . . . A Town About To Vanish . . . Disappear. . . The town of W., situated at the lowest point of a valley along a river in the vicinity of etc. etc. . . . , will soon come to lie totally submerged under a reservoir being built for a new electrical power station near N.; the dam, construction of which has just been completed, is located about a half-mile below W.

Its got pictures, too. . . Here's the town the way it used to look. . . Here's the huge wall of the dam; there are some houses, partly under water now; and here they're just getting ready to blow up the church steeple.

Blow up the church steeple? Stangler said, suddenly loud. . . Why would they do that?

Probably so it wont stick out above the water, someone said. . . How do you think that would look?

Incidentally, whatever compensation the people there are getting from the government must add up to quite a tidy sum of money, said the man with the vultures head; then he immediately started sketching the whole story the countryside around W., including the dam on the white table top with a pencil stub. . . All right, now lets draw the steeple just as its toppling down.

Yes, this is how our life streams onward, like water over a dam. . . Now Jentsch got to see those pictures for himself; what stood out most in two of them was his family home owned by strangers for more than ten years now since it was the largest building in town. . . Its white gable cut into the chain of woodland hills behind it. . . Then, next to it, another picture of the house, taken from closer up; a broad strip of water, all smooth and shiny, had made its way into the street. . . Jaroslav suddenly began looking for the shop sign outside the bakery that had so often sweetened his way to school; there it was, or at least it could be detected as a little dot in the picture.

Let them hold it fast who can. . . Something whatever it was was going to have to happen here, very quickly and very soon, but what? ? What was it that was supposed to happen? ? He found something to occupy him for the moment, anyway; he jotted down the name and date of the magazine, doing which showed him that it was almost two weeks old. . . Then in one of the pictures he noticed the veranda and part of that mountain, the Stiftenberg, a high wooded elevation about an hour away from the town.

A shard, a shred, a sweep and then suddenly the black void tears open! ! Jentsch was now thinking very vividly about the enjoyment he used to get from riding now and then in the last car of a railroad train because it was so entertaining to watch how the arms of the signal masts would always lower, dropping to the horizontal position behind the speeding train and barring the route.

To be able to have feelings like that again . . . as if in a new light, a world made a whole different way There was that tapping sound in his left ear again. . When he stepped back out onto the street, already a little darker, everything looked heavy and massive to him, the fronts of the buildings hard, ready to rebuff, the roar of the traffic abruptly peaking, merciless on the ears, the light everywhere as sharp as salt.

The next day began with the managing directors saying to Jentsch, If you'd like to travel out to the country to see your wife, as you were wishing earlier, I don't think there's any reason why you couldn't.

Jaroslav thought vaguely, Now I'm supposed to feel happy, and yesterday at the train station I was supposed to feel a little downcast, but in both cases

What a total mess had set in as of the day before! ! What the hell had actually happened, though? ? He'd been able to get hold of the particular issue of that magazine and was carrying it in his jacket pocket. . And now there was time at his disposal!

Oh God, yes! ! What mass confusion and how had he blundered into it? ? There were certain parts of the city, too, that he definitely didn't know, and streets, perhaps, from which one could look directly out into the countryside. . All of a sudden he was seeing the contour of this countryside, feeling it as keenly as if it were being drawn right through him, as though it were gliding through his hands the round hills close by, though already a good way away from the white house, reaching hazily to the sky, then the wider descent, with nothing shining into it but a sky paler yet; then it rose up once more, too, leading in a slow sweep to the highest elevation, the Stiftenberg; whatever was beyond that was veiled in haze as it reached ever onward. . Right up at the front of this image, though, was that one large rose bush with the blue glass globe.

The children in the City Park were making plenty of noise. . Jentsch rode home now and gave himself permission to do all that needed to be done. . The first time he actually looked up at all was when the train was pulling in and he, Jentsch, was riding away in it not leaving from the South Station, but going in an entirely different direction.

2.

The inn was on an overlook above the valley.

At first there had been only lethargic staring out into a landscape he could not recognize, its main feature a mighty curving wall of bright-colored masonry cutting on a level plane through the valley with its broad meadows. . But he grew confused when he turned his glance elsewhere; it ranged across a lake that was pushing everything away to the edge, making everything into a shoreline, all the way across to the windows and the roof ridges that were protruding, all sunlit, from the middle of the water. . Immediately beyond it, his eye confronted this or that section of hillside, and then, in an instant, that eye of his and his heart, too were besieged; as it stood there against the horizon, this landscape coalesced, resumed its familiar face, and all these heights that were his homeland came surging toward Jaroslav, all of them at once.

When he stood at the opposite end of the room, nothing shone through the open windows but the pale sky. .

Two paces forward, though, and the round hills closer by though already a good way off were climbing upward, reaching hazily to the sky; then the wider descent, which then rose up once more, too, leading in a slow swelling to the highest elevation, the Stiftenberg; whatever was beyond that was veiled in haze as it reached ever onward.

Three more paces forward, pressed right up against the window, and it was all standing there facing him; none of it as puzzling as the landscape, to be sure, but separated from him, as if under glass, unable really to register with him that masonry wall, that lake, this whole vicinity now half covered with water; that large white house out there, standing in the lake. . And he comprehended nothing and was void and empty and had expected it to be different, more beautiful and more terrible.

He had rented a boat for two days.

The shoreline; then the sun-bright shield of water, a surface for the eye to glide along; now he was driving himself distracted over on the other side about isolated details; then turned back, tired, and became subject to the encircling barrier of the masonry wall, so massively present as it loomed over the reservoir and utterly closed off the distance.

The shoreline; no reeds and rushes, though, but only the hillsides of a meadow now submerged, a meadow plunged underwater with all its grass, accustomed to feeling the sun; a narrow border of water; no, not the edge of the woods, then a swamp, and at last a view that suddenly opens out onto an inviting tract of water instead, the woods had been laid low here, cleared all the way up to a particular boundary line, though still belonging wholly to the forest in the steam of woodland smells and the crackling heat of the blow no, the surface of the lake pushed its way in abruptly. . Chips of wood floated all along the edge.

The boat grew light and pushed off, but the oars got stuck, and Jentsch made his way along a short curve back to shore.

He just stayed sitting there, on the meadow that went plunging underwater, disappearing right there in front of him, just as it was; he could still see the grass for a little way below the surface. . The heat was intense, but Jaroslav still needed a long time before deciding to take a swim in the water, even though it was so clear. . Then he lay down on the shore; the caress of the sun's hand awakened his body to feelings of contentment, and so the warmth shifted just a little to meet an utter stillness that was standing so near it, here at this fixed and rigid lakeshore, as if in a world made a whole different way. . With lingering tones a faraway flute filled all the sun-drenched space over the lake; Jentsch had never heard anyone playing the ocarina here in earlier times, had he? ? It was as if this monotonous sound were being made expressly for him. . His heart took new courage and went no more adrift than did the boat from the bank.

Late in the afternoon, though, almost as it was getting toward evening, his boat was finally sailing along, circling around the midpoint of the lake, gradually making its way closer and closer in.

Hands on the oars, always on the oars, just keep busy, his bent lower back already feeling the unaccustomed effort on this lake with no fish, no aquatic plants. . As if under the force and the spell of that gigantic wall towering over him, he tenses his arms and glides along its length, his little boat not venturing too close. . This life of his (per-haps to speak in its own defense?) is now gathered before the wall, and certainly not just for dreaming; after all, everything from earlier, from out there on the outside, is lying on the ground like a little, torn-off, dust-covered strip of something! ! Indeed, the wall fell across the valley like a powerful signal mast, closing off the route and the distance.

Now, however, as he looked across the way, the white gable was cutting into the chain of woodland hills behind it: first the round hills close by, though already a good way away from the white house, reaching up hazily into the evening sky, then the descent, and beyond it a last gentle upswell and rise. . Closer by, as dusk more and more began softening all the other contours and ridges, the stiffness of the shape opposite him also yielded more and more, a shape unfathomable, before which he, Jaroslav Jentsch, was standing or, here in the moving boat, sitting but unable to grasp anything whatever, vacant, as if with his nose flat up against a wall, and let them hold it fast who can.

In the midst of it all, where is life occurring? ? A totally abrupt decision made by his muscles alone a most resolute, independent motion gave the pointed end of the boat a vehement turn toward the middle of the lake, with which it was directly facing the moon rising behind the round hilltops. . The moon. . The full moon; it hadn't been back there, back in the city.

Growing ever more radiant, its darkness fleeing ever more off into the distance, the landscape now unfolded, newly brought forth in birth and transformed

whereas it had nearly trickled away earlier in the gathering dusk now unfolded like a bright mantle opening around a tall figure; the white house was standing almost twice as high, as if it had just now reared itself up, as if until now it had been kneeling or squatting.

He headed straight toward it, steering right into the first street of the town.

A quick jab of fear, a chill down his spine, but he pushed it firmly away. . Quite naturally the shutters and window frames had been removed almost everywhere here; left and right, against the walls in the narrow little street, the boat made waves that now, as they went through the empty window openings, were breaking with a loud splash inside the houses. . Undressed houses and where are all those people now, he thought vaguely. . There were corners into which children had once been sent as a punishment: maybe, as a boy, someone had drawn little men somewhere, down where only small children can reach, three feet off the ground, and maybe they'd stayed there the whole time, and the someone might be forty today, but those little men come back into his mind now she wishes the water were gone.

As he turned forward in the boat now, the white house with its gable towered almost up to the sky.

Then there was a little square, a more open expanse of water filled with moonlight, yes, with moonlight. . What else was left? ? The covered veranda was totally under water by now, along with the ground floor, but above it there was a large platform, a kind of terrace with stair steps, and that was exactly the spot his heart was craving now; that was the veranda onto which his room had opened. . There was the room he'd lived in during the summers back then, when he was a student.

He docked by the stairs; the water reached almost up to the flat surface above. . He disembarked with quite a bit of effort and caution (less agile than a Venetian gondolier, was what occurred to him just then) and tied the boat fast by its line to the stone railing. . Then he took a few unsteady steps.

So now here. . What madness, he thought suddenly, and then he tried to ponder those words, but it was like talking to a wall; there wasn't the slightest reaction. . The moment at which he might have been able to push all this off to the side had now trickled away. . He stood up and turned around. . In the shadows of the streets, the water was often so dark that a person might not even have seen it, might have thought it right out of existence.

Veranda . . . yes, over there, that's the Stiftenberg . . . what amazing nights those were . . . but it started . . . when did it start, though? ? I know! ! It was a summer afternoon; earlier wed been up on the Stiftenberg together . . . of course! ! The house was completely empty . . .

Images from those days now rose up before him, ones he had hardly ever either banished or named in his conscious awareness. . Images rose up, newly fledged, as if they had no skin. . Now here she was, coming down the stairs, white, pressed into the darkness, moving along the wall in the sharp shadow of the moon, and then he was welcoming this assenting spirit, this divinely warm and

wavering woman, with his arms and with his mouth, as it found hers and closed over it . . . oh, once more, just one more time, to be able to have feelings like that again, as if in a new light, a world made a whole different way!

The masonry wall in the moonlight, a heavy arm fallen across the valley: let them hold it fast who can.

Then he decided all of a sudden to walk through the house; he turned on his flashlight and stepped first into the room that had once been his. . Nothing completely bare, scratches and scrape marks, trash, dirt. . He began stepping up his pace, hurrying past rooms now missing their doors, rooms all suffused with moonlight. . Finally he came to a stop, in a gabled room upstairs; he just stood there at the window; he just stood there, and then it was over.

The lake, the sheet of light, the swelling of the hills, the light in his room, everything so bright, days and nights all in heaps, Christmas and the first signs of spring. . A candle, a book with a blue binding, the rooftops, the moon.

It was over; he went back downstairs. . What am I worried about? ? How does this concern me anyway? ? What madness! ! He turned off the flashlight and went out the door onto the terrace.

Hello? called a clear voice.

His eyes released a bright shape from the moonlight. . That face then he took a firm stride toward it, but he couldn't bring out the cry Martha! Only her face was standing before him. . Her own cry of recognition stayed stuck in her throat as well.

They stood three paces apart and stared at one another.

Sharply etched in the moonlight, every shape around them was staring the water, a sheet of light; the deep steel grey of the streets a heavy arm fallen across the valley: let them hold it fast who can.

But then suddenly she made a womanly movement, a beatific movement, coming up to him and saying, so softly, so simply, Is that really you, Jaro?

Yes, he said, its me, still listening all the while, though, only for the sound of her voice; it had really been as if, amid huge boulders and slabs of ice, he had suddenly heard a faraway flute.

3.

They stayed standing there, each with a shadow that lay sharp on the white stone paving, but they soon enough atomized the astounding shape of her movement and conformed themselves very well indeed to it and blunted its contours, which were soon opposing them with less of a cutting edge. . Using the one means remaining to them here, they got through their plight they grew used to it and brought it down to their level, down where their watches ran. . She laughed brightly when the question escaped him, like an involuntary movement, How did you get here, and today of all days? She said she could give a simple account of herself, all right, but wasn't she entitled, after all, to ask him the same, but with even more astonishment?

So he soon heard all about the whys and wherefores. . Her boat was tied up right next to his, and he helped her unload two baskets filled with food and wine. . An Evening Night in Venice to him, that had an altogether provincial ring; tonight was the second time they were using their inundated little corner of the world for an *al fresco* meal on the water by night, complete with singing, guitar music, and boats decked out with colored lanterns. . Dancing, too, no less what they did, she told him, was dance right here on the terrace to the sounds of the gramophone. . No doubt these people considered that highly romantic and original. . An Evening Night in Venice not long before, in the neighboring little town of N., this delightful, original, romantic idea had been brought up for consideration, apparently by a couple of those *maîtres de plaisir*, those total heartbreakers or party boys one can always find in a provincial town.

So now he was hearing all about it. . I have to tell you I mean you have no idea how madly wonderful this is; the most delightful thing I could ever imagine, she added. . Madly wonderful, is it? thought Jaroslav. . Its pretty much just a coincidence that I showed up by myself tonight, she chattered on. . I was taking a little boat ride on the lake anyway I'm just mad about doing that alone in the moonlight but this time I was finished my ride way too early. . Oh, and by the way, I guess everybody else will be arriving soon; we got started at ten o'clock the last time, too. He had entirely forgotten, incidentally, that shed been married for years and living over in N.; her husband was just now on a business trip for some weeks, and the evenings in Venice were in full bloom.

She suggested they go into the gabled room to keep a lookout, and now she was fluttering ahead of him, all in white, through the rooms, fluttering and chirping away. . The thought finally came clear to him that it would be ridiculous impossible, even -- to advise the expected arrivals that they were trespassing on private property. Whose property was this house now, anyway? ? Certainly not his. . More hazy ideas of the same kind were going through his head as he stepped behind her into the moonlight flooding the gabled room, but at that very moment he was able to see completely through her light clothing; the moon, with its shamelessly sharp, cold light, picked out and highlighted her body, lifted all covering away from her. . There there they are! she happily called, waving

her arms, and already they could hear music. . He was still standing behind her all this time; suddenly he was shaken by a fierce bout of rage as he thought of this masculine miscellany that had come here for enjoyment.

Oh, look! ! Come look! He stepped up to the window and stood next to her. . The lake was bright with colors in several places, patches of color that quivered on the water and were drawn out slowly. . There; over there! He turned to the other window; there, one of the streets was undergoing a complete change, indeed a transformation, flooded with color and parted by a wide vessel brimming over with colored lanterns. . They went hurrying down to it now. . More boats had arrived from another direction, and they were all tied up at the terrace. . The water was coming up to the square in waves; green and red shimmered on the moon-metal surface.

The twang of strings arises from the disrupted streets, all asplash with waves. . A whitewashed wall is blazing red, as if aflame.

Grown men, young lads, girls, and women everything light and bright, plus they'd brought plenty of wine, and even tables. . Now the gramophone was blaring; the music took hold of their limbs and set them all dancing. . Here the shattered moonlight kept staring at a wall, there it went drifting away on distant sheets of water. . The choppy dance steps . . . he wanted to talk with her about all this . . . his heart was in his mouth, but her face was completely sure, and she was at rest in her partners arms, untouched by anything. . The moon was making a square cutout of her movements; her spike heels were clicking on the stone.

Am I stark raving mad? Jaroslav suddenly thinks, as his glance now ranges along and beyond a street that's remained empty and dark.

The wall! ! The wall! ! They're dancing in front of the wall. . What if they're all dead people dancing here? The looming shape of the masonry wall stretched across the valley like a dragon in the moonlight; it closed off everything else; it had come dropping down and would stay fallen there forever, a mighty bolt.

Has the water risen much higher since the last time? asked someone standing on the stairs.

Lets see I took notice to it before. . Yes, by a step and a half. . Well then, I guess this will be our last picnic; after all, its hardly even rained in the past few weeks. Then suddenly his glance went back to her, and behind it came flashes of that revealing image from the gabled room. . Now, amid the braying and the squawking from the gramophone, he had her in his arms; he could feel how her shape had grown fuller, but he also believed that her youthful body was still inside the one he was holding now, as it were, only tucked away and hidden yes, just as the flood waters were surging, layer by layer, over everything here, so also layers had spread themselves over this coarser face of hers. . Even so, everything the last few hours had brought to the fore was now slipping away from him; it was painful to feel it happening, but there was nothing he could do to make it stop. . So, at this moment, he was just simply dancing on the terrace here, nothing else.

But then, in the dark room nearby the moonlight changing the shape of it at whim, squaring it off, carving it up, picking out this, locking up that in twice-dark night he could feel her warmth, and he sank down into the feeling as into a bath, his head buried on her breast. . Then somehow she was jostled up against him but the music soon sucked the few people who'd come into the room right back out. . He felt for her hand. . Martha . . . They made their way deeper into the house, to the stairs leading to the gabled room; he was running away from everything, taking flight, hurtling in a direction that he knew to be no direction at all, but merely a fervently willed outbreak of nonsense. . He seized on every means that presented itself: Martha you're the only one it was the real thing, the right thing, the only thing, really and truly. Now he was even kneeling before her, but the very next minute they were kissing ravenously, obsessively. . Outside! ! We have to go outside! she panted. . You have to dance with all the other girls now, one after another, but not with me; you cant believe what kind of gossip . . . Tomorrow night, Martha? ? Here, at the same time . . . Yes, Jaro, she said softly, but very distinctly and sharply, Ill come then.

He kept drinking wine, glass after glass, and was now hardly able to tell one face from another, all the while dancing with some girl or woman in his arms. . The gramophone pounded the beat all the way through his skull into the small of his back; the whole gleaming sheet of water was swaying, along with the town in all its colors atop it the red of the lanterns and the chalk-white rectangle here, on which all of them, more or less inebriated by now, were reeling about, as the masks of the moonlit houses with the empty sockets of their windows went swaying, too.

Intermezzo

The next day the landscape had once more been set out into the summer warmth. . Chips of wood were floating motionless all along the edge of the water, where it made its way into the woods; not a leaf was stirring. . The round hilltops reached hazily up to the sky.

Jentsch, a tiny figure, was standing down at the bottom on the valley side of the masonry wall, which thrust up toward the sky in its rectangular height, observing it with his tilted head bent all the way to the back of his neck. . It was hot and dry here. . High above him, the projection around the top of the wall constantly jutted out on all sides; every white cloud drifting by was confronted with its ochre-yellow mass. . Left and right it rolled away in endless breadth, turning in a gentle curve.

He thought about the dam breaking.

It would be all over then, before one breath could be drawn and released; as if a giant meteor had struck, everything would be over and done, in one single, downrushing wave as smooth as glass.

Meanwhile, the wall jutted mightily upward and held; it held the whole surface of the lake, on which (Jentsch was actually feeling it now!) the white house,

along with the whole surrounding area, along with his anticipation of the coming night, was afloat. . Yes, afloat; the wall held it all; it closed off routes and distances; but without it, none of that would be even imaginable.

The wall.

4.

The sheen on the surface of the lake paled away as evening came on, as mist came drifting into the landscape. . Later on, amid utter silence, an amazingly large moon climbed up behind the round hilltops; no chorus of frogs came to greet it, but now the lake once more arched like a gleaming shellpiece of armor, and behind the wide descent the far vista was radiant and pure.

Two boats put off from the shoreline, one on the near side and one on the far side of the lake.

Jentsch tied his boat up at the terrace and hurried into the gabled room to look out. . Right away he caught sight of her little rowboat, a small, dark lump in the surfeit of moonlight, and then he soon recognized the outline of her body as she sat working the oars, rowing steadily she was striving to reach him. . He couldn't resist waving to her with his handkerchief; now her tiny white wave was fluttering back from her craft.

He rushed downstairs and out into the flood of moonlight. . Here was her boat coming rounding around the corner already, with a sweeping sound as it come gliding up; she was sitting turned away, rowing with the swing of her last few oar strokes right up to the steps, to these very steps which he wanted at this very moment to go rushing down except that they were now under water. . It had reached the top stepone and splashed over it; the water was right near the edge of the flat surface. . The terrace pounded smooth by the moonlight, extremely bright, even as if at white heat; their two sharp-etched shadows blended into one. . They burrowed deep into their embrace, and yet, quite to his surprise, the world around him didn't melt away; no, there she was, but at this moment he even knew what was standing behind and beside him; he was picturing it but at the same time found what he was doing unnatural. . And now possibly for the very first time it was completely clear to him that such a melting away of all the world around him was an intrinsic, necessary component of an embrace like this, but not the kinds of afterimages, whooshing away so rapidly, that he had about him -- his mother-in-laws commiserating with him at the train station, though but there didn't exist any legitimate claim on his part for sympathy, so he couldn't really respond on the inside to any expression of it . . . the weight of the sun on the square . . . the managing director at Kneipers saying to Jentsch, If you'd like to travel out to the country, I don't think there's any reason why you couldn't. . . . Now I'm supposed to feel happy . . . What an indescribable situation; the moon, how beautiful, God how beautiful she is here . . . There came a brief tapping inside his left ear that sounded exactly as if someone were pounding a drum in the distance.

His tenderness grew twice as intense; he pressed her into his arms and was swept away. . This is the most wonderful moment of my whole life . . . oh, how long it takes to get to the real thing, the only thing that matters. Before him he now saw, as it had been revealed to him up there in the gabled room, the shape whose darker core the moon had picked out and highlighted, lifting her away

from her all coverings, which were now being consumed in their bright glow, as if at white heat. . They climbed into a single boat the two of them in one, now and he took had the oars. . They went gliding through these empty streets and onto the lake. . Walls aglow in moonlight stood facing them and then dropped past and away, dissolving into pieces of shadow, and the parted surface of the water, set in motion, scattered its metal into flickering flakes of light; now the water surged out into the open, smooth and motionless. . Jaroslav let the oars drop, following where the vista bid him go. . Still, his eye could not grasp what he was seeing; for him, her form was greater than the whole landscape sinking down into the nearer darkness and emerging again in the radiant glow farther off; the aspect of the sweeping hills on the horizon was not resolving did not resolve into anything he knew. . The round hills close by; the wider descent; beyond it the slow sweep upward all of it enfolded in itself. . God knew what was in her eyes, though, in this womans eyes the moon?

Now they stepped once more onto that flat surface gleaming white, that stage of their love from the night before, not so very far behind it, as they looked past the deep shadows of a street, the wall stretching across the valley in the moonlight. . They unloaded all sorts of things from the boat tonight: a basket filled with food and wine, lanterns, and more their shadows flitted busily back and forth. . Where are we taking all this? She led the way into that room next to the terrace; only the moon had patterned it so far, but now it was filling up with restless light. . Whats that? Jaroslav suddenly cried. . Dont tell me you dont remember, she said laughing, thats from back in those times days; its that old bench that was your hideaway you used to lounge on; you used to call it your best friend. They couldnt remove it, because its bolted down or built into the wall, or something like that.

A massive, wide bench in the bay window, practically a platform or a rostrum, the leather all worn.

No, he said, I didnt even notice it; Id forgotten all about it.

His wide bench to rest on his; for who else was it, who was it other than himself, after all, who used to lie here, his glance ranging over the high crowns of the trees, fixed in summertime itself as it came near and stood so close to the house? ? Who was it other than himself? ? What open days this veranda that had summoned him to step out onto it, to look around and see in how many directions the landscape and the wide world spread out. . Then he stretched out his arms and bent his head back. . And the landscape met a glance that had no aim, so it enfolded that glance completely and drew it through its whole wandering aspect, the round hills close by. . And as he stood there, he swept his flashlight over this window bench as if looking for something.

There a face cut with a dull edge into the wooden frame; a funny face, eyes crossed, mouth wide open, a little man.

There the letter J, and right next to it an M.

There she was, walking down the stairs along the wall, white, pressed into the darkness, in the sharp shadow of the moon, as if in a new light, a world made a whole different way.

Hello! called a clear voice from the veranda. . Come down!

He started; he thought she was still standing right here next to him . . . hed completely forgotten . . . suddenly he saw two such bright figures here.

Wait! she called up to him. . Here comes Now for the the surprise.

Outside, the gramophone started playing dance music.

For a moment he could feel his brain moving inside his head. . He leapt over the threshold, as if over a barrier, into the flood of light. . While she stood there, the moon wrapped itself around her body from behind. . The music boomed out in full sound from the large record player a drawn-out dance number with humming and soft little whoops and some kind of rattling. . Now he could feel her body, and they glided right into the music, dancing away.

Dancing in front of the wall but now he found it charming. . He had no choice but to find it so; what was there left to object to! ! The moon! ! Martha! ! This veranda! ! And then there came such a great, warm support to uphold it all; there was no more parting them as they let theat clockwork out there keep running for its own sake, while the dance music kept on playing. . Soon they didnt even hear it any more, noticed nothing that had to do with cutting short or breaking off.

*Dome-shaped, night stands
over the loving, the glad
the huge wall holds
all who now make themselves sad
you know the one, the wall
that has the thanks of all*

What a stupid poem that is! came the voice of the managing director at Kneipers. . No, thats not a stupid poem, but youre a jackass. . Its not a poem at all, in fact; its a practical object for everyday use, retorted Jaroslav, wildlyfiercely infuriated. . And if you dont mind, please be careful with your scissors . . . Damn it, wont you try to grasp how dangerous my situation is? (It seems he doesnt understand me any more not at all or he doesnt want to understand me, just because Ive turned into a little side street, and through a tiny little door I cut for myself out of a sheet of newspaper.)

Well, it just wasnt a good idea for me to drift so far away; I cant even see her any more, high up there, very small but white, beautiful, in this new light, in this world made a whole different way. . Now shes climbingoming up steps while and Im going down them . . . in these chalk-white streets. . Ive made my mind up; Im not buying candy here any more, not even if they had re were ten ten shop signs outside the bakery!

A tapping sound and a ringing in his ears.

Nonetheless, how sweet is the the fluid movement of the limbs, of the loosened hair the streaming.

Get rid of the paper scissors! ! Damn it all! ! No, the managing director should just leave the wall alone. . I admit I turned off a second time, Im now in another side street, and yes, I have to get back out of here before

Lord God, theres nothing I can do, its dissolving just like sugar, streaming onward just dont let me have to die in some little side street, please dont.

Just at this very moment, however, was when he sensed that something insidiously earnestcunningly serious was being played out oh, these chalk-white houses! ! And

*This face whose sight
no mortal can endure
and mask of wall
the distance to immure*

I have to tell you, the managing director said, those poems arent going to get you anywhere. help you one bit.

No, whimpered Jentsch, because that was none other than evil falseness itself in the dim light behind it all he could clearly see the bones through the bright, white coverings over the body, even though he didnt dare lift his glance. . He knew now that he was lost now, and he screamed like a raving madman as the dam now really did break, with a huge roar, the single, downrushing wave, smooth as glass, wanting to take him away with it, for always, forever.

He started up and stared wildly into the daylight that had created this room anew; the re was no more tapping tapping in his ear had gone away, but there came a muffled rumbling, repeated that came back right away, stronger, jostling his heart . . . and then, in his undefinedindefinite fear, he of course looked for the other human being, and so the bundle under the blankets again took shape and meaning in his mind. . Was she really lying awake, her head raised, looking at him?

Whats going on? he managed to say.

What do you mean? ? What was all that horrible yelling about? You gave me a terrible punched me something terrible!

Something struck the floor with a sharp blow.

There! ! Whats that?

Oh, thats nothing to worry about. . Its been going on for a while now. . An engineer told me its from all these pieces of wood that were glued down but then came loose over time, and now theyre popping up, especially now, because the waters just below us, right under the flooring, thats why the pounding is so loud. . Theres no danger, though! ! HeThat man told me this house was so solidly built it would last forever; itll stay standing under water for a hundred years. . Ill bet youre afraid.

No, he said. . Nonsense.

But then why were you yelling so loud in your sleep, just right now, before you woke up, and lashing out in every direction?

It was because I . . . Hed been about to say, Because I couldnt stay there in the side street, but it was all slipping away from him already and was making no sense whatever, not even to himself, and like a flash he thought, Am I speaking a new language?

They stared at one another. . Both their faces looked like turnips at this early morning hour, after such an uncomfortable night. . He started listening all of a sudden and looking at the gray-white rectangle of the door; now he grasped the meaning of that constant trickling, drippingsprinkling sound. . It was raining. . She seemed to be following his train of thought, because she nodded her head, her mouth drawn up in a bitter expression or a kind of sneering satisfaction (he was noticing it for the first time!); what she was doing by her nod and her turning down the corners of her mouth was drawing the grayness and the sadness inside him fully out into the light of day, nailing it up, and pointing to it with rebuke.

It even seemed to him now as if, inside her understanding, she was jeering at him with a wink.

He couldnt stand what she was doing; it was incomparably more distressing to him than her earlier Ill bet youre afraid. He quickly slipped out of the covers and went over to the window bench, grew startled at the kind of clothes he had on and the state they were in (her glance resting on him the whole time); he put himself to rights and moved two or three steps away from her. . Only now did he meet her glance.

It kept on raining steadily. . Daylight had now broken fully and was standing in the room, revealing the blank walls.

Two strands of hair in particular were now hanging down in her face, now drained of blood; two strands from this mop of hair, all tumbled about from sleep. But; but what he couldnt take was too much about this about this face was that her cheeks were sagging like jowls little pouches, even though this was, after all, the face of a young woman thats right eyes, like jowls little pouches.

Right now youre not exactly a pretty sight, she suddenly said, after a long silence, and she brushed back her hair.

What? ? What are you saying? Jaroslav cried, growing totally bewildered. . What a place of sheer torture! ! Oh for a release . . . in a new light, in the . . . there, it rose up for the space of a single breath and beamed on shone down on him suddenly, like sunlight; and with astonishment he saw; it had all remained unhurt, was all there behind him . . . it was gone!

Oh good, theres still some sherry, she said, upending the bottle, tilting her head back, and drinking.

This was terrible, though understandably disgusting and therefore easier to deal with. . She looked back at him. . He was standing there, standing

Yes, that's how you are she grew somewhat more cheerfully you and all the rest of them.

What do you mean?

You men. Period.

Now watch, though! Our Jaroslav Jentsch, before letting himself just simply be massacred, as it were, was still able to leap over the barrier, or rather to trample it down, and not badly, either, in quite good style.

You're very smart, and you're right, he cried out needlessly loud; he had to compact a tremendous aggregate of strength behind these words so as to be able to bring them out at all, which was why there was now too much of a good thing. . Keep going, though; follow the battle cry. . Charge her! ! Kiss her hard! ! Eyes. . Mouth. . A couple of blankets went flying off to the side and now it all dissolved like sugar! ! The limbs, the streaming! ! Night opened up again for a few moments, proffered its great, warm support; and now everything was good and calm

*Dome-shaped, night stands
over the loving, the glad
the huge wall holds
all who now make themselves sad*

And now there came a good, hard rumbling and a real drumming sound from under the floor!

This time, however, her face couldn't conceal the effect these sounds had on her. . They were still lying, fled deep into their embrace, but now she lifted her head, startled, and listened.

What an unpleasant language this is, though, he said very clearly, at the same time wondering over these peculiar words of his. . He closed his eyes and pressed his face into her breasts; just then, what flashed through his head was, We all just have to stick together and help one another out. . This is terrible! ! What's going to happen now, happen to her?

Let me go, she said very clearly, pried herself completely free of his embrace, and looked all around. . He sat up now, too.

The full daylight was shining right on it a shallow very thin layer layer of water had seeped over the threshold and was, licking its way into the room like a tongue being extended stuck out.

Jaroslav broke down. Let it just go now; he couldn't hide anything any more. Exhaustion welled up inside him in a flash, like a narcotic, and struck him down. So they simply sat there without a word; their bodies, their arms and legs included, developed a punctilious, precise caution about abstaining from contact.

The water, she said.

He looked, openly dejected, down at the floor and saw something there, but he said not a word.

Here and there came a glint between the floorboards; by now the wetness was already seeping through. Then, hardly three steps away from him, there was a low, quick gurgling and bubbling.

Lets get out of here. Pack everything up, she said; every word seemed to sap her strength. He at once did as he was bidden, making no answer. Soon thereafter, though, and with great suddenness, words filled up his mouth, and he began talking: Listen, you have to understand . . . there are side streets . . . but then he fell silent again, and she just dismissed him. Side streets what was that supposed to mean, anyway, damn all these side streets, he thought, tired and in a blur. So they stepped out into the day, their feet in water now, since it was already spread in a thin layer over the whole terrace; she pushed him gently away as he tried to carry her to her boat. They both got in, one to a boat.

The mighty wall, the huge embankment beyond the rain over the valley, past the houses in the water they keep the roofs hanging in air. To you Ive returned, you wide vista, you landscape, and you too suddenly turn your back!

Nonetheless, the two little rowboats draw onward yet, side by side for a time, but now, when she makes to turn off, he practically leaps over into her boat, and indeed his face appears to move in very close to hers; it is a mask now shattered by the sorrow of this moment. She takes the hand hes holding out over the edge of his boat and hers, over the widening gap of water between them; she takes the hand, and her features, too, like his, are now beaming like sunlight for the space of a single breath, while their hands part.

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