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Minus Sapiens

Translated from Croatian by Andrea Rožić

There is blood running from my mouth, but it is not mine. Or it is my blood, but it is not my mouth. There are feelings, unrelated to each other, swarming somewhere inside me, or somewhere even farther, if they are feelings at all and not something else; they are too strong and they rip at my heart, if it is a heart, some of them mine, some belong to others, but I do not know where they are coming from and how they came to be. Yet, only a few thoughts dwell in my head, and I bet at least half of them are not mine, or they are mine but they spring from two different heads. I am not sure whether I still have all my teeth, nor whether my entire head is still standing on my shoulders, perhaps I have already lost them in this new country. All that perchance remains of me has moved and is being pieced together and rebuilt by a method unfamiliar, new and long-forgotten. As if death once again stepped in to save me.

Immediately after the explosion, pieces of the sky burst into flames, like a tomb with hundreds of billions of souls scattering from it, but as they approached the ground, they began to peter out, and now, having cooled down, they are piling up at the side of the road like magnolia petals. The sound of the explosion, deafening at first, gradually turned into a scream, but my ears, or maybe my mouth, resonate with the chirrup of, I would say, giant birds. When I play it in my head, it sounds as if you placed the needle of a record player on a disc made of stone, but when I replay the chirrup backwards in my memory, I hear the strangest conversation of birds I have ever heard. Persians may have listened to more immodest birds, but I have not. They speculate without any shame that our entire universe is an assassination of an unknown target outside the universe, an explosion, but one that is still going on, as if hesitant. The comparison was served to them on a platter so they conclude the universe is an inflation of Hamlet's famous soliloquy, his glitch, infinitely enlarged, while Hamlet himself is, in turn, as we all know, nothing more than a glitch, a mistake, an error of reason in the

*very moment of its mature manifestation. Why, these birds have a sense of humour, too, and I bet the Persian ones did not. As far as I know, a special kind of bacteria creates and transmits truth, and birds are free to spread misunderstandings, sorrow, deceits or tragedies, without anybody having to believe them. Birds, as they say, are just farting in the wind. It is not easy singing an aria while you are playing the saxophone.*¹*

While the birds were talking, I thought I heard, though behind them, or deep in their shadow, another voice, perhaps human, perhaps, artificial, which seemed to be having a telephone conversation with someone. At first I could not make out anything, but after playing the entire conversation over in my memory, at least ten times by now, I am convinced that I understand perfectly what the mysterious voice is saying. Right after you die, the voice is relating to someone on the other side, they ask you which word you want to be buried in. Most people choose a word that bears some power or importance to them, often the name of their child, wife, mother, or the words god, life, happiness, house, light, forest, river, night, morning, but so far, miraculously, only one person has chosen to be buried in the word pilgrim.

The sky simmered down and became as smooth as oil and all the debris had already fallen to the ground. Propelled from the explosion, I am dirty, bloody, eyes stitched in pixels, while an entire world made up of collapses, glitches and errors lies before me. You don't have to do everything yourself, my ex-wife, whose name I no longer remember, used to tell me, the future will also lend a hand.

Langley's one-eyed spectre shows me, as if drawing a picture in my head, the petals by the side of the road, purple on the outside, white on the inside. Or perhaps, they aren't there at all. Only girders of a bridge remain in the distance, nothing else. Rocks covered in lichen, mould growing on strands of moss. The road suddenly rises, as if climbing up a cherry tree, connecting to the bridge in a single leap, while the bird excrement on its bricks, illuminated by the sun, shines like metal. The drawing in my head is not too clear, it is more like a smell, and it is entirely possible that Langley has shown me something else.

Langley's spectre tells me, if I understand him correctly with the pieces of my

¹ For the transcript of the conversation of birds, see the end of the book.

brain, that it is not often the case that someone's ideal in life is an indigo-coloured door. It is even more rare, I think to myself, for someone to be guided their entire life by the way a staircase banister is decorated with hazelnut-shaped iron buttons, as it might be the case with someone whose feather-clad spectre I have also been meeting more often recently. I have spent my entire life guided by the scent I always kept fresh in my memory, despite the fact that I have never managed to discover where and when I first sensed it. I call it the scent of violets, yet its very origin and complex composition cannot, by any means, be reduced to violets, though there is, undoubtedly, a certain close connection to real violets. Perhaps it is the scent we experience when, in a stuffy, damp space, we remember violets from our childhood, rather than actually smelling them, or maybe it is the smell of the space in which something extremely important happened, probably something tragic, and in all the commotion, someone accidentally stepped on some violets. In all my life, I have never experienced anything more important than that smell. It was like a scream ripping the sky in the distance, a sound you keep following, trying to decipher what exactly it is saying. When I try to imagine a space around this scent, maybe because of the words I have attributed to it, I only manage to discern a fragment of the shrubbery, supported by grass, and a few flowers, their indigo-violet colours, as Langley would say, precisely in that moment lit by a tiny match of sunrise, and then the stems and the leaves, imbued with viscous moisture rising not from the space but from the fabric of time. I believe this scent is the reason I have never had any luck with human emotions. I had to keep inventing new ones in order to understand the old ones in a new translation. Just as you might claim no one would be able to understand Homer until the advent of the science-fictional 22nd-century people whose feelings would finally explain what the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* had been about all along. Only future words, new translations, will be able to explain what the ancient original said. At present, no one knows what we will be called one day and what these words will reveal about who we had really been.

Here they will call me Gilgame. Marquis de Gilgame, even. They used to call me Herzog. Back then, I made films, real films that flickered like birds on the edge of the human field of vision. The people and the spectres in my life had fused into a thick, virtually impenetrable, dark forest, yet when I came closer, just like in Baker's description of a walk through a real forest, they would start to sway, letting me pass through, so that suddenly I could not touch any of them, caress them or offer a kind word, because each of them was a solitary oak or an elm, casting a completely private shadow over the wide space around them. One day, when I had almost got used to the lonely walks among these

trees, for no reason at all and without making any fuss, I changed my life, ridding myself of the old spectres and their weathered furniture; I left that haunted house, my wife and daughter, and became that unknown person just rushing into the airport, one of those people who have an all-point bulletin issued on them saying “If you do not recognize this man, notify the police immediately”. While we were shooting *Fitzcarraldo*, people wanted to shield me from what they thought was my madness and kept advising me that if only I cut the scene from the script with the transportation of the steamship across the mountain then everything would be fine. I also mentioned this in my journal of the making of *Fitzcarraldo*, which I released as a farewell to that world, an exorcistic showdown with the old spectres. I fanatically defended Fitzcarraldo and his madness, but without a second thought, I had given up on myself. For decades after that, I became something which I should not speak a word of. But then, at one point, I discarded not only myself, but also my space and my time, once again becoming someone else. A 500-year-old man. A marquis. And wherever I went, spectres, both old and new, followed. Space and time, when they die, become spectres, why, even children know that, yet very few people know that spectres precede life, that space and time start out dead, then become spectres, and only in the end become alive. Just as a real astrologist, though these are hard to come by, would read your fortune from a thanatoscope, so does your life follow a fate determined by its end. You will live the way it was written in the stars in moment of your death.

After completing *Fitzcarraldo*, and it has been over thirty years, I cut all ties with the world of film and have not made a single film since. I have watched them by the hundreds, though, and have fantasized so much about so many of them that I sometimes feel as though I made them myself. Then, one night, perhaps overripe with my own destiny, I dreamt a peculiar, expansive, almost other-earthly dream, and as soon as I startled from it, I knew by the scent I felt everywhere around me—and it is a known fact that when you step on a dream it smells of crushed grapes, almonds and dark forest—that I had to make a sequel to *Fitzcarraldo*. Herzog was long dead inside me, but Fitzcarraldo came back to life. The vision spilled out from the dream without losing even the tiniest bit and took hold of me in the same way as, back when they still called me Herzog, a vision had haunted me incessantly, compelling me to make *Fitzcarraldo*. This, though, was something entirely different from the story about a man who wants to build an opera house in the jungle, and then, for some financially rectangular reason, transports a steamship across a mountain. And, if observed more closely, a mountain over a ship, for that matter. In this vision, if I know what I’m saying at all, it was only possible to see time

clearly, yet completely vaguely, while space was not particularly important, as if it had been erased, scrawled over, or had suffered an accident and broke, perhaps it fell and was left lying on the floor like a broken radio, while Fitzcarraldo appeared in person only once, at the very end, when he finally, vaguely, met the one he was searching for, somebody who had not been expecting him. In the dream it was clear to me, as if I was suddenly seeing everything through somebody else's eyes, the way things seem so clear only in dreams, that people do not even realise that time is not fast enough. That everything, propelled by a force of its own, always moves faster than time and that the present, god help me, is always late. But I realised right away that, in order to transfuse this vision into film, I would need a different sort of present, either borrowed or rented, to which I and my film assistants would be the future, which it would reject like foreign tissue. In order to demonstrate the truth about time, we would have to provoke some sort of error and then record this glitch, this collision. Just as one of the first films ever made depicted a train arriving at La Ciotat Station, I sensed that Fitzcarraldo, in his white hat and linen suit, was the only one who could stand unafraid on such a station, without running from the frightening scene of time, suddenly, for the first time, seen not as leaving or disappearing, but *arriving*. If time was not late, we would never be able to see it coming, we would be forever deprived of this collision and the chaos that time creates. Back then, I did not know how exactly I would depict this new arrival of a speeding metal train, but a departure to another age was necessary, of this I was convinced. This atonal opera needed to be filmed deep in the jungle of another century.

That is why, guided by the ghostly scent of indigo violets, on 22nd June 1580, together with my entourage, a retinue of about twenty film professionals and auxiliary staff, I embarked on a journey from Montaigne, across Paris, Switzerland and Germany to Italy. I headed out only a few hours after Michel Eyquem, the thinker and inventor of the essay, of Europe and the modern human, whom history remembers as Michel de Montaigne, embarked on the same journey. Where he goes, I go, but if for some reason I diverge from the path, or if, god forbid, I lose him, it will always be easy to find out where Montaigne is at any given moment because I had on me his *Journal of Travels in Italy by way of Switzerland and Germany in 1580 and 1581*, which would not be published in his lifetime but only two whole centuries later. I stumbled on a paperback copy of it in the spring of 2016, at a small bookstore in Berlin, ducking inside because it had suddenly started raining, or because, with a lesser known organ, I felt something inside me, or because I could no longer feel anything. Leafing through the book I came across a place in

the foreword or in the text itself, about Montaigne's sick kidneys and the stones which he wanted to expel during the journey described in the book, and I realised that this was the journey I wanted to undertake myself; to follow Montaigne so that Fitzcarraldo could, at some point, which would be the ending of the film, meet him. At the same time, I cannot say that back then I understood why, I knew I should not shoot Montaigne, but rather something that only touches, or almost touches him, brushes him perhaps, and suddenly I realised it had to be water; it had to be fountains, springs, streams, rivers, basins, baths, anything that would, through a power of its own, prepare for Fitzcarraldo's appearance at the end of the film, even though at the time I still did not know how these two cinematic forces were supposed to connect. I just knew that water, which was supposed to possess the power needed to melt the stones that had accumulated during his life inside Montaigne, the inventor of a special subspecies of humans, the European human, the most dominant sort since the appearance of *Homo sapiens*, so far definitely the most aggressive and confused, that this water was, therefore, more important to me than Montaigne. I knew right away that this could lead to misunderstandings, because the viewers' saturated souls could interpret such a depiction of water as a metaphor for the general belief that time flows, always in only one direction, from the past towards the future, while I was haunted precisely by the vision in which time stands still, or continues rather than passing, while only space flows. The only way to see time *arriving* (from an angle we approximately refer to as the future), would be to depict it standing still, while everything else moved around it, overlapping; to depict time not taking anything away, not washing away anything, but rather piling all the events up on a heap that keeps on growing, like an endless chain collision on the motorway. Instead of having a mystery to work out, as if it were an oilrig, there could be no resolution of mysteries here, only their amassment. What we needed was one colossal chain collision of mysteries. Such conceptions about time came to me so clearly, like being pervaded by a strong smell, that it may have just as easily been a dream, which perhaps it was. Understanding something in a dream, though, is not the same thing as depicting it on film. There are always glitches.

Our first stop was La Fère. It was an atmospheric, almost transparent little town where nothing happened in its desolation. However, as we were travelling towards the next town, something horrible, no one had any doubts about it, started happening before us, yet, as hard as I tried, I could not see what the desolation of this horror was. The light, coming from above like in the Middle Ages, fell on all life but was unable to finish the job, as if it did not know all the numbers, all the codes. By then it was clear, and it later became

a haunting certainty, that there was something wrong with my *picture*, like bad reception on TV. Still, it was somehow nice, being in the sixteenth century, hovering like a scent, generally seeing very little and knowing even less about it.

Montaigne, or his scribe, who wrote down the first half of the travelogue, notes that in the town of Meaux, to which we arrived a day later, he “visited the treasurer of the church of St. Stephen, one Juste Terrelle, a man of note among the savants of France, a little old man, sixty years of age, who has visited Egypt and Jerusalem, and lived seven years in Constantinople.” This Juste showed the distinguished guest his library and the beauties of his garden. “Nothing in this garden,” the journal continues, “is as rare as a tree of box, spreading its branches all around and it is very thick and so artfully trimmed that it resembles a beautiful trim ball, about a man’s height.” Now that I am looking at it myself, having sneaked up to Terrelle’s garden using an ancient trick of obstinately acting like a rich man who will not be deferred by anything, to me this tree of evergreen does not seem like a firm ball, though I am barely able to discern whether it is an evergreen at all. In fact, I am absolutely certain that it is an ornamental spectre, perhaps even some sort of glitch in the reception of time, still, I would say it is more likely a spectre, and I am even fairly sure, though I cannot see anything very clearly, that it is a life-size silhouette of a man, coughing up his path through life, deep from within his balls. At first I think I see the contours of an old Robert Plant, his face wrinkled from all the orgasms, but quickly, almost laughing at myself, I realise how wrong I was in my estimate, and choking in surprise, I discover that is not the summoned ghost of the famous Led Zeppelin singer, but the lavish spectre of a favourite writer of mine, a writer whose face, it must be mentioned, strongly resembles mine, but who is still, as he would say, fundamentally distinct from me; a noteworthy author who was, in fact, most interested in topics such as, if I know what I’m saying at all, hygiene and delousing, prison architecture, secular temples, the art of healing with water, zoological gardens, departures and arrivals, light and shadow, steam and gas, and many other things. He died in 2001, and not only that, but his feathery spectre, or its copy was, by some miraculous force, displayed in Juste Terrelle’s shadowy garden, in the town of Meaux, back in 1580. Perhaps it was a mere coincidence, perhaps it was meant to be so, but in the desolateness of the spectral silhouette of a writer he was not familiar with, Montaigne was only able to recognise a ball of evergreen. Maybe Terrelle duped him and Montaigne never knew what hit him, I mean, it is easy to imagine with mischievous joy how this cosmopolitan trickster pulled some

classy faux wool over his eyes and Montaigne was none the wiser. Still, like an itch, something compels me to say: the way the dead do not understand the living is not the same as the way the living do not understand the dead. But do not ask me to elaborate.

We arrive in a little town whose name I do not know, and if I did, I would not know what do to with this knowledge. Montaigne dedicated about ten lines to it. At first, the place is a blot on the enormous flat photograph of the sky, but when you come closer, you can only see blurry squares because the photograph is, by some strange force, disproportionately enlarged now. The closer we get, the more it actually seems further behind us, still, it is a bright day so any visitor could definitely see plenty, though, in the end I do not manage to see much at all. I walk around the place, but I have a sense that, by some indeterminate ability, I am only remembering it. I can only intuit the streets and the houses, but I cannot distinguish what exactly is in front of me, a window of a low house or a weathered wooden fence with pigs wriggling in the yard. Individual façades appear blurry in my consciousness, like scratched or dim glass, even entire houses are barely visible, as if each of them was lit only by a single wax candle, even though it is early afternoon. Yet, through some force of my own, I see large areas of empty orange and bright red surfaces everywhere. Then suddenly, aided by a mysterious force, I begin to see some things remarkably clearly, too sharply even, as if a madman was imagining them right at that moment. I am not too worried because by now I know that I will be able to see this place much clearly later, when I am remembering it. I can remember many things I never knew I saw, which, maybe precisely because of it, later emboldened by some secret strength, become all the clearer in memory. I remember some of them because in their vagueness, they only ever exist in memory and it is truly impossible to see them in the real world. I would even venture that, remembering something almost always makes me see much more of it and more clearly than while I was seeing it live, for the first time.

Though this place is not lacking in horrors, we quickly leave it. As I sit in the carriage observing something on the palms of my hands, for a moment everything in front of me, through some new force, suddenly turns black. When I am once again able to see, we find ourselves in a shabby inn, located, it seems, by the side of the road, on the edge of a forest, out of firing range. Judging from the look of the patrons, it is clear right away that we find ourselves at least partly in a different region. We hardly saw a single soul in the previous place, either on the streets or under the trees, while here everyone is almost openly exposed, some even doubly so, because they seem to have two of something; two hats, perhaps, or two bodies in one suit or two souls in a single body. For instance, the

server is, I would say, dressed in two black dresses, all buttoned up, yet her face, the way I perceive it, has a scent more than a look: she has a thin nose because her face smells like a thin nose, her eyes are narrow because she smells of narrow eyes, etc. After a short flash, though, in which different colours could be discerned, a stooped old lady is now standing by the table somehow, her blond hair turned completely white from living so long; only she does not seem to be waiting to take our order, but instead seems to be surveying the state of things, waiting for me to report my numbers as well. I notice that this is yet again a new place, because that, perhaps imaginary doubleness of certain subjects and occurrences, is now gone, while the things and the smells around me, though barely discernible, are, if I know what I'm saying at all, somehow different. I ask if they serve roast tapir and how long it takes them to catch and roast it, and, when they first saw tapirs as subjects in the area, whether they came voluntarily or the subject of a force known only to them made them, and what this region looked like before tapirs, whether the trees, by some secret force, grew under a different angle and whether the grass smelt differently. The old lady does not seem to understand my language, still, with formidable tenderness, she vaguely replies that the tapir subjects will be on the table promptly or, if the gentlemen so wish, in two days' time, if the gentlemen so prefer. Though she is speaking in a German I am not familiar with, I do not care, because, aided by some force, or her scent, I can understand everything, even if what I understand is not at all what she wanted to say. For several minutes nothing, at least nothing visible, happens. I hear a hot wind blowing sand down the road that is slowly disintegrating on the ground, but I cannot see anything; my entire field of vision is filled with a viscous, bright red surface slowly beginning to twist and dissolve like a celluloid film strip under the unexpected heat of my gaze. I can also hear indistinct calls, but it feels as though both the sound and my ear are somewhere deep underground. Everything in front of me is grey now, but not for long, because by some force, or the depth of its smell, the grey surface also begins to change colour around the edges, as if it, too, needs to burn out and become a different colour, but I can no longer tell which one. Through the window I catch a glimpse of a man with something in his hand, a metal bar maybe, led by some absent force, or just its smell, approaching a horse and waving his arm, as if swinging or fixing something. With this bar, or perhaps it is something else after all, the man now seems to be pounding the greyness in front of me with even greater force, while the blow, or something only related to it by chance, seems to clear up the image and I can suddenly see the pretty face of the server, almost a little girl, placing a jug of water and a jug of wine in front of with, by a special

force of her own. Yet, in my ears, though they seem to be someone else's ears, I can still hear the breathing of that man who approached the horse and he is approaching it again, and he is swinging or fixing something again. There is a strong scent, though I am not the one smelling it, but rather some cinematic spectre inside me, of sizzling coal briquettes in the fireplace, of damp sawdust on the floor and of chicory, only I cannot see the fireplace or the sawdust or the damn chicory, which is not at all strange. Although I am sitting at a table, I am seeing everything aslant and from above, as if my gaze was a spectral camera attached to the ceiling.

Kinski sits across from me at the table in his primordial strength. That is not his real name, but I call him that because I hired him to play Fitzcarraldo. He is not a professional actor, but strongly resembles Klaus Kinski, though this only underlines their fundamental difference. I think he has been sitting here much longer, for years, so my gaze can barely catch up to him, because in some indeterminate way, or out of the sheer fact of his life, he is ageing faster than me. He seems to be making his way through an old photograph, but when he finally emerges from its infinite desolation, he is tired and disappointed. He is all yellowish, as if the force of life has caused him to air out in the scorching sun. I ask him what he would like to drink. He seems to be saying that he already had a drink a long time ago, maybe wine, maybe water, I did not quite catch that and he does not know any more either, and that now he is just waiting for me to have my drink, so that we can start eating. Then, for a very long time he tells me about something complicated that happened with the cameras this morning, but inside me, the whole story is reduced to a few phrases, that, if I know what I'm saying at all, the cameras *have been placed up in the trees*, or *next to the trees*, I am not sure. As if tempting nature, that man is approaching the horse again, and holding something in his hand, or maybe something else, and, aided by a force from the future, swings and breaks off something grey, the sound of it falling to the ground both overly familiar, even embarrassingly intimate, and completely foreign, maybe similar to the sound of striking something that would be an undocumented transition between meat and glass, or, more likely, rock.

Kinski is vaguely retelling me the gossip about our camera crew, who, after taking a piss in the woods this morning, saw some natives, naked, their skin shiny and oily, taking an object out of the stream, which the camera operators could neither describe nor knew the application of, but it was frightening, long and red, and it immediately caught fire when it was placed on the grass. Though I can hear everything Kinski is saying, his words do not translate themselves into images—that, by some self-explanatory force appear in

your head when you are listening to someone—but instead evoke scenes from a film you saw ages ago and whose name you no longer remember, scenes that have no visible connection to what you are hearing. Imbued with such noncausal force, I now see a shot from a film in which dark blue and emerald fields flicker on and off, as the moving shadows of the clouds illuminate them one moment, then dim them the next. The fields and the meadows, if these are meadows at all, stretch across the slopes below a village perched on a hill, only the belfry of the church visible under the black sky. The image is extremely grainy and seems to be vibrating, as if something was moving underground, perhaps breathing it its sleep or slowly masturbating.

Around the time I first saw this film, I was reading Sebald in Spanish, a language I did not know. This meant that I would copy sentences from *Austerlitz* and *Vertigo* in Spanish to my computer and then, using Google Translate, transfer them into a language I knew then, but cannot remember now what language it was. I did not want to read the “pure” Sebald, but rather a misshapen, artificial version of him, sometimes so distorted and corroded by translation and verbal decomposition, by human and machine error that it became unrecognizable. I wanted even my first reading of Sebald to resemble a vague *memory* of a first reading, and I wanted even more never to find out what he was saying exactly, but only to intuit, to somehow only come close to his world, without ever getting to know it. Just as—Sebald himself used to say something along those lines—an enormous building freshly built can impress you by the ruin it will one day become, I wanted somehow to reverse the process of decay and read Sebald as if he was, from the very outset, a complete ruin, as if he wrote knowing what he would look like in a thousand years’ time, when only fragments, misunderstandings and distortions remain of him, believing that it is precisely this ruin that is his original version. I remember several of these distorted sentences by Sebald, which is odd, because I do not have very good memory at all and I usually cannot quote anything correctly. To say I remember them is also not entirely correct because I am not the one who really remembers them, instead they are simply here, immersed in me like a bag of tea, or they might even belong to a broader, perhaps someone else’s memory, though one that is sometimes closer to me than my own and virtually always much more intense. Whomever these sentences belong to, and recently, I have begun to suspect they are the spectre’s, I have since been associating them with a film in which flickering, grainy fields, and then, in later shots different skies, roads and buildings, seemingly want to escape from within themselves and decompose, while at the same time wanting to infect our gazes, somehow turning them too into

technical grains mindlessly spinning around in a coded space.

For a few moments there is nothing there and I can only hear buzzing, but then I realise I am alone in a dining room, if it is a dining room at all anymore, because everything inside is filled with a powerful orange light so I do not exactly know what is around me.

I look around for Kinski, but he is gone. It occurs to me, what if our camera crew did not set up the cameras right after all, what if the deep focus shot through the window does not manage to capture the glass of water we were supposed to shoot. Our cameras do not capture depth; a glass right under your nose and a mountain in the distance will seem equally far away, the way they would look on Giotto's frescos. This allows us to shoot from a great distance, without coming close to Montaigne, sure he will not smell us or suspect anything, while each desired detail still seems right in front of us.

In the next moment I am sitting alone on a long wooden bench and there is leftover food on the plates, wine-stained glasses and pieces of bread, but this is a different inn, the other one had chairs, not benches.

The scene in front of me suddenly breaks off, as if it had been recorded on a film strip that something had cut. Everything turns black and becomes white. What unfolds in front of my eyes starts from the darkness and from the light. My grandfather is fixating my head and hitting it with a hammer. Lightly at first, then more energetically. He is trying to break off a rock from the top of my head. While my grandfather is hammering, the whole world falls into my eyes from a great height, huge, bloody and white. This is the first image in my memory—probably a false one—an unfinished image of my grandfather giving birth to me, or saving me, or killing me.

If some people are born by their grandfathers and not their mothers, my grandiose grandfather, the biggest opera character in our family, would definitely be capable of such a feat. To him everything was both majestic and visceral. While others pursued an authentic destiny, he in turn copied his life from others, those better than himself, as he used to say. He was an adventurer, a terrorist, a birdman and a gigolo, a lover of Rilke, of blue mountains, wine, scampi, brawls and pistols, yet, false about all of it and happy to be so. A paid serial killer and an assassin for pleasure, he did not believe in violence, regarding passions and instincts to be simply the most persistent expression of self-love and murders a routine shortcut to the accumulation of wealth. He was always interested in politics, but he preferred to accept other people's political views: he was both a

premature and a belated fascist, a communist both of the active and armchair variety, while democracy was a notion his friends, whom he imitated, never managed to grasp. Politics is about ruling, not about exploring mass tastes and letting others rape you, they claimed. He subscribed to monarchism the longest because, funnier and simpler than even fascism, it in general required the least effort from its supporters. He honestly, devotedly, believed in refined and complex emotions, so he always preferred to imitate what other people felt; he gave no importance to his own emotions because he did not see what could earn them his respect. When he was in an exceptionally good mood, he could spare only some general, false compassion for them, almost Christian in its cruelty. He was proud of the fact that nothing unique happened in his life and that he did not have a single original thought or any incomparable experiences; he built his career on theft, forgeries, alterations and adaptations. When you follow someone else's grand idea, whether you are worthy of its every little detail is less important, the grandness of the concept overrides all your individual failures – even his main idea in life was taken from someone else. When he “mimicked” what he thought, for example, a character from a film had experienced, grandfather would sometimes wonder whether stealing emotions was the right thing to do, and the answer would always be the same: of course it was. Not only would he never experience anything better, he thought, but also nothing moderately worse. To get carried away, for no reason at all, expecting something interesting and special to happen to him too, he claimed, though beautiful, would simply be extremely blind egotism. He relished the idea of other people's films directing his life because that way he could surrender himself to something he undoubtedly liked and could trust. “To define is to distrust”, he quoted some famous author. He did not want to be exceptional and unique, but rather, deeply and in every exiting detail, shaped by the things that surrounded and determined him. The limits of experience of others are the limits of my own world, he would say. While everyone almost religiously put their trust in desires, for them probably the contemporary embodiment of angels, my grandfather ridiculed them, claiming they were just primitive fun, limited in their reach, monotonous, drunk, promiscuous, demented and tragically unintelligent. To surrender one's self to one's own desires is the surest way to never leave your own village, he would say. Still, grandfather did not want to be any better than the rest, and he did not want to use the awareness of other people's idiocy as proof of his superiority, but rather as an even stronger excuse to be all the more stupid. He wanted to be the perfect failure of his time, following the *Free your mind for the experiences of others and your ass will find an excuse* principle. Damn

it, the self is a tumour of the consciousness, my grandfather used to say, I don't want to be an author, but a tourist in my own life. You have to stroll through life and get out; you can't actually start believing in any of that. At the time such statements coincided with the spirit of the age so nobody took any notice.

- Look – he would say – once I went crazy for this woman in a bar, as these things go. It ended very badly. Sex, scratches on my back, death, you know, the whole Christianity and heavy metal combo. I knew, of course, that my infatuation was the result of alcohol, but weren't my other feelings also the result of some alcohol, isn't the brain always distilling some schnapps, isn't affect always the effect? Every emotion is a moment of weakness. That's why other people's feelings and emotions are more important to me; after all, they undergo some social filtering, some goddamn distillation. If someone despised me, I always trusted that more than my own defensive feelings. If people hated me, they were probably right. If I loved or hated somebody, I was probably drunk. When I killed people, I always believed their hatred was justified and that they had every right to take revenge. I never took my own reasons for killing them seriously, these could be cheap self-justifications, or even just plain indifference. I killed them because I trusted the feelings and ideas of other people, my friends.

Yet, a terrible irony befell him because the bestselling, most popular fake, which hundreds of billions of people always naively bought into, kept evading him. Even though he was very smart and cunning when others needed to die, he himself did not know how to. Death pulled all the stops to elude him. We all suffered for it, he worst of all. He was overly healthy, bursting with life, like a tumour. Yet, he so keenly wanted to die, as if life had in the meantime become something outdated, something that has for some time only looked good on film. On a reel of magnetic tape he recorded, what was in our family know as his famous "necro-pastoral epistle", and, though at first we thought it was meant for us, he was the one listening to it, playing it over on an old tape recorder, as if wanting to discover what lay behind his words, because he did not seem to know. Someone else inside of him was telling him something and he longed to understand what: "Once you realise there is no hope, you try to make things worse in order to get things moving at least, but things can't get any worse, everything is so jam-packed that you can't move a finger, let alone die. Your body will be a surplus, it will spill over the glass, there won't be any room for you at the cemetery, and they will have to leave you undead, somewhere on the side, in some plastic grocery bag. To death, human beings are foreign tissue, it doesn't recognize them anymore. The only option is endless life because life suffers everything. A

stone doesn't tolerate schizophrenia and *Escherichia coli*, but life simply adores them."

Oh, I tried to strangle my grandfather so many times, my brother shot him from a pistol once and used a rifle four times, he poured gasoline on him and tried to set him on fire, but nothing helped. He wouldn't go anywhere, didn't want to see anything, he just remained – on beds, in armchairs, on the floors, on the chairs. He just wouldn't disappear, not even once. He simply didn't know how to die. We keep seeing it in front of our eyes, we can't even count the times we saw it, my brother furiously throwing the newspaper on the floor, taking an axe and trying to cut off grandfather's head, the axe bouncing off it as if it was a car tyre. Sighing with disappointment, grandfather turns on his side and adjusts the pillow under his head, perhaps only a thread of violet light trickles from his neck, slipping to the floor like a silk scarf and quickly disappearing. Or maybe it was even more nerve-wracking when we were killing him at his front door, with all the neighbours watching. Richard Brautigan, who was one of the neighbours, later wrote about it in one of his novels. After we had fired ten bullets in him and he just wouldn't die, finally we had to plead "Grandfather, please, for the love of God, die, we don't want to keep killing time like this," and he said, "Ok, I'll die, but please, don't shoot any more, for your sakes, this is embarrassing, people are watching." "Not a bullet more," my brother said. "Okay, there, I'm dead," grandfather said, but he wasn't. If there were any justice, grandfather would have been dead by then, on his way to a half-heaven half-hell. He would occasionally only stop to rest at a white villa in the shade of coconut trees, a woman in a long white dress would be waiting for him on the veranda with the dioptric power of evil in her eyes and would invite him inside. Grandfather would, I'm sure of it, slay her on the spot, so fast she wouldn't even have time to reveal how much evil the world has lost with her, as the old cowboy Brautigan used to say, and not knowing she was dead, she would keep welcoming people on the veranda, dressed or nude, depending on the lens of space, spreading about her a relaxing scent squeezed from evil.

We are a family who travel all the time, more through time than through space, for good reason or no reason at all. We follow the scream. We travel and erase spaces behind us, rinse them out just by looking at them, by living, like in *Tetris*, so the only thing that remains of them, is what we did not understand, or did not solve. Sometimes we leave no trace, other times we leave behind vast, practically intact cities, fields, forests, people and animals. Though I almost never travel with my loved ones, my family, or, one part of it, to be more precise, are always a step away, even if I go to a different century or the North Pole. They are my *Tetris*, chained to me like a problem that cannot be solved, haunting me

even to the end of the world. For reasons I never managed to fathom, we also never travel together or get together as a group. The grandfather, my sister and brother stay in touch and I often see them together, though lately, mostly for the same futile reason. I don't see my father, mother or other relatives, I don't know why and I don't ask.

My brother is calling me from a room which seems to be behind me, but at the same time also somewhere up and down. "We're waiting for you," I can hear him, but his voice seems to be coming from a speaker now, carried by butterflies. I get up and head towards the room from which I believe his voice is coming, or in which this voice was recorded. My brother is sitting in the corner again, his ear glued to an old-fashioned, messianic radio receiver made of dark brown Bakelite, and he is deciphering mysterious emissions he believes are messages from the dead. The only thing that can be heard sounds like murmurs which could be coming from a very old, empty reel of magnetic tape, full of butterflies, though you could also say anything else, because, in the murmurs and the crackling, or in something between them, or behind them, he recognizes instructions, regulations, explanations, reports, statutes, dictates them to my sister, who is writing them down in a special black notebook with golden edges, always hoping that one day they will decipher the cardinal messianic manual for dying, which could also be used on grandfather. "576 777 carry 45 9 888 9 white furs 212 77 transparent 458 586 546 6 64 4 waiting 22 67," my brother is dictating and the light in his eyes turns grey, then orange and red, as if some messianic viscous mass was dissolving in them as well. My brother is crouched by the radio receiver, but he is also standing, some metal metric object in hand, perhaps the famous messianic ruler, from behind slowly coming up to grandfather, who is sitting by the window, gazing into the distance like a butterfly. Through the window there is a valley, streaked with glittering meadows, with tall furnaces of a former iron foundry or the towers of a huge factory, its function long forgotten, piercing the sky that is black, yet at the same time, filled with redness that might even be foreign to it. Grandfather watches the ruin for hours every day, staring at it as if possessed, and from time to time, when he notices something new on it, or something older even, I am not sure, records it with a camera with a huge lens, always standing at the ready on a tripod in front of the open window. In that moment, a bird suddenly flew above the tall chimneys, maybe a grey falcon, maybe just a scream, and grandfather immediately squeezed the button several times, quickly, as if firing a semiautomatic rifle.

- Machines have been eaten by maggots, electricity by people, people by darkness and children have been eaten by the light – grandfather is muttering to himself.

The sunlight, previously scattered evenly around the place, has now pooled into a single red dot lost inside the white fog enveloping the distant fields, afraid of being photographed, maybe.

- Not only were you not allowed to kill other people, you even had an obligation to do so.

- It's beautiful. I like this grainy quality – I'm saying as I look at the photographs scattered around the table or framed on the walls for the hundredth time.

- But isn't beauty that which destroys things? Wouldn't they've come out better if there hadn't been any beauty at all?

There is another photograph on the table, its radiation amplifying the darkness in the room, and many tiny instruments scattered around it; screwdrivers and scalpels, tiny microscopes, coils of wire of different colours and of silk thread, odd translucent cogwheels, syringes and cups containing thick, fragrant liquids.

- Don't touch that one. I'm still fixing it.

- What's wrong with it?

- A scream.

When grandfather was killing those two in the basement, my brother and I, aged twelve and ten, were holding their arms and legs. Now, after my brother has knocked him to the floor with the metal bar, we are holding him down the same way, while my sister is trying to cut out his heart with something resembling the claws of a neon lobster, as funny as that sounds. Grandfather is not resisting, but he is grumbling, already disappointed, convinced of failure. His chest becomes greenish and translucent, full of glowing butter, soft to the touch and somewhat bird-like. My sister realises she should not have even bothered and angrily casts the pincers aside. Furious, she kicks grandfather on the head with her shoe and yells: "Enough, we can't take it anymore, come on, already!"

I look at grandfather's transparent torso and it occurs to me: "no place can *see* you, you have to change *your death*."

- Do you remember when you read Rilke to me, about there being no place that does not watch you and that you have to change your life? If everything is watching you, if the world is a camera, then you are in fact a figurine on a screen, all of us constantly appear on one screen or another, we always have, that is how I understood it. But if the world can't see you, you can't even get on a screen; you are discarded, so you can't even die.

- Or, you died a long time ago, before the recording ever began.

- Come on...
- So, you'd prefer to be forever dead on some screen?
- What are you talking about? We're all alive...
- You read too much.
- Grandpa!
- Son...
- Okay... here, take a photograph of us.
- What else have I been doing? All day, every day.

Something falls in through the window at high velocity, spinning around, then banging to the bottom as if the entire room was a chimney. Grandfather walks over to the dresser and takes out a reel of magnetic tape from a drawer and skilfully attaches it to his tape recorder which seems as though it was made in the sixteenth century. With his hand, he signals me to sit down and listen. After the sounds which could have been created by setting up the microphone and moving objects around, suddenly I hear a low, deep, drawn-out voice, or the effect is produced by the tape turning more slowly than normal, a voice somehow familiar, though faded and corroded by the crackles, murmurs and echoes in the room. The voice could be my grandfather's, the way he would sound in 1920, or in 1520, scratched by time travel, or it could be mine, the way it would sound on Edison's polygraphic cylinders or on old, silver mirrors if they were placed on a gramophone.

"You can convey meanings to others, more or less successfully, it doesn't matter now, that's another story, but there is something else, which philosophers have known for a long time, but ordinary people don't think about. Whenever you experience something, whatever it may be, a thought, a feeling, an observation, you do it in a way known only to you. Nobody, not even god, will ever, absolutely ever, find out how it feels to be you on the inside. You are perfectly alone in any feeling you may have. There is no one in the entire universe who could know exactly what the experience is like when you see the sky or feel the blade of a razor on your neck. People can torture you, can hear you scream, they can even rationally and empathetically understand what you're experiencing, yet, nobody will ever find out what your pain looks like on the inside. Because of this uniqueness, your every experience separates you from the rest of the cosmos. Your specific internal experience is actually a surplus to the world, utter wastefulness; there is no medium for the exchange of this experience in the universe, outside of you, there is no space for it at all, and isolated like that, not in contact with anything, it could just as easily float through endless space forever, like a capsule, or lie underground, non-dissolvable, like plastic. You

can convey words or thoughts, but never your own experience of these words and thoughts. That which is to you the most life-like, the most your own, to others is like death, something beyond any reach. To them your inner world is not something living, but a spectre. You are dead to them while you're still living. But you're also dead to yourself, because you can't discover where this inner feeling comes from. You have it, but you don't know why or how. Even though you feel your own experience seemingly directly, from the inside, and to you it seems the truest and most genuinely yours, you feel alive only because this experience really a dead man lying inside you. A spectre lives inside you from birth. That spectre is you."

Grandad gazes out the window absentmindedly and doesn't seem inclined to comment on the recording. A greyish smoke rises from the factory, and, not knowing how to go up to the sky, it slowly comes back down, mixing with the white smoke rising from the ground.

*The conversation of birds:

- They say our entire universe, everything that's happening in the world, is simply one long explosion. We all live inside this enormous bomb.

- I can't hear you very well. There's a lot of echo.

- It was your idea to meet under a church bell. I said, since all of us are the interior of a bomb, we don't know what it's supposed to demolish, or who it's supposed to kill in the exterior. In the ex-te-rior, I said!

- Alright, alright, don't shout, I got this part. You mean to say that our entire universe is an assassination, a-ssa-ssi-na-tion?

- Precisely.

- And all the diverse infinity inside it is just Ikea-bana, the interior design of death?

- Like in ancient stories, logic, natural laws and meaning are not the soulless, final truth, but a weapon.

- Meaning is a weapon, use it. I always liked this old saying.

- Surrounded by the silence of the sky, we think the universe is silent, but in fact it's howling? Racing tremendously and screaming? I said, scree-miiiing.

- I heard you, I heard you. Instead of a background murmur we should be talking about a background scream.

- You took the words right out of my beak. The gaping silence around us only means that someone has muted the speaker. Turn it up, and you'll hear this deafening scream, the soundtrack of the assassination whose mechanism was put in motion long ago and it's no longer possible to stop it.

- So, existence has a goal, after all. And we're here to discover what it's like to live inside a bullet fired into the great unknown.

- But who could there possibly be out there to kill? Except maybe the heavenly father?

- Kill the heavenly father? Is that what you said?

- Yes.

- Who would come up with such a silly idea? But to avenge the heavenly father... Perhaps the universe has a Hamlet & Rube Goldberg label on it.

- HRG, you say. The universe avenging its heavenly father? Is that what it's supposed to do, then?

- Do? No. Dream, perchance -to dream.

- What?

- I said, to dream, not to do.

- You mean, to hesitate?

- A bomb that hesitates? I like that. A school classic. A bomb that thinks too much and therefore does nothing.

- Or it doesn't think at all, and everything happens without it even knowing.

- What's the difference?

- What?

- I said, what's the difference, anyway?

- In that.