

**Charles University**

**Faculty of Arts**

*Institute of Translation Studies*

*Translation Studies*

# **Dissertation**

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**Common Rue: Anglický překlad povídek z výboru Jana Čepa**  
*Zeměžluč*

**Common Rue: An English Translation of Stories from Jan Čep's**  
*Zeměžluč*

Dissertation supervisor *doc. PhDr. Stanislav Rubáš, Ph.D.*

2025

I hereby declare that I have written this dissertation independently, using only the mentioned and duly cited sources and literature, and that the work has not been used in another university study programme or to obtain the same or another academic title.

In ...Prague... on ...7.4.2025...

Robert Michael Baugh, BA, MgA

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## **ABSTRACT (English)**

The doctoral dissertation is a thesis-by-practice, offering an English translation of nine short stories from Jan Čep's 1931 Czech anthology *Zeměžluč* – itself comprised of the collections *Zeměžluč* (1931), *Vigilie* (1928), and *Dvoji domov* (1926) – and a commentary. The commentary details the strategies utilized to translate the stories into English, while also examining literary themes of *Zeměžluč*.

An introduction explains the reason for translating *Zeměžluč* into English, as well as the reasoning behind the structure and methodology of the dissertation.

Part One provides a brief biography of Jan Čep for a non-Czech audience.

Part Two of the dissertation presents the English translation of nine stories: “Domek,” “Bouře,” “Dvoji domov,” “Kozlovice,” “Peněženka,” “Zbloudilý,” “Hoře z lásky,” “Můra,” and “Cesta na jitřní.”

Part Three of the dissertation offers the commentary, which contains four chapters. Its first chapter investigates the metaphysical geography of *Zeměžluč*; the second chapter tracks the rapidly shifting verbal tenses in Čep's stories and explains why they have been altered in the English translation. The third chapter sets out the problems Czech names and realia pose for translating stories from *Zeměžluč* into English. The fourth chapter examines Walter Benjamin's concept of translatability to see whether or not the theory can be put into practice.

**Keywords:** Jan Čep, Czech literature, Czech fiction, Short stories, Translation, Translation studies, Translation theory, Narrative tenses

## **ABSTRAKT (Czech)**

Disertační práce je povýtce prakticky zaměřená: nabízí anglický překlad devíti povídek z výboru Jana Čepa *Zeměžluč* – který byl česky poprvé vydán roku 1931 a sestává z povídkových sbírek *Zeměžluč* (1931), *Vigilie* (1928) a *Dvojí domov* (1926) – a překladatelský komentář. Ten jednak detailně popisuje strategie použité při překladu povídek do angličtiny a jednak analyzuje literární témata daného výboru.

Úvod práce pojednává o důvodech překladu *Zeměžluči* do angličtiny a zdůvodňuje strukturu a metodologii disertace.

První část disertační práce obsahuje stručný životopis Jana Čepa, určený především zahraničnímu publiku, jež s dílem tohoto velkého českého autora v podstatě není obeznámeno.

Druhá část nabízí anglický překlad devíti povídek: „Domek“, „Bouře“, „Dvojí domov“, „Kozlovice“, „Peněženka“, „Zbloudilý“, „Hoře z lásky“, „Můra“ a „Cesta na jitřní“.

Obsáhlý komentář ve třetí části práce je pak rozdělen do čtyř kapitol. První zkoumá metafyzickou geografii *Zeměžluči*; druhá kapitola se věnuje problematice slovesných časů a časové souslednosti a vysvětluje, proč v anglickém překladu často dochází ke gramatickým posunům; Třetí se snaží postihnout problémy s českými jmény a reáliemi, které vyvstávají při anglickém překladu Čepových povídek. Čtvrtá kapitola pak zkoumá koncept přeložitelnosti Waltera Benjaminova a zamýšlí se nad tím, zda lze Benjaminovu teorii uvést do praxe.

**Klíčová slova:** Jan Čep, česká literatura, povídky, překlad, překladatelská studia, teorie překladu, vyprávěcí časy

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

For their wisdom and encouragement to translate Jan Čep, I must thank Martin Janeček, Petr Onufer, Terezie Pokorná, Viktor Karlík, Helen Oyeyemi, and Paul Wilson. The insight, kindness, and patience shown by Stanislav Rubáš during my studies and dissertation-work can never be overstated or repaid. I am also deeply indebted to my wife, Tereza, who always serves as the first and best editor of my translations. The small successes in this dissertation owe much to you all; the many shortcomings are my own.

## INTRODUCTION

There is a natural question that arises from the mere existence of this dissertation, as it is a thesis-by-practice, offering *Common Rue*, an English translation of nine short stories from Jan Čep's 1931 Czech anthology *Zeměžluč* – itself comprised of the collections *Zeměžluč* (1931), *Vigilie* (1928), and *Dvoji domov* (1926) – and a critical commentary. The question: why Jan Čep?

Well, as Martin Podivínský writes in his 1996-article, “Vzájemná korespondence F. X. Šaldy a Jana Čepa,” in the inter-war period, notable literary critics such as Arné Novák, Pavel Fraenkl, and Bedřich Fučík felt that the two best Czech writers at the time were Vladislav Vančura and Jan Čep. Čep even dedicated his story “Cesta na jitřní” to Bedřich Fučík. In turn, Fučík would go on to say that his mentor – perhaps the most esteemed Czech literary critic of all – F. X. Šalda “*miloval [Čepa] tichou, zdrženlivou láskou.*” Podivínský also concludes that “*Dílo Jana Čepa patří k zatím stále nedoceneným vrcholům meziválečné české literatury.*”<sup>1</sup>

While it is true that Jan Čep is still less-known than his fellow writer Vladislav Vančura, Jan Čep may have become more popular since Podivínský wrote that he was underappreciated. Since the Velvet Revolution, over sixty books by or on Jan Čep have been published in Czech. Often with strong editorial and translation work from Jan Zatloukal et al., Brno's Centrum pro studium demokracie a kultury has almost created a cottage industry publishing non-fiction works of Jan Čep with stunning frequency: *Milý Vladimíre... Milý Maestro...: Vzájemná korespondence Jana Čepa a Vladimíra Pešky, 1951–1966* (2009); *Kniha týdne* (2015); *Meditace*, (2019); *Jan Čep*

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Podivínský, “Vzájemná Korespondence F. X. Šaldy a Jana Čepa.” *Česká Literatura* 44, no. 6 (1996): 607. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42686356>.

– Henri Pourrat: *Vzájemná korespondence* (2021); *V setmělém horizontu: Deník, zápisníky a pracovní texty z let 1929–1943* (2022); *Úvahy emigranta: Francouzské články a rukopisy z let 1948–1960* (2024).

Czech research into Jan Čep has yielded an impressive amount of work, as well. The last thirteen years have witnessed the publications of Jaroslav Med's *Básník jitrního zraku: Jan Čep* (2012), Tomáš Kubíček's *Dvojí domov Jana Čepa* (2014), Karel Komárek's *Čep, Durych, a několik příbuzných* (2014), and Richard Změlík's *Slovník Jana Čepa: Kvantitativně-korpusová analýza a literární věda* (2015), while the 2000s saw the publication of Michal Bauer's *Jan Čep ve vzpomínkách své rodiny* (2007). The nineties yielded Mojmír Trávníček's book *Pouť a vyhnanství: Život a dílo Jana Čepa* (1996), as well as an issue of *Česká literatura* (Vol. 46, No. 6; 1998) devoted to the author. *Česká literatura* has featured articles on Čep consistently since the 90s.

Interest in *Jan Čep* has also arisen in France, which is natural since the author emigrated to the country and spent the remainder of his life there (along with three years spent in West Germany); however, as his literary career never took off in France, the interest seems to have been fostered primarily by the publication of Jan Zatloukal's book *L'exil de Jan Čep*, in 2014 with a preface by Xavier Galmiche of the Sorbonne.

In German, Urs Heftrich of the University of Heidelberg edited *Der Mensch auf der Landstraße* (2003), a collection of Čep's short stories translated by Bettina Kaibach and Hana and Peter Demetz. (In 1962, Čep stories translated by Hana and Peter Demetz were published in Austria under the title *Zeit und Wiederkehr. Bilder aus Bohmen und Mahren.*)

In English, however, the work of Jan Čep is virtually unknown. When I discussed the author with professors of Czech from Indiana University and Harvard, as well as two of the top translators of Czech into English, his name drew a blank. Other than “The Lost,” a translation of his story “Zbloudilý” that my wife and I wrote for the translation journal *Asymptote*, the only

scholarly mention of Jan Čep that I could track down in English since the end of the Cold War was a passing reference in Josef Škvorecký's 1990 article "Bohemia of the Soul."

This wasn't always the case, however. In the late 1930s, the journal *Books Abroad*, published by the University of Oklahoma, mentions Jan Čep numerous times, both highlighting his literary prizes in Czechoslovakia and refers to him "moving the Czech Catholic novel to the countryside" ("The Novel in Czechoslovakia," 1937). In his 1939 article in the *Slavic and Eastern European Review*, "Twenty Years of Czech Literature (1918-1938)," René Wellek praised Čep as one of the most promising Czech writers, particularly championing his short stories. Later, there was a flurry of interest in Čep generated by Peter Demetz's chapter "The Art of Jan Čep," in the 1964 book *The Czechoslovak Contribution to World Culture*. In their reviews of the 600-page book, Demetz's article was singled out and lauded by both George Gibian in the *Slavic Review* and by Paul Trensky in the *Slavic and East European Journal*.

More than half a century later, Rajendra Chitnis of Oxford University is currently writing a book he intends to publish with Karolinum Press on the countryside in Czech literature, which will feature Jan Čep. With one of the higher profile English Bohemists set to publish a book that includes Jan Čep, a translation of Čep's stories could allow literary scholars without a reading knowledge of Czech (or French or German) to engage with this notable Czech writer.

This, along with encouragement from translator and editor Petr Onufer (himself encouraged by Terezie Pokorná, editor-in-chief of *Revolver Revue* and granddaughter of Bedřich Fučík), led Martin Janeček of Karolinum Press to contract me to translate a book of Jan Čep's for his Modern Czech Classics series. Together we decided I should translate all of the stories from the anthology *Zeměžluč*, which includes the collections *Zeměžluč* (1931), *Vigilie* (1928), and *Dvoji*

*domov* (1926).<sup>2</sup> Forthcoming in Spring 2026, the artist Jiří Grus has supplied illustrations and cover art, while Rajendra Chitnis has agreed to write the afterword.

### *Potential Audience*

Karolinum Press crosses its fingers and holds its collective thumb for its translated fiction to reach one or more of four potential audiences.<sup>3</sup>

The first audience is made up of university libraries. The University of Chicago Press handles distribution for the Modern Czech Classics series outside the Czech Republic and Slovakia, and their sales representatives enthusiastically pitch the books to libraries and university book stores.<sup>4</sup>

The second audience are scholars and students of Czech literature. The hope is that the book will be included in the syllabus of a Czech literature class, leading to dependable repeat orders for a number of years. Because there are few Czech literature classes in Anglophone universities, it is unlikely the number of books sold would amount to more than a few hundred. (If every university in the United States with a strong Czech program ordered fifteen books for a seminar, Karolinum would sell 260 books.)<sup>5</sup> The best way to reach a broader audience of students

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<sup>2</sup> The nine translations I am most pleased with have been included in this dissertation.

<sup>3</sup> After being contacted to translate *Čep* for the Modern Czech Classics series, I later went to work at Karolinum Press as an acquisitions editor. Martin Janeček is the series editor, but I was fortunate enough to work closely with him on a number of titles in the series (as well as its sister series: Modern Slovak Classics). Insights into sales, marketing, and audiences come from my work there.

<sup>4</sup> Sadly, academic bookstores have become a more difficult market. According to University of Chicago Press Sales Representatives, in 2023 the campus bookstore at the University of California – San Diego removed all of its physical books to concentrate on selling more profitable sweatshirts and other clothing with UCSD logos.

<sup>5</sup> The website [czechschoolsamerica.org](http://czechschoolsamerica.org) lists two additional schools with Czech programs, but Czech is only offered through language centers there. The American universities that regularly offer Czech and Czech literature classes are: Brown University, Columbia University in the City of New York, Harvard University, Indiana University, University of California at Berkeley, UCLA, University of Chicago, University of Illinois at Urbana – Champaign, University of Michigan, University of Nebraska, University of North Carolina – Chapel Hill, The University of Texas at Austin, and Yale University.

is for the book to be added to the syllabus of a literature course that does not focus on Czech literature. This happens on occasion. In 2014–2016, the University of Bristol ran a MOOC (massive open online course), FutureLearn: Cultural Studies and Modern Languages, four times. As Eva Kandler’s English translation of Ladislav Fuks’ *The Cremator* appeared on the syllabus and sales rose dramatically, Karolinum reissued the book.<sup>6</sup>

The third audience are customers in the Czech Republic. Roughly half of all sales of Modern Czech Classics books occur in bookshops in the Czech Republic. This is one of the reasons for the bright covers by Jiří Grus – they are visible and attractive to customers at a distance of six feet.<sup>7</sup> (The other reason is that his artwork is excellent and an impressive form of literary criticism in itself.)

The fourth audience are approached in a Hail Mary–fashion, or more accurately a Hail Helen. In the March 13<sup>th</sup>, 2014 issue of *The New York Times*, stylish English author Helen Oyeyemi appeared in the newspaper’s By the Book feature. She was asked about the last great book she had read, and answered:

Susan Reynolds’s translation of “Kytice” (“Bouquet”), Karel Erben’s classic cycle of Czech folk tales in verse. I don’t really know how to describe these stories, except that most of them are profoundly strange, with outcomes that you shrink from rather than anticipate, and so you simply pause from time to time to make peace with your goose bumps. The very particular rhythm of the verse contributes to its effect, which makes the translation all the more impressive.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> See Rajendra Chitnis, “University Award for Education in Arts 2015,” University of Bristol, <https://research-information.bris.ac.uk/en/prizes/university-award-for-education-in-arts-2015>

<sup>7</sup> The rule of thumb for book covers is they have to be appealing both from a distance of six feet (from a bookcase for people shopping in a bookstore) and six inches (from a computer screen for those shopping online).

<sup>8</sup> Helen Oyeyemi, “By the Book,” *New York Times*, March 13, 2014. <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/16/books/review/helen-oyeyemi-by-the-book.html>

Also impressive were the sales her comments drove. Jantar, the London-based independent press had been struggling until Ms. Helen Oyeyemi's mention of the book.<sup>9</sup> It is now Jantar's bestselling title and the third edition will be published soon.

For *Common Rue*, Karolinum Press and I will approach interesting authors for blurbs, but the truth is that this collection of early twentieth-century stories about wanderers who are lost either geographically or spiritually (and often both) is unlikely to become a hit in the way that Susan Reynolds' translation of *Kytice* has.<sup>10</sup> An ideal situation would be if *Common Rue* were used in a broader literature course. To do this, in the advanced information sheets for marketing the book and for meetings between Karolinum Press and the sales representatives at University of Chicago press, I hope to draw attention to the stylistic and thematic connections between Jan Čep and one of America's greatest authors: William Faulkner.

Čep and Faulkner were contemporaries, publishing their first major works, *Dvoji domov* and *Soldier's Pay*, in the same year (1926). *Zeměžluč* and *As I Lay Dying*, which both employ drastically shifting narrative tenses would be published within a year of each other (1931 and 1930, respectively). They are also modernists who focus on a major, but marginalized, region of their countries – Moravia and the American South – while creating fictional counties (Čep's Přisence and Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha) that, if they are not exact replicas of Myslechovice and Lafayette, were certainly inspired by their hometowns.

This, however, is still quite ambitious. A much more reasonable goal is to hope that Rajendra Chitnis who is writing a book on Czech interwar fiction's treatment of the countryside will include it in the syllabus for one of his seminars or that a handful of scholars interested in

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<sup>9</sup> This was related to me by Mike Tate, the owner of Jantar, in 2019.

<sup>10</sup> It is worth noting that while Oyeyemi's praise for Susan Reynolds' translation of *Kytice* drove sales up dramatically, the quality of Reynolds' translation led to Oyeyemi's praise; Reynolds' is an excellent translator.

early twentieth-century fiction and university students curious about Czech fiction will read *Common Rue*.

### *Structure*

Because the core of this dissertation will provide the material for the Modern Czech Classics edition of *Common Rue*, the English translation of Jan Čep's *Zeměžluč*, I have chosen to structure the bulk of the thesis to match the format used most often by Karolinum Press' Modern Czech and Slovak Classics series.

Usually, the books consist of a short biography of the author for a foreign audience who have not studied the authors in school. The translation of the literary work, which makes up the bulk of the book, follows. Lest readers be swayed by a certain analytical interpretation of the work before they have read it, the Modern Czech Classics series eschews forewords in favor of scholarly afterwords. The final critical component is an optional essay by the translator.<sup>11</sup>

Thus, including this introduction, the structure of the dissertation will be:

#### **Introduction**

Potential Audience

Structure

#### **Part 1. Brief Biography of Jan Čep**

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<sup>11</sup> See: Jaroslav Kvapil, *Rusalka*, trans. Patrick Corness (Prague: Karolinum, 2020); Ján Johanides, *But Crime Does Punish*, trans. Julia and Peter Sherwood (Prague: Karolinum, 2022); Libuše Moníková, *Transfigured Night*, trans. Anne Posten (Prague: Karolinum, 2023).

## **Part 2. *Common Rue*: Translated Stories from *Zeměžluč***

- 2.1 House                    [“Domek”]
- 2.2 Storm                    [“Bouře”]
- 2.3 Two Homes            [“Dvojí domov”]
- 2.4 Kozlovice
- 2.5 Wallet                    [“Peněženka”]
- 2.6 Lost                      [“Zbloudilý”]
- 2.7 Burning Up            [“Hoře z lásky”]
- 2.8 Moth                      [“Můra”]
- 2.9 Path to Morning    [“Cesta na jitřní”]

## **Part 3. Commentary**

- 3.1 Getting Lost: The Metaphysical Cartography of Jan Čep’s *Zeměžluč*
- 3.2 Chronic Tension: Shifting Čep’s Narrative Tenses to Translate *Zeměžluč*
- 3.3 Koláče and Kleofáš: Translating Czech Realia in Jan Čep’s *Zeměžluč*
- 3.4 Translating Translatability: Considering Walter Benjamin while Translating Jan Čep

## **Appendixes**

## **Bibliography**

For the third section of the dissertation, the commentary, I placed “Getting Lost: The Metaphysical Cartography of Jan Čep’s *Zeměžluč*” first, since it analyzes the significance of Čep’s literary

techniques more than it concentrates on translation techniques. As such, it corresponds closer to the critical afterwords that appear in books from the Modern Czech Classics series. Each of the next three chapters, “Chronic Tension: Shifting Čep’s Narrative Tenses to Translate Zeměžluč,” “Koláče and Kleofáš: Translating Czech Realia in Jan Čep’s Zeměžluč,” and “Translating Translatability: Considering Walter Benjamin while Translating Jan Čep,” with some slight adjustments, could be used for the translator’s note that closes a Modern Czech or Slovak Classic.

To enable the various chapters to be used more easily within a Modern Czech Classic book or to be submitted as articles to English journals or chapters of English anthologies, I have followed the tradition of Anglophone dissertation-writing that minimizes subheadings and subchapters.

## **PART 1      ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

**Jan Čep** (1902–1974) was a Czech writer and translator. Born in the Moravian town of Myslechovice (then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire), he moved to Prague to study Czech, English, and French. After leaving university, he joined Josef Florian’s radical Catholic community in Stará Říše from 1926 to 1927, working and translating for Florian’s publishing house. He returned to Prague and its outskirts to work in publishing, and he was close to many of the leading Czech interwar writers. World War Two and the Nazi occupation of Czechoslovakia drove him back to Myslechovice; the Communist Coup of 1948 drove him out of Czechoslovakia. Although he worked for Radio Free Europe in Munich from 1951 to 1954, he spent most of the rest of his life in France – his second home.

The author of one novel and a prolific translator – he translated authors such as George Bernard Shaw, Honoré de Balzac, Joseph Conrad, and Gustave Flaubert into Czech, and writers like Egon Hostovský into French – Čep is now best known for his essays and short stories. Because of the prevalence of rural settings in his stories, Čep has often been categorized as a Catholic or ruralist writer – but he himself would have disagreed, as he argued that writers with similar styles and outlooks had more in common with each other than writers from similar backgrounds and religions. Peter Demetz writes, “Čep seizes upon the epic world of naturalism to demonstrate its glory as well as its deficiencies; the world as he creates it . . . is nothing if not a promise of eternity”; however, due to his interest in the human soul and his experimental approach to narration, Čep should actually be viewed as one of the great spiritual modernists.

*Common Rue* is Čep’s first collection to appear in English.

## PART 2      COMMON RUE

### 2.1 House

It was *buchty* for lunch today, rolls as sweet as honey. When Miss opened the window to the garden, the scent of lilac flooded into the classroom. It was a joyous day. The little children sang “May, May, the woods are bright as day” and “the raven returns with the setting sun, now our song is sung”; their book bags bumped against their backs, and the path before them ran radiant between the dandelions and the shade of young rye, from the school to the cross and the threshing floors of Mysletice.

When Jeník and Anička get home, the cattle shed is wide-open and the hens pick through the trough. It is the time of day to work in the field and only the old man remains behind in the garden tying up a bundle of sticks. The children don’t go to see him: rebukes collect crankily in the wrinkles around his mouth as he sits behind the chopping block, his hatchet sounding a stubborn *crack, crack* to spite the starlings as they imitate all the voices of the world in front of the birdhouse in the pear tree.

Their schoolbags fly to the corner among the old rags and Jeník, discovering cakes in the cupboard, shouts: “They left snacks for us!” He grabs a big one, leaving the smaller for Anička, then rushes out of the kitchen that nobody even had time to sweep—Anička, don’t you know that is your job? But Anička doesn’t care and runs after Jeník.

Frantík, the cobbler's boy, has already been gathering boards in the yard (he must have clambered over the wall again, how else could he have gotten here so fast) and Božena, the Tichýs' girl, rinses out a green bottle she pulled from the mud by the well.

“Come on, come on,” Frantík shouts, “we're going to play house!”

Stones and blocks of woods will become pillars, and there are all sorts of planks under the toolshed that can be used for a table and benches—just wipe them with a wet cloth and blow the earwigs and centipedes out of the cracks. The girls look for ribbons and Frantík yells at them to hold the parade until the walls are done. Jeník gets lost in his thoughts, as usual, and God knows how beautiful he wants everything, but whatever he builds falls down in a second, so of course Frantík is the one who has to build it all.

Before it's finished, everyone has worked up a sweat and gotten into a hundred arguments, at least. At one point Frantík flung a piece of wood to the ground and shouted, “Cripes, maybe I'll just go home”; then the others submitted to his dominance.

When the little house is built, it has only two walls: one provided by the fence and the other is actually the wall of the neighbor's cattle shed. Two are enough: a great pile of dirt encloses this little world from the creeping expanse of the yard. The ceiling comes from two large elderberry bushes on each side, bowing before the inhabitants, casting a fragrant web of shade and sun onto the table and benches.

Jeník climbs up to a fork in the tree and props his chin up with his knees. Frantík yells—what is he thinking, won't he work anymore? But his friend looks at him perplexed. Frantík gets upset, calls the girls to the dirt pile and shows them how to make flour. “Maybe you want to eat some,” he threatens Jeník, but when he sees that it is hopeless, he starts to carve a strange instrument that he never finishes.

In the meantime, Jeník, transformed, walks among blades of grass growing strips between the benches and table; a bare pathway enters, like into a courtyard and beckons warmly, just like roads always do, only nobody can walk this one—this place has become a world unto itself. Soft-leaved twigs touch the earth as the green silence relaxes its wings like a dreaming bird. But suddenly the silence groans, God knows why. Just when Jeník thinks how nice it would be to stay here and not go anywhere, wistfulness settles onto the leaves and the tiny house yawns.

Something tightens inside of Jeník and his eyes nearly well up. But they mustn't, for there is a world outside that he must see, must know. He is about to push the branches aside and step on the soil, but once more he looks at their little house, the grassy strips and the bug-path upon which he cannot walk—this tiny world must remain abandoned and futilely beautiful, no one shall know of it...

Anička and Božka sit on the ground, baking kolache. Frantík lies on his belly nearby, blowing into some kind of hole. “What have you got there?” Jeník asks. “Just what you see—a millstone,” Frantík snaps at Jeník, then pays him no mind.

Jeník turns to the girls, but before he can open his mouth, they both scream that he'd trampled what they had baked. So he walks behind the pear tree and looks to the sky: azure saturated with a sweet glare; the leaves of the trees embrace the blissful glow. The boy's eyes lift higher and higher: “God, how is it possible to go on and on and never reach the end? No end. How terrible!”

And then something scares him: an end is also impossible! If there were a wall at the end of the world, it could be ploughed through and again there would be a hole...

Everything goes black. When Jeník comes to, he sees Frantík, Božka and his sister Anička. He wants to go to Frantík, but right away he realizes that Frantík doesn't know that there can be

no end, that a wall can be ploughed through and something must lie beyond. Božka doesn't know anything either. And Anička? Jeník freezes. Anička knows! She stares at him wide-eyed with anxiety, her dirty little hands swinging helplessly. How do Jeník and Anička know what other boys and girls do not?

A horrible sadness befalls Jeník. He runs behind the yard—the old man can surely explain, the old man knows everything and fears nothing. But when he reaches the chopping block, the old man is gone, but the hatchet clings stubbornly to it, its iron blade facing Jeník. Jeník leaves the threshing floor, sits down on the grass and smooths it out with the back of his hand. The softness of the grass penetrates the depths of his soul. A long green field spreads before him, and shivering with secret bliss, it bows to the sky. Jeník lays his head in the grass and, with an unspeakable wistfulness, he bursts into tears.

Later on after dinner, mom went to the orchard for the blankets. “They’ll smell wonderful!” she told Jeník, who had gone with her.

As they stepped upon the wet grass, enchanted, they inhaled the beauty of the evening. The splendid crown of the old pear tree glowed bright as it miraculously blossomed to the very last branch.

“Mom, look how the trees lean towards each other,” Jeník whispered. “How quiet they are.”

“Let’s sit for a moment,” she said, placing her son’s head in her lap.

“Mom, how can we hear the rustling even in this silence?” Jeník asked. When his mother kept quiet, he grasped her neck and started to tell her about the little house, how it had to stay abandoned.

Startled, his mother gazed into Jeník's frantic eyes and he blurted out: "Mom, are the stars far away?"

His mother's infinitely kind hand stroked his hair with unspeakable tenderness: "Jeníček, you must believe that we are not alone. Nothing is futile. One day, perhaps, we will understand it all."

Then her hands dropped into her lap and her whole being erupted into prayer, begging God to not abandon her child when he is no longer soothed by her example, her trust.

## 2.2 Storm

Scarcely had the road rounded the corner, when behind the roofs rose the sky, suffocating all hope with its dark threat. The road cowered in fear, the cows hung their heads to the ground, and the cart stopped its clacking. Father pulled down his straw hat, brim-bent from the wind, and raised the whip high as the veins bulged out from his bare arms. Yet the whistle of the whip went silent and a crack thundered forth, tearing heaven above. Jeník grabbed his mother's hand but he let go immediately and went even paler, for he spied fright in his mother's eyes. You must fear for yourself—no one can save anyone else. His father didn't even look back at him, he just tugged the reins and the shirt on his back swelled with wind. His mother's eyes landed upon him finally, but they intended to teach him devotion: "The Lord knows of us." But Jeník was afraid and wanted assurance that he wouldn't be killed.

The hamlet knelt back beneath the trees and the cart was already in the middle of the fields, the landscape hugged the ground like a partridge, women ran barefoot with their heads down, men shouldered their scythes, two long rows of unshocked sheaves lay end to end like slaughtered troops, and grain piles were hurriedly loaded, hunching their spines before the ire of heaven that kept opening and opening. Only the wooden cross stands quietly at the crossroads, stretching its shoulders to the cloudy horror.

Soon enough it will remain here alone, and lightning might snatch half of its body, but again it will stand, like the silent Martyr, like God abandoned by his people, a frightful symbol that blasphemers would only dare touch when they're drunk.

Now, humiliated from fear, they stamp the dust with the prints of their laughable wretchedness, longing to reach the village, and the nearer they draw, the better they feel. Jeník watches them, envies them: a moment ago the Skládals were by the road, and now they are turning towards the open threshing floors. The wind grabs the women's skirts, baring their knees; now they can't be seen, perhaps they have opened the barn door and now they have a roof over their heads and above that roof the crown of a giant apple tree. They have dry ground beneath their feet; they look at the heavy clouds and think: "How lucky we are to be home." And swallows silently chirp, barely peeking out from the nest.

Jeník thinks to himself: "Oh to sit by the window and watch the hens as they run under the shed!" He pauses, however; his father stands upright above the hayrack and with each lightning flash his mother makes the sign of the cross. From below, Jeník sees his father's body against the black sky, he doesn't even wear a coat; his mother moves her lips quietly, and the cows swing their heads and with each thunderclap they squint their eyes.

"To sit by the window nice and dry," flashes through Jeník's mind, but right then he looks at his father and mother, and he cannot swallow, something heavy has grown inside of him, an obstruction that cannot be removed...

The cart hops a curb and drives onto the field. Jeník takes the whip and walks towards the cows so they won't scare. Mother is already passing up the sheaves. Jeník pets piebald Stračena's forehead and he prays from fear: "Angel of God, my guardian," and then says, "Dear God, please let us load at least seven shocks." He's terrified, forgetting to breathe, but he wouldn't want to be at home now, not without his mother and father; it wouldn't help to be the only one safe...

Two shocks are already on the cart and only a few sheaves remain of the third. Jeník clutches his fists impatiently when a sheaf takes too long, and now, look, one of the bindings breaks

loose; and again a sheaf is too heavy for his mother and falls back on her; the cartload gets stacked higher and higher—only two shocks more and they will be done!

Father stands on top, his head bare, blood running down his arm. Poor mother tightens her blue skirt and is unable to reach up; the grain and bristles fall into her eyes, her mouth, down the back of her blouse; sweat drips down her face and she has no time to wipe it. A black abyss looms overhead, resounding with leg-buckling booms. Dear God, just one more shock!

Jeník takes Stračena by her muzzle and leads her to the final shock; the grass between the stubble-fields trembles in the black wind—black for everything is black, the ground, the sky... Jeník looks up, his father's white face remains nailed to the clouds as a terrifying and brilliant abyss opens behind him; the cows, knocked down by a terrible blow, fall to their knees; father tumbles to the ground, while mother, pale as death, grabs onto a stanchion. Jeník cries and clasps his hands together, but he cannot remember a single prayer.

There is a deep rumbling in the clouds and rain begins to fall; with unsteady steps father goes to the cows to help them up, mother wipes away Jeník's tears and pats his hair, unable to express a word. The cartload wobbles and the last shock remains on the field as heaven hurtles to earth in a torrent of rain.

“Step on the wheel!” father screams, but the boom of thunder swallows his words and the cart slips down the wet hillside; for an instant, the wheel stands still in the air and only by a miracle does the cart not tip. But they take this miracle as a matter of course—they are as resolved for death as they are for life.

Hunched over, father goes to the front wheel; his skin shining through his shirt and water splashing out of his boots, but he notices nothing, he has completely transformed under the

pressure of gathering the entirety of the toppled load, and he can no longer be startled, not even by a thunderbolt that would put an end to everything.

Mother pulls Jeník away from the cart since the danger is greater there; only father must go that way, no one can go there in his stead, come what may...

Suddenly, Jeník has the taste of soil in his mouth and almost chokes on the sweet humility that both presses him to the drenched ground and unburdens him. He looks for his father but all he can see is a hunched back, and suddenly *bang!* Both cows drop to their knees; father returns to the ridge and looks back at mother and Jeník, exhaustion in his eyes. Rain stands like a wall between them and the village: Oh Lord, are we meant to perish here? But lo and behold, it is the patient eyes of the cows that open first and the animals strain against the yoke unbidden; the humans simply trudge behind in the gloom.

A cross emerges from the darkness, its shoulders spread. All three of them pray aloud as they pass by.

The way from the cross to the farmhouses led through a netherworld, and when the first hedge appeared, their joy was unexpected and beautiful like an undeserved reward. "Are we really alive?" they asked. The mud was so warm between their toes, the linden-trees gave off a pleasant scent, and the rain died down. Father turned back at last and smiled, his face paler than Jeník had ever seen before. Mother didn't dare smile yet; it seemed like blasphemy to her.

Then they looked at each other and at the soaked cartload. "I said we shouldn't go," mother said, but then even she laughed since no one got hurt. Jeník approached Stračena, but his hand, outstretched to pet her, froze when he saw tears running from her eyes. He never knew that cows cried too.

## 2.3 Two Homes

When they had come to the edge of the forest and the road descended beneath Rampach and ran soundly through the broad plain, doe-eyed Srna looked back and released a long bellow. Roubal the cotter pulled at her halter, and his wife pet the cow's rump to calm her: "Come now, you'll get used to living here with us."

Roubal's wife sadly knew what would become of this carefree creature that up to now had only grazed in the mountains—Mrs. Roubal had spent her youth cutting grass in the mountains before she was married—so she would have preferred to urge the cow on with caresses and her humble example, but finally her husband screamed and whipped Srna with a broken-off switch until a long welt rose against her skin. The cow bolted forward and as it trotted down to the village on tired hooves, Mrs. Roubal's soul went out to her fellow martyr.

At the threshold of the barn Roubal the cotter made the sign of the cross with his switch and pulled the new cow into the warm darkness. The two wide nostrils of Stračena snorted out to welcome her companion. Srna hesitated at first, but at the sound of the harsh voice, she dashed headlong into the unfamiliar hole. The door closed behind her like water above a drowned man—

"She won't drink," Roubal's wife told her husband before dinner, but he didn't even remove the pipe from his mouth.

Roubal's wife huddled over the soup, and the scent of the steaming potatoes reminded her, sentimentally, of the fires in her own mountains, where the path seemed to ascend to heaven above, and the last time the smell of thyme mixed with the evening chimney-smoke from the houses

below. Today she had had to travel through familiar paths again, and once more smoke rose from the fires, but her husband was in a hurry and would not let her stop; it was only from afar that she could glimpse the steep roof under which strangers now lived.

Roubal's wife ate soup for a long time and wistfulness gripped her just like the first night the house was empty of her husband and she so wanted to return to her mountains.

As soon as her husband went out to the yard to examine the sky and bolt the gate, Roubal's wife sat down on the threshold by the furnace; her head, untouched for so long, trembled against her poor knees. The tick of the clock and the sighs of her sleeping children punctuated her sobbing. But lo, steps sounded on the porch and Roubal's wife bent over the basin and got to washing dishes.

The cotter entered, took off his shoes (soil fell from the folds of his rolled up pants) and said carelessly: "Srna is down already. Tomorrow I'll hitch her up."

The night mercifully salved the freshly opened scars, and when the first cart passed through the still blue village square, Roubal's wife rose from bed, grabbed a poker and started the fire. The walls in the yard didn't yet have the indifferent appearance they took on during the day, and when she opened the barn, both cows turned their heads toward the door, welcoming her together.

"Well, have you shared secrets yet?" Roubal's wife asked, smiling sadly. The cows stretched their tongues out, but she didn't let them lick her. She piled their trough high with clover, sat down on a stool and the bright streams of milk echoed out into the bluish dawn.

In the meantime, Roubal got up, walked around the yard, greased the cart, readied the gates and repaired the yoke for the new ox. In the kitchen, flame licked the floor, steam hissed on the griddle, and the children began to wake at the familiar sound of a coffee mill. The voices were growing and the light as well; windows clattered at the heavy rumble of farm carts and the night

clouds drifting to the mountains stopped in the center of the sky, leaving only half the face of the moon—ashamed of its poor showing compared to the splendor to the east.

And Roubal is already leading the cows out of the barn (they drag clods of wet manure behind them over the threshold), and while Roubal's wife hitches up Stračena on the left side, her husband occupies himself for a while with the tall, slim mountain animal, looking with delight at her cocked head and little horns. Finally, everything done, Roubal tells his wife more festively than usual: "Open the gate!"

With the tip of his switch he draws a cross before the front legs of the cows, drives them on and heads to the village square. With compassionate eyes, the woman follows the careful beauty from the mountains.

"It's going to be hard for you to get used to Roubal's yoke," thinks Roubal's wife, then quietly adds: "But you have to—I did too."

Time passed and doe-eyed Srna adapted. At first the grass would lure her away, but the sting of a whip was all she needed to obediently return to the narrow road running through the broad fields. Mountain paths are different, with all the dew and the streams to be crossed barefoot; hips are narrower and hills can be run down, danced down, heedless of time—it's beautiful. But roads on the plain are laid out geometrically according to the fields and it's necessary to follow where they lead: a cow can't wander wherever she wants. A village cow cannot escape the yoke (their hips raw from the harness straps) and from morning to noon to dusk it pulls the plow, its route determined by the number of furrows. By the time the bell sounds, the field is full of cloven prints. In autumn those hoof prints are where quail will sleep their frightened sleep.

However, before she tamed completely and began to hunch low with worry, coming to resemble the countryside herself, she dared one last time to dance a cruel dance upon the ploughed field. People near and far stopped their work, and those, who were closer and had the courage, called to Roubal: “Settle down, man, or you’ll kill that ox of yours!”

But the cotter was beside himself, all pale, eyes bulging, as he beat the cow with an broken-off switch, and when only a splinter remained in his hands, he grabbed a hoe, and beat the cow with the handle until the animal finally stopped resisting.

Roubal’s wife stood nearby, her hands clasped, and she didn’t dare make a sound. She knew that just like from a thunderbolt or a flood, there was no refuge from her husband’s rage.

From that moment on, the “mountain girl,” pulling the yoke for dear life was like a little lambkin. The splendor faded from her. Her head hung low like the cows of other cotters, and when they would take her out in the morning it never crossed her mind to trot. Time passed and her appearance adapted to the countryside and Roubal’s cottage, and everyone who saw her instantly knew: “She must be one of Roubal’s.”

They both grew old, the cotter’s cow and the cotter’s wife, their beauty fading; if anyone ever heard them call the cow “doe-eyed Srna,” he would be struck with the thought that there was nothing deer-like about her...

Then one night, with that strange loneliness of autumn, when leaves fall, Roubal’s wife awoke terrified, trying in vain to grasp the threads of a happy dream that transformed her back into a young girl scything grass in the woods above her childhood home. But the devil of our childish faith, who appears on moonlit nights to plow a team of the damned, sliced through her blissful dream with the terrible lash of his whip, and Roubal’s wife, crossed her timelines and couldn’t tell

whether she'd awoken in this world or the other; she sat for a moment and stared into a night marred by the moon. Little by little her senses sharpened until things became familiar, but then she grasped something terrifying: there are two worlds. And then it hit—a pain too ordinary.

Roubal's wife threw on a skirt and sulked out into the yard. Roubal, barefoot and in his underclothes, stood in the middle of the orchard, swinging his whip. Srna, with her tail raised, ran from the well to the backyard, the broken chain hanging from her neck, the night suffocatingly quiet.

It took a long time before they could trap the cow inside and tie her to the trough; the moon shone long, and the runaway ox darted through the trees clanging her chain and causing fright. The two comical figures in nightdress trembled as the cow, which was fed and milked three times a day, shot fire from her eyes and she didn't heed their voices. Finally, she lowered her head and walked to the stable quietly, by herself. This time Roubal didn't dare to strike her.

The moon shone like daylight. Roubal's wife couldn't fall asleep; she saw the cottage in the mountains below the woods, a lump of thatch sticking out of the roof and casting a momentary shadow upon the moon. But something had left forever, mother and father are dead, what is real is somewhere else...

In the morning the sun was peaceful and the events of the night were like a dream. Srna went calmly to cart, plodding down the road through the far-spreading fields.

Roubal's wife, however, roamed about the house like she'd lost her soul, pausing now and again and holding her greying head in her scarred hands. The dream of her first home, awakened unexpectedly, left a sadness gaping in her until she died.

## 2.4 Kozlovice

The farmhouses circled a Romanesque chapel with a baroque cross, and wise people said that important things were happening in the world and everything would change now, because things couldn't go on like they did in the old days.

“Indeed,” the farmers and cotters agreed as they locked their gates and checked their barns before going to bed.

Cracked palms hurt, yet tomorrow the field must still be plowed from road to ravine, the clods crushed, and in bed you can feel your soul rusting with anxiety.

But this morning a broom sprouts from the fence wall behind the Spurný's garden, in the pond on the square frogs drop gleaming green gems into dreams, and a whole world of scents pours through an open window, wanting God-knows-what from you.

“We need at least ten musicians, but let's talk to the Savinskýs—ours are getting a bit too full of themselves!”

Bedřich Spurný, who delivered this speech, hitches up his trousers, ready to fight if he doesn't get his way.

Franta, Hynek and the other Franta leave; staid and frugal, they read tracts on soil amelioration and papal crimes (lent to them by the veterinarian, Kolář) and they are too ashamed to deal with such nonsense.

“But just you wait, they'll be more than happy to come and dance,” Bedřich spits after them:” Those still sitting on the roller under the pear tree are loyal through and through.

The gates of the three most beautiful farms slam behind “the smart crowd”; Bedřich, however, misses his old man coming back from the pub and has to climb over the dwarf wall to sleep next to the horses, beside the groom.

The dance is in a week.

The afternoon is no great affair, the ballroom is half-empty and Bedřich solemnly leads the first waltz. “The “smart crowd” have taken their books to the forest; the wealthier girls will barely peek through the window; the farmers disappear behind the farm houses, pretending they notice nothing.

Only the poor don’t make a fuss; they live it up to their last penny and get drunk right away since they cannot prolong the pleasure. Bedřich Spurný’s family has land, but he gambles and won’t get any of it, so he’s together with the rabble...

Meanwhile, Julka Hudcová has been sitting under an oak tree by the edge of the forest to make sure she doesn’t miss the train. Kolář, who first kindled her lustful and languorous beauty, is on his way; but today, in the darkness of her eyes, in the parting of her full lips, in her carelessly buttoned blouse, who cannot see the sorrow of a tattered rose? Kolář was the first, but not the last. She’s damaged goods to the farmers’ sons, and Kolář steers clear of her.

Julka, once precious, waits alone under Lidka’s window. Even on Sundays Lidka must wash the dishes and char away in the barn; she has all kinds of trouble that Julka doesn’t understand, and she pays bitterly for dreaming beyond her world.

The two girls sit under the oak tree, the hamlet broken into gardens down below, and music reaches them, sadness touches them. They have already argued three times today and they sit silent. But look! The train makes its way across the field like a mole scampering through a ditch and Julka has to go—farewell until the dance!

Kolář carries his suitcase past the farm houses, but Julka waits by the cross, her hair loose, falling down her back, and Kolář can't break away. He promises to come to the pub that night.

Evening arrives, Lidka, in secret and in fear, irons the laces of her slip. She's embarrassed even in front of her mother and, God, what if her father suddenly entered? A snide word from him would leave a stain in the white fabric that she could never wash out.

How much trouble the slip has already cost her! Among the cold bricks of the hallway she would embroider it in smoky lamplight, while others were long asleep. How she worried about running out of silk and money for another. And what good is it all for? In the morning the slip will be trampled, the laces ripped out, and she'll be sadder than usual. And still, staying home is impossible. She would suffocate. Today she shall dance, and in a few hours yesterday will begin again—the mud, the manure...

Lidka's tears sizzle under the iron, but somebody approaches; the girl snatches up the undergarment and runs with it to the closet.

Kozlovice is a hamlet the world doesn't know about; farmers mind their fields and their beer; their heads bald while their stomachs swell; the sons grow up obedient and secretly sinful, holding the cotters and laborers in disdain, like vermin.

The pub stands in the dark and to get to the dance hall you have to cross the yard, but you have to be careful since it's narrow and the manure pile is right in front of the door.

The dance hall is a tumbler you filled with Maybugs and shook. It teems and buzzes and swarms! But everyone finds his way—farmers in the front at the tables, the others on the benches by the walls, and the poor, the drunks and the bums at the back by the tap-room. High up on the stage sit the musicians; bespectacled Uncle Hřibek plays the first fiddle and Kohout the cocky prep

student stretches out in the back with his clarinet. He's languid and sarcastic, and he doesn't dance much, irritating the girls for acting so superior.

Almost everyone is a local, Kozlovice is alone, staring into its own eyes. All those biddies in the corner chatter merrily and good old Mrs. Hudcová listens to them praise her Julka, still unaware of her tarnished glory. Toothless Myšková smirks at the Potockýs' daughter—they say Lidka over there always has to be different than the rest, she has enough of that weird philosophy, but never any money...

Myšková's giant son, Franta, dances around with tiny Rézinka Němečková bringing a smile to his mother's jowls. Lojza Bendů stands coatless by the tap-room, drinking beer from a glass boot. When the musicians finish the song, he totters to the middle, and spins the shoe, soaking everyone.

"Vermin!" Franta, Hynek and the other Franta sneer from a table upstairs. Bedřich was right when he predicted they would come. The music strikes up again and now Franta is actually dancing; he makes a scornful face and shakes his legs comically.

"He should get married," says toothless Myšková.

Bedřich has already had too much to drink and sits quietly by the door. Soon he'll grow sad and request a solo before all the offended eyes.

Julka gazes pointlessly at the door. Kolář has lied to her. She plays with crumpled violets, speaking to no one. Her mother looks at her uneasily, but Julka pretends she doesn't notice.

Lidka is having a good time; she dances from one person's arms to the next, never stopping to rest—at least now she can let her mind be a blank. The rhythm of the music puts her into a trance, but it isn't erotic. It's unpleasant when someone presses against her. Sometimes she's alarmed herself: "God, why am I not like everyone else?"

All the boys are nice but indifferent to her—she’s twenty-one years old. She’s Julka’s confidant and doesn’t like to think about what she once heard: confessors learn of love but never find it.

Lidka drives the thoughts away and increases her tempo. Next to her she notices Běta Hanzlíčková, her body barely contained by her stained white clothes, lustfully leeching onto a bow-legged groom with a hat on his head.

“She is already going to dances?” Lidka is astonished, but then she reckons Běta’s age and is surprised that she herself is twenty-one years old. Her ripped shoes flash past, the ones she still recently wore to school, the shoes of the stupid girl with hunger in her eyes and lice in her hair.

The fast polka makes her nauseous and she asks her dance-partner to sit down with her. Comments come right and left. She doesn’t understand and cannot answer since they wouldn’t understand. Solitude surrounds her like an icy wall and the fan spinning beneath the ceiling inhales the anxious and resisting dance-hall.

“Made her sick”—it is the voice of Mrs. Škrábková.

Lidka gets up amazed, looking around with her bright eyes.

“But I’m not sick!” she protests firmly and goes to sit down by the window. Next to her she sees Julka losing hope.

“Why aren’t you dancing?”

“Men are such snakes!” Julka sighs and Lidka suddenly wants to laugh.

“You’ll marry me, won’t you?” she asks Hynek Navrátil, the son of a wealthy farmer, who stands before her, mouth agape. With a burst of laughter Lidka storms back onto the dancefloor.

Kohout, the student, stands by the balustrade, blowing on his clarinet, looking derisively at the dancefloor, as if he were playing at the circus for dancing animals.

Hudec and Hubáček, the two richest farmers, sit down with their beer by the door, grabbing at the skirts of the dancing girls. But the ladies glare at them and they both disappear. “God damn this life—always having to think about your reputation and what your son will think,” Hudec curses as they head to another pub.

It is already eleven when Kolář enters. He used to like making a grand entrance in his hometown, but now all the girls want to get married and he makes his old friends uncomfortable. The mothers are sore at him for playing with their daughters’ heads; the fathers cannot forgive him for the way he turned his nose up at farming, and the youth don’t need him anymore since now they know just as much about Rome, Jesuits, and Darwin as he does.

He doesn’t want to hear about Julka, but as soon as he sees her, he’s helpless.

They dance with their limbs intertwined and their breath fused and the music fades from their ears, circles cross, and their eyes mist over...

But lo the hours drift by and midnight passes before you know it, and it’s already today—today when Kozlovice will lie dusty and vulnerable by the side of the road, from which they are assailed by the strange world from the automobiles flying past; already today the Králíček children will sit in the gravel, crying all day for their mom; already today the street organs will whistle into the midday silence, and old Škrábková will sweep the horse manure from the village square and chase her five hens into the coop!

Little Josef Němeček, you’ve grown smaller and haven’t even finished laughing; already today you must plow the edge of the field where your wheel broke on Saturday, and you, Lidka Potocká, you want to dance yourself silly – but it’s all in vain, already today you have to slip off

your pumps and step barefoot into the manure. Oh, how heavy the pitchfork will be, and how your eyes will burn!

Kozlovice, already today the infinite world will spread over you and you will be a single tear before it, with goose droppings on the village square and that ridiculous sign by the pub: Village, parish, Kozlovice...

Lojza Benda's, you are drunk, but that doesn't give you the right to torment your Žofinka so! She was like a flower bud only last year, and look what she has become now! Lojza, you dance with a pitcher over your head and a crying woman in your arms, but already today you will trot over the field to the brickyard with a bundle under your arm, clenching your teeth, and nobody will say: "God bless you!"

Time flies past midnight; a pink dress is wrinkled in shame. Franta, Hynek, and the other Franta leave first, and the belly of old Pačula sways towards his five daughters, who reluctantly drag out themselves from window to window.

Kolář covers Julka in a wrap and with a mysterious gesture responds to Kohout who makes the sign of the cross behind him in the doorway.

Courage falters after the first depart. The corners yawn; the music dozes.

Nobody would have expected you to raise such a storm, old man Stejskal, you who pinches every penny! And still, when Bedřich drowned his sorrow in drink and Lojza told his wife, "Don't cry," you shouted out in the middle of the dance hall: "It's not yet time to leave!"

Alas! How ashamed he gets! The little white-haired man would speak with such a quiet voice, always patiently tapping with his hammer from morning till night, and now suddenly he is a drunk!

He gets frightened, his eyes blur like a dying sparrow's, his knees buckle, and the beer spills on the floor. There's nothing to do, old man, it's time to go home.

Bedřich staggers out of the corner and spreads his arms, but he can't stop them anymore. He grabs the glass boot, swings it, and breaks it to pieces. The musicians lie under the table and a torn wreath hangs from the ceiling.

Kohout, the student, leads the way, going through the hamlet, whistling: "'Til morning, 'til morning ..." The band follows him limply, their teeth chattering, passing Brach's lit windows. "They say he's been dying of consumption for two days already," says somebody at the back.

The farmhouses lift up their wings like clucking-hens, welcoming the stragglers beneath them. Lidka hesitates by the door, her heart stuck to the threshold like a scraped-off mushroom. The village is quiet like a ripped drum; dawn is approaching.

Finally, she gathers her courage, but the loud bangs of the door still shock her. The floor inside is cracked, her bare feet shuffle through the hall, and Lidka squeezes through the door like a chick, bowing before the whip of an impatient scolding.

The cold kitchen greets her indifferently, the tick of the clock pierces her temples, and the blanket is not thick enough to suppress her sobs.

As soon as sleep draws its thin curtain on her memory, the day enters through the windows, voices come to life, and mother's poker prods the guts of the stove. Her eyelids have fused together and it's painful to separate them. Roads, free at night, lie with resignation beneath the wheels of the carts; the anxiety becomes merciless. The village takes up its old cross.

And you, traveler, who wanders the world past low farmhouses, notice the blood drops on the pebbles—and don't laugh when you read the sign: Village, parish, Kozlovice.

## 2.5 Wallet

Yesterday the square by the village church buzzed like an afternoon garden humming with bees. But today it's dead, and Vojtěch sits out front in the sand. Yesterday's celebration snuffed out, ribbons from the harvest festival lie in the ditch beside the road.

In the palm of his hand Vojtěch plays with a beautiful yellow wallet, barely brightening the glumness of the day. Already the leather seems to have cracked and faded. Why can't a wallet ever stay as new as on the first day? It would have been better had he never gotten it. . .

He barely finishes the thought when two faint shadows stretch out ahead of him on the dusty road. Startled, Vojtěch raises his head; two tramps, one big, one small, stand before him. They have long necks and cloth sacks hang from their elbows.

Vojtěch looks for protection but finds dead silence. The eyes of the taller one resemble those of a beast examining its prey before devouring it.

“Gimme your wallet, I'll give you mine!”

Vojtěch's new wallet lies next to a creature with a frog's black belly, run over by wagon wheels; the frog, dragging its intestines behind, had crawled on, until it was crushed by another wagon and trampled with hooves. He presses its belly and a hole gapes wide.

Vojtěch peers into the eyes of the tramp, wanting to speak up. But the young man snatches the last bit of courage away from him and says: “My wallet's better—now take it!” In the simmering voice Vojtěch hears a threat.

He looks back into the eyes of the dragon, searching for the faintest hint that he's joking. But the tramp grows impatient: “Give it here!”

Before Vojtěch can pull himself together, the two shadows start down the road and the two sacks disappear around the corner. Something foul and black, similar to the stomach of the trampled frog, lies in the little boy's palm like an unabsolved sin.

Spit out helpless into the town square, Vojtěch drops the wallet on a pile of gravel. He runs away as fast as he can. He looks back and the wallet glares at him from afar, still visible. Penitent, the little boy returns and picks it up. He thinks about the narrow ditch between two low-walls where sewer-water flows black over broken bottles and rusty pans, where the belly of a drowned kitten floats beneath tall weeds.

Vojtěch backs up to it and with all his strength he hurls the wallet into the foul muck. He turns back to see the wallet impaled on a jutting stalk. He grits his teeth to keep from fainting and creeps along the wall, pushing his fingers into the gaps between the stones. He retrieves the wallet.

He feels like crying and he doesn't know what to do. He opens the gate and is amazed that home is so near—a moment before he had been so alone. . .

His father fixes a cracked barrel in the courtyard. Vojtěch steels himself. He produces the wallet and confesses. Then he waits silently. Instead of being soothed, a word is hurled at him like a rock:

“Jackass!”

Vojtěch hangs his head and drags his shame into the yard, behind the haystack. With a piece of iron he digs out a pocket and buries the burden inside.

Then he raises himself up, and bleeding inside from unwept tears, he watches the road wind like a river, vanishing into places Vojtěch has never been. On the horizon two small figures stagger against the orphaned sky, carrying sacks.

Vojtěch watches for a long while, and the distant figures stay set, planted beside the road like two milestones.

The next morning they were still there, heads hanging over their eternal quest. Time passed and the rain drenched them and the sun scorched them, but the figures, eternal pilgrims, never reached the end of the long road. And then one day Vojtěch set out after them and caught up to them. Two old willow trunks, twisted and grimacing, jutted out over a dried-up pond.

Vojtěch reached into the guts of the hollow trunk; the palm he withdrew was sad and empty.

## 2.6 Lost

That afternoon the house emptied out, the voices in the neighboring rooms fell silent, the wagon of a child stood overturned in the yard, and inside the half-open gate peeked someone's goat. Clouds covered the sky and hills encircled the ravaged and vindictive countryside; the trails led nowhere and the steel surface of the pond shimmered with hostility.

Petr Cleopas left the house and set out on the first trail he found without meeting a single soul. On a marshy meadow with dry grass, stumps of old willows stood over black pools. Grey groves, blasted by the breath of age and death, bit maliciously into the barren hillsides. Past the pond on the other side, crooked roofs from the village hunched beneath the dismal sky.

Petr Cleopas found himself in a grassy trench below an empty stubble field with two stunted pine trees. A bit further stood a forest, full of dry needles and fallen cones. The only sounds were the rustle of dry grass and the bloodless whisper, like fire consuming paper, inside Petr Cleopas. He half-knelt, half-lay on the cold earth; eyes closed, he silently counted the beat of his slowing heart. The sense of sheer nothingness and the proximity of death caused a poisonous and grotesque sweetness to spring inside him. Damp and cooling colors flowed before his eyes...

He awoke with a sudden shiver—as if someone tall and dark, yet invisible, stood behind watching over with infinite remorse and love. Petr Cleopas did not dare to look back; instead he pressed himself to the ground, longing to have his heart stabbed through. He longed to drain his blood drop by drop onto the dust of the miserable trails and the fading flowers shredded by the

autumn wind. He wanted to feel the eternal thorn of love, piercing deeper and deeper into his breast.

It was pitch black by the time he stood up to go on. The wind had died and the air was warm and wet. The hills and slopes, so stern and sullen during the day, seemed alive and friendly in the dark—like wakeful eyes were watching Petr Cleopas.

Wandering through the meadows, Petr came upon an iron cross standing between two trees, and the grassy path quickly turned into a narrow trail. He thought he was veering to the left, so he trudged across the field to get back on course. I'll be home in an hour, he thought. The town I'm setting out for is just over that hill. He felt wheel-tracks under his feet, and in the middle of a ploughed-up field the roof of an old shed emerged from the darkness. A little ways on, a village spire jutted into the sky. "I must have gone further than I thought," Petr Cleopas said to himself as he headed along the back fences. Despite being night-blind, he was quite calm. The kind eyes followed him, vigilant. Petr reached a road and hopped a still stream in a clay gulch; slipping into the woods he thought bordered the village. But the gentle path jack-knifed in the opposite direction before plunging into a dark ravine.

Petr broke out in a sweat, but decided to head back to the trail. Within several steps he was stumbling over clods of overturned earth. The forest came up quick and a strange gurgle disturbed the tar-black night. Shivers ran through Petr. He bolted down the hillside but his feet slopped into the mud of an unseen swamp. He had to return. As he did, the creek snarled at him from the woods like a dog. Petr headed left across the field, leaving the creek growling behind

Petr wound around to the left again, presumably, onto his original course. As he walked along the broad trail, a sound unusual for that time of day and that time of year startled him: someone reaping clover? It was Sunday—Petr had never seen people work the fields on a Sunday

here. And where would they find clover this late in the fall? Petr couldn't breathe and without thinking he softened his footsteps. Suddenly he found himself back at the creek, now running silent and level through a narrow gulley. Petr took several steps along the creek, and saw a white dress in the water. Suppressing the first shudder, Petr thought to himself: "A couple must have had a rendezvous." He took two more steps and laughed: "Keep your wits together—God knows where your imagination might lead." Just then the white dress, with a figure inside, seemed to float to the surface. Petr was trying to compose himself, when he realized that the white dress was only the water in the creek shining with inexplicable intensity. The natural phenomenon shocked him more than if he'd felt the cold fingers of a ghost on his throat. A thick pitch drenched the skies above so no star shone through. It was so utterly quiet and the creek glistened with such unexpected silence that terror seized Petr. He took off to the right across the field, sensing the devilish laugh of immense, unblinking eyes behind him.

He could neither see nor fathom the end of the field he ran across. He expected the labyrinthine darkness above to swallow him like a maelstrom, then something sprang out: a tree lining the road. It was so unforeseen, so unexpected. The road seemed like mirage, a *fata morgana*. From the shape of the trees and the twists of the road, he knew this was not the road he'd sought, and the mendacity of the entire landscape overwhelmed him. He reeled and inadvertently he crossed himself. He stood on that mysterious and slightly luminous road, unsure if he was behind the village or hundreds of miles away. He stood, uncertain whether to go up or down. In the sheer silence and utter solitude, coming upon another traveler seemed unlikely; the darkness was endless, not even a glimmer to hint at a nearby hamlet.

In the depths of the darkness and uncertainty, Petr Cleopas suddenly experienced some subtle security, a perfect distraction that tasted of arrogance and curiosity. Straightaway he headed down the road, planning to bang on the first cottage door in the first village he found.

He hadn't gone far when suddenly a yellow light flickered at him from a crook in the road. He stood still, listening to the unmistakable creaking of wheels. He walked on a bit, and he finally spied a horse pulling a rickety wagon; upon it a man sat hunched. Petr greeted the man and said the name of the village he sought. The man loosened his blanket and tugged on the reins. He leaned out to him, "Přísennice? You're going the wrong way! You've got a long trip ahead of you." Then the old man invited Petr into the back of the cart to sit on a pile of empty sacks; as soon as Petr settled in, he realized how badly his legs ached.

"Quite a detour," said the old man shaking his head. "You must have gotten lost." Petr mentioned where he had been walking, and the old man nodded, mumbling to himself: "Yeah, they always sneak around here." Petr trembled and looked at the pensive old man. "Like that time with Francek Lipka," he began after a while. "He's getting dressed one morning to go chop wood, still dark out, and someone knocks on his window. He opens up and Janek Chalupa's standing there, an axe looped over his shoulder. 'You comin' out,' he says. 'Hold on, let me just stuff straw in my boots,' Francek answers from inside. And a second later bam! bam! on the window. 'Hurry up!' Janek calls outside. 'I'm comin' already,' Francek answers back, grabbing his axe and heading off into the dark with Janek. They'd gone quite a ways and were at that cross, where the road forks, when Janek just vanished. Just like someone blew him off the earth. And just then Francek remembered Janek had already been buried half a year. His legs froze with fear; he took off his cap and said an Our Father for the souls in purgatory."

The old man grew silent and bundled himself up in his blanket. The buggy creaked along the road, shaking the lantern's yellow beam. The wind picked up and a cold drop of rain fell onto Petr's face. The carriage crested the hill and windows shone below. "That's Přisenice," the old man said as they headed down the slope.

Petr Cleopas sat in the back on the pile of sacks. He watched the lights before him and remembered the dead. "Please, stay true to me," he quietly cried, and all at once he felt he had signed a crucial pact with the countryside. As if she had granted him intimacy and in return he had accepted responsibility.

"What awaits me behind those windows," he wondered, looking out into the darkness at the village hiding his impending and unknown fate. "Maybe it will begin tonight, as soon as I open the door," he thought, "maybe only those doors lie between me and perdition." At the church the road split into two. The old man stopped. Petr thanked him for the lift, and set off, walking up to the village.

They never saw each other again.

## 2.7 Burning Up

She stared for a while at her mud-splattered apron; she understood nothing. She made an imperceptible movement, a gesture towards an uncertain step, and then without tears and without words she froze in desperation. She surprised herself that she wasn't screaming, that she wasn't running after the man up the sodden road disappearing into the grey horizon. Just a month ago, just last night, she wouldn't have stood for this. But today she knew it was over. Her cry dried up at the source, and her heart and limbs went still as a corpse.

Her pain didn't arise from the sorrow that this man had spurned her; it was not the thought of lost love that pricked her heart. She knew it all already, knew that he didn't love her (this man with the faint mustache and swollen white face with its lolling indifferent eyes)—but she had clung to him as frantically as a woman drowning, embracing her fantasy, her sin, the last remnants of her defiance, her sedition, her willing and dogged humiliation.

But now it was all over. Her hands were empty, her mouth tasted the sediment of regret, her heart weighted with the sadness of something irretrievable and misspent. "It's over," she repeated to herself, finding herself facing a blind and emotionless wall and looking back at the bridges burning behind her.

She stood in the middle of the road and gazed with dull eyes at the puddles rippling in lazy circles from the autumn rain. Her scarf slid down, clinging to her forehead and her temples and

her hair, already thick with ash-grey streaks. Overnight the surrounding countryside had lost its last traces of color; now it was scrubbed and soaked through into a rotten and sepulchral black.

The eyes of the abandoned woman reflected the desperate grey of the sky and the gloom of utter exhaustion, and all at once something in them changed; her expression came to painful life and her mouth twisted. She noticed that at the edge of the road stood a stone cross, the site of detestable and incomprehensible suffering. She began to run away, staggering as if she were drunk.

It was the pointless flight of an animal, prolonged by the cruel whims of a mysterious hunter—the Saint Vitus’ dance of a creature overcome by the horror of an inalterable reality.

Today in the wet and thickening twilight, Karolína Vachutková embarked on her final trip to her lover, her final pilgrimage; forced by the passion that had come to her so late in life, she stumbled blind and crazed along the road that for fifteen years had paved her shame. The aging target of all the local laughter and insults, a ghastly mess clutching and embracing the destruction that had become an irresistibly sweet poison.

“Hey, look. Here she comes!” the workers in the field called, stretching their backs. The young men yelled out: “Karolínka, let’s see those knees! Sweet dreams, sweetheart!”

She walked with her head down, silent to their jeers, captivated by the sin from which she had no desire for release. Day after day she walked through this—always towards evening, always through the backroads, hills and stubble fields to avoid human eyes and human speech; the flat countryside could not hide her skinny frame dressed in yesterday’s faded fashion.

She would walk there in the evening and return in the morning with swollen eyelids and pursed lips, shyer yet even more stubborn, sunk one span deeper into the swamp of perdition. For fifteen years she made these twilight visits to her lover, with his doughy white body, dusted with moldy sensuality.

At first the hypocrites taunted her, later they just laughed, but they always eyed her. In the end Karolína's daring and ludicrous rendezvous turned banal, and for those working in the field her daily quests became a way of telling the time, like the bell from the city's brickyard or the slow rattle of the yellow mail car. The strange love of the aging woman began to mimic the countryside, became part of the local fauna.

The course of events that would soon follow, however, would again inject life into the fading interest of those witnesses who long ago had grown inured to the tragic spectacle. But at this moment the unhappy woman is still wandering over the drenched fields, and although it is almost night and there is not a soul to see, she searches for the furthest path like she's avoiding a thousand eyes fixed right on her; she returns, but goes forward again, as if today she wanted to travel simultaneously along every path that she had tread upon during the fifteen years of pilgrimage. She stumbles to her knees, touching the face of the earth, as if she were looking for lost coins or counting the footprints the wind and rain had long erased from the hills and paths, which somehow came to life before her in this moment of reckoning. And while the sad rain rattles in the dry brush and the remains of a forgotten copse, she staggers through the wasteland betrayed, like a sick animal that seeks out the farthest corner of the yard, consumed with the humiliation of its own death.

Karolina fled every memory like someone without a single drop of health in her entire body; what had previously pleased her now hissed at her like asps hiding wherever she sought peace. Reeking of mold, accompanied by the moans and incomprehensible hatred of her mother, who in her dress lay dying in the corner on a pile of rags refusing to see the priest until death stayed her tongue, Karolina's youth faded away with that first fissure in her chastity, opened in a drowsy

moment with the stable boy; if she did not become a mother then it was only because the old woman had beaten her unconscious with a crutch. Afterwards she withered like an unsightly blossom; her heart rusted, she wore scarves and long skirts. In church she knelt in the shadow of the last pillar; at dances she stood closest to the door, her eyes mournfully and bitterly tracking the other girls so pleased with being unblemished—perhaps they carried their sins with a lighter conscience. Her downcast eyes and the scarf pasted against her forehead were not signs of contrition, however; her rebellious soul still yearned for a taste of the insidious sweetness of sin. It tumesced and leavened with an accursed yeast, out of which bloomed a pride and passion whose audacity would shock even the boldest.

She had been as white as a canvas when Jindřich Frýb, a cigarette in his mouth and a hat on his head, took her to the dancehall, and when the music stopped he heard the chattering of her teeth. That night he slept with her and in the morning when he hopped the fence of her yard, he still felt a chill throughout his body, for he had not expected to awaken a tigress in this woman. He was shocked the next evening when he found her in the doorway of his home, but he quickly succumbed to the sensual tenderness that she showered upon him. “How can such a plain creature be so slick and sticky?” he wondered to himself after her nightly visits, between morning and evening when his wits were together and he realized the ridiculousness of the circumstances. Yet he could not control himself; her body transmitted a sinful lust to his, so for fifteen years he could only flail in her web despite the occasional half-hearted effort to fend her off.

Whereas he never fooled himself about the root of his slavery, his mind remained clear though it yielded constantly, Karolína surrendered to her passion with both body and mind, and she longed for its flame to consume her whole. How sweet damnation would be if they were damned together. Drunk with defiance, she took pleasure in perdition. She did not know that evil

is finite and the human soul is insatiable. It wasn't a lack of love from him that drove her suddenly to the edge of the abyss. She knew that if she came to him tonight, everything would be as it was before. But all at once she felt that she no longer could—something in her was spent. As she stood on the sodden road in the hopeless whisper of the rain, she realized that it was all for nothing, that she was alone. This was the end. She could live no longer. Just like when someone reaches the end of a corridor and faces a stone wall, they cannot go on, there is nothing left. A vision of the cross came to her—and she started to run.

She could not bear the sight; that passage seemed closed off to her. A strange pleasure coursed through her entire body at the thought that she would be damned. At that point she still didn't know there would come a moment when everything would be exhausted and nothing would remain—nothing at all. But already then when she knelt in the shade of the farthest pillar with her scarf over her eyes—already then she knew that she was hurting someone: the one stretched out on the cross. She felt that everything would change suddenly if—if there were some release to whatever was stretching like a bow inside of her. But the idea that she was hurting Him stroked the joy inside of her. She pressed on the dagger stuck in her heart and her pain transformed into frenzied delight; someone's laugh resounded within the murmur of her blood.

And now that path is closed to her and she runs away. She knows she has nowhere to run, and she claws her face. She doesn't know what to do, she isn't thinking about killing herself; she only knows that this is the end, that there is nothing left as horror swallows her. There is nothing, only she juts out into the universe—and she knows that she can no longer be, that her life has reached its end. Now where is that poisonous delight that drove her to always stab the dagger deeper—where is that deceptive voice? Nothing, just silence. The vast emptiness of space. The poor thing runs and runs.

Accursed habit drove her to the burlesque's ultimate irony: Karolína Vachutková hanged herself from the pear tree outside Jindřich Frýb's window. It never occurred to her to take revenge on her lover with this piece of theater. She had no control over her last steps; her final moments of consciousness were veiled in darkness—no one knows what terror strangled her. When they cut her down, her dress was spattered with mud and her shoes were in tatters. Her face was blue, twisted into an inhuman grimace.

A crowd of onlookers had already gathered in front of the house when the poor thing's lover appeared in the doorway. He spotted her dead, went pale and covered his face. All day he wandered through the fields and when he returned that night, he could neither eat nor sleep. During her life, Karolína's love had become uncomfortable for him, but after her death it lay on him like an enormous burden. Who would rid him of her haunting presence? Who could erase the traces of her embrace from his body? Jindřich Frýb's skin began to feel like it was burning with fresh sores. His bulging eyes peered into the darkness and he felt that although he had been unfaithful to so many alive, to this one dead he would remain faithful forever, even though he didn't want to. He fell into bed fully dressed and drove his nails into his face.

## 2.8 Moth

The path led to the bottom of a barren ravine on the outskirts of the city. In that ill-defined time between evening and night, the sky was a vague black, blind and naked. Out from the gorge's wet soil jutted sleek crags. Like a wanderer, Cyril Nedoma set his suitcases on the ground, wiped the sweat from his face and swallowed the uncertainty, tasting the insidious silence.

He knew he had taken the wrong path, that it would be best to go back. He felt the bitterness surge through him. He bent down, and with a groan he lifted the suitcases again and lugged them up the increasingly steep path. He pressed his frozen lips together and drove himself faster. He raged against the burden, wrestled with it; by the end he nearly ran, as if seeking humiliation. Suddenly he stopped, startled by the echoes that shook the darkness, the silence. When he recognized the noise as his own footsteps, he sighed, disappointed. Again he hoisted up the suitcases and dragged himself slowly on, fighting the fatigue. He felt it growing, and with all his might he forced his mind to race so he wouldn't keel into the slick black muck, fall asleep and hit a crag, lay down in the moist midst of the darkness.

The slope gradually evened out, leading to a desolate field. But in the center of it a single building reached for the abandoned sky. It was black and silent, but across the windows wandered cobalt glints, reflections of city lights burning below. The iron gate was ajar, and Cyril, gripping the wet handle, looked back at the red sash of fog stretched across the city, its hundred towers swallowed by the sodden glow. With his heart in his throat, Cyril turned and stepped onto the gravel walkway.

He opened the doors to the building and ascended a stairway bathed in a weak, milky light that only made the shadows darker, the grime blacker. The building, however, was not quite as empty and dead as it had seemed from outside. Muffled noises filled the building, as if distant voices or steps were steadily approaching, growing louder, yet never quite entering the corridor. For an instant Cyril thought he could just make out the sound of a piano before it quickly vanished into the vague noise that, like the flickering light on the concrete stairs, may actually have been an echo. Perhaps from a choir.

Cyril stopped at each door and read the names outside, until finally on the fourth floor he set his suitcases down, reread the name three times to make sure he had it right, and rang. The bell resounded through the emptiness, as if nothing living dwelled behind the doors. Sweat beaded on Cyril's forehead. To keep from reeling, he leaned against the doorframe; he reached out and rang again. Nothing. Only Cyril's heartbeats cleaved the silence. With his icy palm he shielded his eyes and peered down at the name on the door: Robert Frýbort. He removed a crumpled piece of paper from his pocket that read: Mrs. Frýbortová. "Her husband's name is still on it," Cyril muttered to himself.

Almost automatically, as if in a dream, he raised his hand and rang again. He left his finger on the button, amused that the clangor rattled his nerves like an icy shower. Finally, he took his finger off the buzzer and listened. In the depths of the apartment something stirred: a kind of creak, a swish of fabric and slippers shuffling across the floor. In the crack of the door two frightened eyes appeared, like the eyes of a mouse or a hamster peeking out of its hole to make sure no murderer lurks nearby, ready to stomp. Cyril said his name and Amálie Frýbortová opened the door.

Amálie Frýbortová was fortyish, short and heavysset. She had small black eyes, a heavy brow and a shock of hair. “I was asleep,” she explained foggily. Candle in hand, she led Cyril into the room. “Keep this here for now,” she said, setting the candle on the nightstand. “I’ll buy you a lantern tomorrow.” Then she clasped her hands and took a long uneasy look at the young man. The dank and woolly chamber flickered in the candle’s shimmering flame. “Dear God,” he thought, “Dear God.”

“I live here alone now,” she said finally. “My husband died.” Her face scrunched up like a bawling child’s, and for a while she wrestled against her impulse to cry. But then she looked up at Cyril for help, and let out a loud childlike wail, and pressed her fists into her eyes as she shook, seizing up from the violent sobs. Cyril watched the woman crying; her stature and rural mannerisms reminded him of his grandmother (even though he never knew his grandmother when she was forty). He opened his mouth to say something, but instantly he realized there was nothing to say. He ran a helpless hand across his face and leaned against the headboard of the bed.

“Why does one person die, and the other stay behind?” the widow cried, wiping away the rush of tears with both of her palms. “Why don’t they both die together? We were so in love, we never had children, there’s nothing we wouldn’t have done for each other—and then it was over. One morning he wasn’t feeling well, and the doctor came and said he had to go to the hospital. He was kidding around when they took him off—he was happy, you know—and then the next day when I went to see him, he didn’t recognize me. That night they put him in a casket. I thought I’d lose my mind. I wanted to stab myself in the heart. They took him away from me, up to Malvazinky, and threw muck on top of the poor thing. They had to hold me down so I wouldn’t jump in after him. When I got home and it was so empty here, it dawned on me that he would never come back. I

collapsed on the floor and slammed my head into the wall so many times that everyone thought I'd gone crazy..."

The face of the poor woman dropped and a heartrending moan howled from her lungs. Without saying a word, Cyril watched the wretched woman curl into herself like a wounded animal with no escape, no hope.

"At night when I can't sleep," the woman said, pressing her hands against her chest, "I think about him, the poor thing, how he's in the dark, underground, in the muck. Getting crushed! But then I tell myself that he doesn't feel anything, he's just a dead body. I met up with one of his friends recently, and he tried to persuade me to do one of those séances where they would call my husband. But I don't think it would do any good. My late husband always said that when somebody's dead, they're dead. When you cut a chicken's head off, the blood pours out, and that's that—same for a person. When I still lived at home with my mom in Poboudlice, I went to church and believed in pretty much everything. But then my late husband laid it all out so nicely for me, how the priests thought it all up to trick poor people. But I'm sure I don't need to tell you about it, Mr. Nedoma, you must know that already." The unhappy woman turned around and, with a heartbreaking attempt at courtesy, smiled at her new tenant.

But Cyril stood motionless, still leaning against the headboard, and with a painful smile he stared at this bloody knot of human woe and lunacy. He swallowed several hollow gulps, opening his mouth to say something, but his voice failed and his eyes wandered across the walls, searching desperately for solace. In the light of the candles' flickering flames, he glimpsed several color prints: a rococo count courting a rococo farmwife, The Bartered Bride, an alpine landscape; large photographs of Mr. and Mrs. Frýbort hung over the sofa. They both looked young and dashing:

she wore a plaited braid, her face nice and round, her eyes trusting; he smoldered, his mustache waxed and upturned.

Cyril Nedoma imagined this voluptuous village girl, tramping down a dusty path, barefoot with a bundle of grass on her back, or in her Sunday best and white stockings, with a prayer book in her hands—and how she came to the city for work, and bought a hat, and at a local dance she spies Frýbort's twisted mustache, and feels his voice in her heart and his hand on her waist, and how she completely lost herself in him, how she foreswore everything for him, hurling herself headlong down wild and unknown paths with him. And now here she stands before Cyril, a quivering and pitiful woman, betrayed, abandoned and conned, convulsing with pointless tears as she repeatedly compares her husband to a headless chicken.

Suddenly she stopped crying, wiped her eyes with her apron, and glanced around the room with keen and sober eyes. "I hope you'll like it here," she said. "Good night!"

Cyril Nedoma stood alone for a while, amidst the scratchy rugs and the walls shuddering in the candlelight, his heart constricting with anxiety and his stomach sour. This room ended the months of drifting, the nights spent at friends', the days of uncertainty, the lunches on park benches and the aimless walks from morning to night, the exiled and orphaned days that were so hard to bid farewell to since they reflected the beauty and purity that he abandoned along with the faintest hope of their return. Walking into this room he severed the bonds with his past, surrendering it for good. He entered into a pact with his humiliation, and he embraced it.

Cyril approached the window and peered at the city unfurling below, its lights quivering upon the river that snaked underneath dark arches until it disappeared into the vague outskirts on the horizon. How distant the lights were! Cyril felt deflated, deprived of any air, as if he had been untethered from the force that binds all the world's beings together, to God.

The gloom of unspeakable sadness, agony and disgust pierced his soul. He blew out the candle and fell face-first into bed.

But he was not etherized by the darkness that enveloped him, and he groaned under the pressure of an invisible force. Cyril could feel the whole building breathing the sick thoughts of its unknown inhabitants, both live and dead, into his soul. He felt the godlessness and curse of those walls, within which he never heard the hallowed whisper of prayers. He felt their profane obstinacy, their supernatural hate. He pressed his hands against his eyes so he wouldn't have to face the wall where the likenesses of the Frýborts hung. But this was in vain: they were behind his eyes. He saw them in the glaucous glints of the city night, he saw their lips contort, he saw the tips of Frýbort's mustache stretching past his eyes and all the way to his forehead, he saw the red embers within the smoldering eyes; he heard the laugh of the twisted lips, starting as a slight rasp, but growing increasingly lewd and loud, then all at once changing into a heartrending cry, a beastly howl.

Cyril jumped out of bed and listened to the sobs filtering in from Mrs. Frýbortová's room, weak and desperate yowls tearing the unhappy woman's heart like a hawk ripping bloody flesh with its beak. The house stood quiet and grim, soaked with death, but the inhuman wails echoed through his desolation like cries of the damned in a craggy wasteland.

Cyril stripped off his clothes and wound the blanket around his head. But he could feel the body that lay stretched out in the dark and frozen earth pressing down on him, its eyes oozing, its great lips scarlet, its guts seething with slimy white maggots. The tips of the mustache still twisted above the face's sinister laugh, reflecting the reality, and his wife's desperate howls penetrate the layers of soil and dirt, swallowed by the mouth's horror.

Cyril's conscious nightmare quickly turned to shallow sleep, and his soul, weakened from struggling with his own betrayal, entered a shameful pact with those eyes watching from the wall, those insolent and shameless yet humbled and whimpering eyes, whispering: I know you see through our lie, but I know you shall succumb, that you shall defile yourself in my bed, that you shall embrace your shame and damnation!

Alas, the eyes took on a disgustingly tender expression, set no longer in Frýbort's face, but in the shaggy sockets of a specter, a beast. It leaped upon Cyril, staring into his eyes, and the whole of the dark and monstrous, claspings and unseen body exhaled its warm and musky scent; he felt it all embracing him, permeating him, but he could not move; his limbs stiffened in a deathly swoon and his own body became alien. He struggled, resisting up until the very last drop of his will, when suddenly he felt something move out from under him and he began to plummet straight into the abyss—with his last ounce of strength he twitched and screamed.

Pale twilight bathed the room, and traces of furniture emerged from the shadows: the corner of a table, a wardrobe's side and a shelf stacked with old newspapers and brochures, Frýbort's artifacts; in the city below the burning lights faded in the break of day. Rigor mortis and emptiness consumed all and the human scream in the middle of the night had vanished as if swallowed by the silence of a lifeless planet. Yet on his lips Cyril tasted the saccharine disgust of the grotesque dream, and in his heart he felt the shame defeat. He wanted to hide from himself—more than anything he wanted to bury himself under every mountain in the world, to suffocate the memory of the monster's disgusting tenderness, to bury the evidence of his momentary weakness. He buried his face in the mattress, in the blankets. After shutting out all his thoughts, he finally fell asleep.

He woke up to face the insipid winter morning, the dingy and shabby room and the vast silence of his shame. He grasped for the shreds of his life, fighting the feeling of disgust and regret

that gurgled up into his throat. When Mrs. Frýbortová brought coffee to him, Cyril gazed with amazement at the matter-of-factness with which this frail woman began the day.

He sat down, swirling a spoon in his coffee as the landlady busied about respectfully. She had scarcely left for the kitchen when he ran out to the balcony and poured his breakfast down the drainpipe.

Then he looked out and saw that his time left would be spent choking down swill.

## 2.9 Path to Morning

*For Bedřich Fučík*

The darkness of the night was alive, infused with a strange glow. It was silent, as if after a tremor, permeated with the bliss of complicity and lit with the undying embers left by the angel wings of our childhood.

Invisible trails intersected the countryside, along them moved dark figures, scarcely thicker than the surrounding air. They had left their cozy hamlets behind and set out along the paths, frozen and phosphorescent in the weak reflection of the stars, on mute journeys to the very center of the night.

Like a wanderer, Cyril Nedoma walked beside his mother on a path from his childhood, along a narrow road between bare trees, which connected Přísene to the parish church. Creeping off into the darkness in both directions was a field coated with a fine layer of snow, a constant in the changing seasons, passing from father to son, generation to generation. Silent in the frost and the dark, it stretched out black and bare. In the spring the wheat in this spot rippled with a nest of larks, and once a little further on in the rye they found a dead drifter (afterwards they buried him nameless), and over there (how many years has it been?) labor pains sliced Stázka Roubalová like a scythe; they buried both mother and child... The field lay quiet in the darkness, the same today as a year ago and another year and a decade and a century. How many times has it been plowed, how many footprints have there been, how many tears and how many curses, how many secret sins lie entrenched in the soil! What web of intertwined fates holds this land together—how many

faces, male and female, young and old, how many hands have kneaded this earth, pressing it to their hearts?

Cyril Nedoma hears the sound of his steps and the steps of his mother, and in the distance (far off? nearby?) the same steps echo, just twenty years younger, the steps of a child and a young woman; the sounds are so familiar, so real, while the footfall of today is so improbable, so incredible. How did this happen? When did these twenty years rush by, making a man from the child and a young woman old?

In life there is a distinct border dividing our first taste of maturity from youth: the age of anticipation, of endless days, the age of hope and expectation, the ephemeral and reckless age, the age when we believe the future holds something definitive, glorious, and beautiful. Despite its loneliness, even through its sadness, youth is an age without responsibilities, a life sheltered by the past; however, all at once (we never know the precise moment of its arrival) comes the time when we realize that we stand face to face with reality, that we must bear the burden of our lives upon our own shoulders, that we no longer have anyone to blame, anything to rail against; absolutely nothing glorious and beautiful awaits us. What we lost spoiled and rotted—will remain lost, spoiled, and rotten. We shall carry our scars to the grave, forever.

Their steps echo off the bone-cold road and Cyril Nedoma hears them as if they were the steps of someone else. Their rhythm, their fall, is familiar, so familiar—after all they accompanied him down this road last year, into the middle of this field. The same bush of dog rose stuck out of the ditch right here, on the slope to the right the same strip of forest darkened the stars, and with the same shriek a flock of partridges flew out of that trench. Then a clear and certain voice rang out beside Cyril, sounding out from his childhood.

Cyril spins around and freezes in shock, only to see an empty space beside him. Puzzled, he looks to the other side where his mother walks, and she turns to him. Cyril realizes that she is thinking the same thing, that she also hears the steps that walked alongside them last year, which now are missing. Even through the dark he sees that her eyes glisten with tears. Again he turns away.

They came face to face with death last time. They peered into her blank, rolled-back eyes. Imprinted in their minds was the tragic movement of her hand, lifting towards her forehead, as if to shoo away the darkness that fell between the soul and the things so dear in this world.

She created such a void around them. They stood inside it naked, like a bulls-eye. They shivered in the eerie breeze, awaiting a new visitation.

Cyril steals a glance at the frail figure walking beside him, defined by the tilt of her head, an ancient gesture of submission.

His mother. The hidden layers of time awake in her, inside her there still lives a little girl, skipping around her garden, pulling nettles from the hedges for the baby geese. Does she remember another scene, when she saw the color of the sky and the green of the trees and the white of the trail? From what distance does she peer into that corner that holds the Eden of her childhood, gazing at those two geranium-filled windows and the damp shade beneath the tree by the stream. It is perhaps a world similar to his own (after all, this is his mother), only slightly askew, refracting the light at a different angle, since every living creature is different, yet grafted to the same universal mystery. But a strange half-light shines in this world; it is scarred and torn by blows that never pierced Cyril! How can he understand how a virgin's heart mysteriously changes into a woman's and a mother's? How can a man fathom her relationship with her children, her own body's creations? How can he understand what a mother feels when she first gazes into those two

newly born eyes, the eyes of a new being, the eyes of her child. And what happens in her heart when she holds her baby in her arms, and watches the rigid body convulse and die? Who can fathom how a mother sees her children, how she views the bloom of their soul? If she recognizes whether it fades with grief or sickens with hidden evil?

With whom is she walking down this road? Whence did this adult, this man, come to her? Through what worlds has he wandered? What lands live in his vision?

Her son. What sorts have crossed his path, whose prints remain in his soul? What sorrows has he shouldered?

Cyril Nedoma feels the tracks of those encounters all over himself, he feels wrapped in the external image he presents to people like a series of shells that he is now tearing off. Face-to-face with this land he has to have his own likeness, as if before God. Down the road to his parish he drags all of his defeats, his betrayals, all of his shame, his bitterness, all of his bruises, all of his regret for so many foolish, futile and irrevocable words, all the injustices he suffered, all the injustices he committed; he drags this burden down the path to his youth, side by side with his mother, the only one in the world who would understand everything—the only one in the world who would forgive him everything. But his mouth is shut and nothing in the world is strong enough to pry it open.

A little ways ahead a light appears on the hill, illuminating the arch of the gate. Cyril remembers that "*Ave, maris Stella!*" is written in gold lettering above the gothic statue of the Virgin Mary. He looks around at the landscape that spreads out beneath the hill like a dark lake. But the quiet night comes alive, the clattering of steps upon the frozen ground grows louder, and on all sides the black outlines around human shapes thicken like they're rising from the earth. Cyril and his mother pass several of these figures and fail to recognize them, dark and silent as they are,

wrapped in mysteries known only to God. Who knows? They could be their neighbors, maybe strangers from a distant parish—their faces shine with an odd pallor, and a quiet laugh, an incomprehensibly ironic laugh, escapes from them, penetrating the veil of mystery...

With horror Cyril looks upon the passing faces, and the names of people long dead enter his mind, their inimitable gestures, their irrecoverable voices, everything that will never be seen again. He thinks the old man with the fur hat and the cane clacking along the street is the lost soul Ztratil, who died years before in the poorhouse—at the time Cyril was not even old enough for school, but he remembers how people said that his son's wife starved him. That woman in the black scarf around her head, walking so stiff and proud, that's farmer Nechleba's daughter, who married Šima the day laborer and died in an insane asylum. That square shouldered giant in the Hessian boots is Josef Roubal—there were whispers that he had a child with his own daughter, the one they found drowned in the lake.

The closer they come to the parish church, the more these figures appear, they throng from every single side, so close but so distant, so impenetrable. They came from all nine hamlets, until the place teemed with these mysterious pilgrims, who adopted the faces of the living, transforming their descendants into shadow and illusion. At times it seems to Cyril that the bodies split into several different figures before merging back into one. On the hill above the church gates a lamp burns above the crèche, and streams of new pilgrims flow along the paths cutting through the field, the children of this land that had become the only land, Bethlehem. This path along which Cyril walks with his mother, the path of his childhood, is the only path, the path of all souls, the path to eternity. This narrow country road lined by low trees and clumps of fading grass, this tranquil path imprinted with the tracks from his childhood, all at once rises beyond time and becomes The Path.

Cyril Nedoma no longer hears any steps, he hears only the rush of air sliced by the movement of the countless figures flying above the earth, not even touching the ground; when he suddenly looks back at his mother, he freezes in shock, for it seems to him that she too has turned into one of those mysterious figures, those weightless, shadowless, half-dark, half-transparent figures, rustling with soft and ironic laughter.

He cries out, but only he hears the scream, and immediately the lunacy ends.

“...you remember, it was under the old apple tree that stood in your granddad’s garden,” his mother says, explaining something.

In the dark, the mother and son look at each other and laugh. “We’ll know it when we wake up for good,” Cyril thinks to himself.

Before they knew it, they had reached the gate and entered the church. Everything shone with silver frost and the bright healthy faces of the villagers; they betrayed nothing of their recent metamorphoses. Cyril, however, remained transfused with the breath of those otherworldly places, and when “*Christus natus est nobis*” rang out from the altar, tears filled his eyes and warmth pierced his heart.

### 3.1 Getting Lost: The Metaphysical Cartography of Jan Čep's *Zeměžluč*

In the first paragraph of the first story in *Zeměžluč* (“Domek”), readers encounter one of the most important words in the collection: *cesta*.<sup>12</sup> The word *cesta* will appear 89 more times in *Zeměžluč*: it is the fifth most frequent noun to appear in the collection, beating out *den* [day], *matka* [mother], and *svět* [world]. The only nouns that Čep uses more often are certain parts of the body: *oko* [eye], *tvář* [face], *ruka* [hand], and *hlava* [head]; the only verbs that appear more frequently are *být* [be], *mít* [have], and *jít* [go].<sup>13</sup>

The word *cesta* has a broad meaning in Czech, and can often be translated as “journey,” “process,” “road,” “route,” “travel,” “trip,” or “way.” For its first appearance in the book, I chose “path” because of its stronger spiritual connotations, but when Čep uses the word *cesta*, he seemingly intends every meaning and connotation.<sup>14</sup> Overall, however, the best translation of the word is probably “journey,” since every story I’ve translated for this collection involves a physical one. In “Domek,” Jeník and Anička make their way home from school, taking the road that, in so typical a fashion for Čep, leads to the cross and the threshing floors.<sup>15</sup> The story “Bouře” centers around Jeník’s cart-trip home from the fields through the titular and terrible storm. A cow comes

<sup>12</sup> “*Děti potom zazpívaly ‘Máj, máj, máj, zelená se háj’ a ‘na noc k lesu letí vrána, písnička je dozpívána, brašničky jim na zádech zahrkaly a cesta od školy úvozem ke kříži a k myslетickým humnám běžela záříc před nimi uprostřed pampelišek a stínů mladého žita.*” *Zeměžluč*, Jan Čep. (Prague: Vyšehrad, 1991), 11.

<sup>13</sup> *Kvantitativně-korpusová analýza a literární věda: Model a realizace autorského korpusu a slovníku Jana Čepa v kontextu zahraniční a české autorské lexikografie*, Richard Změlík. (Olomouc: Univerzita Palackého, 2015) 125–7.

<sup>14</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, “path (n.1), sense II.4,” December 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1048396412>.

<sup>15</sup> In his book *Dvojí domov Jana Čepa*, Tomáš Kubíček sees the trip as safe and innocent, but he fails to note the connotation of violence – both in the cross as the symbol of crucifixion and the threshing floors, where grain is beaten with flails to release the edible part. 116

down from the mountains in “Dvojí domov” to serve the Roubals, spurring on Roubal’s wife to remember her own personal journey from the mountain village where she grew up. “Kozlovice” is set in a village on the day of a dance, but the return of the character Kolář by train provides the dramatic centerpiece of the story. The story “Peněženka” ends with Vojtěch, the young protagonist, making a strange discovery after setting out to catch up with two tramps who had stolen his wallet. In “Zbloudilý,” Petr Kleofáš leaves his home and gets lost on his way to Přísenice. Karolína Vachutková, in the story “Hoře z lásky” embarks on her “final pilgrimage” to the lover who has spurned her. In “Můra,” Cyril Nedoma hauls his bags through a barren ravine and field to reach an apartment building on the outskirts of the city. In the final story included in the translated collection, “Cesta na jitřní,” Cyril and his mother make their way through the dark night from Přísenice to a service at the parish church.

The only two journeys that are direct and simple are the children’s way home in “Domek” and Kolář’s train trip in “Kozlovice.” While every character seems to be lost emotionally and spiritually in *Zeměžluč*, they are often equally lost physically: in “Peněženka,” when Vojtěch opens up a gate, “*podiví se, že domov je tak blízko*”;<sup>16</sup> Cyril Nedoma in “Můra” “*vědel, že je na nepravé cestě*”;<sup>17</sup> when Petr Kleofáš, after being turned topsy-turvy by a mendacious landscape, finally meets someone on the road and asks the way, he is met with the response, “*Cože? Přísenice? Vždyť jdete na druhou stranu! Máte je už hezký kousek za sebou.*”<sup>18</sup>

In his essay “Krajina v díle Jana Čepa,” Karel Komárek asserts that “*Většina Čepových povídek a novel i jediný román se odehrává v krajině, jejímž reálným vzorem byl jistě hanácký*

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<sup>16</sup> Jan Čep, *Zeměžluč* in *Dvojí domov* (Prague: Vyšehrad, 1991) 31. Because of the confusing titles – the 1991 anthology is called *Dvojí domov*, which is the title of Čep’s 1926 collection that he later included in the larger 1931 collection, *Zeměžluč* – hereafter all citations for this edition will simply refer to *Zeměžluč*.

<sup>17</sup> *Zeměžluč*, 99.

<sup>18</sup> *Zeměžluč*, 37.

venkov, konkrétně spisovatelovy rodné Myslechovice u Litovle a blízké okolí,” and further clarifies that “*Přísenice jsou jeho rodné Myslechovice.*”<sup>19</sup> The evidence is not, however, air-tight. While Komárek may be onto something that “*tato přesná lokalizace se dá určit spíš nepřímou, protože autor změnil místní jména svého rodiště i nejbližších obcí; ale ponechal skutečná pojmenování vzdálenějších vesnic (Luká, Savín, Slavětín, Slatinice) a vícekrát výslovně uvádí, že na dohled je Olomouc, první vršky Jeseníků a Českomoravské vrchoviny,*” none of these locales are mentioned in the stories in this collection. Furthermore, in the translated stories when Čep does use the names of existing towns, he obscures their exact location with names, such as Mysletice and Kozlovice, which denote numerous towns throughout Czechia.<sup>20</sup>

Untethering the stories from a specific geography, Čep achieves two interesting effects.

The first is that he places the reader in a similar situation to the characters in the stories. There are two moments in the translated stories when the narrator directly addresses someone. The first is in “Domek,” when he teases a little girl for neglecting to sweep up the kitchen: “*Nevíš, Aničko, že je to tvá práce?*”<sup>21</sup> It carries echoes of the earliest literature when Homer uses the vocative to speak to Eumaeus, the kindly swineherd, in Book XXIV of the *Odyssey*;<sup>22</sup> however, the other time the narrator of *Zeměžluč* addresses someone is much more modern in style: “*A ty, poutníku, který jdeš do světa kolem chalup zařatých hluboko do země.*”<sup>23</sup> Breaking the proverbial fourth wall, the narrator addresses the reader as “traveler.” As readers and fellow pilgrims, we are lost too.

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<sup>19</sup> Karel Komárek, “*Krajina v díle Jana Čepa,*” in *Místo – prostor – krajina v literatuře a kultuře*, eds. Petr Komenda, Lenka Malinová, and Richard Změlík (Olomouc: Univerzita Palackého, 2012) 91–2.

<sup>20</sup> This is reminiscent of the television series *The Simpsons*, which is set in Springfield – yet which of the many Springfields in the USA is never specified.

<sup>21</sup> *Zeměžluč*, 11.

<sup>22</sup> “τὸν δ’ ἀπαμειβόμενος προσέφη, Εὐμαίε συβῶτα” from Homer, *The Odyssey with an English Translation* by A.T. Murray. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1919) XIV, 55.

<sup>23</sup> *Zeměžluč*, 129.

In an article on Dostoevsky's *The Adolescent*, "Wandering in Two Different Directions," Charles Arndt examines the Russian concept of странничество, spiritual wandering. He points out that "at its most basic level, this wandering is an attempt to follow Jesus to leave everything and follow him (Luke 18:22), imitating the itinerant lifestyle of the one who 'had no place to lay his head'<sup>24</sup> (Matthew 8:20, Luke 9:58)." Jesus' actual words in Matthew and Luke are, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man hath not where to lay his head."<sup>25</sup> With his radical Christian beliefs, Čep seems to be endowing his wanderers, including the reader, with some of the messianic qualities associated with the Book of Daniel's "son of man." Cyril might have the surname Nedoma, but it could equally apply to all the protagonists in this collection.

The other effect this departure from real geography has is that it creates a more powerful metaphysical map for the characters to wander through – the mountains from which Srna the cow and Roubal's wife descend, within Čep's portrayal, can now take on Matterhorn-like dimensions.<sup>26</sup> Directions also take on a symbolic rather than a geographic importance.<sup>27</sup>

In *Dvojí domov Jana Čepa*, Tomáš Kubíček devotes his eighth chapter to exploring the utilization of space in three Čep stories: "Domek," "Peněženka," and "Elegie." He does brilliant work charting the stories along lines of longitude and latitude that correspond to the intimate, public, and unknown spaces; Kubíček, however, limits his insights to two general axes: vertical

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<sup>24</sup> Charles Arndt, "Wandering in Two Different Directions: Spiritual Wandering as the Ideological Battleground in Dostoevsky's 'The Adolescent.'" In *The Slavic and East European Journal* 54, no. 4 (2010): 607.

<sup>25</sup> King James Bible. (2017). King James Bible Online. <https://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/> (Original work published 1769)

<sup>26</sup> Being able to Google the 1603-meter elevation of Sněžka, the highest mountain in Czechia, may hurt the grandiosity of the stories for some contemporary readers.

<sup>27</sup> "Semantika prostoru je tak u Čepa velmi komplexní, počítá jak je složitějšími vyznamy symbolické a metaforické povahy, tak i s primárním způsobem hodnotové orientace objektů (udalostí) a v prostoru na ose horizontální a vertikální. . . podobně lze použít významy, známý a neznámý, bezpečný a nebezpečný." Tomáš Kubíček, *Dvojí domov Jana Čepa* (Brno: Host, 2014) 118.

and horizontal. For the purposes of this translator, specific and less theoretical directions are more important: right, left, up, and down.

Only one story in this collection deals directly with left and right: “Zbloudilý.” As Petr Kleofáš loses his way while traveling to Přisenice, he lies down and wakes up in the dark. As he wanders, “*Myslí, že se uchýlil trochu vlevo, a klopýtal napříč přes pole, domnívaje se, že nabude tak zase ztraceného směru.*”<sup>28</sup> This seems to suggest that the left direction has a sinister quality that the going right means a correction. That may not be the case, however, as going right seems more frightening as the route jack-knifes back, and drops off into a ravine, so Petr “*musil se vrátit, přičemž hlas potoka vyskočil protiněmu z lesíka jako psi štěkot.*”<sup>29</sup> This change in direction leads Kleofáš to further danger, as he finds himself back at the creek, and sees a drowned woman in a white dress floating in the water – it turns out the vision is only mirage caused by the turbulence of the water, but that scares Petr even more:

*Zachvěl se tímto přirozeným rozuzlením víc, než kdyby byl ucítil na hrdle ledové prsty přízraku. Ticho bylo tak úplné a voda v potoce se leskla s takovou nevyzpytatelnou mlčenlivostí, že se Petra zmocnila opravdová hrůza. Pustil se napravo přes pole a cítil za sebou ďábelský smích ohromných, široce rozevřených očí.*<sup>30</sup>

Turning right does eventually lead him to meet a Charon-like cartman who tells him ghost stories before dropping him off at his destination, but with the pitfalls that appear when Petr goes in either direction, it seems that Čep avoids the easy key of left being sinister and right being correct.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> *Zeměžluč*, 40.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> *Zeměžluč*, 41.

<sup>31</sup> This fits into some of the most archaic interpretations of left and right. The word sinister in Latin means “left” but carried the connotation of lucky for Romans since in Roman augury a bird appearing on the augur’s left side would be fortunate (unless it were a raven or a screech owl); for the Greek augurs, left was unlucky, and this view became more culturally dominant. For an extensive treatment on this topic, see Charles Burton Gulick, “Omens and Augury in Plautus.” *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 7 (1896): 235–47. <https://doi.org/10.2307/310484>.

Ascent, going up, in Čep's stories certainly gives a nod to the Christian concept of moving towards heaven. In fact, the first time a character, Jeník, ascends in *Zeměžluč* (in the first story, "Domek"), he addresses God and contemplates the infinite: "*Bože, jak je možno jít pořád dál a dál, a nikdy nedojít na konec? Jak je to hrozné, žádný konec!*"<sup>32</sup> In "Dvojí domov," Roubal's wife sees the highlands as a type of heaven on earth that represents liberty:

*Roubalka se tiše schoulila nad polévkou a vůně páry, vystupující z brambor, jí připomněla příliš tklivě ohně v rodných horách, když ulehlá cesta stoupala strání a končila se pod samou oblohou, materiďouška voněla naposled a večer pod kopcem kouřil domov. . . . Cesty na horách jsou jiné, víc se brouzdají rosou a často musí bosýma nohama přes potok, mají útlejší boky a je krásné, jak sbíhají z návrší tancující, nevšímavé k času. Ale cesty v rovině mají přesně vyměřeno své místo mezi pravidelnými obrazci polí a nutno jít poslušně, kam nás vedou, a krávé se nelze popásat, kde ji napadne.*<sup>33</sup>

Much like with the directions left and right, however, ascent is not simply spiritually uplifting – it can also be an anabasis, an uphill slog. In "Můra," Cyril Nedoma

*věděl, že je na nepravé cestě a že by udělal nejlíp, kdyby se vrátil. Cítil, jak v něm stoupá nesmírná vlna hořkosti, a sehnul se, vzal opět s povzdechem kufry a vlekl je vzhůru do kopce (cesta roklinou příkře stoupala). . . Ujal se opět kufrů a vlekl se pomalu dále, přemáhe je slabotu.*<sup>34</sup>

When Cyril arrives at his destination, he climbs up to the fourth floor of the building to find his new home – a creepy and tomb-like apartment he will share with the owner, Amálie Frýbortová. He submits to a repulsive and lustful fantasy before he falls asleep. The following morning:

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<sup>32</sup> *Zeměžluč*, 11.

<sup>33</sup> *Zeměžluč*, 19–21.

<sup>34</sup> *Zeměžluč*, 99.

“pohlédl před sebe a viděl, že se musí prohryzat časem jako vrstvou hnoje.”<sup>35</sup> Cyril may not be in hell but he certainly hasn’t reached heaven either.

This may make sense since, before his ascent up the hill and to the fourth floor, Cyril was heading on a path that led to the bottom of a ravine. This is one of many descents in *Zeměžluč*. Perhaps the most dramatic and traumatic moment of “Bouře” occur when “*vůz sklouzl po mokrém svahu*.”<sup>36</sup> In “Dvojí domov,” Čep draws a clearer line between descent and suffering when Roubal’s wife, who formerly lived in the highlands, sympathizes with the cow Srna’s fate as it makes its way to the lowlands, and calls her a “fellow martyr”:

*Roubalka předvídala smutný úděl bezstarostné pastevnice z hor (sama strávila své panenství žnouc travu na horských stráních) . . . Kráva ulekaně poskočila a Roubalkav duši politovala novou spolutrpitečku, klusajíc unavenýma nohama dolů k dědině.*<sup>37</sup>

In “Zbloudilý,” after all the twists and turns that make it so difficult for the reader to follow the route of Petr Kleofáš, we find his destination lies down below: “*To jsou Přísennice,*” ozval se stařík. *Bryčka serozjela po svahu.*”<sup>38</sup>

These downward travels are important because Čep is essentially a katabasist: a poet concerned with descents into the underworld.<sup>39</sup> In one of the first instances of katabasis in literature (only Gilgamesh’s journey to the underworld precedes it), Odysseus opens a portal to the underworld so he can communicate with the dead: “I took the victims, over the trench I cut their

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<sup>35</sup> *Zeměžluč*, 105.

<sup>36</sup> *Zeměžluč*, 17.

<sup>37</sup> *Zeměžluč*, 19.

<sup>38</sup> *Zeměžluč*, 42.

<sup>39</sup> In a 1959 essay, “Básník a lidské společenství,” Jan Čep writes about the concept of “poeta nascitur, orator fit”: that poets are born but orators can be made. He writes, “Byl ve své době jenom jeden Homér; byl jenom jeden Vergil, jeden Dante, jeden Shakespeare.” It seems fitting that three of the poets lauded by Čep – Homer, Vergil, and Dante – employ katabases in their epics. Jan Čep, *Meditace*, eds. Petr Komenda and Jan Zatloukal (Brno: Centrum pro studium demokracie a kultury, 2019) 277, 308.

throats / and the dark blood flowed in – and up out of Erebus they came, / flocking toward me now, the ghosts of the dead and gone . . .”<sup>40</sup> In “Zbloudilý,” Kleofáš finds himself in a grassy pit and “*toužil cedit svou krev kapku po kapce do prachu.*”<sup>41</sup> Perhaps it’s no wonder then that the old man who gives Petr a ride to Přisenice tells him a ghost story, and Petr “*myslí na své mrtvé.*”<sup>42</sup>

Čep repeatedly implies the journeys his characters take in *Zeměžluč* do not pass merely through this world. “*Cesta od kříže k humnám vedla takřka oním světem,*” after all the descents in the story “Bouře.”<sup>43</sup> In “Hoře z lásky,” the landscape, later described as a “*pustina,*”<sup>44</sup> becomes a tomb: “*Kraj kolem dokola ztratil přes noc poslední zbytky podzimních barev a byl vytrvale louhován vlhkou syrovostí v hnilobnou čern hrobu.*”<sup>45</sup> We encounter another metaphorical tomb in “Můra” when Cyril reaches the apartment he is moving into: “*Táž mrtvá prázdnota, jenom buchání Cyrilova srdce proráželo tichem. Přejel si ledovou dlaní přes oči a nahnul se znovu nad vizitkou: Robert Frýbort. . . . ‘To tady má ještě vizitku svého muže.’*”<sup>46</sup> The tomb turns into a grave as he lies in bed, listening to Amálie Frýbortová wail over her dead husband, whose burial she talked about in the bluntest terms:

*Cyril se sebe strhal šaty a zamotal si hlavu do přikrývek. Ale zdálo se mu, že na nich cítí otisky toho těla, které leží nataženo v syrové a zmrzlé zemi, obklopeno tmou, s očima tekoucíma, s ohromnými fialovými rty, s útroby hemžícími se bílými a slizkými červy. Jenom špičky knírků jsou ještě vztyčeny nad strašným smíchem obličeje, zobrazujícího pravdu věcí, a zoufalé vytí jeho ženy proniká vrstvami drnu a země a mrzne hrůzou okolo tohoto pošklebku.*<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. Robert Fagles (New York: Penguin, 1996). XI.40–2.

<sup>41</sup> *Zeměžluč*, 39.

<sup>42</sup> *Zeměžluč*, 42.

<sup>43</sup> *Zeměžluč*, 17.

<sup>44</sup> Čep uses the word *pustina* (“wasteland”) later as a simile for Cyril Nedoma’s psychological desolation in “Můra.” *Zeměžluč*, 90, 103.

<sup>45</sup> *Zeměžluč*, 88.

<sup>46</sup> *Zeměžluč*, 99. Even the uphill slogs of “Můra” somehow seem like katabasis. Cyril Nedoma lugging his suitcases up the ravine, then up the stairs, reminds the reader of Sisyphus’ fate in the underworld.

<sup>47</sup> *Zeměžluč*, 103–4.

With the importance of descents and katabases in *Zeměžluč*, it is easy to think that Čep presents earth as infernal;<sup>48</sup> however, even as Robert Frýbort in the form of a lustful beast presses down on Cyril Nedoma in the grave of his imagination, it becomes evident that there exist spaces below (“*najednou ucítil, že pod ním cosi uhnulo, že začíná padat kolmo do hlubin*”).<sup>49</sup> Yet these depths and abysses appear above the characters in *Zeměžluč* too – in “Bouře” “*černá prohlubeň visí už nad samouhlavou a praští to v ní, až nohy podklesávají*.”<sup>50</sup> With abysses appearing above and below – and even on our level (the horizontal axis Tomáš Kubíček explores) in “Hoře z lásky”<sup>51</sup> – it seems most likely that Čep’s stories take place in an earthly purgatory, which helps explain why Petr Kleofáš “*sundal čepici a pomodlil se otčenáš za duše v očistci*” when he reaches Přísenice.<sup>52</sup>

Writing about katabases, Rachel Falconer points out that “A katabasist, one who writes about underworld descents, also characteristically employs the narrative structure of a journey to look inward, downward, and back.”<sup>53</sup> Čep certainly does this; however, he also employs the convention to look forward, up, and beyond. With abysses above, below, and on the horizontal axis, space become infinite – a concept Jeník contemplates in the very first story of *Zeměžluč*, “Domek”:

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<sup>48</sup> For more on the physical cosmography of hell, purgatory, and paradise in Dante, see Anika Burgess, “Mapping Dante’s Inferno, One Circle of Hell at a Time,” *Atlas Obscura*, July 12, 2017, <https://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/mapping-dante-hell-inferno-satan-divine-comedy> or “Mapping Hell: Cartography and the Comedy,” *The Poetry of Science Dantes Comedy and the Crafting of a Cosmos*, accessed April 6, 2025, <https://library.brown.edu/create/poetryofscience/mapping-hell-cartography-and-the-comedy/>.

<sup>49</sup> *Zeměžluč*, 104.

<sup>50</sup> *Zeměžluč*, 16.

<sup>51</sup> “Nebyl to nedostatek lásky u jejího milence, co ji přivedlo náhle na pokraj nicoty.” *Zeměžluč*, 91.

<sup>52</sup> *Zeměžluč*, 42.

<sup>53</sup> Rachel Falconer, “Bouncing Down to the Underworld: Classical Katabasis in ‘The Ground Beneath Her Feet.’” *Twentieth Century Literature* 47, no. 4 (2001): 467. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3175991>.

*Hošíkovy oči stoupaly výš a výš: “Bože, jak je možno jít pořád dál a dál, a nikdy nedojít na konec? Jak je to hrozné, žádný konec!*

*A vtom se čehosi ulekl: vždyť konec je také nemožný! Kdyby byla zeď na konci světa, probourala by se, a zas by tam byla díra. . .*

*Chtěl jít k Frantíkovi, ale hned ho napadlo, že Frantík jistě neví, že nikde nemůže být konec, že se zeď může probourat a zas musí být cosi dál.<sup>54</sup>*

Čep raises the issue of the infinite again in the story “Hoře z lásky,” using the same metaphor of a wall. Karolína, scorned by her lover, “*ucítla, že není možno dále žít. Jako když někdo přijde na konec chodby, která se končí skalní stěnou – nelze jít dál, je po všem.*” Čep shows the reader, however, that Karolína is mistaken about the finitude of the world, because “*v tom zasáhly její oči kříž – i dala se na utek.*”<sup>55</sup> The spiritual world, represented by the cross, grants Karolína space to break through the wall. Unfortunately for Karolína, she ends up committing suicide because “*nevěděla, že zlo je omezené a duše lidská že je nenasytná.*”<sup>56</sup>

If, as Jeník sees, the true universe, the spiritual one, is unbound then directions and locations become senseless – points on an unstable map floating like grains of sand in the ocean or comets in the firmament. The story “Cesta na jitřní” makes this concept clear. Liberated from a fixed geography, Cyril Nedoma can now wander a Czechia that echoes the Haná plain yet still come across signs of the sea (“*Ave, maris Stella! je tam napsáno zlatým písmeny nad gotickou*

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<sup>54</sup> *Zeměžluč*, 13.

<sup>55</sup> *Zeměžluč*, 91.

<sup>56</sup> *Zeměžluč*, 91. While suicide is usually considered a Christian sin, this was not always the case. Christian martyrdom and proselytizing was considered by some early theologians as suicide. See scholia on Remigius. That Karolína’s soul is limitless and evil is finite perhaps adds a modicum of optimism to her fate.

*soškou Panny Marie, vzpomněl si Cyril.”)*<sup>57</sup> No wonder Cyril Nedoma appears to his mother like an interstellar traveler: “*S kým to jde v této chvíli po této silnici? Odkud k ní přišel tento dospělý člověk, jakými světy bloudil, jaké krajiny žijív jeho zraku?*”<sup>58</sup> Attempts to trace the geography of *Zeměžluč* are folly, because as the story “Cesta na jitřní” reveals it’s not cartography that tie this world together: “*Jaká síť osudů záhadně spletených zatahujetento kraj, kolik tváří, mužských i ženských, mladých i starých, kolik rukou, které hnětly tuto hlínu, které ji tiskly k srdci!*”<sup>59</sup>

As fellow pilgrims, who through our reading have wandered along the same paths with the characters in *Zeměžluč*, we find ourselves walking next to Cyril Nedoma as the narrow country road lined by low trees and lumps of fading grass “*najednou povýšena nade všečen čas, stala se Cestou*” not in Přisenice but the countryside “*který se proměnil v jediný kraj země, v krajinu betlémskou.*”<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> *Zeměžluč*, 134. While *Stella Maris* refers to the Virgin Mary, arising from a mistranslation of the Hebrew name Miriam, in Latin it literally means “star of the sea.”

<sup>58</sup> *Zeměžluč*, 133.

<sup>59</sup> *Zeměžluč*, 131.

<sup>60</sup> *Zeměžluč*, 135.

### 3.2 Chronic Tension: Shifting Čep's Narrative Tenses to Translate *Zeměžluč*

Time is such an important component to the stories of *Zeměžluč* that Tomáš Kubíček devotes the first chapter of analysis in *Dvojí domov Jana Čepa* to it. Identifying Čep's 1926 collection *Dvojí domov* as a type of multifarious elegy, thus requiring a sad hero, Kubíček writes “*v tomto případě učinil Čep svým smutným hrdinou jednu z nejabstraktnějších kategorií – čas.*”<sup>61</sup> The subject also caught the attention and critical eye of František Valouch in “Čepovo Pojetí Času”; Valouch, however, concentrates on the abstract, stating, “*Ve svém příspěvku chci se soustředit nikoli na problematiku času v Čepově díle jako konstitutivního prvku jazykového materiálu (tedy nedotknout se například funkce slovesných časů a časových adverbii), či na relace mezi časem událostí a časem vyprávění.*”<sup>62</sup> This is understandable, but it is unfortunate for anyone attempting to bring Čep into another language, because Valouch sets aside one of the trickiest translation nuts to crack regarding Čep – how to work with his narrative tenses.

The first story in *Zeměžluč*, “Domek,” contains 186 verbs. Of these, 121 are in the past tense; 50 are in the present tense. This corresponds to Valouch's assertion that in Čep's perspective “*má větší váhu spíš minulost než přítomnost,*” but the significant number of verbs in the present tense hints that the present tense is fairly noteworthy.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Tomáš Kubíček, *Dvojí domov Jana Čepa* (Brno: Host, 2014) 31.

<sup>62</sup> František Valouch, “Čepovo Pojetí Času.” *Česká Literatura* 46, no. 6 (1998): 576. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43321979>.

<sup>63</sup> Valouch, 577. While Valouch puts more emphasis on the past in Čep's works, he does not downplay the present. He also focuses on works of Čep like *Děravý plášť* that use the present tense less often than many of the stories in *Zeměžluč*.

The importance of the present tense becomes clearer if we look at the shortest story in *Zeměžluč*, “Peněženka.” Of the 95 verbs in the two-page story, 60 are in the present tense; 30 are in the past tense; the remaining five are in the future tense or conditional mood. The narrative begins in the present – although it recalls the events of the previous day, it comes from the close third-person narration of a boy, Vojtěch, who “*dnes sedí . . . na písku přede dveřmi*” and plays with his new wallet.<sup>64</sup> In the third paragraph, the narrative switches to the past tense (“*Sotva domyslí*”) before returning to the present in the sixth (“*peněženka leží*”). Some past-tense verbs follow, but they are in temporal clauses subordinate to the present-tense narration, so the next narrative shift actually occurs in the ninth paragraph when the “*dva stíny a dva uzlíčky zmizely za rohem.*” In the middle of the same paragraph, with the very next sentence, the narrative tense returns to the present: “*Černá páchnoucí věc . . . leží.*” The narrative tense (mercifully for a translator) remains in the present until the eighteenth paragraph, when it switches to the past tense (“*Ráno tam byly ještě*”) and remains that way until the story soon ends.

English critics have found it remarkable that over the course of hundreds of pages, Charlotte Brontë shifts to the present tense seven times in *Jane Eyre*;<sup>65</sup> this is the same amount of times Čep shifts tenses in the first story of *Zeměžluč*, “Domek,” which is little more than three pages. “Bouře” contains eight shifts in narrative tense; “Dvojí domov” four; “Kozlovice” sixteen (over fewer than seven pages); “Cesta na jitřní” has nine.

The frequency of narrative shifts begs the question of why Čep employs this technique.

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<sup>64</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all the quotations from “Peněženka” are from *Zeměžluč* (1991), 30–1.

<sup>65</sup> See Edgar F. Shannon, “The Present Tense in ‘Jane Eyre.’” *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 10, no. 2 (1955): 141–5. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3044228>.

Kubíček writes that the shifts endow the stories with a fantastic aspect, as they somewhat echoes the *bylo-nebylo*-ness of Czech fairy tales and that the “*kontrast mezi časem tehdy a nyní . . . lehce ironizuje skutečnost reálnost idylické vzpomínky.*”<sup>66</sup>

Valouch adds more with his explanation:

*Čas v Čepově pojetí je časem cyklickým, utvářeným do podoby kruhu, v němž se všechno pravidelně opakuje, je to čas věčného návratu, odměřovaný přírodními hodinami, posloupností stále týchž jevů, čas mytický.*<sup>67</sup>

Čep stresses this concept of time in the story “Kozlovice.” As Lidka irons the slip she will wear to the big dance, Čep writes, “*Dnes bude tančit a za pár hodin začne znovu včerejšek v blatě a na hnoji.*”<sup>68</sup> Here he figuratively highlights the mundanity of life in the village where everyday is the same; however, grammatically wedding yesterday to the future tense creates a temporal chaos that suggests time is essentially meaningless.<sup>69</sup>

“Cesta na jitřní” offers more opportunities to explore Čep’s perception and presentation of time as unfixed. As Cyril and his mother walk along the path that connects Přísenice to the parish church, “*Pole ležela mlčky ve tmě, dnes jako loni a jako předloni, jako před desíti i před sto lety. Kolikrát už byla přeorána, kolik šlépějí, kolik slz a kolik kleteb, kolik tajných hříchů bylo zahrnuto do jejich brázd!*”<sup>70</sup> Čep views time – the past, present, and future – like the field: disrupted, watered with tears, and stamped flat.<sup>71</sup> These layers of time, almost geological or archeological, exist within

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<sup>66</sup> Kubíček, 36. Like English fairy tales traditionally open with “once upon a time,” Czech fairy tales begin with *bylo-nebylo*—“it was and it wasn’t.” This theory helps me reconcile the inclusion of one of the oddest, most dream-like lines of the collection, which appears in the story “Kozlovice” as Čep sets the scene for the village: “*žáby v rybníčku na návsi spouštějí do snů zeleně zářící drahokamy.*” *Zeměžluč*, 23

<sup>67</sup> Valouch, 576.

<sup>68</sup> *Zeměžluč*, 24.

<sup>69</sup> Not unlike the way space is untethered from specific geography in *Zeměžluč*.

<sup>70</sup> *Zeměžluč*, 131.

<sup>71</sup> See Valouch, 581.

the characters of *Zeměžluč* too:<sup>72</sup> “*Jeho matka! Ožívají v ní také zasypané vrstvy času, žije v ní ještě malé děvčátko, hopkující v zahrádce okolo záhonků a trhajícíu plotu kopřivy housátkům.*”<sup>73</sup> For Čep, it would be impossible to separate the past from the present (and the future, as well) because the past never leaves us – it lies buried, always ready to be unearthed by memory like ancient artifacts unwittingly upturned in a field by plows or shovels. This is what happens to Cyril as he gets closer to the church:

*Cyril pohlížel s hrůzou do těch tváří, které míjel, a na paměť mu přicházela jména lidí dávno zemřelých, sdružená s nenapodobitelným posunkem, s nenávratným přízvukem hlasu, se vším, co se už podruhé neuvidí. Zdálo se mu, že ten stařík v beranici a s holí, který tluče silně do silnice podpatky s podkůvkami, je nebožtík Ztratil, co umřel před lety v pastoušce — Cyril tenkrát ještě ani nechodil do školy, ale pamatuje si, jak se říkalo, že ho snacha umorila hladem —, ta žena v černé šále okolo hlavy, jdoucí tak zpříma a hrdě, to je dcera sedláka Nechleby, která si vzala navzdory rodičům nádeníka Šímu a která potom umřela v blázinci, ten vysoký ramenatý obr v botách s holíčkami, to je Josef Roubal, o tom se šušovalo, že měl dítě se svou vlastní dcerou, kterou potom našli utopenou v rybníku...<sup>74</sup>*

That the pasts of many inhabit each individual is illustrated by the fact that, as Cyril watches the phantoms of the past and the living people arriving at the church, at times it seems to him that the bodies split into several different figures before merging back into one.<sup>75</sup>

Because the blending of time and disruption of chronology proves to be such an important theme in *Zeměžluč*, it seems clear that in an English translation the narrative shifts should match the shifts

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<sup>72</sup> Peter Demetz feels Čep views “time and eternity as coexisting spaces or landscapes penetrating one another.” See Demetz, “The Art of Jan Čep.” In *The Czechoslovak Contribution to World Culture*, ed. Miloslav Rechcigl (Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton, 1964) 78. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783112415900-010>

<sup>73</sup> *Zeměžluč*, 133.

<sup>74</sup> *Zeměžluč*, 134.

<sup>75</sup> *Zeměžluč*, 134.

in Czech as closely as possible, if not identically. In the first three drafts of my translations, I followed the tenses slavishly to provide an accurate reflection of the Czech original. One problem, however, arose from this – it sounded awful.

Paul Wilson, the Canadian translator of Czech literature, recommended that I use readers who do not know Czech to read my translations of Čep, in order to ensure that the translation primarily appeals to Anglophone readers instead of pleasing the small audience of bilingual Czech-English readers.<sup>76</sup> Following Wilson's advice, I used three non-Czech speakers as beta-readers for my early translations of *Zeměžluč*: Iranian-American poet and translator Roger Sedarat; German-American translator Kristina Kalpaxis; and Ethiopian-American novelist Maaze Mengiste. They offered numerous and valuable suggestions – the one criticism common to each of their critiques, though, concerned the rapidly shifting tenses. Later, my thesis advisor, the Czech translator and scholar Stanislav Rubáš, also noted the clunkiness of employing so many different narrative tenses in English.

English authors who employ jarring narrative shifts have also faced criticism. Writing about William Faulkner's novel *As I Lay Dying*, which features a fractured narrative told by multiple narrators, Stephen M. Ross states:

Among Faulkner's many experiments with narrative technique, *As I Lay Dying* seems in certain respects the most puzzling. . . . most notably, the book's temporal structure appears to break down badly, as Faulkner mixes past-tense and present-tense narratives, even switching from one to the other within certain monologues.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Wilson maintains that his best editor is a North American woman who speaks Serbo-Croatian but not Czech.

<sup>77</sup> Stephen M. Ross, "Shapes of Time and Consciousness in *As I Lay Dying*." *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 16, no. 4 (1975): 723. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40754354>.

In *As I Lay Dying*, each chapter is a monologue, and the chapters which feature the boldest shifts in narrative tense are those told by the traumatized child Vardaman, who at one point declares, “Pa shaves every day now because my mother is a fish.”<sup>78</sup> I agree with both Stephen M. Ross and Dorothy J. Hale that Faulkner’s shifts in narrative tense add to the meaning of the novel;<sup>79</sup> however, it is noteworthy that readers such as R. W. Franklin, a former director of Yale’s Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library, feel that the temporal shifts betray a major fault in the book. In his seminal essay “Narrative Management in *As I Lay Dying*,” he writes:

For a novel there is a stable present. Traditionally it resides at the point of narration and is the present of the narrator. By skillful manipulation of the past, the reader may be induced to translate it into a fictive present, but when the chronology is disturbed, he resorts to the point of narration for stability and consistency. In *As I Lay Dying* the fictive present is the only present, and when its chronology is disturbed, the reader has no present to resort to, except his own. This drives him out of the novel and forces him to pronounce it inconsistent.<sup>80</sup>

The notion that narrative shifts drive the reader out of a literary work, pushing them to conflate the fictive present with their own could serve the intentions Čep in *Zeměžluč*, but it likely won’t stop readers and editors from attributing the narrative shifts to shoddy translation. After all, Franklin attributes the narrative shifts in *As I Lay Dying* to Faulkner’s shoddy writing:

Faulkner repeatedly declared that he wrote *As I Lay Dying* in six weeks, while on the night shift in a power plant . . . Instead of attempting forced explanations, we are more accurate

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<sup>78</sup> William Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*. (London: Vintage, 2004) 71.

<sup>79</sup> See Ross, “Shapes of Time and Consciousness in *As I Lay Dying*” and Dorothy J. Hale, “*As I Lay Dying*’s Heterogeneous Discourse.” *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 23, no. 1 (1989): 5–23.

<sup>80</sup> R. W. Franklin, “Narrative Management in *As I Lay Dying*.” *Modern Fiction Studies* 13, no. 1 (1967): 64. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26278647>.

simply to judge the anachronisms inconsistent, the narrative management faulty, and to recognize that *As I Lay Dying* shows the great haste in which it was written.<sup>81</sup>

To keep critics from thinking that I translated Čep's *Zeměžluč* in haste, I decided to smooth out the narrative tenses in the stories that employ numerous shifts.<sup>82</sup>

I have chosen to go against Valouch's idea that Čep favors the past – I instead favor the present so that I can make the narratives more vivid. Examining narration in the present tense versus past, Edgar F. Shannon, Jr. writes that in past-tense narration:

The narrator stands in the way. The reader must accept an account of what has happened instead of seeing the actors themselves; and the technique reminds him that the action has actually been completed some time before the narration began. Through this displacement of time, the story loses some of its vividness and power of conviction.<sup>83</sup>

He sees Charlotte Brontë's use of the present (in seven instances of *Jane Eyre*) as a solution to the "handicap." I hope my predominant use of the present serves as a remedy as well.

An early impulse of mine was to shift all of the narrative tenses to the present. This would add power and vividness to the narration, but English readers would miss the opportunity to gain any insight into Čep's specific notion of time. Valouch informs us that for Čep time is cyclical, circular, eternally returning to itself.<sup>84</sup> Thus, for most stories I have settled on a strategy I first employed while revising the translation of "Peněženka": I begin with the narrative past tense, move the narration to the present for the bulk of the story, and return the narrative to the past tense for the end.

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<sup>81</sup> Franklin, 65.

<sup>82</sup> "Můra" and "Zbloudilý" feature no significant narrative shifts, so I simply kept their English translations in the past narrative tense.

<sup>83</sup> Edgar F. Shannon, 142.

<sup>84</sup> Valouch, 576.

“Storm,” my translation of the short story “Bouře,” may provide a decent case-study for this approach.<sup>85</sup> The original story begins with the line “*Sotva se stočila cesta za roh, vyvstalo za střechami nebe, usmrcující svou černou výhrůžkou jakoukoliv naději.*”<sup>86</sup> The English keeps the same narrative tense: “Scarcely had the road rounded the corner, when behind the roofs rose the sky, suffocating all hope with its dark threat.” In the original, the final sentence of the second paragraph introduces the present narrative tense: “*Jen dřevěný kříž stojí tiše na rozcestí a rozpíná ramena do hrůzy mraků.*”<sup>87</sup> Again, the English mirrors the Czech: “Only the wooden cross stands quietly at the crossroads, stretching its shoulders to the cloudy horror.” The Czech now remains in the present narrative tense until the seventh paragraph: “*Vůz skočil přes mez . . .*” The past narrative tense here appears briefly; the next sentence returns fully to the present: “*Matka už podává snopy. Jeník hladí Stračenu po čele a strachem se modlí.*” To keep the tense shifts from jarring readers, I have put the entire passage into the present: “The cart hops a curb and drives onto the field. Jeník takes the whip and walks towards the cows so they won’t scare. Mother is already passing up the sheaves. Jeník pets piebald Stračena’s forehead and he prays from fear.”

When the past narrative tense again intrudes quickly into the eighth paragraph (“*ještě se ke všemu povřísló rozvázalo, teď zas byl snop příliš těžký a spadl matce nazpátek*”) before returning to the present within the same line (“*fůra je vyšší a vyšší*”), I have again shifted the past tense to the present: “one of the bindings breaks loose; and again a sheaf is too heavy for his mother and falls back on her.”

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<sup>85</sup> See the appendix for my earlier translation of the story with narrative tenses that closely match the original’s.

<sup>86</sup> All of the following Czech quotes from “Bouře” are from *Zeměžluč*, 15–8.

<sup>87</sup> *Zeměžluč*, 15. A future narrative tense briefly and immediately follows this (“*Zůstane tu brzy sám a snad mu blesk urve půlku těla...*”), but since it belongs to the primary sequence of verbs (present, future, present perfect), I have generally included it with the present narrative tense.

In the middle of the tenth paragraph of the original, the tense shifts back to the past: “*Jeník vzhlédl, otcova bílá tvář zůstala přibita k mračnům, strašná svítivá hloubka se za ním rozevřela a krávy sražené děsným úderem spadly na kolena.*” Aside from the fourteenth paragraph, which briefly mixes the present and past narrative tenses (“*Matka odtahovala Jeníka od fůry, neboť tam je nebezpečí větší; jenom tatínek tamtudy musí jít, nikdo tam nemůže jít místoněho, staň se co staň...*”), the original story remains in the past narrative tense from paragraph ten to the story’s end after the nineteenth paragraph.

In the English translation, however, I do not revert to the past in the tenth paragraph: “Jeník looks up, his father’s white face remains nailed to the clouds as a terrifying and brilliant abyss opens behind him; the cows, knocked down by a terrible blow, fall to their knees.” In fact, I keep the story in the present until the seventeenth paragraph when the Roubal family has made it to safety: “The way from the cross to the farmhouses led through a netherworld, and when the first hedge appeared, their joy was unexpected and beautiful like an undeserved reward.” The final three paragraphs all use the narrative past.

Using this ouroboros-structure for the narrative tenses in my translations of “Bouře,” “Domek,” “Dvojí domov,” “Peněženka,” “Hoře z lásky,” and “Cesta na jitřní” hopefully signals Čep’s concept of eternal return to readers, while blending the temporal narratives in a more gradual way – so the shifts do not nauseate readers the way the rapid tempo of the polka sickens Lidka in “Kozlovice.”

Actually, the English translation of “Kozlovice” departs from this past-present-past tense–structure slightly. While most of the original Czech stories begin with the past narrative tense, “Kozlovice” begins in the present, before shifting tenses sixteen times, but predominantly keeping

the present tense. To retain the mixing of narrative tenses, I have changed the first paragraph to the past. “*Chalupy sedí kolem románské kaple s barokovým křížem a moudří lidé praví, že se dějí ve světě veliké věci a že se teď musí všechno zjinačit, protože to už nejde jako stará*” becomes:<sup>88</sup>

The farmhouses circled a Romanesque chapel with a baroque cross, and wise people said that important things were happening in the world and everything would change now, because things couldn't go on like they did in the old days.

The narrative tense stays in the past until the fourth paragraph. In the original, the fourth paragraph actually begins in the past, but Čep's use of the word today makes it a natural place for the translation to shift into the present, as does Čep's subsequent use of the present tense in the one-sentence paragraph. Thus,

*Ale ze zídky za Spurných zahradou vyrazilo dnes do rána mlíčí, žáby v rybníčku na návsi spouštějí do snů zeleně zářící drahokamy a celý svět plný vůně hrne se otevřeným oknem do světničky a chce po tobě bůhví co.*<sup>89</sup>

moves entirely to the present in the translation:

But this morning a broom sprouts from the fence behind the Spurný's garden, in the pond on the square frogs drop gleaming green gems into dreams, and a whole world of scents pours through an open window, wanting God-knows-what from you.

The narrative tense in English will remain in the present for the next 55 paragraphs, the remainder of the story.

The reason for breaking the cyclical structure used in other stories is two-fold. First, Čep himself ends the story in the present tense: “*A ty, poutníku, který jdeš do světa kolem chalup*

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<sup>88</sup> *Zeměžluč*, 23.

<sup>89</sup> *Zeměžluč*, 23.

*zařatých hluboko do země, viz kapky krve na kamení! A neposmívej se, když čteš: Osada: obec: Kozlovice.*”<sup>90</sup> More importantly, however, is the vocative and imperative nature of the the closing of “Kozlovice” – the command and direct address would make it nearly impossible to put in a narrative past. Ending the story in the present (“And you, traveler, who wanders the world past low farmhouses, notice the blood drops on the pebbles—and don’t laugh when you read the sign: Village, parish, Kozlovice.”) achieves something else.

Exploring Čep’s complex view of time, Valouch cites a letter from the author where he writes “*I čas takto nalezeny má jenom rozměr horizontální, je jenom trváním. Aby se opravdu stal jakousi formou věčnosti, jejím přítokem, musil by být doplněn rozměrem vertikálním, osobním vztahem k Bohu.*”<sup>91</sup> I hope that by breaking the cyclical narrative tense–structure in “Kozlovice,” which I see as the centerpiece of the collection, it moves the reader beyond the horizontal dimension of temporal duration by establishing a vertical connection, not with God the Creator, but Čep the creator of *Zeměžluč*.

Is this eternal link not what the author achieves in his one instance of addressing the reader directly?

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<sup>90</sup> *Zeměžluč*, 29.

<sup>91</sup> Valouch, 581.

### 3.3 Koláče and Kleofáš: Translating Czech Realia in Jan Čep's *Zeměžluč*

In “The Task of the Translator,” Walter Benjamin points out that even though the word *Brot* in German and *pain* in French both mean “bread,” the words signify something different to a German and a Frenchman because of the cultural context.<sup>92</sup> We can imagine the word “bread” conjuring up images of sliced rye for our imaginary Hans, while Jean would perhaps think of a baguette. So, what should an English translator do when in the very first line of Jan Čep's story collection *Zeměžluč* – “*K obědu byly buchty jako med a den byl plný radosti, když slečna učitelka otevřela okna do zahrady a vpustila do třídy potok šeríkové vůně*”<sup>93</sup> – readers encounter a specific type of bread that Czechs know well, yet is unfamiliar to most Anglophone readers?

The question of how to best communicate cultural connotations arises when translating almost any text, but in *Zeměžluč*, where the stories often evoke sentimental feelings about the Czech countryside before examining the anxiety and horror present there, it seems to come up constantly. With every mention of food, music, names, and flora, I had to consider how best (and how much), I should translate.

In the case of *buchty*, I have decided not to translate it at all: “It was *buchty* for lunch today, rolls as sweet as honey. When Miss opened the window to the garden, the scent of lilac flooded into the classroom.” The decision to leave a Czech word in the first sentence of the translation is

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<sup>92</sup> “The Translator’s Task,” Walter Benjamin.” Trans. Steven Rendall. *TTR : traduction, terminologie, rédaction*, vol. 10, n° 2, 1997, p 156.

<sup>93</sup> *Zeměžluč*, Jan Čep. (Prague: Vyšehrad, 1991), p 11.

not one I make lightly. In fact, I strongly disagree with Ryan Bloom's advice to do just that in his 2012 *New Yorker* article "Lost in Translation: What the First Line of 'The Stranger' Should Be." (For "Aujourd'hui, maman est morte," Bloom suggests "Today, Maman died,"<sup>94</sup> which would leave me as a non-Francophone to wonder who this Maman fellow was.) Yet, after trying "hot cakes" and "sweet rolls" for *buchty*, I feel keeping the Czech word is best.

I have a few reasons for this. The hope of bringing a Czech word beyond "robot" into English is certainly one of them, but more importantly I think it is safe to assume that English readers of Czech modernist (although often labeled ruralist) stories from the late 1920s and early 1930s will not be disheartened by elements that seem foreign to them. (An English translation of Jan Čep will most likely be read in only a handful of university courses.) The next reason is that while I leave the Czech word, I have supplied what Alex Zucker has described as an invisible footnote,<sup>95</sup> inserting "rolls" as a parenthetical to *buchty*.

Later in the same story, "Domek," two children sit and bake different imaginary cakes: "*Anička s Božkou seděly na hlíně a pekly vdolky.*"<sup>96</sup> In "Translation as a Decision Process," it seems Jiří Levý would demand the use of an exact translations for *vdolky* when he writes, "The word 'gooseberry' must be translated by exact equivalents (*Stachelbeere, groseille*) in prose."<sup>97</sup> A direct English translation, however, would have Anička and Božka sitting on the ground baking "Bavarian cream donuts." Having the girls pretending to bake an item with Bavarian in the name runs the risk of focusing on a German connection to the food that Czech readers would not make;

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<sup>94</sup> "Lost in Translation: What the First Line of 'The Stranger' Should Be," Ryan Bloom. *The New Yorker*, 11.05.2012.

<sup>95</sup> "Tough Nuts to Crack: Challenges in Czech to English Literary Translation." Panel discussion for the Czechoslovak Society of Arts and Sciences New York, 02.05.2011. Recording: <https://www.svu2000.org/newyork/audio/orisky.mp3>

<sup>96</sup> *Zeměžluč*, 1991, p 12.

<sup>97</sup> "Translation as a Decision Process," Jiří Levý. In *The Translation Studies Reader*, ed. Lawrence Venuti. (London: Routledge, 2000) p 153.

simply using the general word donut would make it seem as if the story is set in Missouri instead of Mysletice. In order to keep readers feeling that they are reading a Czech story and observing a typical Czech activity, I have altered one Czech pastry into another: “Anička and Božka sit on the ground, baking kolache.” Prior to 2013, I would have felt that using the word kolache – the English transliteration of *koláče* – would be worse than leaving *vdolky* in Czech; however, ten years ago kolache became a fairly trendy food in America. It moved out of ethnic Czech communities in Texas, and became popular on both the east and west coast of America. The New York Times even ran an article titled “The Kolache: Czech, Texan or All-American? (All Three).”<sup>98</sup>

I made similar choices when references to Czech music appear. In the story “Kozlovice,” the traditional Czech dance polka is mentioned: “*Udělal se jí mdlo z rychlé polky a požádala svého tanečníka, aby s ní usedl.*”<sup>99</sup> Because the polka is so well-known internationally, there is no reason to change it, thus: “The fast polka makes her nauseous and she asks her dance-partner to sit down with her.” The story “Můra” has a trickier musical reference. The protagonist finds himself with a widow who both repulses and attracts him, and while looking around her home, “*Zahlédl v skákajícím světle svíčky několik barvotiskových obrázků, rokokového hraběte laškujícího s rokokovou selkou, ‚Rozmyslí si, Mařenko‘, jakousi alpskou krajinku a nad pohovkou zvětšené fotografie paní a pana Frýbortových.*”<sup>100</sup> While I imagine most Czech readers of this story would recognize the allusion to the musical number “Rozmysli si, Mařenko” [“Make up your mind, Mařenka”] from Smetana’s *The Bartered Bride*, I fear that among English readers only musicologists and opera aficionados would catch the reference. For this sentence, I used a sort of reverse-synecdoche, giving the whole for the part mentioned: “In the light of the candles’

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<sup>98</sup> “The Kolache: Czech, Texan or All-American? (All Three),” John T. Edge. *The New York Times*, 07.10.201

<sup>99</sup> *Zeměžluč*, 1991, p 26.

<sup>100</sup> *Zeměžluč*, 1991, p 102.

flickering flames, he glimpsed several color prints: a rococo count courting a rococo farmwife, *The Bartered Bride*, an alpine landscape; large photographs of Mr. and Mrs. Frýbort hung over the sofa.”

From the translation examples I have provided about the Frýborts and Anička and Božka, it is perhaps clear that I prefer to not alter the names Čep has given his characters. This did raise some issues, however, when characters – both human and bovine – had names that evoked personal characteristics: a cow named Stračena or Srna, an arrogant student named Kohout, Cyril Nedoma who never feels at home. In order to convey some of the characters’ qualities that Čep highlights with their names, I prefer to use a technique suggested by Rajendra Chitnis and I when we edited Karolinum Press’ newest English edition of Ladislav Fuchs’ *The Cremator* [*Spalovač mrtvol*] for the surnames of Kopfrkingl’s colleagues who are all named after animals (Beran, Fenek, Zajíc), and are similar to them in character: epithets. We suggested that perhaps Beran could be introduced as “ram-like Mr. Beran” or “Mr. Beran, stubborn as a ram.” The translator, Eva Kandler, rejected the proposal – and probably for good reason. In *Spalovač mrtvol* it may have been too conspicuous.

But because there are only a few names that draw such attention in *Zeměžluč*, I hope it works. In the story “*Bouře*,” when “*Jeník hladí Stračenu po čele a strachem se modlí,*”<sup>101</sup> I simply add the meaning of the cow’s name to describe its color: “Jeník pets piebald Stračena’s forehead and he prays from fear.” Stračena’s color may be a fairly superficial trait, but the name of another cow is far more important. In the story “*Dvojí domov*,” a crucial element of the story is the way a cow from the mountainside has her spirit broken by the heavy-handed husband of the protagonist who identifies with the cow. The cow is named Srna (“Doe”), which seems to suggest both a timidity and a lack of domestication. To clue English readers into this, I often attach the epithet

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<sup>101</sup> *Zeměžluč*, 1991, p 16.

“doe-eyed” to Srna; for example, when the cow is introduced: “... *obrátila Srna nazpět své vejcovité oči a zdlouha zabučela,*”<sup>102</sup> [doe-eyed Srna looked back and released a long bellow]. Had I not added an epithet, but still kept the name in Czech, a later line, “*Zestárly obě, kráva i hospodyně, a krásy jim nepřibylo, a měl-li kdo zavolat na krávu: ‚Srno,‘ cítil přespříliš, že se to jaksi nehodí,*” would make no sense at all. Repeating the epithet, I translated the line as, “They both grew old, the cotter’s cow and the cotter’s wife, their beauty fading; if anyone ever heard the cow called “doe-eyed Srna,” he would be struck with the thought that there was nothing deer-like about her.”

While the owner of the cow is named Roubal, which derives from the Czech verb “rubat” [fell, cut down] – appropriate for a violent man – I feel that the surname is common enough not to be noticed by most Czech readers, so I do not use an epithet for him. On the other hand, I make sure to describe the arrogant student Kohout in the story “Kozlovice” as “cocky”; the most important epithet, however, goes to the character Cyril Nedoma in the stories “Můra” and “Cesta na jitřní.” In these stories, Cyril Nedoma travels between different cities and towns, feeling lost geographically, morally, and spiritually. Because Nedoma literally means “not home,” I felt this aspect of his character should be emphasized, so in each story he is described as “like a wanderer”: “*Cyrl Nedoma postavil kufry na zem, utřel si pot s čela a polkl chuť podezřelé nejistoty a zákeřného ticha, které číhaly okolo něho*”<sup>103</sup> [Like a wanderer, Cyril Nedoma set his suitcases on the ground, wiped the sweat from his face and swallowed the uncertainty, tasting the insidious silence]; “*Cyrl Nedoma šel vedle své matky po cestě svých dětských let, po úzké silnici mezi holými stromy, spojující Přísenice s vesnicí, v níž byl farní kostel.*”<sup>104</sup> [Like a wanderer, Cyril Nedoma

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<sup>102</sup> *Zeměžluč*, 1991, p 19.

<sup>103</sup> *Zeměžluč*, 1991, p 99.

<sup>104</sup> *Zeměžluč*, 1991, p 131.

walks beside his mother on a path from his childhood, along a narrow road between bare trees, which connects Přisenice to the parish church.]

There is one name, however, that I feel should be altered from its Czech form: the surname of Petr Kleofáš in “Zbloudilý.” Kleofáš is the Czech version of the Greek name Κλεόπας (Romanized as Cleopas), which in the Gospels of Luke and Mark is the name of one of the travelers who meets Jesus after the resurrection. In “Zbloudilý,” Petr Kleofáš while traveling meets a man who tells him the story of Janek Chalupa, who appeared six months after his burial – the echoes of the story, combined with Janek Chalupa’s initials matching Jesus Christ’s, makes it seem that Čep certainly intends to draw a connection between Petr Kleofáš and the Biblical Cleopas, so for the benefit of English readers I have substituted Cleopas for Kleofáš.

Because the stories in *Zeměžluč* have rural settings, local flora appears constantly. I assumed this would cause problems, but as the Saint Lucian poet Derek Walcott has pointed out, tradition and colonialism have given primacy to European plants in literary contexts.<sup>105</sup> As a result, the sad willow trees in “Peněženka,” carry the same connotation for English readers in Australia or California as they do for Czechs. When willows appear again in “Zbloudilý,” overlooking a dark marsh, their English association with Ophelia’s death in *Hamlet*, seems to foreshadow the drowned body he thinks he sees. Elsewhere, *šeřík* can be directly translated as lilac, as *materídouška* with thyme, and *dub* with oak. So, it seems that the cultural context and connotations of flora caused no problems at all in these rural tales. Except for one.

*Zeměžluč.*

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<sup>105</sup> In fact, a major impetus behind Walcott’s writing of the epic poem *Omeros* was a desire to elevate the status of New World flora (palm, mango) to the literary level of Old World willows and oaks. See *The South Bank Show: Derek Walcott*, Dir. Tony Knox. 1989. Esp. 21:40.

The *zeměžluč* plant never actually appears in any of the stories included in *Zeměžluč*, but as the title of the collection, it is easily the most important word, much less plant name, to translate. A direct translation, however, will not work – for *zeměžluč* is Centaurium, or English “centaury.” An English reader could easily Google centaury, if she is unfamiliar with the plant (I certainly was), and be confronted with over two million results, but she may never discover that the power of this flower as the title comes not from what centaury is, but what *zeměžluč* means. It is a compound of the Czech words *země* [earth] and *žluč* [bile, bitterness]. In a book filled with stories about grief, anxiety, and violence set against the backdrop of the countryside, the title *Zeměžluči* is perfect. *Centaury* is not. It sounds like it will be a collection about mythical creatures or sci-fi adventures in a triple star system, so another plant with a similar effect on readers must be used.

I came up with two suitable plants: bitterroot (*Lewisia rediviva*) and common rue (*Ruta graveolens*). The name bitterroot carries similar and immediate connotations for Anglophones as *zeměžluč* does for Czechs, but it is a plant that only occurs naturally in the dry rocky areas of western North America – it is a plant which neither Čep nor his characters likely ever saw. Luckily, common rue works beautifully. In English “rue” has two meanings that make it a suitable substitution for *zeměžluč*: derived from the Latin *ruta*, rue has been used since the 13<sup>th</sup> century for the plant *Ruta graveolens*; but derived from the Old English, the word rue also means sorrow.<sup>106</sup> Common has the sense of ordinary, but also something that is shared. So common rue carries the sense of sorrow that pertains to us all – certainly the characters in the Čep’s stories, as well as the readers.

This play on the meanings of rue has been utilized in English before – in Hamlet. Ophelia, having gone mad and gives out flowers she has picked:

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<sup>106</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “rue, n.<sup>2</sup>, sense 1.a” and s.v. “rue, n.<sup>1</sup>, sense 1”, July 2023.

There's rosemary, that's for remembrance. Pray you love, remember. And there is pansies,  
that's for thoughts. There's fennel for you, and columbines. There's rue for you, and here's  
some for me; we may call it herb of grace o'Sundays. You must wear your rue with a  
difference. (IV.5)

With the slight changes and explanations I have made in the English translation, I am  
hoping Čep's *Common Rue* will merely be *Zeměžluč* worn with a difference.

### 3.4 Translating Translatability: Considering Walter Benjamin While Translating Jan Čep

In the *Cambridge Introduction to Walter Benjamin*, David Ferris writes of Benjamin's "The Task of the Translator": "The preface to Benjamin's translation of Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs de Mal* has achieved the status of a work that cannot be avoided in discussions of translation and its theory."<sup>107</sup> A confusing and at times contradictory essay, "its concern is not the reader's comprehension nor is its essence communication."<sup>108</sup> The essay "is far from a practical guide to translation," Ferris points out. "Rather it is concerned with the question of what significance translation possesses."<sup>109</sup> Ferris is correct, but Benjamin's instructions for translators should not be overlooked—they make up an essential portion of the essay and provide translators a fascinating template to consider. To test its practical validity, I have translated short stories by the Czech author Jan Čep while keeping Benjamin's suggestions in mind.

For someone more interested in producing translations than pondering them, Benjamin's concept of translatability is still a valuable concept. As Benjamin stresses, "the translatability of linguistic creations ought to be considered even if men should prove unable to translate them," but he also says a crucial issue of translatability is: "Will an adequate translator ever be found among the totality of its readers?"<sup>110</sup> Every translator should ask himself if he will be up to the task.

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<sup>107</sup> David Ferris, *The Cambridge Introduction to Walter Benjamin* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2008) 62.

<sup>108</sup> Carol Jacobs, *In the Language of Walter Benjamin* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1999) 76.

<sup>109</sup> Ferris, 62.

<sup>110</sup> Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, eds. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1996) 254.

But what does Benjamin mean by translatability, this “essential quality of certain works”? He comes closest to answering it with another question: “does [a literary work’s] nature lend itself to translation?”<sup>111</sup> Benjamin then goes on to say about translation, “of all literary forms it is the one charged with the special mission of watching over the maturing process of the original language and the birth pangs of its own.”<sup>112</sup> This hints at a similar theme discussed by the Old English translator Burton Rafael who compares translating Beowulf and Catullus, asking rhetorically: “Roughly a thousand years separate the two examples. But can anyone doubt that Catullus is in virtually every way more ‘modern’—in subject, poetic approach, use of language, sophistication of feeling, and so on?”<sup>113</sup> The idea that Rafael is close to defining translatability as a work sharing a similar sensibility to the *animus mundi* of the specific world producing the translation is reinforced by Benjamin’s theory that “all suprahistorical kinship between language consists in this: in every one of them as a whole, one and the same thing is meant”<sup>114</sup> and “languages are not strangers to one another, but are *a priori*, and apart from all historical relationships, interested in what they want to express.”<sup>115</sup>

That Benjamin asserts “the higher level of the original, the more translatable it remains” suggests he would find Catullus to be more translatable than Beowulf.<sup>116</sup> Depression from unrequited love (*odi et amo, quare id faciam fortasse requiris / nescio, sed fieri sentio et excrucior*) is certainly more relatable to a contemporary audience than monsters, elves, and giants (*þanon untydras ealle on wocon/eotenas ond ylfe ond orcneas / swylce gigantas, þa wið Gode wunnon*).<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Benjamin, 254.

<sup>112</sup> Benjamin, 256.

<sup>113</sup> Burton Rafael, “Translating Medieval European Poetry,” in *The Craft of Translation*. eds. John Biguenet and Rainer Schulte (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989) 29.

<sup>114</sup> Benjamin, 257.

<sup>115</sup> Benjamin, 255.

<sup>116</sup> Benjamin, 256.

<sup>117</sup> *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, ed. Klaeber (Boston: Heath & Co., 1922). Lines 111–3.

In addition to theme, Benjamin does warn about a gulf in linguistic style as well when he points out that “what sounded fresh once may sound hackneyed later; what was current may someday sound archaic.”<sup>118</sup>

By such measures, the interwar Czech writer Jan Čep would rank low on the scale of translatability. Not only does his spiritualism, tasting so heavily of wafer and wine, seem foreign to me and so many secular-minded contemporary readers, but he writes with a literary style that has fallen out fashion: he employs odd and archaic language, builds sentences like labyrinths, and unspools ambiguity through each of his pieces.

Struggling with an author who ranks low on the translatability-scale, it could be worth looking to Benjamin for guidance. What strategy would he recommend for a translator? Translate it word for word.

In “Task of the Translator” he includes the admonition of Pannwitz: “Our translations, even the best ones, proceed from a mistaken premise. They want to turn Hindi, Greek, English, into German instead of turning German into Hindi, Greek, English.”<sup>119</sup> Benjamin also champions Voss as a great translator, a translator Goethe admires for using hexameters in his translations of Ancient Greek.<sup>120</sup> In fact, Benjamin admires Goethe’s thoughts on translation, calling them (along with Pannwitz’s) “the best comment on the theory of translation that has been published in Germany.”<sup>121</sup> Benjamin’s recommendations for more literal translations recall Goethe’s idea that “a translation that attempts to identify itself with the original ultimately comes close to an interlinear version and greatly facilitates our understanding of the original.”<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> Benjamin, 256.

<sup>119</sup> Benjamin, 261–2.

<sup>120</sup> Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, “Translations,” in *Theories of Translation*, eds. Rainer Schulte and John Biguenet. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993) 63.

<sup>121</sup> Benjamin, 261.

<sup>122</sup> Goethe, 63.

Benjamin recommends “a literal rendering of the syntax which proves words rather than sentences to be the primary element of the translator.”<sup>123</sup> For Benjamin, “free translation” does not mean that a translator can ignore the original’s syntax and diction but that he can ignore the syntax and diction of the target language: “freedom proves its worth... by its effect on its own language.”<sup>124</sup>

“The task of the translator,” he says, “consists in finding the particular intention toward the target language which produces in that language the echo of the original.”<sup>125</sup> This sounds like Benjamin advocates a goal widely acknowledged by professional translators: to produce an equivalent effect, similarly to when he says that the “essential quality” of literature “is not communication or the imparting of information.”<sup>126</sup> But Benjamin is actually interested in using translations to explore the kinship between languages in order to gain a tiny bit of understanding of the “pure language,” the “true language,” that exists beyond them.

Whereas in the various tongues that ultimate essence, the pure language, is tied only to linguistic elements and their changes, in linguistic creations it is weighted with a heavy alien meaning. To relieve it of this, to turn the symbolizing into the symbolized itself, to regain pure language fully formed from the linguistic flux, is the tremendous and only capacity of translation.<sup>127</sup>

“True language,” Benjamin believes, “is concealed in concentrated fashion in translations” and “it is the task of the translator to release in his own language that pure language which is exiled among

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<sup>123</sup> Benjamin, 260.

<sup>124</sup> Benjamin, 261.

<sup>125</sup> Benjamin, 258.

<sup>126</sup> Benjamin, 253.

<sup>127</sup> Benjamin, 261.

alien tongues, to liberate the languages imprisoned in a work in his recreation of that work.”<sup>128</sup> Benjamin hopes that by turning what Roman Jakobson terms the *signum* into the *signatum*,<sup>129</sup> a glimpse of the pure language may be achieved; for Benjamin every good translation adds another detail to the blueprints for the Tower of Babel.

Benjamin’s ideas are admirable, so it’s worthwhile to look at examples of translations he would respect. Because he writes, “The interlinear version of the Scripture is the prototype or ideal of all translation,”<sup>130</sup> Hinds’ *Interlinear Literal Translation of the Greek New Testament* is a natural place start: “Answered Jesus not twelve are there hours in the day?”<sup>131</sup> This gives a good idea about the structure of Koine Greek, but it leaves something to be desired in terms of readability. How would it work for something by Jan Čep? Let’s look at a sentence translated literally from his story “Path to Morning”: “How for them in the last time became intimate the face of death!”<sup>132</sup> That sounds even worse.

Perhaps, Benjamin’s theories work well only in theory, but not in practice. Excellent writers, however, have offered recommendations for translating that closely mirror Benjamin’s. Vladimir Nabokov, for example:

A schoolboy’s boner is less of a mockery in regard to the ancient masterpiece than its interpretation or poetization... It is when the translator sets out to render the “spirit”—not the textual sense—that he begins to traduce his author. The clumsiest literal translation is a thousand times more useful than the prettiest paraphrase.<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> Benjamin, 259, 261.

<sup>129</sup> Roman Jakobson, “On Linguistic Aspects of Translation,” in *Theories of Translation*. eds. Rainer Schulte and John Biguenet (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993) 144.

<sup>130</sup> Benjamin, 263.

<sup>131</sup> *The Interlinear Literal Translation of the Greek New Testament* (New York: Hinds, 1894) 280, John IX.9.

<sup>132</sup> *Jak se jim v posledním case stala důvěrnou tvář smrti!* In my translation of the story I have chosen to translate it less interlinearly as “They came face to face with death last time.”

<sup>133</sup> Edith Grossman, *Why Translation Matters* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2010) 127.

To test this, we can look at an intralingual translation of Nabokov's most famous sentence: *Lolita, glow of my being, incandescence of my crotch, my vice, my spirit. Lo-lee-ta: the edge of my tongue journeying three paces down the roof of my mouth to percuss, at three, on the masticators.*<sup>134</sup> This rewording is ridiculous, of course, but it may be no worse than Nabokov's literalist translation of *Eugene Onegin*:

My uncle has most honest principles:  
when taken ill in earnest,  
he has made one respect him  
and nothing better could invent.<sup>135</sup>

Describing his *Onegin* as unreadable, Edith Grossman, the acclaimed translator of Marquez, Llosa, and Fuentes, writes in her book *Why Translation Matters*: "Nabokov was a brilliant novelist but a dismal translator."<sup>136</sup> She then describes a good translation in terms that many practicing translators would agree with:

Good translations are good because they are faithful to contextual significance. They are not necessarily faithful to words or syntax, which are peculiar to specific languages... words do not *mean* in isolation. Words *mean* as indispensable parts of a contextual whole that includes the emotional tone and impact, the literary antecedents, the connotative nimbus as well as the denotations of each statement.<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> This monstrosity is my own.

<sup>135</sup> Grossman, 70.

<sup>136</sup> Grossman, 70.

<sup>137</sup> Grossman, 71.

The examples above of translations that obey the literal syntax of the original are indeed unreadable, a point on which Benjamin would actually agree with Grossman. He himself says, “A literal rendering of the syntax casts the reproduction of meaning entirely to the winds and threatens to lead directly to incomprehensibility.”<sup>138</sup> For Benjamin translatability and readability are not synonymous. Benjamin does not want translations to convey the feeling or style of the source text, he wants translations to supplement the original in an attempt to reach “pure language.” “No poem is intended for the reader, no picture for the beholder, no symphony for the audience”;<sup>139</sup> although his analogy is patently wrong, it is clear that in Benjamin’s mind a translation is not for the reader but the translator himself.

The approach spelled out by Benjamin does, however, work when the reader is somewhat familiar with the language of the original (thereby removing its usual *raison d'être*). This is the reason Jen Hofer, an electrifying translator of Mexican poetry, can incorporate Spanish syntax and say:

Contemporary American English is too often polluted by a monological megalomaniacal English-only xenophobic imperialism that seeks to impose — via “shock and awe” or “enduring freedom” or “extreme rendition” — a language of hegemonically-defined totality on the rest of the world.<sup>140</sup>

I admire Hofer and her translations, but this view of the arrival language<sup>141</sup> as enemy only makes sense when seen through the eyes of a speaker of a ‘disadvantaged’ departure language that is

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<sup>138</sup> Benjamin, 260.

<sup>139</sup> Benjamin, 253.

<sup>140</sup> Jen Hofer, “Suspension of Belief: Some Thoughts on Translation as Subversive Speech.” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Protest*. Online. <http://www.joaap.org/5/articles/hofer/webspecial.htm>

<sup>141</sup> Hofer rejects the traditional translation terms of ‘source language’ and ‘target language’ in favor of ‘departure language’ and ‘arrival language.’

spoken by more than 400 million people (and studied by the majority of American high school students). A Salvadoran poet can get in a car and hold readings anywhere within a 6,689 mile stretch from Tijuana to Tierra del Fuego without crossing into a country where Spanish is not the official language. She can find an audience of native speakers on five different continents.<sup>142</sup>

Traveling an hour and forty-five minutes north, two hours west, or three hours south, a novelist from Prague can only speak to the locals if he knows German; two and a half hours east will land him in Poland. While Hofer often views English as a truncheon, Czech writers tend to see it as a megaphone, telephone wire, broadband: an instrument to carry their thoughts, style, and work to the world. So it makes sense to translate the Czech of Jan Čep into an English that can be read and understood.

Having worked primarily as a translator of drama, where immediacy of effect trumps fidelity, I find it hard even to subscribe to Rosemarie Waldrop's belief that "A translation that can suggest the lost beauty of the original is preferable to a smooth replica that pretends to be original itself" (141). Like the Dickinson-quoting editor Venuti criticizes in "Towards a Translating Culture," I want my readers to feel like the tops of their heads have been taken off.

There are times when translating Čep that I strive to keep the original syntax. This is because in his stories the theme of disorientation weighs heavily throughout, and to transfer this confusion upon the reader, Čep exploits Czech's highly inflected, fluid grammar. While Czech tends to use the subject of the sentence at the beginning, like English, Čep consistently places the subject after the verb, often at the sentence's very end. It's an ingenious trick and one he uses constantly to build suspense. In "Path to Morning" I try to mirror the syntactical trick: "Creeping off into the darkness in both directions is a field"<sup>143</sup> and "With the same shriek flew a flock of

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<sup>142</sup> I'm counting the Philippines as Asia.

<sup>143</sup> "*Vpravo vlevo ležela ve tmě pole...*" *Zeměžluč*, 131.

partridges.”<sup>144</sup> Čep does this especially well in the story “Moth”: *Ze svahů rokle čněly mezi vlhkou hlinou lesklé balvany* (“Out from the gorge’s wet soil jutted sleek crags”) and *Jenom v oknech bloudil namodralý odlesk* (“across the windows wandered cobalt glints”).<sup>145</sup> The retention of the subject at the end of the sentence jars at times (especially in the latter), as it can in Czech, but here I felt the greater shame would be losing the suspense.

For “Burning Up,” I consciously rejected Benjamin’s recommendation for literal syntax both because Čep rarely puts the subject at the end of the sentence, and because Karolina, as upset as she is in the story, knows exactly where she is. She is disturbed but never disoriented. As a result, it is probably the most readable story I have translated so far.

Čep also utilizes alliteration to great effect. For example, in “Burning Up,” when Karolina stands in the rain, he chooses words with sibilants to make it sound like rain hissing down: “v ústech hořkost zvětralé sedliny a v srdci smutek čehosi zmrhaného nevrátně a svevolně.”<sup>146</sup> I have tried to incorporate a similar effect into my translation of these lines: “her mouth tasted the sediment of regret, her heart weighted with the sadness of something irretrievable and misspent.”

I have also rejected Benjamin’s identification of the word as the basic unit for a translation’s measurement. Instead I followed Roman Jakobson’s advice to concentrate on messages instead of code-units.<sup>147</sup> For Čep, I have taken a message to not be a full sentence, but instead an entire story—much as Rosemarie Waldrop has suggested that the smallest unit to measure a translation is the entire book.<sup>148</sup> So when I cannot capture the alliteration in one place, I can add it in another line.

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<sup>144</sup> “... zbrázdy se vzneslo s týmž poplašným křikem hejno koroptvi...” *Zeměžluč*, 132.

<sup>145</sup> *Zeměžluč*, 99.

<sup>146</sup> *Zeměžluč*, 88.

<sup>147</sup> Jakobson, 146.

<sup>148</sup> Rosemarie Waldrop, *Dissonance: If You Are Interested* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2005) 148.

I also use alliteration where Čep does not, such as the phrases: “scrubbed and soaked,” “dagger deeper,” “faithful forever” in the story “Burning Up,” to reproduce the way Czech sounds to me, with so many voices coming from the front of the mouth. This, combined with Czech’s persistent accent on the first syllable of every word, lends the language a poetic (indeed, trochaic and dactylic) rhythm that I want to echo in the English. Gregory Rabassa, the acclaimed translator of Gabriel Garcia Marquez, has emphasized the importance of having a good ear as a translator, noting that “writing is not truly a substitute for thought, it is a substitute for sound” (81);<sup>149</sup> repetition of sounds and words seem to be my best bet at triggering the desired effect.

To capture Czech’s rapid tempo I found it necessary to delete words that could be taken as redundant, especially adjectives and adverbs, which unlike in English, can be piled into a Czech sentence and still sound smooth. For example, if I hadn’t eliminated some words in the first passage of “Path to Morning,” it would appear as:

The darkness of the night was weirdly alive, infused with a strange glow. It was silent, as if after a tremor, permeated with the bliss of mysterious complicity and lit with the undying embers left behind by the brilliant angel wings of our childhood.<sup>150</sup>

To keep the adjectives and adverbs from bogging down the pace in English, I have changed it to:

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<sup>149</sup> Gregory Rabassa, “The Ear in Translation,” in *The World of Translation* (New York: PEN American Center, 1987) 81.

<sup>150</sup> *Tma té noci byla podivně živá, prostoupená prýštním tajemného světla. Byla tichá jako po nějakém otřesu, proniklá blžeností záhadné spoluviny. Jasnost andělských křídel našeho dětství v ní zanechala nehasnoucí stopy* (131).

The darkness of the night was alive, infused with a strange glow. It was silent, as if after a tremor, permeated with the bliss of complicity and lit with the undying embers left by the angel wings of our childhood.

When I translated these stories of Čep, I tried my best to disobey Benjamin and consider the reader. In “Translation as Appropriation,” Piotr Kuhiwczak writes that “any sincerely undertaken intellectual encounter with the former Central Europe or present Eastern Europe is, first and foremost, a taxing personal experience,”<sup>151</sup> so why make it any more difficult by inflicting upon English readers an incomprehensible interlinear translation? I even refuse to break up the flow of the narrative by offering a footnote (a technique Benjamin applauds in “Translation—For and Against”) to explain that in Czech Cyril Nedoma’s surname has the significant meaning of “homeless.” If I have not helped English speakers peek into “pure language,” I do hope that I have had some success in turning the stories/messages into strong, fluid, and readable—if not translatable—prose.

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<sup>151</sup> Piotr Kuhiwczak, “Translation as Appropriation,” in *Translation, History & Culture*. eds. Susan Bassnett and Andre Lefevere (London: Cassel, 1990) 121.

## APPENDIX 1

*An earlier draft of “Storm,” the English translation of “Bouře,” with narrative tenses mirroring Čep’s.*

Scarcely had the road rounded the corner, when behind the roofs rose the sky, suffocating all hope with its dark threat. The road cowered in fear, the cows hung their heads to the ground, and the cart stopped its clacking; father, however, pulled his straw hat down and raised the whip high as the veins bulged out from his arms. Yet the whistle of the whip went silent and a crack thundered forth, tearing heaven above. Jeník grabbed his mother’s hand but he let go immediately and went even paler, for he spied in his mother’s eyes fright. You must fear for yourself — no one can save anyone else. His father didn’t even look back at him, he just seized the reins and the shirt on his back swelled with wind. His mother’s eyes landed upon him finally, but they intended to teach him devotion: “The Lord knows of us.” But Jeník was afraid and wanted assurance that he wouldn’t be killed.

The village was kneeling back beneath the trees and the cart was already in the middle of the fields, the landscape hugged the ground like a partridge, women ran barefoot with their heads down, men shouldered their scythes, two long rows of unshocked sheaves lay end to end like slaughtered troops, and grain piles were hurriedly loaded, hunching their spines before the ire of heaven that kept opening and opening. Only the wooden cross stands quietly at the crossroads, stretching its shoulders to the cloudy horror.

Soon enough it’ll remain here alone, and lighting might snatch half of its body, but again it will stand, a silent Martyr, a God abandoned by its people, a frightful symbol that blasphemers would only dare touch when they’re drunk.

Now, humiliated from fear, they stamp the dust with the prints of their laughable wretchedness, longing to reach the village, and the nearer they draw, the better they feel. Jeník watches them, envies them: why, weren't the Skládals all the way back by the road a moment ago, now they are turning into the farmhouse. The wind grabs the women's skirts, baring their knees; now they can't be seen, perhaps they have opened the barn door and now they have a roof over their heads and above that roof the crown of a giant apple tree, they have dry ground beneath their feet; they look at the heavy clouds and think: "How lucky we are to be home." And swallows chirp noiselessly, barely peeking their heads from the nest.

Jeník thinks to himself: "Oh to sit by the window and watch the hens run under the shed!" He pauses, however; his father stands upright above the hayrack and with each flash his mother makes the sign of the cross. From below Jeník sees his father's body against the black sky, he doesn't even wear a coat; his mother moves her lips quietly, and the cows swing their heads and with each thunderclap they squint their eyes.

"To sit nice and dry by the window," flashes through Jeník's mind, but right then he looks at his father and mother, and he cannot swallow, something heavy has grown inside of him, an obstruction that cannot be removed...

The cart hopped a hedge and drives into a field. Jeník takes the whip and walks towards the cows so they won't scare. Mother is already passing up the sheaves. Jeník pets Stračena's forehead and, afraid, he prays: "God's angel, my guardian," and then says, "Dear God, please let us load at least seven shocks." He's terrified, forgetting to breathe, but he wouldn't want to be at home now, not without his mom and dad; it wouldn't help to be the only one safe...

Two shocks are already on the cart and only a few sheaves remain of the third. Jeník clutches his fists impatiently when a sheaf takes too long, and now, look, a bind broke loose, and

again a sheaf was too heavy and fell back on his mother, the cartload gets stacked higher and higher; only two shocks more and they will be done!

Father stands on top, his head bare, blood running down his arm. Poor mother tightens her blue skirt and is unable to reach; the grain and awns fall into her eyes, her mouth, down the back her blouse; sweat drips down her face and she has no time to wipe it. A black maelstrom looms overhead, resounding with leg-buckling booms. Dear God, just one more shock!

Jeník takes Stračena by her muzzle and leads her to the final shock; the grass between the stubble-fields trembles in the black wind, black for everything is black: the ground, the sky... Jeník looked up, his father's white face remained nailed to the clouds as a terrifying and brilliant abyss opened behind him; the cows, knocked down by a terrible blow, fell to their knees; father tumbled to the ground, while mother, pale as death, grabbed onto a stanchion. Jeník cried and clasped his hands together, but he couldn't remember any prayer.

The rumbling died down and rain began to fall; with unsteady steps father went to the cows to help them up, mother wiped away Jeník's tears and patted his hair, unable to express a word. The cartload wobbled and the last shock remained on the field as heaven hurtled to earth in a torrent of rain.

"Step on the wheel!" father screamed, but the boom of thunder swallowed his words and the cart slipped down the wet hillside; for an instant, the wheel stood still in the air and only by a miracle did the cart not tip. But they took this miracle as a matter of course, resolved as they were for death as for life.

Father went to bend over the front wheel; his skin shining through his shirt and water splashing out of his boots, but he noticed nothing, he had completely transformed under the

pressure of gathering each of the toppled sheaves, and he could no longer be startled, not even by a thunderbolt that would put an end to everything.

Mother pulled Jeník away from the cartload since the danger was greater there; only dad must go that way, no one can go there in his stead, come what may...

Suddenly, Jeník felt the taste of soil in his mouth and almost choked on the sweet humility that both pressed him to the drenched ground and relieved him. He looked for his father but all he could see was a hunched back, and suddenly *bang!* Both cows went to their knees; father fell back against the ridge and looked back at mother and Jeník, exhaustion in his eyes. Rain stood like a wall in between them and the village: Oh Lord, are we meant to perish here after all? But lo and behold, it was the patient eyes of the cows that opened first and the animals strained against the yoke unbidden, the humans only fell in behind them.

A cross emerged from darkness with its shoulders spread. All three of them prayed aloud as they passed by.

The way from the cross to the farmhouses led, as they say, through another world, and when the first fence appeared, their joy was unexpected and beautiful like an undeserved reward. "Are we really alive?" they asked, the mud was so warm between their fingers and toes, the linden-trees gave off a pleasant scent, and they died down. Father turned back at last, his pale face broke into a pure smile, Jeník had never seen him this way before. Mother didn't dare yet, laughter still seemed like blasphemy to her.

Then they looked at each other and at the soaked cartload. "I said we shouldn't go," mother said, but then even she laughed, since no one was hurt. Jeník approached Stračena, but his hand, outstretched to pet her froze., when he saw her open eyes and tears running out. He never knew that cows could also cry.

## APPENDIX 2

Stories from *Zeměžluč* in Czech

*From Jan Čep, Dvojí domov (Praha: Vyšehrad, 1991)*

VYŠEHRAD

PRAHA 1991




Jan  
ČEP

DVOJÍ  
DOMOV

Jan Čep — Vyšehrad 1991

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ZEMĚŽLUČ

# JAN ČEP DVOJÍ DOMOV

1

K vydání připravil

Mojmír Trávníček a Bedřich Fučík

Doslov napsal Bedřich Fučík

Obálka a typografie Zdeněk Stejskal

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OBSAH

ZEMĚŽLUČ

*Dvojt domov*

Domek / 11 ✓

Bouře / 15 ✓

Dvojt domov / 19 ✓

Kozlovice / 23 ✓

Peněženka / 30 ✓

Do města / 32

Elegie / 35

*Vigilie*

Zbloudilý / 39 ✓

Rozárka Lukášová / 44

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## Domek

K obědu byly buchy jako med a den byl plný radosti, když slečna učitelka otevřela okna do zahrady a vpustila do třídy potok šeríkové vůně. Děti potom zazpívaly „Máj, máj, máj, zelená se háj“ a „na noc k lesu letí vrána, písnička je dozpívána“, brašničky jim na zádech zahrkaly a cesta od školy úvozem ke kříži a k myslетickým humnám běžela zářic před nimi uprostřed pampelišek a stínů mladého žita.

Když Jeník s Aničkou přišli domů, chlév byl otevřen a v korytě hrabaly slípky; byl čas polní práce a jenom stařeček dodělával za zahrádkou otýpky. Děti se ani nešly za ním podívat, má vždycky mrzuté napomenutí ve vráskách okolo úst, sedí za špalkem a jeho sekyrka dělá tvrdošijně tuk tuk navzdory špačkům, napodobujícím před budkou na hrušce všechny hlasy světa.

Brašničky vlítly do kouta mezi staré hadry a Jeník, objeviv buchy v almárce, vykřikl: „To nám naši nechali k svačině!“ Pak uchvátil větší kus a Aničce ponechal menší a nezdržel se už v kuchyni, která dnes pro samý spěch nebyla ani zametena. Nevíš, Aničko, že je to tvá práce? Ale Anička nedbá na nic a běží za Jeníkem.

Frantík ševcův tahá už v zahradě desky (beztoho zas skočil přes zídku, kde by se tu vzal tak brzy?) a Božena Tichých vyplachuje zelenou láhev, kterou vytáhla z bahna u studny.

„Honem, honem,“ křičí Frantík, „budeme si hrát na domek!“

Z kamení a špalků se udělají pilíře a pod kůlnou se válí vřelých prken, a ta se zrovna hodí za stůl a za lavičky; stačí je přetrít mokrým hadrem a vyfoukat ze štěrbin škvory a nožky. Děvčata se hned shánějí po pentličkách a Frantík na

ně křičí, ať počkají s parádou, až budou postaveny zdi. Jeník zas jenom mudruje a chtěl by mít všechno bůhvíjak krásné, ale když něco postaví, hned to spadne a Frantík to teprve musí udělat po svém.

Než to bylo hotovo, všichni se zapotili a nejmíň stokrát se pohádali a Frantík jednou praštil o zem kusem dřeva a zvolal: „Fiks mordie, že půjdu domů!“ a ostatní se podrobili jeho mužné převaze.

Když byl domek postaven, měl jen dvě zdi, jednu zastupoval plot a druhou byla skutečná zeď sousedových chlévů. Druhých dvou nebylo třeba, neboť velká hromada hlíny uzavírala tento malý svět před bludným prostranstvím zahrady. Stropem byly dva veliké bezové keře, sklánějící na stůl a na lavičky vonnou sít stínů a slunce.

Jeník si vylezl do vidličnatého kmene a podepřel si bradu o kolena. Frantík mu vynadal, co si myslí, nemínil-li už nic dělat, ale kamarád se na něho podíval naprosto nechápavě. Frantík se dopálil, zavolal na děvčata na hromadu hlíny a ukázal jim, jak se dělá mouka. „Však budeš chtít jíst!“ pohrozil Jeníkovi, ale když viděl, že s ním nic nespraví, pustil se do vyřezávání jakéhosi neobyčejného nástroje, který nebyl nikdy dokončen.

Jeník zatím, proměniv se, procházel se mezi stébly trav, jež rostla alejemi mezi lavičkami a stolem; lysá pěšinka vcházela sem jako do dvora a přívětivě zvala, jako zvou cesty venku, jenže po ní nemohl nikdo jít, prostor byl uzavřen jako svět, větvičky s měkkým listím visely až k zemi a zelené ticho spouštělo křídla jako snící pták. Ale znenadání si ticho posteskl, bůhvíproč. Právě v té chvíli, když si Jeník pomyslel, jak dobře by tu bylo zůstat a nikam odtud nechodit, usedla si tesknota do listí a domeček si zívá.

V Jeníkovi se něco sevřelo, div mu slzy nevstoupily do očí. Vždyť to nejde, vždyť venku je svět, a o tom by pak nic nevědě! Už chtěl rozhrnout větvičky a stoupnout na hlínu, ale ještě jednou si prohlédl „domek“, aleje travnatých stébel a pěšinku pro brouky, kterou on nemůže jít, malý svět musí zůstat opuštěný a marně krásný, nikdo se o něm nedoví...

Anička s Božkou seděly na hlíně a pekly vdolky. Frantík ležel na břiše kousek od nich a foukal do jakési díry. „Co to

tam máš?“ ptal se Jeník. „Vždyť vidíš, mlýnek!“ odsekl Franta a víc se o Jeníka nestaral.

Jeník se otočil k děvčatům, ale než otevřel ústa, spustila obě křik, že jim pošlapal pečivo. Odešel tedy za hrušku a díval se do nebe. Jeho modrost byla nasyčena sladkou září a listí na stromech od ní přijímalo blažený odlesk. Hošíkovy oči stoupaly výš a výš: „Bože, jak je možno jít pořád dál a dál, a nikdy nedojít na konec? Jak je to hrozné, žádný konec!“

A vtom se čehosi ulekl: vždyť konec je také nemožný! Kdyby byla zeď na konci světa, probourala by se, a zas by tam byla díra...

Jeníkovi se zatmělo v očích. Když prozřel, uviděl Frantíka, Božku a sestru Aničku. Chtěl jít k Frantíkovi, ale hned ho napadlo, že Frantík jistě neví, že nikde nemůže být konec, že se zeď může probourat a zas musí být cosi dál. Také Božka nic neví. A Anička? Jeník strnul. Anička to ví! Právě se na něho podívala svýma velikýma očima, plnýma úzkosti, a její zamazané ručky se bezradně zakomíhaly. Proč to jenom Jeník a Anička vědí, a proč to ostatní chlapi a děvčata nevědí?

Jeníkovi bylo hrozně smutno. Rozběhl se za zahrádku, stařeček mu to jistě nějak vysvětlí, stařeček ví všecko a nebojí se ničeho. Ale když přišel k špalku, byl už stařeček pryč, jenom sekýrka tam trčela tvrdě zařatá a obracela k Jeníkovi železný tylo. Jeník se pomalu loudal za humna, sedl si na trávnik a hladil jej hřbetem ruky. Měkkost trávy mu pronikala až do duše. Dlouhé zelené pole leželo před ním a zachvívajíc se tajnou blažeností klanělo se nebi. Jeník položil hlavu do trávy a rozplakal se nevýslovnou tesknotou.

Po večeri šla maminka do sadu pro peřiny. „Ty budou vonět!“ povídala cestou Jeníkovi, který šel s ní.

Když vstoupili do mokré trávy, užasle vdechovali krásu večera, v kterém svítila ohromná koruna staré hrušky, rozkvetlá zázračně do poslední větvičky.

„Maminko, dívej se, jak jsou stromy k sobě nakloněny, jak jsou tiché!“ šeptal Jeník.

„Sedneme si na chvílku,“ řekla matka a vzala synkovu hlavu na klín.

„Mami, proč je slyšet šumot, i když je největší ticho?“ ptal se Jeník. Když matka mlčela, vzal ji prudce kolem krku a vypravoval jí o domku, jak musil zůstat opuštěn.

Matka hleděla polekaně do vytřeštěných očí Jeníkových, který nedočkavě vyrazil: „Mami, jsou hvězdy tuze daleko?“

Nekonečně laskavá ruka matčina mu přejela po vlasech s nevýslovnou něhou: „Jeníčku, věř, nejsme sami a nic nemůže být nadarmo. Snad se jednou všechno dovíme.“

Pak spadly její ruce do klína a celá její bytost se vzňala modlitbou, aby Bůh neopouštěl její dítě, až nebude stačit k jeho utišení příklad její důvěry.

## Bouře

Sotva se stočila cesta za roh, vyvstalo za střechami nebe, usmrcující svou černou výhrůžkou jakoukoliv naději. Cesta se strachem přikrčila, krávy svésily hlavy až k zemi a vůz přestal klapat, avšak otec si přitlačil slaměný klobouk, jehož skývy mu vítr ohýbal, a zvedl bič v ruce nad loket obnažené, s žilami tlustě naběhlými. Leč hvizdot biče oněměl, když se ozvalo zaprašnění, trhající jim nebesa přímo nad hlavami, a Jeník se zachytil matčiny ruky. Ale hned se jí pustil a zbledl ještě víc, neboť i v matčiných očích přistihl hrůzu. Každý se musí bát za sebe a jeden druhého nemůže zachránit! Otec se na něho ani neohlédl, prudce škubal opratí a košile na zádech se mu nadouvala větrem. Matčiny oči na něm konečně spočinuly, ale chtěly ho učit odevzdanosti: „Pán Bůh o nás ví!“ Jeník se však bál a chtěl záruku, že nebude zabit.

Dědina klečela vzadu pod stromy a vůz byl už uprostřed polí, krajina se tiskla k zemi jako koroptev, ženy utíkaly bosy, s hlavami sehnutými, muži s kosami na ramenou, dvě dlouhé řady nezmandelovaných snopů ležely od jednoho konce na druhý jako pobité vojsko a fůry se narychlo dokládaly a hrbily hřbety před hněvem nebes, znovu a znovu se otvírajících. Jen dřevěný kříž stojí tiše na rozcestí a rozpíná ramena do hrůzy mraků.

Zůstane tu brzy sám a snad mu blesk urve půlku těla, a pak tu bude stát zas, mlčenlivý Trpitel a Bůh lidmi opuštěný, strašlivý symbol, jehož se i rouhači troufají dotknout jenom v opilosti.

Teď ryjí do prachu směšné stopy své ubohosti, ponížení strachem, k dědině touží a čím jsou jí blíž, tím je jim lehčeji. Jeník se za nimi dívá a závidí jim: hle, Skládalovi byli před chvílí až u silnice, a teď už zatáčejí k humnám, vítr bere

ženským sukně a odkrývá jim kolena, už je nevidět, otvírají asi právě vrata, střechu mají nad hlavou a nad střechou korunu veliké jabloně, pod nohama suchou půdu a říkají si, hledíce do mračen: „Jak je nám dobře, že jsme doma!“ A vlaštovky tichounce štěbetají a sotva hlavičky vystrkují z hnízda.

Jeník si myslí: „Sedět tak nyní pěkně u okna a dívat se, jak slípky utíkají pod kůlnu!“ Však zarazí se, otec stojí vztyčen nad žebřím a matka dělá kříž při každém zablesknutí. Jeník vidí zdola otcovu postavu proti černému nebi, ani kabát nemá na sobě, matka hýbe potichu rty, kravky kývají hlavami a přimhuřují oči, kdykoliv zahřmí.

„Sedět tak v suchu u okna,“ napadá znova Jeníka, ale hned potom pohlédne na otce a na matku a nemůže polknout, cosi těžkého v něm roste, překážka neodstranitelná...

Vůz skočil přes mez a vyjíždí na roli a Jeník jde s bičem ke kravám, aby se neplašily. Matka už podává snopy. Jeník hladí Stračenu po čele a strachem se modlí: „Anděle boží, strážce můj...“ a pak říká: „Pane Bože, ať naložíme aspoň sedm mandelů.“ Bojí se hrozně a zapomíná dýchat, ale doma by už nechtěl být, leda s tatínkem a s maminkou; nic by nepomohlo, kdyby jen sám byl v bezpečí...

Už dva mandele jsou na fůře a z třetího zbývá pár snopů; Jeník svírá netrpělivě pěsti, když to s některým snopem trvá příliš dlouho, a teď, hleďte, ještě se ke všemu povříšlo rozvázalo, teď zas byl snop příliš těžký a spadl matce nazpátek, fůra je vyšší a vyšší, už jen dva mandele, a bude to!

Otec stojí nahoře bez klobouku a po ruce mu teče krev, maminka, chudák, v modré sukni se napíná a nemůže dosáhnout, zrní a vousy jí padají do očí, do úst, za košili, pot jí teče po tváři a nemá kdy si jej utřít, černá prohlubeň visí už nad samou hlavou a praští to v ní, až nohy podklesávají; Bože, ještě jeden mandel!

Jeník bere Stračenu u huby a pojíždí k tomu poslednímu; travička mezi strniskem se chvěje v černém větru, neboť černé je vše, země, nebe... Jeník vzhlédl, otcova bílá tvář zůstala přibita k mračnům, strašná svítivá hloubka se za ním rozevřela a krávy sražený děsným úderem spadly na kolena; otec se svezl po fůře k zemi, zatímco matka se chytila klanice, bledá

jako smrt. Jeník plakal a spínal ruce, ale nemohl si vzpomenout na žádnou modlitbu.

V mracích to hluboce domumlávalo a déšť se spustil; otec šel nejistým krokem ke kravám a pomáhal jim na nohy, matka utírala Jeníkovi slzy, hladila ho po vlasech a nemohla ze sebe vypravit slova. Fůra se zakymácela a poslední mandel zůstal na poli, nebe se řítilo k zemi těžkými proudy deště.

„Stoupněte na kolo!“ křičel otec, ale dunivé zaburácení pohltilo jeho slova a vůz sklouzl po mokřém svahu; kolo stálo okamžik ve vzduchu a fůra se jen zázrakem nepřevrátila. Ale i zázrak přijali v této chvíli samozřejmě, odhodláni na smrt jako na život.

Otec šel sehnout nad předním kolem; kůže mu svítila přes košili a voda vystřikovala z bot, ale nevěděl o ničem, všecek proměněn v napětí, jímž zachycoval každé zakolísání fůry, a nesměl být překvapen ani úderem hromu, kterým se skončí vše.

Matka odtahovala Jeníka od fůry, neboť tam je nebezpečí větší; jenom tatínek tamtudy musí jít, nikdo tam nemůže jít místo něho, staň se co staň...

Jeník najednou ucítil chuť hlíny v ústech a div se nezalkl sladkou pokorou, jež ho tiskla k rozmoklé zemi a zároveň ho zbavovala tíže. Hledal očima otce, ale viděl jenom přihrblá záda, a najednou prásk! obě krávy ležely na kolenou, otec se zvrátil na břeh a ohlédl se na matku s Jeníkem a v očích měl už únavu. Déšť stál jako zeď mezi nimi a dědinou: ó Bože, což tu přece zahyneme? Však hle, trpělivé oči krav se první otevřely a zvířata se sama od sebe opřela do prostranků, lidé jenom následovali v mrákotách.

Kříž se vynořil ze tmy s rameny rozpjatými. Všichni tři se modlili nahlas, jdouce mimo.

Cesta od kříže k humnám vedla takřka oním světem, a když se první zídky ukázaly, jejich radost byla nenadálá a krásná jako nezasloužená odměna. „Jste opravdu naživu?“ tázali se, bláto mezi prsty bylo tak teplé, lípy voněly a déšť ustával. Otec se konečně obrátil a usmál se tak čistě bledou tváří, jak ho Jeník nikdy dosud neviděl. Matka se ještě neodvažovala, smích se jí zdál ještě rouháním.

Pak se podívali na sebe a na promoklou fůru. „Říkala jsem,

abychom už nejezdili," povídala matka, ale pak se tu smála, neboť se nikomu nic nestalo.

Jeník šel k Stračeně, ale zadržel ruku, napřáženou hlazení, když viděl, že jí tekou z otevřených očí velké slzy. Nevěděl, že krávy mohou taky plakat.

## Dvojí domov

Když vyšli na kraj lesa a cesta sestupovala strání pod Rampachem, rozvázně si vedouc dole širou rovinou, obrátila Srna nazpět své vejcovité oči a zdlouha zabučela. Chalupník Roubal ji tahal za ohlávku a jeho žena, aby ukonejšila krávu, popleskávala ji po zadku: „Pojď, pojď, však si u nás zvykneš!“

Roubalka předvídala smutný úděl bezstarostné pastevnice z hor (sama strávila své panenství žnouc trávu na horských stráních) a byla by ji raději přemlouvala laskáním a příkladem své hlavy pokorně nakloněné, ale její muž se nakonec rozkřikl tvrdým hlasem a švihl Srnu čerstvě uříznutou hůlkou, až jí naskočil na kůži tlustý pruh. Kráva ulekaně poskočila a Roubalka v duši politovala novou spolutrpitečku, klusajíc unavenýma nohama dolů k dědině.

Chalupník Roubal udělal koncem své hůlky kříž na prahu chlěva a vlekl novou krávu do teplé tmy, z které dýchaly dvě široké nozdry Stračeniny družce na uvítanou. Nejprve se zdráhala, ale pak, upamatována pronikavou tvrdostí hlasu, vrhla se střemhlav do neznámé díry a dveře se za ní zavřely jako voda za utopencem — — —

„Nechce pít,“ povídala Roubalka před večerí muži, ale Roubal ani nevyndal dýmku z úst.

Roubalka se tiše schoulila nad polévkou a vůně páry, vystupující z brambor, jí připomněla příliš tklivě ohně v rodných horách, když ulehla cesta stoupala strání a končila se pod samou oblohou, mateřídouška voněla naposled a večer pod kopcem kouřil domov. Dnes musila znovu jít známými cestami, kouř zase stoupal z ohňů, ale muž spěchal a nedal se jí zastavit a jenom zdaleka mohla zahlédnout nahnutou střechu, pod kterou teď žijí cizí lidé.

Roubalka dlouho polyká polévku a tesknota ji svírá jako onoho večera, když jí dům jejího muže poprvé zpustl a ona by se byla tak ráda navrátila do svých hor.

Sotva vyšel muž na dvůr, aby prozkoumal oblohu a zastrčil vrata, sedla si Roubalka na práh u peci a její hlava, kterou tak dávno nikdo nepohladil, se prudce otřásala na ubohých kolenu. Tikot hodin a oddechování spících dětí přerušovaly její vzlykot. Ale už se ozvaly kroky na zápraží a Roubalka se dala do umývání nádobí, hluboko skloněna nad škopkem.

Chalupník vstoupil, zouval si boty (hlína se mu sypala z přehrnutých kalhot) a řekl ledabyle: „Srna už leží. Zítra ji zapřáhnou.“

Noc milosrdně potáhla oživené jizvy hojivou pokožkou, a když první vůz projel návsí dosud modrou, Roubalka vstala z lože, vzala pohrabáč a rozdělávala oheň. Zdi na dvorku neměly ještě své denní lhostejné podoby, a když otevřela chlév, obě krávy obrátily hlavy ke dveřím a vítaly ji společným pohledem.

„Nu, už jste si pověděly své tajnosti?“ otázala se Roubalka, smutně se usmívajíc, a krávy po ní natáhly jazyky; nedala se však lízat. Naložila jim na koryto jeteliny, usedla na stoličku a jasné proudy mléka zazvonily o modravý úsvit.

Zatím i Roubal vstal, obešel dvůr, mazal vůz, chystal brány a spravoval chomout pro novou tahounku. V kuchyni skákal plamen po podlaze, na plotně syčela pára a děti se začaly probouzet při známém zvuku kávového mlýnku. Hlasů přibývalo i světla, okna řinčela těžkým hřmotem selských povozů a noční mraky, uhnuvše k horám, zůstavily uprostřed oblohy poloviční tvář měsíce, stydícího se za svou nuzotu před skvoucím východem.

A Roubal už vyvádí krávy z chléva (chumáče mokrého hnoje táhnou za sebou přes práh), a zatímco Roubalka zapřáhá Stračenu na straně podsední, její muž se dlouho zaměstnává štíhlou a vysokou horačkou a zálibně si prohlíží její vztyčenou hlavu s malými růžky. Konečně je všecko hotovo a Roubal praví ženě slavnostněji než jindy: „Otevři vrata!“

Špičkou bičičtě rýsuje kříž před přední nohy krav, pobídne je a vyjíždí na náves. Žena doprovází soucitnými očima opatrně kráčející horskou krasavici.

„Budeš si těžko zvykat Roubalovu chomoutu!“ myslí si Roubalka a dodává potichu: „Ale musíš si zvyknout, i já jsem musila!“

Tak plynul čas a Srna si zvykala, a ač ji zpočátku silně vábily travnaté břehy vedle úvozových cest, napomenuta palčivým švihnutím biče vracela se poslušně do kolejí, rovně ubíhajících uprostřed polí daleko rozložených. Cesty na horách jsou jiné, víc se brouzdají rosou a často musí bosýma nohama přes potok, mají útlejší boky a je krásné, jak sbíhají z návrší tancující, nevšimavé k času. Ale cesty v rovině mají přesně vyměřeno své místo mezi pravidelnými obrazci polí a nutno jít poslušně, kam nás vedou, a krávé se nelze popásat, kde ji napadne. Chalupnická kráva se nesmí vyhýbat chomoutu (boky jsou odřeny od prostranků) a od rána do poledne, od napoledne do soumraku táhne pluh; kolik brázd, tolikrát musí pole přeměřit, a když zazní klekání, je polem rozseto bezpočtu hlubokých stop rozštípeného kopyta, v kterých budou na podzim spát koroptve vyděšeným spánkem.

Nežli však zkrotla docela a připodobnila se krajině starostí nízko nahrbené, odvážila se naposled krutého tance na zoraném poli, při kterém lidé daleko široko nechávali práce, a ti, co byli blíž a troufali si, volali na Roubala: „Človče, mějte rozum, vždyť vám to dobytče zdechne!“

Ale chalupník nevěděl o sobě, byl bledý, oči měl vypouleny a bil krávu obráceným bičičštěm, a když mu z něho zůstala v rukou jenom tříska, zdvihl motyku a mlátil krávu toporem a zvíře se už nakonec přestalo bránit.

Roubalka stála opodál s rukama sepjatýma a neodvažovala se hlesnout. Věděla, že před mužovým hněvem není útočiště, jako před bleskem nebo povodní.

Od té doby byla „horačka“ jako beránek, napínala prostranky ze všech sil a paráda z ní pomalu oprchávala. Věšela nízko hlavu jako krávy jiných chalupníků, a když ji ráno vyváděli, ani ji nenapadlo, aby si poskočila. Čas plynul a její podoba se přizpůsobila kraji a chalupě Roubalově a každý, kdo ji spatřil, věděl ihned: „To je Roubalova kráva!“

Zestárly obě, kráva i hospodyně, a krásy jim nepřibýlo, a měl-li kdo zavolat na krávu: „Srno,“ cítil přespříliš, že se to jaksi nehodí...

Až jedné noci, podivně osamělé podzimní samotou, když listí padá, vyděsila se Roubalka ze spaní a marně se pokoušela zachytit okraj šťastného snu, který jí učinil mladým děvčetem, žnoucím trávu v lese nad rodinou chalupou. Však dábel naší dětské víry, jenž vyjíždívá za měsíčních nocí orat se spřežením lidských zatracenců, přerval příšerným svistem svého biče Roubalčino blažené snění, a ubohá žena, matouc si čas a nemohouc rozeznat, dlí-li na tomto nebo na onom světě, seděla na chvíli na lůžku a třeštila oči do noci měsícem proměněné. Vědomí se sice poznenáhlu vyjasnilo a věci se staly známými, ale to poznání bylo jen novou hrůzou, že svět je dvojitý. A pak teprve přišel náhlý náraz a bolest příliš všední.

Roubalka si přehodila sukni a mrzutě vyšla na dvůr. Roubal bos a v podvlíkačkách stál uprostřed sadu a rozháněl se bičem. Srna pádila se zdviženým ocasem od studny k humnu, přetržený řetěz jí visel na krku a noc byla tichá jako beze vzduchu.

Dlouho trvalo, než se jim podařilo zavřít zdivočelou krávu a uvázat ji ke korytu; dlouho svítil měsíc, a splašené dobytče, řinčíc řetězem, míhalo se mezi stromy a divoce větríc nahánělo hrůzu. Dvě směšné lidské postavy v nočním ustrojení se třásly, když kráva, která se dá tříkrát za den nakrmit a podojit, sršela z očí oheň a nepoznávala jejich hlas. Konečně sehnula hlavu a vešla do chléva tiše, sama od sebe. Roubal se jí tentokrát neodvážil ztlouci.

Měsíc svítil a bylo jako ve dne. Roubalka nemohla dlouho usnout, viděla chalupu v horách pod lesem, jeden došek trčí ze střechy a měsíc se jí na chvílku zastíní. Ale cosi navěky odešlo, otec i matka jsou mrtvi, jinde je skutečnost...

Ráno bylo slunce pokojné a noční příhoda byla jako sen. Srna šla tiše k vozu, tiše kráčela cestou, rovně ubíhající mezi poli daleko rozloženými.

Roubalka však těkala toho dne chalupou jako bez duše, chvílemi se zastavovala a podpírala zjizvenýma rukama hlavu už šedivější. Sen o prvním domově, nenadále procitlý, jí zanechal v duši tesknotu do smrti otevřenou.

## Kozlovice

Chalupy sedí kolem románské kaple s barokovým křížem a moudří lidé praví, že se dějí ve světě veliké věci a že se teď musí všechno zjinačit, protože to už nejde jako zastara.

„Tak, tak,“ přisvědčují sedláci a chalupníci, když ohledali před spaním zámky u vrat a dobytek v chlévě.

Rozpukané dlaně bolí a pole od cesty k úvozu nutno zítra přeorat, hroudy roztlouci, a ještě na lůžku cítíš, jak se ti zažírá do duše rez starostí.

Ale ze zídky za Spurných zahradou vyrazilo dnes do rána mlíčí, žáby v rybníčku na návsi spouštějí do snů zeleně zářící drahokamy a celý svět plný vůně se hrne otevřeným oknem do světničky a chce po tobě bůhvíco.

„Musíme mít nejmíň deset muzikantů, ale řekneme Savínským, naši jsou moc velcí páni!“

Bedřich Spurných, který proslovil tuto řeč, potahuje kalhoty a bude se bít, neprosadí-li svou.

Franta, Hynek a druhý Franta odcházejí, jsou usedlí a hospodární, čtou knihy o melioraci pozemků a o zločinech papežů (půjčuje jim je veterinární medik Kolář) a je jim hanba starat se o takové hlouposti.

Bedřich za nimi plije: „Vsaďte se, že si rádi přijdou zatančovat!“ Zbylí věrní na válci pod hruškou jsou s ním ve všem zajedno.

Za „rozumnými“ bouchla vrata tří nejkrásnějších gruntů; Bedřich však promeškal starého, vracejícího se z hospody, musil lézt přes zídku a spát s pacholkem u koní.

Za týden je muzika.

Odpoledne je to jen tak, v tančírně je poloprázdno a Bedřich obřadně zahajuje první valčík. „Rozumní“ šli s knížkami

do lesa, bohatší děvčata sotva nahlédnou oknem, hospodáři se ztrácejí za humna a tváří se, že o ničem nevědí.

Jenom chudina nedělá okolků a veselí se za poslední halíř, a neumějíc si chytře prodlužovat požitek, zpíjí se hned na začátku. Bedřich Spurných je sice z gruntu, ale je fláma a grunt nedostane a s tou žebrotou je jedna ruka...

Julka Hudcova sedí zatím pod dubem na kraji lesa, aby nepropásla vlak. Přijede Kolář, jenž první zažehl její smyslnou a línou krásu; kdo by však dnes neuhádl v melancholii černých očí, v uvolněnosti velkých rtů, v blůzce nedbale porozepjaté smutek pocuchané růže? Po Kolářovi přišli jiní a zase odešli, synkové z gruntu nechtějí paběrkovat a Kolář se jí vyhýbá.

Julka, kdysi vzácná, čekává sama pod oknem Lidčiným. Lidka musí i v neděli umývat nádobí a poklízet v chlévě, má všelijaké trampoty, kterým Julia nerozumí, a pyká hořce za to, že si svět rozšířila snem.

Obě děvčata sedí pod dubem, dědina je dole zabořena v zahradách, muziku slyšet až sem a oběma je teskno. Pohádaly se už dnes potřetí a mlčí; však hle! vláček peláší přes pole jako krtek brázdou a Julka už musí jít, na shledanou večer u muziky!

Kolář šel s kufříkem opatrně kolem humen, ale Julka čekala u kříže s vlasy rozpuštěnými po zádech a Kolář se už nevymanil. Musil slíbit, že přijde večer do hospody.

Přišel večer, Lidka žehlí potají a se strachem krajky svých spodniček. Stydí se i před maminkou a, Bože, kdyby tak otec náhle vešel! Jeho jízlivé slovo by utkvělo na bílém plátně jako skvrna, kterou by nikdy nevyčistila!

Co jí ta spodnička stála už starostí! Vyšívala ji v síni na studených cihlách při světle čoudivé lucerny, zatímco ostatní už spali, a co se nastrachovala, že jí dojde hedvábí a peněz na druhé nebude! A k čemu to všechno je! Ráno bude spodnička pošlapána, krajky budou vytrhány a smutno jí bude víc než jindy. A přece není možno zůstat doma, zadusila by se; dnes bude tančit, a za pár hodin začne znovu včerejšek v blátě a na hnoji...

Slzy kapou Lidce pod žehličku, ale vtom kdosi jde, děvče sbírá prádlo a utíká s ním na komoru.

Kozlovice jsou dědina, o které svět neví; sedláci si hledí polí a piva, hlavy jim tiše olysávají a břicha se nadouvají, synové rostou v poslušnosti a v tajných hříších a pohrdají domkářskou a nádenickou chamradí.

Hospoda stojí ve tmě a do tančírny se jde přes dvůr a musí se dát pozor, neboť zásní je úzké a hnojiště je hned přede dveřmi.

Tančírna je těsná sklenice, do které bys nacpal chroustů a pak tím silně zatřepal. Jak se to hemží, bzučí a leze po sobě! Však každý najde svou cestu, selští vpředu u stolů, ostatní na lavicích podél zdi a chudina, ožralci a pobudové vzadu u nálevny. Nejvýše na pavlači sedí muzikanti; strýc Hříbek s brejlemi na nose hraje prim a vzadu se roztahuje septimán Kohout s klarinetem. Je flegmatik, ironický a tančí málo a děvčata na něho mají zlost, jakého dělá pána!

Prespolních je nepatrně, Kozlovice jsou samy a hledí si zblízka do očí. Tetky v koutě vesele melou a panímáma Hudcová poslouchá se založenýma rukama chvály o své Julce, a neví ještě o poklesnutí její slávy. Bezzubá Myšková se obula do Potockých: tamhle Lidka prý je vždycky jiná než druhé, všude plno roztodivných rozumů, a peněz nikde...

Nesmírný kolohnát Franta Myškův obtančil právě s maličkou Rézinkou Němečkovou a mámě Myškové se nafoukl podbradek. Lůjza Bendů stojí bez kabátu u nálevny a pije pivo ze skleněné boty. Když muzikanti dohráli, vmotal se doprostřed, roztočil botu a všechny polil.

„Chamrad!“ ohrnuli rty Franta, Hynek a druhý Franta, sedící u hořejšího stolu. Bedřich se nemýlil, když tvrdil, že přijdou k muzice. Hudba znovu spustila a Franta teď dokonce tančí; dělá přitom pohrdavý obličej a plete směšně nohama.

„Taky by se mohl oženit!“ ulevila si bezzubá Myšková.

Bedřich už mnoho pil a sedí tiše u dveří. Blíží se chvíle, kdy se oboří na svůj smutek a dá si zahrát sólo před očima všech pohoršených.

Julka hledí marně ke dveřím. Kolář ji obelhal. Hraje si s pomačkanými fialkami a s nikým nemluví. Matka na ni hledí nepokojně, Julka však dělá, že nic nevidí.

Lidka je veselá, ani nevychází z kola a je ráda, že jde z náručí do náručí; aspoň nemusí na nic myslet. Rytmus hudby ji

omamuje, není však vášnivá a příliš těsné doteky jsou jí protivné. Sama se toho někdy leká: „Bože, proč nejsem jako ostatní?“

Všichni chlapci jsou jí stejně milí i lhostejní a je jí jedenaadvacet let. Je Julčinou důvěrníci a nerada si připomíná, co kdysi slyšela: komu se jiní svěřují se svými láskami, ten prý se sám nikdy nezamiluje...

Lidka zahání myšlenky a zrychluje tempo. Zahlédla vedle sebe Bětu Hanzličkovou, jejíž silné tělo se stěželo sepnout do těsných bílých hadříčků, žalostně pošpiněných, a chtivě se přisávalo na křivonohého pacholka s kloboukem na hlavě.

„Ta už chodí k muzikám?“ žasla Lidka, ale pak si spočítala Bětčino stáří a byla překvapena i svými jedenadvaceti lety. Mihly se jí děravé boty toho děvčete, v kterých je vídala ještě nedávno chodit do školy, děvče s mozkiem neuvěřitelně tupým, s hladem v očích a s vešmi ve vlasech.

Udělalo se jí mdlo z rychlé polky a požádala svého tanečníka, aby s ní usedl. Povíдали jí něco zprava i zleva: nerozuměla a nemohla odpovědět, protože by ani jí nerozuměli. Obklopila ji samota jako promrzlá zeď a ventilátor, prudce se otáčející pod samým stropem, vsával do sebe celou tančírnu, úzkostně se vzpírající.

„Udělalo se jí špatně,“ slyšela hlas tetky Škrábkové. Vstala s úžasem a rozhlédla se očima úplně jasnými.

„Vždyť mi není špatně!“ ohradila se pevně a šla si sednout k oknu. Uviděla vedle sebe Julku, pozbývající už poslední naděje.

„Proč netančíš?“

„Ó, jak jsou ti mužští falešní!“ povzdychla si Julka a Lidce bylo najednou do smíchu.

„Vid', že si mě vezmeš?“ zeptala se Hynka Navrátila, dědice gruntu, který před ní stál s otevřenými ústy. Lidka s novým výbuchem smíchu vlítla do kola.

Septimán Kohout stál u zábradlí, foukal do klarinetu a díval se posměšně do sálu, jako by hrál k tanci zvířatům v cirku.

Hudec a Hubáček, dva nejbohatší sedláci, si sedli s pivem u dveří a chytali tancující děvčata za sukně. Tetky však po nich okouněly a oběma se za chvíli zdálo výhodnější zmizet. „Sakramentský život, člověk aby pořád myslel na vážnost své

osoby a na to, co tomu řekne syn!“ nadával Hudec, a odešli raději do druhé hospody.

Bylo už jedenáct, když Kolář vstoupil. Kdysi se ukazoval rád před svou dědinou, ale teď se už bývalé kamarádky chtějí vdát a kamarádi před ním upadají do rozpaků. Tetky na něho mají zlost, že plete hlavy jejich dcerám, tatíci mu nemohou odpustit, že se posmívá jejich hospodaření, a mladí ho už nepotřebují, protože o Římu, o jezuitěch a o Darwinovi jsou stejně poučeni jako on.

O Julče nechce slyšet, ale jakmile ji uvidí, není mu pomoci.

Tancují s údy propletenými a s dechem spojeným a hudba jim slábne v uších, kruhy se splétají a oči se zamlžují...

Však hodin přibývá a než si pomyslíš, hle, půlnoc minula, a již dnes budou Kozlovice ležet bezbranné v prachu vedle okresní silnice, po níž je přepadává cizí svět na zdivočelých automobilech; již dnes budou Králíčkovy děti sedět v košíkách na hromádce šterku a plakat celý den za maminkou, již dnes se rozskřípají flašiny v poledním tichu a stará Škrábková bude smetat na návsi kobylince a honit do kurníku svých pět slípek!

Jozítku Němečků, celý ses zmenšil a nedokončil ani svůj smích; již dnes musíš zorat to souvratí, na kterém jsi v sobotu polámal kolečka, a ty, Lidko Potocká, marně se chceš utančit do tuposti; již dnes musíš zout své střevíčky a stoupnout bosa do hnojiště; oh, jak budou vidle těžké, a oči budou pálit!

Kozlovice, již dnes se nad vámi roztáhne nekonečný svět a vy budete před ním k pláči maličké, s husinci na návsi a s tou směšnou tabulkou u hospody: Osada: obec: Kozlovice...

Lojzo Bendů, jsi opilý, ale proto bys přece svou Žofinku tolik mučit nemusil! Hleď, před rokem byla jak poupátko, a co je z ní teď! Lojzo, tančíš se džbánkem nad hlavou a s pláčící ženou v náručí, ale již dnes budeš klusat s uzlíčkem pod pažďím přes pole do cihelny; budeš zatínat zuby a nikdo ti neřekne: „Pozdrav Pán Bůh!“

Čas letí s půlnoci a růžové šaty se stydí, že jsou pomačkány; Franta, Hynek a druhý Franta první odcházejí a starý Pačula kývá ve dveřích baňatým břichem na svých pět dcer, jež se

neochotně táhnou jedna za druhou od okna k oknu.

Kolář zabaluje Julku do plédu (panímáma šla už napřed) a odpovídá záhadným posunkem Kohoutovi, který za ním dělá ve dveřích kříž.

Odchodem prvních se statečnost zakolísala a kouty zívají, muzika podřimuje.

Nikdo by se byl nenadál, že vy se vzbouříte, stařečku Stejskale, který tak úzkostlivě škrťíte krejcar ke krejcaru, kravěnci ke kravěnci! A přece když Bedřich smutně pil a Lojza říkal své ženě: „Neplač!“ vzkřikl jste uprostřed tanečírny, sklenici nad hlavou: „A ještě se nepůjde!“

Však běda! Jak se zastyděl! Tichým hlasem človíček hovořívá, vlasy má bílé, trpělivě ťuká kladívkem od rána do noci, a najednou se opije!

Sám se teď polekal, oči mu bloudí jako umírajícímu vrabci, kolena mu podklesávají a pivo se vylilo na zem. Stařečku, není pomoci, musí se jít domů!

Bedřich se vypotácel z kouta a rozpráhl ruce, ale už je nezadržel. Uchopil skleněnou botu, rozmáchl se a rozbil ji na kusy. Muzikanti leželi pod stolem a se stropu visel přetržený věnec.

Septimán Kohout jde po dědině v čele hloučku a píská: „Až ráno, až ráno...“ Následují ho schlíple, drkotající zuby, a míjejí obloukem osvětlená okna souchotináře Bracha. „Umírá prý už dva dni,“ praví kdosi vzadu.

Chalupy nazdvihly křídla jako kvočny a přijaly pod ně opozdilce. Lidka váhá u dveří, srdce se tiskne k veřejím jako rozšlápnutá puchavka, dědina je tichá jako protržený buben; brzy bude svítat.

Konečně se odhodlala, ale rány na dveře byly přece neočekávané a příliš hlučné. Podlaha uvnitř zapraštěla, bosé nohy šouपालy po síni a Lidka se protáhla dveřmi jako kuře, ohýbajíc se pod bičikem netrpělivého hubování.

Vystydlá kuchyně na ni lhostejně civí, tikot hodin bodá do spánků a příkrývka nestačí udusit deroucí se vzlykot.

Sotva položil první spánek na paměť řídkou záclonu, vstupuje okny den, hlasy ožívají a matčin pohrabáč rejdí v útrokách plotny. Oční víčka jsou srostlá a lze je jen s bolestí od sebe odtrhnout. Cesty, za noci osvobozené, kladou se ode-

vzdaně pod kola vozů a starost se stává neúprosnou; dědina na sebe bere svůj starý kříž.

A ty, poutníku, který jdeš do světa kolem chalup zařatých hluboko do země, viz kapky krve na kamení! A neposmívej se, když čteš: Osada: obec: Kozlovice.

## Peněženka

Včera zvučela náves kolem kostela jako kvetoucí zahrádka po poledni, ozývající se rojem včel. Dnes sedí Vojtěch na písku přede dveřmi a den je hluchý, včerejší sláva zhasla a v příkopech vedle silnice leží cáry včerejšího posvěcení.

Vojtěch obrací na dlani krásnou žlutou peněženku, stěží rozsvětlující dnešní opuštěný čas. Zdá se mu dokonce, že se kůže od včerejška rozprýskala a lesk se zatemnil. Proč nemůže peněženka zůstat stále nová jako v první den? Bylo by líp, kdyby ji vůbec nebyl měl...

Sotva domyslí, položily se před něj do prachu na silnici dva slabé stíny. Vojtěch zdvihl ulekaně hlavu; dva otrhanci, větší s menším, stáli u něho, měli dlouhé krky a uzlíky jim visely na loktech.

Vojtěch se ohlédl po záchraně, ale všude bylo ticho jako po vymření a oči většího otrhánka se podobaly očím obludy, která zkoumá svou oběť, nežli ji pozře.

„Dej mi tvou peněženku, já ti dám svou!“

Nová Vojtěchova peněženka leží vedle nestvůry s černým břichem žabím, přes které jela kola vozů, a žába, vlekouc střeva za sebou, lezla dále, dokud ji nový vůz nepřejel a podkovy nerozšlapaly. Však hle, stiskneš, a uvnitř břicha se objeví otvor!

Vojtěch hledí otrhánkovi do očí a chce se s ním dorozumět, ale výrostek mu bere poslední odvahu a říká: „Moje peněženka je lepší, honem si ji vezmi!“ Hlas ho už příliš neposlouchá a Vojtěch v něm slyší výhrůžku.

Vzhlédne ještě jednou k dračím očím a hledá v nich nějaký koutek, z kterého by uviděl, že je to všechno jenom žert. Ale otrhánek se stává netrpělivým: „Dej sem peněženku!“

Než se Vojtěch vzpamatoval, dva stíny se pohnuly na silnici

a dva uzlíčky zmizely za rohem. Černá páchnoucí věc, podobná břichu přejeté žáby, leží v chlapcově dlani jako neodpuštěný hřích.

Vojtěch je vyvržen na náves zcela bez pomoci. Položí peněženku na hromádku šterku a utíká, co může. Ohlédne se, a peněženka na něho křičí, zdaleka viditelná. Chlapec se kajícně vrátí a zdvihne ji. Vzpomene si na úzký příkop mezi dvěma zídkami, kterým odtéká černá močůvka. Válejí se v ní rozbité láhve, dna hrnců, a olysává tam břicho zdechlého kotěte. Nade vším roste divoké bejlí.

Vojtěch se blíží pozpátku a ze vši síly mrští peněženkou do smrdutého bahna. Ohlédne se, a peněženka trčí vzhůru, nabodnuta na lodyhu. Zatínaje zuby, aby neomdlel, plazí se podél zdi, zarývá prsty do štěrbin mezi kamením a vyloví peněženku znovu.

Je mu do pláče a neví co počít. Otevře vrátka a podívá se, že domov je tak blízko, kdežto před chvílí byl tak sám...

Otec spravuje na dvoře rozeschlý sud. Vojtěch překousne trapné otálení, vyndá peněženku a vyzná se ze svého neštěstí. Pak mlčí a čeká. Ale místo upokojení mu spadne pod nohy slovo jako kámen:

„Osle!“

Vojtěch sklopí hlavu a odvléče svou hanbu do zahrady za hromadu hlíny. Kusem železa vyhloubí důlek a pochová do něho obtížný dar.

Pak se zdvihne, a krvácející uvnitř neprolitými slzami, dívá se po silnici, která se klikatí jako řeka a ztrácí se až tam, kam se Vojtěch nikdy dosud nedostal. Dvě malé postavičky s uzlíky na rukou se kymácejí na obzoru k zoufání osiřelém.

Vojtěch se za nimi dlouho dívá a postavičky se nehýbají z místa, zasazené vedle silnice jako dva patníky.

Ráno tam byly ještě, s hlavami sehnutými nad nekonečnou poutí. Čas míjel a často je polil déšť a sežehlo slunko, ale postavičky, věčně putující, nikdy nedošly na konec dlouhé silnice. Až jednoho dne se Vojtěch pustil za nimi a dohonil je. Trupy dvou starých vrb, zkroucené a šklebící se, trčely tam nad vyschlou tůň.

Vojtěch sáhl do útrob vykotlaného pařezu, ale dlaň, kterou vytáhl, byla smutná a prázdná.

## Zbloudilý

Stavení toho odpoledne zpustlo, hlasy v sousedních světnicích ztichly, na dvorku zůstal převrhnutý dětský vozík a pootevřenými vrátky nakukovala čísi koza. Nebe se zatáhlo, pahorky uzavřely kolem dokola krajinu náhle vymřelou a mstivou, cesty nešly nikam a hladina rybníka se leskla ocelově a nepřátelsky.

Petr Kleofáš vyšel z domu a pustil se cestou, která se mu namanula, a nikde nepotkal živé duše. Na močálovitých lukách se zaschlou trávou stály nad černými tůněmi pahýly starých vrb. Zamračené lesíky, provanuté dechem staroby a smrti, zahryzávaly se do chudých strání s ponurou nevraživostí. Na druhé straně za rybníkem krčily se pod tísnivou šedivostí oblohy hrbaté střechy nuzné vsi.

Petr Kleofáš se octl v travnatém příkopu, ke kterému se svažovala pustá strniště s dvěma zakrslými borovicemi. Kousek dál byl les, plný suchého jehličí a spadalých šišek. Jediným zvukem byl tu šelest suché trávy a v nitru Petrově jakýsi bezkrevný šepot, jako když se stravuje hořící papír. Petr Kleofáš zpola klečel, zpola ležel na vychládající zemi, oči měl zavřeny a tiše počítal zvolňující se tepot svého srdce. Z pocitu naprosté nicoty a blízké smrti začala v něm prýštit jakási jedovatá a obludná sladkost a před očima mu tekly vlhké a chladící barvy...

Procitl náhlým zamrazením: jako by někdo vysoký, tmavý a přece průsvitný stál za jeho zády a pozoroval ho s neskonale lítostí a láskou. Petr Kleofáš se neodvažoval ohlédnout za sebe, ale tiskna se k zemi toužil mít v té chvíli srdce probodeno. Toužil cedit svou krev kapku po kapce do prachu smutných cest a na vadnoucí opuštěné kvítí, oškubané podzimním větrem; přál si cítit v hrudi ustavičný osten lásky, zarývající se hloub a hloub.

Když vstal a chtěl jít dále, byla už úplná tma. Vítr se utiřil a vzduch zvlhl a oteplil se. Pahorky a svahy krajiny přes den přísné a zachmuřené jako by byly ožily v temnu a staly se přátelskými. Kdosi jako by se upřeně díval na Petra Kleofáše bdělými očima.

Šel kus po travnaté polní cestě, u které stál železný kříž mezi dvěma stromky, a cesta se za chvíli proměnila v úzkou mez. Myslil, že se uchýlí trochu vlevo, a klopýtal napříč přes pole, domnívaje se, že nabude tak zase ztraceného směru. Vesnice, ke které směřoval, je za tímto kopcem; za půl hodiny jsem doma, myslil si. Brzy ucítil pod nohama ujeté koleje a ze tmy uprostřed zoraného pole vynořila se střecha staré kůlny. Kousek odtud trčela k nebi věž jakési vsi. „Zašel jsem trochu dál, než jsem myslil,“ řekl si Petr Kleofáš a pustil se kolem plotů, táhnoucích se podél humen. Byl velmi klidný, přestože neviděl takřka na krok před sebe. Čísi bdělé a soucitné oči zíraly na něho ustavičně ze tmy. Petr vyšel na silnici, přeskočil potok, který váz v hlinitých roklích a nevydal hlásku, a stoupal rychle do svahu k lesíku, naproti kterému, jak se domníval, bude ves. Ale polní cesta, kterou se pustil, obrátila se znenadání zcela opačným směrem a propadla se v hluboký tmavý úvoz.

Petr cítil, že mu vyvstává na čele pot. Nerozmýšlel se však dlouho a odbočil na mez, ale po několika krocích šel po hruďkách zoraného pole. Cíp lesíku se náhle přiblížil až k němu a z jeho černé a hutné tmy se ozvalo podivně hlučné kloktání potoka. Petra přejel mráz. Sběhl rychle po svahu, chtěje se dostat na protější stráň, ale pod nohama mu zamlaskalo bahno neviditelného močálu. Musil se vrátit, přičemž hlas potoka vyskočil proti němu z lesíka jako psí štěkot. Petr se dal po poli vlevo a potok se za ním ze tmy tiše pochechtával.

Petr se stočil ještě jednou vlevo, domnívaje se, že se drží pořád původního směru. Šel po jakési široké mezi, a najednou ho zarazil zvuk neobyčejný v tu chvíli a v tu roční dobu: jako by někdo kosil jetel. Mimoto byla neděle a Petr nikdy neviděl, aby lidé tohoto kraje pracovali v neděli na poli. A kde by se vzal jetel tak pozdě na podzim! Petr cítil, jak se mu ztěžka dýchá, a bezděky tlumil krok. A najednou přišel zase k potoku. Tekl tentokrát takřka po rovině stružkou úzkou a bez

křovin a zcela beze zvuku. Petr udělal několik kroků podél potoka, a vtom se kousek před ním zasvítily bílé šaty. Petr hbitě potlačil první zachvění strachu a pomyslel si: „Snad nějaký párek na dostaveníčku.“ Udělal ještě dva kroky a zasmál se: „Je nutno vždycky rozumně uvažovat; člověk by si třeba v první chvíli myslil bůhvíco.“ V tom okamžiku však postava v bílých šatech jako by se byla náhle položila na zem. Petr měl sotva kdy, aby se vzpamatoval z úleku, když tu mu přišel druhý náraz poznáním, že co považoval za bílé šaty, je jenom voda v potoce, svítící se nevysvětlitelnou intenzívní bělostí. Zachvěl se tímto přirozeným rozuzlením víc, než kdyby byl ucítil na hrdle ledové prsty přízraku. Nebe nahoře bylo zalito hustou černí, ani jedna hvězda nesvítila. Ticho bylo tak úplné a voda v potoce se leskla s takovou nevyzpytatelnou mlčenlivostí, že se Petra zmocnila opravdová hrůza. Pustil se napravo přes pole a cítil za sebou ďábelský smích ohromných, široce rozvřených očí.

Běžel přes pole, kterému neviděl ani nedoufal konce. Tu však ve chvíli, kdy se domníval, že tma a bezcestí se nad ním zavírají jako spousty vod, vyskočily najednou dva kroky před ním stromy podél silnice. Bylo to tak neočekávané, ta silnice v tom okamžiku a na místě, kde se jí naprosto nenadál, že se to zdálo mámením. Podle podoby stromů a podle zákrutů silnice poznával, že to není ta, na kterou chtěl vyjít, a pocit mámnivé neskutečnosti celé krajiny byl tak silný, že se Petra zmocnila závrať a bezděky se pokřižoval. Stál na té záhadné silnici, která se slabě bělala tmou, a nevěděl, stojí-li za humny vsi, do které chtěl dojít, anebo v nějakém kraji sta mil od ní vzdáleném. Stál a nevěděl, má-li jít nahoru nebo dolů. Ticho a samota byly tak úplné, že se zdálo nepravděpodobné, aby se tu bylo možno dočkat chodce; tma kolem se zdála bezedná a nikde ani světýlka, které by označovalo blízkost nějaké dědiny.

Petr Kleofáš ucítil najednou v této hlubině tmy a nejistoty jakousi tichou bezpečnost, která byla dokonalým odpoutáním ode všeho a měla příchuť jisté povýšené zvědavosti. Dal se bez uvažování dolů po silnici a myslil si, že zatluče na první chalupu první vsi, do které přijde.

Nešel příliš dlouho, když se najednou zakomíhalo proti

němu v záhybu cesty žluté světlo. Zastavil se a zaslechl vrzání kol. Šel tedy ještě kousek a rozeznal konečně malého koníka a chatrnou bryčku, na které seděl vpředu schoulený člověk. Petr pozdravil a jmenoval vesnici, která se mu ztratila. Člověk se vychumlal z houní, zatáhl opratěmi a nahnul se k němu: „Cože? Přísenice? Vždyť jdete na druhou stranu! Máte je už hezký kousek za sebou.“ Stařík pak pozval Petra, aby si sedl dozadu na hromadu prázdných pytlů, a teprve když se Petr posadil, uvědomil si, jak ho strašně bolí nohy. „Takový kus si zajít,“ vrtěl hlavou stařík, „to jste asi zabloudil.“ Petr mu zkrátka pověděl, kudy chodil, a stařík kýval hlavou a pobručoval si: „Jak by ne, když oni tu pořád obcházejí!“ Petr se zachvěl a zahleděl na staříka, který byl nad čímsi zamyšlen. „Jako tenkrát ten Francek Lipka,“ začal za chvíli. „Strojí se ráno na dříví, venku bylo ještě tma, a tu mu kdosi zatluče na okno. Otevře, venku stojí Janek Chalupa, sekyru má na provaze přes rameno. „No, půjdeš-li pak už,“ povídá. „Hned, hned, jenom si ještě nacpu slámu do bot,“ na to Francek a šel do jizby. Za okamžik zase buch! buch! na okno. „Dělej, dělej!“ volá venku Janek. „Nu, však už jdu,“ odpovídá Francek v síni, a přehodiv si sekyru, vyšel s Jankem do tmy. Tak šli hodný kus cesty, až najednou na rozcestí u kříže se Janek ztratil, jako když do něho foukne. A teprve v té chvíli si Francek vzpomněl, že Janka Chalupů už před půl rokem pochovali. Nohy mu zdřevěněly strachem, ale pak sundal čepici a pomodlil se otčenáš za duše v očistci.“

Stařík umlkl a zachumlal se do houní. Bryčka vrzala a na silnici se kymácelo žluté kolo lucerny. Zdvíhal se vítr a Petrovi spadla na tvář studená krupěj deště. Vyjeli na kopec a dole zasvítla okna. „To jsou Přísenice,“ ozval se stařík. Bryčka se rozjela po svahu.

Petr Kleofáš seděl vzadu na hromadě pytlů, díval se dojatě na světla před sebou a myslel na své mrtvé. „Aspoň vy mi zůstaňte věrni!“ úpěl tiše, a bylo mu pojednou, jako by byl uzavřel s krajem nesmírně vážnou úmluvu. Jako by byl býval připuštěn do jakési jeho intimnosti, a za to byl vzal na sebe jakýsi těžký závazek.

„Co mě čeká za těmi okny?“ myslil si, když hleděl do dědi-ny ve tmě u svých nohou, v které se kryl jeho blízký, možná,

a přece naprosto neznámý osud. „Snad se to začne ještě dnes večer, jen co pootevřu dveře,“ myslil si; „snad jsou už jenom ty dveře mezi mnou a neznámou katastrofou.“ U kostela se cesty rozdvjovaly. Stařík zastavil, Petr mu poděkoval za svezení a dal se nahoru do vsi. Neuviděli se už potom nikdy.

## Hoře z lásky

Hleděla chvíli vyjeveně na svou zástěru postříknutou blátem, a nic nechápala. Učinila jen nepatrný posunek, sotva naznačila nejistý krok, a pak strnula v zoufalství beze slz a beze slova, sama nad sebou užaslá, že nekřičí, že neběží za tím mužem, který se od ní vzdaloval po rozmoklé silnici, vinoucí se k šedému obzoru. Ještě před měsícem, ještě včera by se nebyla dala takto odbýt. Ale dnes věděla, že je po všem. Pláč v ní vysychal u samého zdroje a srdce i údy jí ztuhly v nehybnost mrtvoly.

Její bolest nebyla v lítosti nad tím, že jí ten muž pohrdl; osten jejího žalu netkvěl v pomyšlení na ztracenou lásku. To všecko už věděla předtím, věděla, že ji nemiluje (ten člověk s chabým knírem a s bílým zduřelým obličejem, v kterém se líně otáčely lhostejné oči) — ale přimykala se k němu se zuřivostí tonoucího, objímajíc v něm svou iluzi, svůj hřích, poslední zálohu svého vzbouření a vzdoru, svého dobrovolného a tvrdošíjného ponížení.

Ale teď už byl konec, její ruce byly prázdné, v ústech hořkost zvětralé sedliny a v srdci smutek čehosi zmrhaného nenávratně a svévolně. „Je konec,“ opakovala si, octnuvši se najednou tváří v tvář slepé a bezcitné zdi a vidouc za sebou mosty pobořeny.

Stála uprostřed rozjeté silnice a dívala se tupě na kalužiny, čerící se loudavými kruhy podzimního deště. Šátek jí sjel s hlavy a vlasy už hustě prošedivělé se jí lepily k čelu a k popelavým skráním. Kraj kolem dokola ztratil přes noc poslední zbytky podzimních barev a byl vytrvale louhován vlhkou syrovostí v hnilobnou čern hrobu.

Oči opuštěné ženy, odrážející zoufalou šedost oblohy a skleslost únavy nevyšlovné, zatěkaly po liduprázdném ob-

zoru a náhle se v nich cosi změnilo, jejich výraz se bolestně oživil a ústa se jí krutě zkřivila. Teprve teď si všimla, že u kraje silnice stojí kamenný kříž, lůžko nenáviděného a nepochopitelného utrpení. Dala se na útěk, motajíc se jako opilá.

Byl to marný útěk uštvané zvěře, prodlužovaný z krutého rozmaru tajemného lovce, strašlivá posunčina bytosti proniklé hrůzou před tváří nezměnitelné skutečnosti.

Karolína Vachutková konala dnes svou poslední cestu, poslední pouť za milencem v houstnoucím soumraku deštivého dne; potácela se, slepá a šílená, cestou, kterou po patnáct let dláždila svou vlastní hanbou, poháněna posedlostí pozdní vášně, jsouc terčem smíchu a nadávek celému kraji, stárnoucí strašidlo, horucně objímající nástroj své strašné záhuby, která se jí proměnila v jed sladkosti neodolatelné.

„Hleďte ji, už jde!“ volávali se smíchem lidé na polích a zdvíhali se od práce, a výrostkové na ni pokřikovali: „Karolínko, ukaž nám kolínka! Hezky se vyspi, panenke!“

Šla se sklopenou hlavou, neodpovídajíc na posměšky, celá v zajetí svého pozdního hříchu, z kterého si nepřála vysvobození. Chodila tak den co den, vždycky k večeru, chodila oklikami, po mezích a po stříništích, aby se vyhnula aspoň přímému styku s lidskýma očima a s lidskou řečí, když její hubená postava, oblečená ve vybledlé šaty podle včerejší módy, nemohla se skrýt v krajině rovné jako stůl.

Chodívala tam večer a vracela se ráno, ještě zarputilejší a plašší, s naběhlými víčky, s ústy zařatými, zabořená o novou píď do bahna svého zatracení. Patnáct let trvaly tyto veřejné noční návštěvy v domku jejího milence, obtloustlého chlapíka s bílým těstovitým tělem, ojiněným plísní hnilobné smyslnosti.

Pokrytecké pohoršení vyráželo zpočátku hlasité skřeky, pak se však spokojilo posměchem, jenž nemohl vždy zatajit jistou mlsnost; až nakonec odvážné a groteskní milostné dobrodružství Karolínino zevšednělo a její každodenní putování se stalo lidem pracujícím v poli ukazovatelem hodiny denní, stejně jako troubení městské cihelny nebo pomalé hrkání žluté poštovní káry po okresní silnici. Bizarní láska stárnoucí dívky přijala mimikry kraje a stala se součástí jeho fauny.

Avšak běh nedalekých událostí měl co nevidět znovu vzpružit ochablý zájem těch, kdož byli tak dlouho lhostejnými svědky této tragické podívané. Tuto chvíli však se ještě nešťastná žena potlouká sama po rozmoklých polích, a ač je už skoro noc a nikde nevidět člověka, vyhledává nejzdlouhavější okliky, jako by se chtěla vyhnout tisícům očí, které jsou na ni dotěrně upřeny; vrací se a jde zase kupředu, jako by chtěla jít dnes zároveň všemi cestami, které poznamenala svými šlépějemi za patnáct let svého milostného putování. Jde, klopýtá, padá na kolena, dotýkajíc se takřka obličejem země, jako by hledala ztracené peníze nebo počítala bludné kroky, které už dávno na mezích a na polních cestách zahladil vítr a déšť, jež však jsou kolem ní nelitostně živы v této chvíli strašlivého účtování. A zatímco smutný déšť haraší v uschlém křoví a v pozůstatcích zapomenutého chrástu, potácí se zrazená ubožačka touto pustinou a podobá se zvířeti, které zalézá před smrtí do nejodlehlejšího koutu dvora, šíráno studem pro svůj pokořující a trapný konec.

Karolína prchala před každou vzpomínkou jako člověk, který nemá na celém těle místečka zdravého, a všechny někdejší rozkoše na ni syčely jako jedovatí hadi z každého úkrytu, v kterém se pokusila hledat útočiště. Její mládí, prosycené zápachem plísně a špíny, provázené skuhravým hlasem a nepochopitelnou nenávistí nebožky matky, která umírala v šatech, sedíc v koutě na hromadě hadrů a odmítajíc kněze až do okamžiku, kdy jí smrtí zdřevěněl jazyk, uvadlo v prvním rozpuku panenství, otráveno polovědomým pokleskem s domácím čeledínem; a nestala-li se tenkrát matkou, bylo to tím, že ji stará ztloukla svou berlou do úplného bezvědomí. Schoulila se pak jako nevzhledný květ, jehož srdce je vyžráno rží, a chodila v šátku a v dlouhých sukních, poklekala v kostele do stínu posledního pilíře, a o muzikách postávala co nejbližší dveřím, stíhajíc pohledem zarputile truchlivým své družky, které byly tak šťastny, že se neposkvřily nebo se dovedly přenést přes své provinění s lehčí myslí. Její sklopené oči a šátek stažený do čela však nebyly znamením kajícího; tato odbojná duše zachovala v sobě zrádně sladkou chuť hříchu a nabobtnávala prokletým kvasem, z kterého rostla pyšná

hlíza její budoucí vášně, jejíž smělost ohromila i ty nejodvážnější.

Byla tenkrát bílá jako plátno, když ji Jindřich Frýb bral k tanci (měl cigaretu v ústech a klobouk na hlavě), a když hudba dohrála, slyšel, že drkotá zuby. Vyspal se tu noc u ní, a když k ránu přeskakoval plot u její zahrádky, cítil ještě mrazení po celém těle, neboť se nenadál, že probudí v té ženě tygřici. Byl ohromen, když ji spatřil večer druhého dne ve dveřích svého bytu, ale podlehl brzo tyranství smyslné něhy, kterou ho zahrnovala. „Kde se bere ta vlna lichotné přilnavosti v tom nehezkém stvoření?“ myslil si kolikrát potom v přestávce mezi jitem a večerem, když vystrízlivěl po její noční návštěvě a uvědomoval si směšnost svého postavení. Neovládal však už své tělo, kterému ona sdělila svým tělem palčivost hříšné žádosti, a motal se v jejích sítech po patnáct let, i když se jí bránil občasnými vzpourami, v jejichž účinnost sám nevěřil a ani si jí nepřál.

Kdežto u něho však zůstával duch stále jasný a neklamal se nikdy o podstatě svého otroctví, ačkoli mu ustavičně podléhal, propadla Karolína své vášni s tělem i s duší a toužila uhořet celá v jejím plameni. Jak krutě sladké jí bylo pomýšlení, že bude zatracena, když bude zatracena s ním! Jakou zlou rozkoš cítila z toho, že se ničí, jak byla omámena svým vzdorem! Běda, nevěděla, že zlo je omezené a duše lidská že je nenasytná. Nebyl to nedostatek lásky u jejího milence, co ji přivedlo náhle na pokraj nicoty. Věděla, že kdyby k němu dnes večer přišla, bylo by všechno jako jindy. Ale ucítila najednou, že už nemůže — že cosi je spotřebováno. A jak stála na té rozmoklé silnici, uprostřed zoufalého šelestění deště, uvědomila si, že je všechno marné, že je sama. A že je konec. Ucítila, že není možno dále žít. Jako když někdo přijde na konec chodby, která se končí skalní stěnou — nelze jít dál, je po všem. Vtom zasáhly její oči kříž — i dala se na útěk.

Nesnesla ten pohled; cítila, že ten průchod je pro ni nepřístupný. Jak jí probíhávala celým tělem podivnou sladkostí rozkoš z pomýšlení, že bude zatracena! Tenkrát ještě nevěděla, že přijde tento okamžik — že bude jednou všechno spotřebováno a nebude už nic, pranic. Ale už tenkrát, kdy klekávala s šátkem na očích ve stínu nejzadnějšího pilíře — už tenkrát

věděla, že komusi ubližuje: Tomu, který je rozpjat na kříži. Cítila, že by se náhle všechno změnilo, kdyby — kdyby povolilo cosi, co v ní bylo napjato jako luk. Ale ona v sobě laskala podivnou radost, kterou jí působilo vědomí, že tamtomu ubližuje. Tlačila na dýku zaraženou v srdci, a její bolest se měnila v divokou rozkoš, a kdosi se smál v šumotu krve.

A teď je ta cesta pro ni uzavřena a ona utíká. Ví, že nemůže nikam utéci, a drásá si nehty tvář. Neví co počít, nemyslí na to, že se zabije; ví jenom, že je konec, že už není nic, a zachvacuje ji hrůza. Nic není, jenom ona trčí do vesmíru, sama, docela sama — a ví, že nesmí být, že její život je u konce. Kde je teď ona jedovatá rozkoš, která jí nutila, aby zarážela dýku stále hlouběji — kde je ten ošemetný hlas? — Nic, ticho, širá prázdnota vesmíru. Ubožačka utíká a utíká.

Byla to jen kletba strašného zvyku, závěrečná ironie této frašky, že se Karolína Vachtková oběsila na hrušce před oknem Jindřicha Frýba. Jí samé nepřišlo na mysl, aby se mstila svému milenci tímto divadelním kouskem. Ale ona už neřídila své poslední kroky; poslední okamžiky jejího vědomí byly zahaleny v tmu a nikdo neví, jakými hrůzami byla nakonec zardoušena. Když ji uřízli z větve, měla šaty strašlivě zablácneny a střevíce úplně rozedrány. Její tvář byla modrá a zkroucená v nelidský pošklebek.

Před domkem se už shromáždil houf zvědavců, když se ukázal ve dveřích mileneček nebožčín. Spatřil mrtvou, zbledl a zakryl si tvář. Celý den probloudil v polích, a když se na noc vrátil, nechtělo se mu jíst ani spát. Láska Karolínina mu byla za jejího života časem poněkud nepohodlná, ale teprve teď, po její smrti, na něho dolehla jako nesmírné břímě. Kdo ho zbaví její strašlivé přítomnosti? Kdo smaže z jeho těla stopy jejích objetí? Jindřich Frýb už cítil, že začínají pálit na jeho kůži jako živé rány. Hleděl vytřeštěnýma očima do tmy před sebou a cítil, že byl-li nevěrný tolika živým, této mrtvé bude věren navždy, proti své vůli. Převrátil se oblečený na postel a zaryl si nehty do obličje.

## Můra

Cesta vedla na dně pusté rokliny na okraji městské periferie. Byla neurčitá chvíle mezi večerem a nocí, nebe bylo neurčitě tmavé, slepé a prázdné. Ze svahů rokle čněly mezi vlhkou hlínou lesklé balvany. Cyril Nedoma postavil kufry na zem, utřel si pot s čela a polkl chuť podezřelé nejistoty a zákeřného ticha, které číhaly okolo něho.

Věděl, že je na nepravé cestě a že by udělal nejlíp, kdyby se vrátil. Cítil, jak v něm stoupá nesmírná vlna hořkosti, a sehnul se, vzal opět s povzdechem kufry a vlekl je vzhůru do kopce (cesta roklinou příkře stoupala), a jak přitom svíral rty, cítil, že jsou studené jako led. Šel čím dál tím rychleji, vzpíral zuřivě své břímě, a nakonec už skoro utíkal, jako by se už nemohl dočkat svého ponížení. Najednou se prudce zarazil, překvapen hlasitým dupáním, které plašilo číhavé mlčení tmy. Jakmile se zastavil, dupání utichlo. „Ach!“ zaúpěl zklamaneč, když poznal, že to byl zvuk jeho vlastních kroků. Ujal se opět kufrů a vlekl se pomalu dále, přemáhaje slabotu. Cítil, že se mu dělá špatně, a myslil ze všech sil na jiné věci, aby se nesvalil na tuto černou mazlavou hlínu, aby nenarazil spánkem na některý z těch balvanů, aby nezůstal ležet uprostřed této mokré tmy.

Svahy se pomalu snižovaly a uprostřed pustých polí vystalo najednou k neobydlenému nebi osamělé stavení. Bylo úplně tmavé a tiché, jenom v oknech bloudil namodralý odlesk světél hořících dole v městě. Železná branka byla pootevřena a Cyril, položiv ruku na mokrou kliku, ohlédl se ještě na červený pás mlhy, ležící nad městem a prosáklé září jeho světél. Jeho sto věží se ztrácelo v propasti tmy. Cyril se odvrátil a vykročil se srdcem v hrdle na skřípající písek.

Otevřel domovní dveře a stoupal po schodech. Byly slabě

osvětleny mléčným světlem, které činilo jejich kouty ještě tmavějšími a jejich špinu ještě černější. Dům však nebyl tak prázdný a mrtvý, jak se zdálo zvenku. Bylo v něm plno šumotu, jakoby vzdálených hlasů nebo kroků, které se ustavičně blížily a zesilovaly, ale nikdy nepronikly až ven na chodbu. Cyrilovi se jednu chvíli zdálo, jako by byl zaslechl i zvuk klavíru, ale i to se vzápětí rozplizlo v onom neurčitěm šumotu, který mohl být právě tak ozvěnou mnohohlasého zpěvu jako šelestem světla o cement schodiště.

Cyril se zastavoval u každých dveří a četl jména na vizitkách, až konečně v třetím poschodí postavil kufry na zem, přečetl si třikrát po sobě jméno, aby se nezmýlil, a zazvonil.

Zvonek se rozlehlel v tichu naprosté vzduchoprázdnoty, jako by za dveřmi nebylo vůbec živoucí bytosti. Cyrilovi vyrazil na čele pot. Opřel se o veřeje, aby se nezapotácel, natáhl ruku a zazvonil podruhé. Táž mrtvá prázdnota, jenom bučení Cyrilova srdce proráželo tichem. Přejel si ledovou dlaní přes oči a nahnul se znovu nad vizitkou: Robert Frýbort. Vytáhl z kapsy pomačkaný papírek a četl na něm: paní Frýbortová. „To tady má ještě vizitku svého muže,“ řekl si Cyril.

Docela mechanicky, jako ve snu, pozdvihl ruku a zazvonil potřetí. Tiskl prst dlouho ke knoflíku, posmívaje se v duchu svým nervům, které se choulily pod tím řinčivým přívalem jako pod studenou sprchou. Konečně přestal tisknout a poslouchal. V hloubi bytu cosi ožilo, bylo slyšet jakési zapras-kání, šustot šatů a šoupání bačkor po chodbě. V šterbině dveří se objevily dvě ustrašené oči, podobající se očím myši nebo křečka, když povystrčí hlavu z díry a pátrá, nevznáší-li se nad ním něčí vražedná bota. Cyril řekl své jméno a Amálie Frýbortová otevřela.

Amálie Frýbortová byla čtyřicátnice, malá a zavalitá, měla malá černá očka, nizoučké čelo a nápadně mnoho vlasů. „Já jsem už spala,“ řekla zmateně a jako na omluvu, a vedla Cyrila se svíčkou v ruce do pokoje. „Nechte si tady zatím tu svíčku, já vám zítra koupím petrolej.“ Postavila svíčku na stůl vedle postele, sepjala ruce a zahleděla se úzkostlivě na mladíka, který stál nerozhodně uprostřed světnice podivně dusně a huňatě, míhající se v kolísavém plameni svíčky. „Bože můj,“ myslil si, „Bože můj!“

„Já jsem tu teď sama, muž mi umřel,“ promluvila konečně paní Frýbortová a tvář se jí zkrivila jako dítěti při moldánkách. Chvilí zápasila s nutkáním k pláči, vzhlédla k Cyrilovi jako o pomoc, ale vtom už propukla v hlasitý dětský nárek, tisknouc si hřbety obou rukou na oči a celá se otrásajíc prudkým lámáním litostivé křeče. Cyril hleděl mlčky na pláčící ženu, která mu postavou a venkovskými pohyby připomínala jeho babičku (ačkoli neznal svou babičku, když jí bylo čtyřicet let), otevřel ústa, chtěje něco říci, ale ihned si uvědomil, že není nic platno něco říkat, přejel si bezradně rukou čelo a opřel se o pelest lůžka.

„Proč jeden umře, a druhý tady zůstane,“ vzlykala vdova a utírala si celými dlaněmi přehojné slzy, „proč raději neumřou oba zároveň? Měli jsme se s nebožtíkem tak rádi, děti jsme neměli, dělali jsme si, co jsme jeden druhému na očích viděli — a najednou je konec. Udělalo se mu jednou ráno špatně, přišel doktor, a že prý musí do nemocnice. Když ho odváželi, ještě se mnou žertoval, on byl takový veselý, a když jsem tam na druhý den za ním přišla, už mne nepoznal a do večera byl na prknech. Myslíla jsem, že přijdu o rozum, byla bych si nejraději vrazila nůž do srdce. Odvezli mi ho na Malvazinky, chudáčka malého, a zaházeli mi ho hlínou. Museli mě držet, abych tam za ním neskočila, a když jsem přišla domů a bylo tady tak prázdno, když jsem si pomyslíla, že už sem nikdy nepříjde, svalila jsem se na zem a tloukla jsem hlavou do zdi a všichni myslili, že už jsem blázen...“

Tvář ubohé ženy se zase stáhla a z ňader se jí vydralo žalostné skučení. Cyril hleděl němě na tuto nešťastnici, svíjející se jako raněné zvíře v bolesti bez východu, bez naděje.

„Když tak v noci nemohu spát,“ promluvila zase žena a tiskla si obě ruce na skákající ňadra, „myslím si, jak mu, chudáčkovi, asi je v té tmě pod zemí, v té mokré hlíně, jak ho to asi tlačí! Ale pak si zas říkám, že on nic necítí, vždyť je to už jenom mrtvé tělo. Sešla jsem se onehdy s jedním nebožtíkovým kamarádem, a ten mě přemlouval, abych s ním šla do toho jejich kroužku, že mi tam nebožtíka zavolá. Ale já si myslím, že to už není nic platno. Nebožtík sám vždycky říkával, že když je jednou člověk mrtev, tak je mrtev. Když zařiznete kuře, krev vyteče a je po něm — a člověk také tak.

Když jsem byla ještě doma u matky v Poboudlicích, věřila jsem také všelichem, do kostela jsem chodívala; ale nebožtík muž mi to potom hezky rozložil, že si to všechno jenom páteři vymyslili na oklamání chudého lidu. Však vám to nemusím vykládat, pane Nedoma, vy to jistě všechno také víte,“ obrátila se nešťastná žena se srdcervoucím pokusem o uctivý úsměv k svému novému podnájemníkovi.

Ale ten stál nehybně, opíraje se pořád ještě o pelest lůžka, a hleděl vyjeveně, s bolestným úsměvem, na tento krvavý chumel lidského utrpení a žalostné pomatenosti. Několikrát polkl naprázdno, otevřel ústa, aby něco řekl, ale hlas mu selhal a oči mu zatékaly po stěnách, hledajíce zoufale pomoci. Zahlédl v skákajícím světle svíčky několik barvotiskových obrázků, rokokového hraběte laškujícího s rokokovou selkou, „Rozmysli si, Mařenko“, jakousi alpskou krajinku a nad pohovkou zvětšené fotografie paní a pana Frýbortových. Vypadali tam oba velmi mladí a hezcí, ona měla plnou hladkou tvář, důvěřivé oči a cop zatočený okolo hlavy, on byl vyzývavě furiantský a ostré špičky knírů měl zakrouceny vzhůru.

Cyril Nedoma si v duchu představil toto boubelaté venkovské děvče, tlapkající bosýma nohama v prachu polních punčochách, s modlicími knížkami v ruce — a jak potom přišla do města na službu, koupila si klobouk, a spatřivši jednou u předměstské muziky zakroucené knírky Frýbortovy, ucítivši v srdci jeho hlas a jeho ruku okolo pasu, jak se v něm celá ztratila, jak pro něho všechno zapřela, jak se s ním střemhlav pustila na syrové a neznámé cesty. A teď tu stála před ním, ubohá třesoucí se žena, zrazená, opuštěná, podvedená, šukbající se marným pláčem, a opakovala po svém nebožtíkovi přirovnání o mrtvém člověku a o zaříznutém kuřeti.

Najednou přestala plakat, utřela si zástěrou oči a rozhlédla se bystře a strážlivě po pokoji. „Doufám, že se vám u nás bude líbit,“ řekla. „Dobrou noc!“

Cyril Nedoma byl už chvíli sám, a pořád ještě stál na témž místě, uprostřed huňatých koberců a stěn třesoucích se ve světle svíčky, a srdce měl sevřeno úzkostí a nechutenstvím. V tomto pokoji tedy skončilo tuláctví posledních měsíců, noclehy u přátel, dny nejistoty, obědy na lavičkách parků

a bezúčelné chození od rána do večera, dny vyhnanství a si-  
roby, s kterými se tak těžce loučil, poněvadž na nich ležel ještě  
odlesk čistoty a krásy, o kterou se připravil, a nesmělý paprsek  
naděje na návrat. Avšak tím, že vkročil do tohoto pokoje,  
zpretrhal všecko spojení s onou minulostí, vzdal se jí nadobro,  
udělal úmluvu se stavem svého ponížení, přijal jej za svůj.

Cyril přistoupil k oknu a zahleděl se dolů, kde bylo rozlo-  
ženo město, jehož světla se trásla v řece, vinoucí se pod tem-  
nými oblouky mostů, a ztrácela se až daleko na obzoru v ne-  
jistotě periférií. Jak byla daleko ta světla, jak byla lhostejná!  
Cyril cítil okolo sebe úplné bezvětrí, jako by ani nebyl obklo-  
pen vzduchem, jako by se byl vyšinul z oblasti soustředivé síly,  
poutající všecko živé v jednotu světa, v jednotu Boha.

Tmy nevýslovného smutku se mu svalily na duši a muka  
hnusu a znechucení. Foukl na svíčku a padl na postel tváří  
dolů.

Ale mrákoty, které ho obestřely, neotupily jeho citlivou  
bdělost, úpějíci pod doteky neviditelných sil. Cyril cítil na  
duši celý ten dům, proniklý dechem a zrudnými myšlenkami  
neznámých lidí, živých i mrtvých; cítil bezbožnost a prokletí  
těchto zdí, o které nikdy nezavadil požehnaný šelest modlit-  
by; cítil jejich rouhavou zatvrzelost, jejich nadpřirozenou  
nenávist. Tiskl si ruce na oči, aby se nemusil obrátit tváří  
vzhůru, ke stěně, na níž visely podobizny manželů Frýborto-  
vých; ale nebylo to nic platno, měl je přece před očima, viděl  
je v namodralém odlesku nočního města, viděl jejich rty  
zkroucené hnusným a zmučeným pošklebkem, viděl špičky  
Frýbortových knírů, prodlužující se až k očím, až nad čelo,  
viděl červené ohýnky žhnoucích očí, slyšel smích zkroucených  
rtů, smích zpočátku jenom suše šelestící, ale čím dál tím hluč-  
nější a rozpustilejší, měnící se najednou v srdcervoucí pláč,  
v zvířecí vytí.

Cyril vyskočil z postele a poslouchal ten pláč, pronikající  
z pokoje paní Frýbortové, marný a zoufalý pláč, drásající ni-  
tro nešťastné ženy, jako dravec rve zobákem kusy krvavého  
masa. Dům stál tichý a šerý, prostoupený smrtí; jenom ten ne-  
lidský nárek zněl jeho opuštěností jako úpění zatracenců  
v pustině skal.

Cyril se sebe strhal šaty a zamotal si hlavu do příkrývek.

Ale zdálo se mu, že na nich cítí otisky toho těla, které leží nataženo v syrové a zmrzlé zemi, obklopeno tmou, s očima tekloucíma, s ohromnými fialovými rty, s útrobami hemžícími se bílými a slizkými červy. Jenom špičky knírků jsou ještě vztyčeny nad strašným smíchem obličejů, zobrazujících pravdu věcí, a zoufalé vytí jeho ženy proniká vrstvami drnu a země a mrzne hrůzou okolo tohoto pošklebku.

Cyrilovo přízračné bdění se zatím proměnilo v bdělý spánek a jeho duše, osláblá zápasem s vlastní zradou, vstoupila v zahanbující svazek s těma očima, které se dívaly ze stěny, drzé, nestoudné a zároveň ponížené a žadonící, jako by říkaly: Já vím, že prohlédáš naši lež, ale vím, že se jí dáš přesto svést, že se přesto poskvrníš obcováním se mnou, že se obejmeš se svou hanbou, se svým zavržením!

A hle, oči nabyly výrazu odporně něžného a nebyly už zasazeny v tváři Frýbortově, nýbrž v huňaté tváři podivné obludy neurčitěho těla, byly už docela blízko, u samých jeho očí; a celé to netvorné a temné, přilnavé a neviditelné tělo na něho vydechovalo teplý živočišný zápach; cítil se jím všecek objat a prostoupen, ale nemohl se hnout, měl údy ztuhlé smrtelnou mdlobou; cítil své vlastní tělo jako nějaký předmět cizí, docela mimo sebe; bránil se, bránil, uchyluje se k posledním zálohám své vůle; ale najednou ucítil, že pod ním cosi uhnulo, že začíná padat kolmo do hlubin — trhl sebou posledním zbytkem sil a vykřikl.

Pokoj byl zalit sinavým pološerem, z kterého vyčnívaly části nábytku, roh stolu, boční stěna skříně a polička, v které byly narovnány staré noviny a brožury, kulturní pozůstalost nebožtíka Frýborta; a dole v městě hořelo nehybně několik světel, blednoucích v začínajícím úsvitu. Všecko tkvělo v mrtvé strnulosti a prázdnotě a lidský křik zněl uprostřed té noci jako v tichu vylidněné planety. Ale Cyril cítil na rtech odporně sladkou chuť obludného snu a v srdci zahanbení ponižující porážky. Byl by se chtěl skrýt sám před sebou, byl by na sebe nejraději navalil všechny hory světa, jen aby v sobě udušil vzpomínku na hnusnou něhu té obludy, na své okamžité zakolísání. Pak se znovu převrátil na tvář, zahalil si hlavu do pokrývek, a ucpav násilím přístup všem myšlenkám, konečně usnul.

Když se ráno probudil, setkal se s omrzelým pohledem zimního rána, s ošumělým a nuzným vzezřením pokoje a s nemírnou tíhou své hanby. Chápal se s odporem cárů svého života, bojuje s pocitem hnusu a lítosti, který mu stoupal do hrdla, a když mu paní Frýbortová přinesla kávu, Cyril se s úžasem zahleděl na tuto nepatrnou bytost, načínající s takovou samozřejmostí nový den.

Sedl ke kávě a míchal lžičkou v hrnku, zatímco bytná uctivě postávala, ale sotva odešla do kuchyně, vyběhl na balkón a vylil snídani do okapové roury.

Pak pohlédl před sebe a viděl, že se musí prohrýzat časem jako vrstvou hnoje.

## Cesta na jitřní

*Bedřichu Fučíkovi*

Tma té noci byla podivně živá, prostoupená prýštěním tajemného světla. Byla, tichá jako po nějakém otřesu, proniklá blažeností záhadné spoluviny. Jasnost andělských křídel našeho dětství v ní zanechala nehasnoucí stopy.

Krajina byla protkána neviditelnými drahami, po kterých se pohybovaly tmavé postavy, sotva hustší nežli okolní vzduch. Nechávaly za sebou zachumlané dědiny a putovaly takřka nezvučně po umrzlých cestách, bělajících se v slabém odrazu hvězd, k onomu místu, které bylo středem této noci.

Cyril Nedoma šel vedle své matky po cestě svých dětských let, po úzké silnici mezi holými stromy, spojující Přísenice s vesnicí, v níž byl farní kostel. Vpravo vlevo ležela ve tmě pole pokrytá sněhovým popraškem, stále táž v střídání ročních dob, přecházející z otce na syna, z pokolení na pokolení. Ležela tiše v mrazu a ve tmě, černá a holá, ačkoli se na tomhle místě zjara vlnilo obilí s hnízdem skřivánčím, ačkoli kousek dál naši jednou v žitě mrtvého tuláka (pochovali ho potom beze jména), ačkoli tam a tam (kolik je tomu let?) přepadly Stázku Roubalovou při sečení porodní bolesti, a pochovali je potom oba, matku i s dítětem... Pole ležela mlčky ve tmě, dnes jako loni a jako předloni, jako před desíti i před sto lety. Kolikrát už byla přeorána, kolik šlépějí, kolik slz a kolik kleteb, kolik tajných hříchů bylo zahrnuto do jejich brázd! Jaká síť osudů záhadně spletených zatahuje tento kraj, kolik tváří, mužských i ženských, mladých i starých, kolik rukou, které hnětly tuto hlínu, které ji tiskly k srdci!

Cyril Nedoma slyší zvuky svých kroků i kroků matčiných, a z dálky (daleké? nedaleké?) k němu zaznívají tytéž kroky, jenže o dvacet let mladší, kroky dítěte a mladé ženy; a ty

zvuky jsou tak známé, tak skutečné, kdežto dnešní chůze je tak nepravděpodobná, tak neuvěřitelná! Jak se to stalo? Kdy uplynulo těch dvacet let, které učinily z dítěte muže a z mladé ženy málem stařenu?

Je v lidském životě jistá mez, která rozděluje věk raného mládí, věk hledící kupředu, nepočítající dny, věk nadějí a očekávání, věk neodpovědný a prozatímní, věk, kdy se ustavičně těšíme, že nás čeká v budoucnosti něco rozhodujícího, slavného a krásného, a věk první zralosti. Mládí je přes svou sírobu, přes své smutky věkem bezstarostným, žijícím pod přístřeším minulosti, avšak najednou přijde chvíle (nevíme nikdy přesně, kdy vlastně nastala) — chvíle, kdy si uvědomíme, že stojíme sami tváří v tvář skutečnosti, že musíme vzít břímě svého života na svá vlastní bedra, že se už nemáme na koho vymlouvat, proti komu se bouřit, a nic slavného a krásného že už nás bezpochyby nepotká. Co jsme promeškali, zkazili a pošpinili, to zůstává promeškáno, zkaženo a pošpiněno. Jizvy, které jsme si utržili, ponese s sebou až do hrobu, až na věčnost.

Kroky zvonily o umrzlou silnici a Cyril Nedoma je poslouchal jako kroky někoho druhého. Jejich rytmus i spád mu byly známy, velmi známy, vždyť ještě loni zněly vedle něho po této silnici, uprostřed těchto polí; týž holý šípkový keř trčel tady u toho příkopu, vpravo na svahu se tměl v paprscích hvězd týž pruh lesa a z brázdy se vzneslo s týmž poplašným křikem hejno koroptví, když zazněl vedle Cyrila hlas, který slyšával od svého dětství, hlas v té chvíli docela samozřejmý.

Cyril sebou trhl a strnul ohromením, když uviděl vedle sebe prázdné místo. Pohlédl tázavě na druhou stranu, kudy šla matka, a ta k němu také otočila hlavu a Cyril poznal, že myslí na touž věc, že také slyší kroky toho, který tudy s nimi loni šel, a letos už nejde. Viděl i potmě, že se jí oči zalily slzami, a odvrátil zase hlavu.

Jak se jim v posledním čase stala důvěrnou tvář smrti! Věru, mohli se dosyta vynadívat do jejích očí, obrácených v sloup a odrážejících už vidění nicoty. Mohli si vtisknout v paměť tragický pohyb ruky, směřující ustavičně k čelu, jako by chtěla rozehnat tmou, která se kladla mezi duši a drahé věci tohoto světa!

Jaká prázdnota se okolo nich udělala! Jak stáli uprostřed ní obnažení, jako terč zdaleka viditelný! Jak se chvěli v tajemném průvanu, očekávající nové navštívení!

Cyril pohlédl kradmo na drobnou postavu té, která šla vedle něho, rýsujíc nachýlením hlavy posunek odvěké pokory.

Jeho matka! Ožívají v ní také zasypané vrstvy času, žije v ní ještě malé děvčátko, hopkující v zahrádce okolo záhonků a trhající u plotu kopřivy housátkům; vzpomíná si ještě na onen pohled, kterým tenkrát viděla barvu oblohy a zeleň stromů a bělost pěšin? Z jaké dálky se nyní asi dívá na onen kout, který byl rájem jejího dětství, na ona dvě okénka plná muškátů a na vlahost stínu pod stromy vedle potoka? Je to asi svět podobný jeho vlastnímu světu (vždyť je to jeho matka!), jenže trochu posunutý, lámající světlo v jiném úhlu, poněvadž každá živoucí bytost je jiná, ačkoli jsou všechny naroubovány na tajemnou jednotu. Ach, ten svět má jistě jiný přísvit; vždyť je zjizven a roztrhán tolika ranami, které jeho, Cyrila, nepronikly! Jak si představit srdce panny, která se mění záhadným přechodem v ženu a v matku, jak má muž pochopit její vztah k dětem, tvorům vyšlým z jejího těla! Jak si představit, co asi cítí matka, když jí poprvé pohlédnou do očí dvě oči nově narozené, oči nového člověka, oči jejího dítěte! A co se děje v jejím srdci, když drží své děcko v náručí a vidí, jak mu modrají rty a jak se mu tělíčko napíná smrtelnou křečí! Kdo může pochopit, jak vidí matka své děti, jak vidí rozkvétat jejich duši, jak pozná, chřadne-li žalem nebo je-li nemocna skrytým zlem!

S kým to jde v této chvíli po této silnici? Odkud k ní přišel tento dospělý člověk, jakými světy bloudil, jaké krajiny žijí v jeho zraku?

Její syn! S jakými lidmi se zkřížily jeho cesty, či otisky mu zůstaly v duši? Jakými zármutky se obtížil?

Cyril Nedoma na sobě cítí stopy těch setkání, cítí se obalen svým vnějším zdáním, které nastavoval lidem, jako mnohonásobným krunýřem, jež nyní se sebe strhává, neboť tváří v tvář tomuto kraji musí mít svou pravou podobu, tak jako před Bohem. Vleče po této silnici, k Betlému své farnosti, všechny své porážky, své zrady, všecku svou hanbu, svou hoř-

kost, všechny své pohmožděniny, všecku svou lítost pro tolik marných a pošetilých slov, která jsou už nenapravitelně vyslovena, všechny křivdy, které utrpěl a kterých se dopustil; vleče to přetěžké břímě po cestě svého dětství, bok po boku své matky, jediné bytosti na světě, která by to všecko pochopila a která by mu odpustila — jediné bytosti na světě, která by mu všecko odpustila. Bohužel, jeho ústa jsou zamčena, a žádná moc na světě by je nedovedla otevřít.

Kus vpředu, na návrší, se najednou objevilo světlo, osvětlující oblouk brány. „*Ave, maris Stella!*“ je tam napsáno zlatými písmeny nad gotickou soškou Panny Marie, vzpomněl si Cyril a rozhlédl se po kraji, který se rozprostíral pod návrším jako jezero tmy. Ale noční ticho bylo čím dál tím živější, ruch kroků na zmrzlé půdě byl čím dál tím hlasitější a černé obrysy lidských postav houstly na všech stranách, jako by se vynořovaly ze země. Cyril s matkou předešli několik těch postav, tmavých a mlčenlivých, obklopených svým tajemstvím, známým jenom Bohu, a nepoznali jich. Kdo ví, snad to byli jejich sousedé, snad lidé z farnosti docela cizí, lidé docela neznámí — jenom jejich tváře prosvítaly podivnou bledostí a zdálo se, že z nich vychází zvláštní tichý smích, pronikající rouškou jejich tajemnosti, smích nepochopitelně ironický...

Cyril pohlížel s hrůzou do těch tváří, které míjel, a na paměť mu přicházela jména lidí dávno zemřelých, sdružená s nenapodobitelným posunkem, s nenávratným přízvukem hlasu, se vším, co se už podruhé nevidí. Zdálo se mu, že ten stařík v beranici a s holí, který tluče silně do silnice podpatky s podkůvkami, je nebožtík Ztratil, co umřel před lety v pastoušce — Cyril tenkrát ještě ani nechodil do školy, ale pamatuje si, jak se říkalo, že ho snacha umožila hladem —, ta žena v černé šále okolo hlavy, jdoucí tak zpřímá a hrdě, to je dcera sedláka Nechleby, která si vzala navzdory rodičům nádeníka Šímu a která potom umřela v blázinci, ten vysoký ramenatý obr v botách s holínkami, to je Josef Roubal, o tom se šušovalo, že měl dítě se svou vlastní dcerou, kterou potom našli utopenou v rybníku...

Čím více se blížili k farnímu kostelu, tím bylo těch postav víc, hrnuly se odevšad cestou necestou a byly blízké a zároveň tak daleké, tak neproniknutelné. Scházely se ze všech devíti

osad farnosti, až se celý kraj hemžil těmito tajemnými poutníky, kteří si vypůjčili tváře živých, proměňující své živoucí potomky v stín a v přelud, a Cyrilovi se zdálo, jako by se někdy rozdělovali v několik postav a pak zase splývali v jednu. Na návrší nad kostelní branou hořelo světlo nad jeslemi Novorozeného a po cestách uprostřed polí přitékaly nové a nové proudy tajemných příchozích, dětí tohoto kraje, který se proměnil v jediný kraj země, v krajinu betlémskou, v údolí radostného poselství. Tato cesta, po které šel Cyril s matkou, cesta jeho dětství, byla cestou jedinou, cestou všech duší, cestou vedoucí do věčnosti. Tato úzká venkovská silnice s nízkými stromy po stranách, vroubená chumáči zvadlé trávy, tato tichouňká cesta, poznamenaná jeho dětskými šlépějími, byla najednou povýšena nade všechen čas, stala se Cestou.

Cyril Nedoma už neslyšel kroky, slyšel jen šumění vzduchu proráženého pohybem nesčíslných postav, které letěly nad zemí nedotýkající se půdy; a když se znenadání ohlédl po své matce, ztuhl úlekem, neboť se mu zdálo, že se mu zatím také proměnila v jednu z těch záhadných postav bez váhy a beze stínu, polotemnou, poloprůsvitnou, šelestící tichým ironickým smíchem.

Vykřikl, a ačkoli ten výkřik slyšel jenom on sám, vyšinuté věci se ihned vrátily do své obyčejné polohy.

„...víš, bylo to pod tou starou jabloní, co stála v dědečkově zahrádce u samého plotu,“ řekla matka, dokončujíc jakési vypravování.

Matka a syn na sebe ve tmě pohlédli a usmáli se. „Tak se poznáme, až procitneme nadobro,“ pomyslně si Cyril.

Než se nadáli, byli u brány a vstoupili do kostela. Třpytil se všecek stříbrem jinovatky a zdravé tváře venkovanů, zalité světlem, neprozrazovaly nic ze své nedávné proměny. Cyril však byl ještě všecek proniklý vanutím nezemských míst, a když od oltáře zaznělo „*Christus natus est nobis*“, vhrkly mu do očí slzy a srdcem mu projelo sladké uštknutí.

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