

NAIYER MASUD

Seemiya

[TRANSLATORS' NOTE: The "Sīmiyā" story translated here appeared as the title story of Naiyer Masud's first collection (Lucknow, India: Nusrat Publishers, 1984) which contained five interconnected stories. However, the two "episodes" of this story were originally published as *separate* stories, approximately eleven years apart, in the Urdu literary journal *Shab-Khūn* (Allahabad). Other than the fact that both original stories had the same title, there appears to be no overt indication that the second was a continuation of the first. The first came out in the February 1972 issue (pp. 41–57) and the second appeared in the December 1982/January 1983 combined issue (pp. 3–23). All of this is, perhaps, significant since it may account for the fact that the second "episode" repeats some details from the first, and such repetition would have been necessary for the second to stand on its own in 1982/83. Also, the epigraphs of this story were originally published with the second "episode," not the first.

Although this is the title story of the *Sīmiyā* collection and by far the longest—occupying over one-third of the total pages in the collection of the five interconnected stories that are best read together—it is the last of the five to be rendered in English. Translations of the other four were first published in the *Annual of Urdu Studies* (No. 12/1997 and No. 18 (Part 1)/2003) and have now been brought together in the recently published second collection of Masud's stories in English, *Snake Catcher* (Northampton, MA: Interlink, 2006). These four, in the order they appear in the original collection, are: "Obscure Domains of Fear and Desire," "Woman in Black" (originally published under the title "The Color of Nothingness"), "Snake Catcher," ("Sīmiyā" appears fourth), and "Resting Place."

The word "*sīmiyā*" can be variously translated as alchemy, magic, enchantment, and necromancy. Ibn Khaldūn explained that this word has been used particularly to describe two branches of magic: natural magic and the science of the secret powers of letters (in *Encyclopaedia of Islam* 2001 CD-ROM ed. v.1.1, s.v. "Sīmiyā"). In the former, the magician manipulates the imagination of his subject, "conveying certain ideas and forms which are then transferred to the senses of the subject and objectify themselves exter-

nally in appearances which have no external reality" (*ibid.*). In the latter sense, it refers to a claim among some groups of Sufis that they were able to control the material world by means of certain letters and names, and figures compounded from them (*ibid.*). All of the above meanings and usages seem to apply to the story here and, therefore, since no one word or phrase would suffice as a translation, the word has been left as is.]

Created half to rise and half to fall;
Great lord of all things, yet a prey to all.

—ALEXANDER POPE

While the spell lasts, breathtaking worlds of illusion spill forth;
In the end, broken, an empty landscape, nothingness itself.*

Čo *barpā'ī*, *ṭilismī*, *pīč pīči*

Čo *uftādi*, *shikastī*, *hīč hīči*

—NIZAMI GANJAVI, *Khusrau and Shirin*

I

I

THE FESTIVAL was over now and there was no one at the riverbank. The evening's bonfires had long since gone cold, but now and then in the darkness, as the lightly gusting wind blew over them, the fire trapped inside flared up. The burning sensation in my nostrils persisted, which meant that some bonfires were still giving off smoke.

I didn't have to wait long. Across the river, there, where the wind came from, the sun had begun to rise. I saw smoke rising from the piles of ashes, swirling, and then dropping back down. The river itself was wrapped in fog. When the sun came out, the fog began to dissipate and large segments of it separated off and floated toward me in the wind. Drifting spirals of smoke would come near the clumps of fog, hesitate a moment, and then bump up against them, disengage and begin advancing in my direction. The rays of the sun peeked out from behind these dark twisting and tumbling forms that were keeping them hidden.

This is exactly what I had come to see. This stroll had the pleasure of

* A more literal translation would be: As long as you stand on your feet, you're an enchanted world, full of wonder and complexity; / Once you fall, you're broken, counting for naught.

dreams. Ahead of me in the distance, I saw a very large lion with its fore-legs raised, as if it was in the act of leaping and coming toward me. There was some rider on it holding a scale in his hand ... no, it was a curved sword that he was hoisting. He brought the sword down and plunged it into the neck of the lion he was riding ... no, he plunged it into the neck of a gigantic horse. The horse turned its head and the rider became hidden in the curve of its neck. Only his slowly moving legs were visible. Then quickly they ... but now it was a very big crab that was advancing toward me sluggishly. Suddenly, coming near my face, it contracted once and then started to expand. I wanted to ... no, it wasn't a crab. It was nothing.

Then there was a turret with serratures. The serratures shook, revealing the crests of trees behind them. Right before my eyes the trees rose up high and bent down as though they were directly in the path of a wind-storm. With the bending of these trees the turret disappeared, and no sooner had it disappeared than small branches scattered like fibers of black wool. Many fibers came flying down and stuck to my face and my open hands. I brushed off my hands. There were no fibers; there was only the refreshing coolness of the fog.

Then there was a revolving lantern in which tiny human figures were hung. The whirling lantern came to a halt, and now it was a rather large flower. The flower snapped, moved straight toward me and passed nearby, disintegrating into ugly-colored blotches.

Now there was a profusion of forms. A few feet away from me, a royal falcon with the wing of one side spread out was advancing cautiously, as if it didn't quite know which direction it should take to approach me. A short distance behind it, and at a slight elevation, a seahorse had started to open its mouth. Next to it, there was a rolled up sheet that several desert rats were pulling, each in his own direction. Adjacent to them, surrounded by flames, was a palanquin with its tassels flying every which way. All of this was coming toward me and behind all of it, and much darker, was a six-legged animal with four short legs and two long. Its mouth was low and its back was about four times higher.

After coming near, both wings of the royal falcon spread open. Then it was obliterated. The seahorse became fused into the rolled up sheet, and the sheet itself and the desert rats burst apart and one of the fragments came in contact with the palanquin and spoiled its form. It began to become clear that, except for one large spiral of jumbled smoke and fog, there was nothing. Leaving a small space on the side of that large spiral, the remainder of the sheet changed into an unfamiliar image, but

this image also seemed to be made of pure smoke, and through the empty space in the middle the six-legged animal could be seen approaching. Its direction had veered away from mine a bit and now it appeared to resemble a man with a dog walking in front of him. Behind him, the rays of the sun were quickly shifting positions.

A gust of wind came up. For the first time I sensed the rolling sound of the river and the sparkling redness of the sun on the water. The gust was so strong that many spirals quivered and scattered, and the atmosphere along the riverbank became ashen. In this ashen haze, the persistent form of a man and a dog managed to escape distortion several times. The enchantment of all the images was broken. Now only this form was approaching. I waited anxiously, but it didn't change its form. Enveloped in the light breeze and the haze, it passed right by me just like this—in the form of a man and a dog—and continued on, and right in front of me it disappeared into the deep haze in the other direction. This was unusual and I had a suspicion that, along with the sound of the river, I heard the fading sound of footsteps on the damp ground. Nevertheless, at the time, I considered this sound part of the enchantment of sculpting images out of fog.

2

That day I returned home early. I didn't watch the sun rising overhead, the fog disappearing, or the river and the area around it coming into clear view. I was feeling thirsty and, even in this haze, the rubbish stuck along the bank of the river was becoming visible. I was very thirsty. I couldn't wait for the current of the river to become strong and carry the rubbish away, so I turned back.

As I came to the turn for the house, it had already become light and my shadow was walking ahead of me. My thirst was blazing so I quickened my pace. The wind gathered strength and my exposed ears and hands were feeling the touch of the ending season.

The turn was just ahead. Here, another sound began to overtake the shrill sound of the wind—it was as if the branches of some distant tree were being dragged on the ground. I was trying to listen closely to this new sound, but with one surge of intense cold it felt to me as if the wind had jolted and stopped. I noticed that my shadow became lost under a very large shadow and then re-emerged, and there were streaks of water on my hands. I looked up and saw a dark black section of a rain cloud

passing quickly overhead. Before long it dipped low on the western horizon and became hidden from view, and some dog that came into its path began barking loudly. The wind was blowing the same way as before now, although the marks of large raindrops had splattered on the ground as if numerous large spiders had suddenly launched an assault.

The faint sweet scents of a fragrant odor rising from the ground were touching my nostrils. "In this season!" I thought, and turned toward the house.

3

When I arrived at the house, I saw that its outer door was open. I had closed it before I left, and today I had returned from the river early. I lingered by the door for some time but I didn't hear any sound, so I went inside. First of all, I looked over at the wall on the right where I had drawn the image of a pair of opened hands. I noticed that the image was changed a bit and I went up close to it. There was no possibility for doubt. Someone had tried to erase it. Picking up the pieces of charcoal lying on the floor, I began to put the image right again. One time when I bent over to pick up the charcoal, I saw a nail lying on the floor. I lifted my head up and looked at the image. The nails attached on its palms had also been pulled out and now, in their place, two holes were visible. The second nail too, I found it lying there on the floor. I quickly redid the image and secured the nails in their places, pressing down with my thumbs. I moved back a few steps and was examining the image when, just then, there was a stir in some remote section of the house.

The faint sound of footsteps on the ground was coming toward me. I went off into a small room on the left. Closing the door of the room from the inside, I stuck my eye up against the crevice. The image was visible straight ahead and the sound had come very close. Then they came into view. It was two men. I didn't know exactly who either one of them was, but they were from among the people who lived in houses near my own. Both of them were heading straight toward the outer door, but the glance of one of them fell on the image. He tugged at the shoulder of his companion, and now that other man also noticed the image. They both went up very close to it. Perhaps they were looking at the nails. When they stood in front of the image, their backs were turned toward me so I saw that their palms were black and there were also black smudges on their clothes. One of them put out his hand toward the image, but the other

man stopped him and said something, then they both proceeded quickly toward the outer door. The image was visible once again. I came out of the small room. The outer door had been latched from the outside and I peeked through the crevice. There was a deathly silence all around. I went out through a side door, opened the outer door, and came into the house.

I went to the remote sections of the house and spent some time checking my things. They were in disarray and the touch of unknown hands was on everything, but all of my things were there. I looked again and again. Nothing was missing.

“Perhaps they were looking for something,” I thought, and I started to put my things back in order. As I was doing this, the thought kept returning again and again that all these things had been touched, so much so that I began to feel I myself was a stranger there, and those things began to seem like someone else’s. Leaving my work half finished, I went back by the image.

For a long time I scrutinized it from far away and close up. Finally I was satisfied that the image was as it should be, like before.

“He must be coming now,” I thought, and again I heard a sound coming from the remote sections of the house. This time I went running there, but this sound was the sound of the cat that I had found wounded on the riverbank a few days before and I had picked her up and brought her home. At that moment, she was playing with my scattered things. I tried to grab her so she ran some distance away. Then she came running up near me, and when I bent over to grab her, she ran off again. She frustrated me this way over and over. Finally, I did manage to get hold of her one time.

“I’m also one of your playthings,” I said tapping my finger on her head, and taking her, I went by the image. There, as I had expected, he was standing between the spread out hands of the image. When he saw me, he laughed loudly.

It was the child with stern eyes both of whose hands were missing. It wasn’t because of some accident; he’d been born that way.

Looking at me, he laughed loudly and stuck his back against the wall. The ends of the black hands of the image came down to his shoulders exactly. All at once he pointed with his head toward the pair of opened hands as if it was some new thing he was showing me for the first time. Then he noticed the cat in my hand and, stomping his feet on the ground, he began demanding her from me. I stuck the cat by the hand of the image, but she thrashed about and fell from my hand onto the ground,

and before I could even bend over she was through the door and outside. I saw that the child was on the verge of tears so I quickly picked up pieces of charcoal and drew the picture of a cat next to one hand of the image. After some time, I erased it and in its place I drew the picture of a lion. Then I erased the lion too. Now I began first telling him and then drawing and erasing the pictures. If the child liked some picture, he would stomp his feet on the ground, and I, after some hesitation, would erase it. When he didn't like some picture, he would also stomp his feet on the ground, but I had no difficulty understanding his meaning and I would immediately erase that picture. Eventually my fingers began to ache, but he wasn't ready to quit this game. So then I drew the picture of a dog, which he approved by stomping his feet. Right next to the dog, I drew the picture of a man, which he rejected by stomping his feet. I erased the picture of the man, drew a leash on the dog's neck, and brought the top of it up to one hand of the image.

Once again he laughed loudly and his stern eyes began to gleam.

"Friend!" I now sat down near him on the ground and said, "So, today I'll tell you many things." But just then there was a sound of something colliding with the outer door. I turned and saw that it was the cat, which had come running in from the outside. After colliding with the door, she stopped in her tracks and stood right there. With her tail puffed up and her back arched, she was facing toward the outside and grr...ing slowly. The child took great pleasure in the cat's demeanor. He stomped his feet on the ground two or three times and, leaving the image behind him, he darted toward the cat. I was just putting my hand out to erase the picture of the dog when, from near the door, the cat screeched, and before I could even turn around the child descended on me. Frightened, he was rubbing his head on my back. I saw the cat disappearing toward the remote sections of the house, and I also saw what the reason for this commotion was.

The black head of a dog was peeping through the outer door, his tongue hanging out a bit, panting slowly. There was nothing in that dog's eyes except innocence and friendship. After some time he turned around and looked behind him and I was certain there was someone there. I moved the child aside, got up, and went to the door. A man was standing behind the dog looking at me intently. There was a hint of displeasure in his eyes, but seeing his tightly pressed lips, the thought crossed my mind that he was trying to keep himself from laughing. I didn't ask him anything, but, finally, he himself spoke.

"Just now a black-colored cat came here."

I remained silent.

“My dog had run after it.”

I looked at his dog. It was a strong animal of a deep black hue. Still I remained silent.

“I saw her myself. She went in through this very door. Perhaps she lives *here* now.”

“She belongs to me,” I said.

“Did you give birth to her?” His voice sounded gruff, and it occurred to me that he might try to come inside.

“She belongs to me now.” I blocked the door with both hands and his dog growled. Bending over, he placed his hand on the dog’s head and slowly pacified him, then he lifted his head and looked at me. There was a fading smile on his face.

“Perhaps ...” He stopped in the middle of saying something, then said, “At least I know this much, you’re an old newcomer here, but I came here before you and ...” He stopped again and turned toward his dog. “Old newcomer!” he told the dog, and then he lifted his head to look at me. Now his smile was very bright. “Doesn’t the name please you?” he asked me. “Well, anyway, I’ve seen you before, old newcomer!”

“I’ve also seen both of you.” To me my voice seemed unpleasant, but I said, “The two of you were wrapped in fog ... and smoke.” His smile vanished and, letting go of the dog, he stood up straight. Perhaps he hadn’t understood my meaning. He turned his eyes toward me and stared, and his eyes became clouded. But while I was looking, his eyes cleared up and his smile returned.

“See you,” he said, and tapping his dog lightly with his foot, he went away quickly. Sometimes the dog walked behind him and sometimes it ran ahead.

*

I moved away from the door. The child was sitting in a corner with his face hidden. I lifted him up and stood him right in the center of the image. It took some time before his anxiety subsided. Then I brought two fruits from my things and the child was pleased and stomped his feet on the ground. I secured those fruits on the two nails of the image. Once again the child laughed loudly, but while he was still laughing I suddenly saw devastation in his eyes. He was looking toward the door and I looked too. Three men had already come inside. The third was the father of this child. Unlike his two companions, he wore a smile of chagrin on his face.

For a long time we all remained silent. I was waiting for them to say something, but perhaps they were waiting for me to speak first. The child stuck himself up against the wall even more tightly. I saw that two or three times he became restless and lifted his feet, but then slowly he placed them back on the ground. Once, he looked at the fruits secured on the nails, but mostly he kept looking toward his father. In his eyes there was dissatisfaction and complaint. Finally, one of those two men pushed the father slowly and went toward the child, and the child stomped his feet on the ground loudly. Then the second man grabbed the father's shoulders and turned him in my direction. The first one chided the father, "Why don't you speak?"

And the father began to speak, but his voice was coming out lower than usual. I didn't understand what he was saying. Perhaps no one understood. Those two men, both at the same time, told him to be quiet, and then they accosted me.

"We aren't afraid of you," one said.

"He's an idiot." The second man pointed toward the father.

Now I was beginning to understand something or other.

"You people have come here twice in one day," I said. "May I ask ..."

"We aren't afraid of you," they both said together.

Now the child looked frightened standing there. Both men went toward the image. With one jerk, they pulled off both fruits and, twirling their hands, threw them out the open door. They gestured to the father and, coming forward, he lifted the child into his arms. The two men pulled out both nails from the palms of the image.

"We'll throw them in the river," one of them said, "and now this child won't come here."

"I don't call him," I said.

"You do call him."

"He comes himself."

"Why does he come?"

I looked toward the father.

"He's an idiot." And they glared at him. On his face the embarrassed smile had returned, but with them glaring at him that way he again became nervous.

"We're neighbors," he said. This time his voice was somewhat clear. The child was struggling to get down from his father's arms and the father hugged him up against himself more tightly.

"Go." They made him go toward the door and when they reached the door they stopped. One said something to the other and, turning quickly,

he came over to me. And now he blurted out that question:

“Who are you?”

“So all of this was only for that?” I asked.

Now the other one also came over to me.

“Who are you?” he also asked.

“Should I tell my name?”

“We know your name,” he said, and his face became flushed. He said something quietly which I couldn’t hear.

I went and stood in front of the door.

“This is my house,” I said. “I’m telling all of you, leave.” And glaring at me, they started coming forward. Passing close by me, they went out the door without stopping. They had ushered the father out between them. Slowly, they went away. As they were going, the child lifted his head from his father’s shoulder once and looked toward the door. The gleam in his eyes had faded. Then they all turned in one direction, and, now, I drank water.

4

In the evening, I was again at the riverbank. The river was flowing in a tangle of small waves. I sat down on the rock that was half submerged and started watching the river. Although the river didn’t curve, its source was hidden from view. It was coming toward me spreading out like beams of light emerging from the darkness, but after coming forward, it went away turning this way and that so many times that at every turn there seemed to be a stagnant wave, and, taken together, these stagnant waves created the illusion of a motionless sea.

Looking at this motionless sea, I said: “River!”

“You must have felt very bad,” someone said.

I recognized the voice easily.

“You must have felt very bad,” he said again.

“For a while,” I said. “After that other people came.”

“You mean to say other people come to see you?”

“They came today.”

For a long time he remained silent, then suddenly he said, “What did you mean by the fog and the smoke?”

I turned toward him now and sat down. I thought he would say something more but he just stood silently. He wasn’t even looking at me. He wasn’t looking anywhere at all.

“I was also at the riverbank early this morning,” I said. “I saw the sunrise.”

Even then, he remained silent, as if he was thinking something and was disappointed. I began feeling guilty.

“I mentioned exactly what I had seen,” I said slowly. “There was fog and smoke everywhere. You didn’t happen to look my way, otherwise you would have seen me too...”

“Never mind,” he said and sat down next to me. Two or three times he looked at me closely and smiled a little.

“I had become angry,” I then said slowly, and he took hold of my hand and pressed it firmly. His hand was very warm.

“First I became angry,” he also said slowly, and then he began to laugh. “About the cat, what you said ... did you know? My dog wounded her. He tried to grab her. Before being injured she wouldn’t have gone to your house.”

“Where is your dog?”

“He must be coming,” he said. “Do you like him?”

“Who?” I asked.

“My dog,” he said, and laughed out loud. “I didn’t give birth to him but ... now he belongs to me. Look, he’s searching for me.” He pointed in one direction.

I saw the dog quite a distance away. He was standing there looking around.

“He doesn’t see us,” he said, and sticking his finger in his mouth he whistled loudly. The dog jolted and came straight toward us. His movement was so fast that it seemed as though some black flower was rolling toward us on the ground.

When he got near us, the dog stopped. He was panting hard. After quite a while he stopped panting and looked at me, and then automatically looked at his owner. Even at this moment there was innocence and friendship in his eyes. His owner was bent over looking at him and smiling.

“What do you think of him?” he asked me.

“His eyes are very nice,” I said.

“And his color?”

“I’ve never seen such a black dog before,” and I looked at the dog closely one more time. “There wasn’t any color on his body except dark black.

“Your cat is also this black,” he said as though he were giving me some new information. Then he said, “I haven’t seen her at close range,

but I think she's also completely black, just like him." I confirmed that what he thought was correct and he immediately said, "This is precisely the reason I wanted to have her."

"Because of her black color?" I asked.

"Black is the color of nothingness," he said slowly.

For some time we both remained silent. During this time, all of a sudden, the darkness of the evening deepened and the sound of the river stopped. Until then I hadn't been aware of the sound of the river, but now I felt its absence.

I remembered my house and the image of the hands. Then I remembered the three men coming there and going away. I stood up, but he took hold of my hand, and this time his hand seemed very cold to me.

"Sit a while longer," he said.

I sat down. I couldn't see his face very well now, and his dog seemed to be a dark patch on the ground.

After a while he asked, "What do you think?"

"About what?"

"About the color black."

"Black isn't a color."

"This is exactly why I say black is the color of nothingness."

And I again said, "Black isn't a color."

He stood up. I wasn't able to see his eyes but without a doubt they were fixed on me. "It's not a color," he said in a stiff-sounding voice, "even so, it contains every color. And is there any color at all that can contain black?"

Along with his voice I heard the sound of the dog growling, and his tone softened again.

"Is there any such color?" he asked with great persistence.

"No, there isn't," I said and got up to leave, but again he stopped me.

"A little longer."

I sat down again.

Standing there he asked me, "Don't you like the color black?"

"I don't know."

"Do you like some other color?"

"Perhaps."

"Which?"

"Maybe green."

"Why?"

"I don't know."

"Green." He stopped and then said, "It's a nice color, but black also

contains green.” Then he bent his head over and said in a low voice, “*It* also was completely black. You must have noticed. Surely you too must have wondered where it came from at this time of year, and where it went.”

“The cloud?” I said. “If it hadn’t drenched me I wouldn’t have believed it.”

“It drenched us too.”

“I heard the dog bark,” I said.

He started laughing.

“He got scared, the idiot,” he said, and he never seemed more lovable to me than at that moment. He was clinging to me like a frightened child. And, you know, old newcomer,” he placed his hand on my shoulder, “one loves the frightened child more.”

Eventually I became aware that he had already gone and the night had come.

5

It had gotten late at the river, so that night I went straight home. Sure, I stopped for a while at the gate of the cemetery, but when I noticed that it had become very late and it was dark in the cemetery, I didn’t go inside. I went straight home. When I reached the turn for the house, I saw many lights up ahead. Just in front of me I also saw a crowd of people and I halted.

“What’s happened?” I wondered, and taking cover in the trees, I began inching my way toward the crowd. People were scattered about in several groups. There was even one group in front of my house, but the closed door was clearly visible in the lights and I sensed that the attention of the people wasn’t directed that way. Most of the groups were gathered in front of my neighbor’s house. I observed people going inside and coming out of that house over and over.

“What’s happened?” I again wondered and, staying out of the range of the lights, I went up close to the crowd. Standing behind a tree next to the walled compound of my house, I tried to hear what the crowd was saying. I heard many voices, but I couldn’t make out the words. Nevertheless, I didn’t move from where I was. Many faces were visible in the lights, but I couldn’t guess from anyone’s face what had transpired. At the very most, I gathered that some curiosity had brought them together.

I continued listening carefully for a long time and eventually I began

to make out some of their words, but just then three men came out of the house. One of them stopped right by the door and called out to some companion of his in the crowd: "Really," he said, "he's turned completely green."

As he was saying this, he drew circles in the air with both hands. I don't know what he was trying to convey.

"Completely green," he said again.

For some time a quiet stillness was heard on all sides. Then people began to speak. Now I heard clearly what many of them were saying. They were talking about death. But I wanted information, and the only information I obtained was that the child with the stern eyes had turned green and died. Nothing more. This was the only meaning that emerged from all the voices reaching my ears: he had turned green and died. They were all telling each other this same thing. And while they were talking, two young men began arguing with each other loudly. They had both just come out of the house and they were trying to outdo one another in giving the details about the corpse. I was hoping to find out a lot from their argument, but almost immediately they started arguing about something else, and something else again. Then they began placing blame on one another for some things in the past. Finally they wrestled. The crowd was continually moving around along with them. While this was going on, two or three lights fell to the ground and no one picked them up. It went so far that people were tripping over them and the lights went out. Now there was no one by the door of that house. I noticed that the child's father came out by the door and, after watching this commotion for a while, went back inside. There wasn't even curiosity in his eyes.

The young men's fight didn't go on very long. They were pried apart and the old men began rebuking them. I heard the voice of one old man clearly, "Someone has died, don't you even care."

And once again they all began talking about death, but now there was no mention of the child.

In the end, I myself began thinking about how he must have died. I imagined that some poisonous insect had bitten him: I saw that a green-eyed insect slithered out from one corner and quickly began to go toward another corner. The child noticed it and stopped playing. He laughed loudly, darted forward and stood in its path. The insect stopped and the child bent down toward it. It turned and began retreating, and the child came forward and placed his foot on it. Then he became nervous, withdrew his foot and ran back. With frightened eyes, he started watching the insect that was slowly wobbling back toward the same corner it had

emerged from earlier. Then the insect disappeared and the child returned to playing, but while he was playing he bowed his head down two or three times and began stomping his feet on the ground. His father came from somewhere, scolded him, and went away. I saw that no sooner had the father left than the child fell on the ground and began to writhe. He was rolling from one corner to another. Dirt was clinging to his hair and his body, and beneath the layer of dirt, his color was slowly turning green.

“No,” I thought, “it can’t have happened like that.”

In short, I thought a lot and I imagined him dying various ways. The thought kept nagging me that if he had hands then perhaps he wouldn’t have died. Sometimes I even began to think that if I hadn’t gone to the river today, perhaps he would have been saved. Sometimes the thought came to me that today I definitely should have gone to the cemetery. But what connection could there be between these matters and his dying or not dying; this I didn’t understand at all. I wanted to feel regret, but I didn’t find any occasion for it. I didn’t even know how he died.

“How did he die?” I heard myself saying out loud, and in reply voices came from several directions at once: “By turning green.”

And once again there was a quiet stillness on all sides. Perhaps they suspected that the voice asking the question was not among them. They started looking at each other and after that they started looking around.

“Who was it?” they began repeating over and over.

Now I heard my name in that crowd for the first time and suddenly they began talking about me.

*

From their manner it was quite evident that even before this they had been talking about me and now those same things were being repeated. They told one another in detail when I had come there, what all I had with me, when I had said what to whom, what occupied me in the very beginning, and what I did for a living and how much I earned—but in repeating all this, neither the speaker nor the listener seemed to have any interest. Whatever they knew about me perhaps didn’t have much importance for them. What did have importance was what they didn’t know about me. They cared a great deal about my past life and they were very conscious of having no one around who had known me from the start. But even beyond that, they were anxious to find out my thoughts.

“What on earth does he believe?” Several people posed this question

again and again. And many people also asked, "What on earth does he want?"

Although I didn't have much interest in what they didn't know about me, nevertheless I continued listening closely to what they said. Now again, they were very conscious of having no one around who had known me from the start. And at this point, they brought up the subject of the river and the cemetery.

"Let me tell you," one of the young men who had been fighting began to say. "I've seen him. I've seen him with my own eyes." And, becoming excited, he nearly poked his fingers into his own eyes. "It's true, with these very eyes, I've seen him at the riverbank. He was sitting on *that* rock and he was staring at the river."

He had to stop. His eyes had been hurt. When he spoke a second time, after rubbing his eyes with his palms for quite a while, his excitement had already abated.

"At the riverbank, he was sitting on *that* rock staring at the river, and I think this happens every day...." He stopped again, and although during this pause no one said anything, still he raised his hand to silence everyone: "Every day!" he said loudly, and then he smiled, "just before sunset."

I didn't understand why he smiled, but there was definitely a bit of genuine or feigned melancholy mixed in with it.

The words of the young man were listened to very attentively. At his final remarks, people looked at one another meaningfully and expressed amazement and, this time again, from their manner, I had the feeling that these things were not said for the first time that night.

"Well, I haven't gone to the river for a long time," one of the old men who had broken up the fight said. He seemed to be engrossed in some thought and he was looking toward the ground. Finally he lifted his head and looked at the young man. "Son, I'm not contradicting you, but I'm speaking the truth." He stopped and looked all around and raised his voice a little, "Believe me, everyone, I've found him in the cemetery many times. By *that* grave. You know I don't lie. I've already found him there so many times that I can say he definitely goes there every day," and the old man also smiled exactly the same way, "just before sunset."

Now they all started talking at once and I couldn't understand what they were saying. I was trying to make out their words but, in the midst of the many voices, I heard the sound of the door of my house opening and, almost immediately, everyone hushed up. I moved back a bit and watched. Those same two men from the morning were coming out the door of my house. They stopped in front of the door and raised their

hands high. Dangling in their hands were small wooden and clay animals and birds tied to cords.

“This is all we found,” one of them called out and said, and everyone surrounded them. Both men disappeared from my sight. Now again, everyone started talking at once. In their voices I didn’t hear anything except the names of different animals and birds. People were coming to the front jostling and pushing one another back. Amidst this jostling, small fights even broke out briefly. I was sure that now they would all go into my house, but the whole crowd remained right by the door.

While this commotion was going on, the door of the nearby house opened slowly. One old man came out and called to someone loudly, and, almost immediately, the crowd moved away from my house and gathered at that door. Everyone had become quiet. Only that old man was saying something to the people in a very low voice. He put his hands out in front of him and spread them to the right and left, and the crowd split down the middle to open a path. The old man opened the door all the way. I saw that it was dark inside, but after a while light began to appear from one direction.

Everyone’s eyes were turned in that direction so I came out from behind the tree, and no one noticed me going back.

*

After going out ahead quite far, I turned and looked. I saw lights coming and they were moving slowly in my direction.

Once again I turned. I noticed that between the lights and me, but at a considerable distance from me, dark black smoke was swirling upward. This time I was not deluded. It was some man who was standing with both hands on his waist and a dog was circling around him.

6

Tripping on the uneven ground and making my way forward through trial and error, I reached the heart of the cemetery. From the moment I stepped inside the gate, I tried to keep going in the same direction and, as a result, I stumbled even more. But, in any case, now I was in the heart of the cemetery and I needed to find my way to the symbolic grave of the drowned maiden, so, from there, I veered off to the right. Meanwhile, I had begun to see things inside the cemetery. At least now I could make

out the graves and the bare ground. Avoiding the graves and walking on the bare ground, I found myself at the boundary wall on the right side. I placed both hands on the wall and looked toward the top. My guess was correct. In the very dim light of the stars, the figure of the tree with ash-colored blossoms came into clear view. I heard the rustling of its branches brushing against the wall in the light breeze. I sat down and began exploring the ground with my hands. Almost immediately my hand collided with the heavy wooden board fastened to the symbolic grave. I sat down on the board.

That was the first day I did not feel that the body of the drowned maiden was there beneath the board.

*

Not much had been told to me about her. People had found her in the cemetery beneath this same tree with ash-colored blossoms. She was weak from fear and fatigue, and for several days was incapable of talking properly. People had wanted to bring her into the hamlet, but she was suspicious of everyone. For several days she didn't budge from her place beneath the tree and people came there and took care of her. And in just this short time, several young men had become desirous of her and the groundwork of several hostilities had already been laid. The situation was such that in the cemetery, where live people are forbidden to live, a crowd had begun hanging around the tree with the ash-colored blossoms all the time, so that finally, the old men made her move from there. No one knew who she was or where she had come from. She had only said that someone was pursuing her and, in order to escape from him, she wanted to go across the river. She hadn't asked anyone for help, nevertheless everyone was prepared to watch over her and everyone admonished her not to cross the river. And it had almost seemed that now she wouldn't leave this place.

But one morning people saw her drowning in the river. There was fear in her eyes, but the ones who saw her swore that that fear was not of drowning in the water. When people dove into the river to save her, only her hair was spread over the surface. And by the time they got near her, even that had disappeared.

Her corpse never rose to the surface. Perhaps the submerged body was carried off somewhere far away. Nevertheless, for a time, people gathered at the bank of the river every day and waited for it to appear. There was much grieving for her, and since she had liked the ground

beneath the tree with the ash-colored blossoms, her symbolic grave was dug right there. On top of the grave, a very fine carved board of black wood had been put in place, perhaps because moving it and keeping the inside of the grave cleaned would be easy.

I arrived there the very day the grave was ready, but before going into the hamlet I had gone into the cemetery and I had seen that ash-colored blossoms were lying on the board of the grave and on the ground around it. These were heavily-scented blossoms that bloom suddenly sometime during the night and by morning drop to the ground. This place was pleasing to me and, on returning from the river in the evening, I always came here. As soon as I would sit down on the board, the thought would come to me that the body of the drowned maiden was present inside the grave. I liked thinking this and I made every effort not to let this thought be broken. Rather, several times I found myself talking to her. On such occasions, I would put aside every thought of the cemetery, and I would somehow or other focus my mind and I would hope that her body would materialize and I would begin to see her in front of me. But I never saw her. Whenever I thought about her, not even a dim shadow would come into my mind except for the black hair going down in the water.

And today, for the first time, I had the feeling that the grave beneath the board I was sitting on was hollow and empty and it was only a symbol. Also for the first time, I had the feeling that the cemetery was an extremely lonely place and its loneliness held no serenity.

“It’s useless,” I thought and stood up. And I noticed that near the wall in front of me, a black figure rose with me. Branches laden with ash-colored buds were just above its head.

But it didn’t take me very long to recognize my own shadow, perhaps not more than a few moments, and during those few moments I saw that shadow in I don’t know how many shapes, and I associated separate stories with every single shape. But when those moments passed, I saw the shadows of the trees and graves turning slowly in one direction. I turned around and looked. Bright lights were coming in through the gate of the cemetery and there were people behind them. After coming inside, the lights stopped in one place and the people too came and gathered near them. Although it was quite a distance and several trees were in the way, I recognized several faces in that procession. I had already seen them a short while ago.

*

Why didn't I think about the fact that they would bring him here? But it wasn't the time to be surprised. The lights were moving again, coming ever closer. Sometimes they turned to the right, sometimes to the left. I couldn't figure out which direction they were actually going. Sometimes they would head straight for me and it would begin to seem as if they had seen me.

Finally I stood right up against the trunk of a big tree. Before my eyes, the dim shadow of the trunk darkened and began shifting to one side, and I shifted along with it. I could no longer tell where they were or what direction they were going. The symbolic grave was in front of me and the black board on it flashed once in the bright light, but as soon as it flashed the shadow of the tree became still. After the shadow hadn't moved for a long time, I stuck my head out very cautiously to look. They were in the heart of the cemetery and I heard the faint sounds of them talking. I noticed that the lights had been placed on the ground and the people had made a circle around them. However, a short time later the lights were picked up again. Behind them, the procession was now going in the opposite direction from me. The shadows around me began shrinking and growing dim, and the black board of the grave disappeared from my sight.

Now I could leave. Walking quickly, I reached the gate, but when I got there I stopped short. I took hold of the big iron ring attached securely on the gate. It was so cold it seemed damp. I felt the chill of the iron seeping into my veins. Beyond the gate, there was nothing except the dark desolate night. I made one futile attempt to remove the ring from the gate and went back inside.

Before long I was walking a few steps behind the procession. This was the section of the cemetery where large rocks were piled up, and after coming into the midst of these rocks the lights suddenly halted. The people were forming a circle around them.

I didn't join the circle. I went and sat down behind a large rock I had spotted a short distance away. Now I heard the sound of iron coming in contact with the light sandy soil.

"Okay," someone said, "that's enough."

"It doesn't seem wide enough," someone else said.

"No, it's enough," the first voice said. "Come on, do it quickly. There's a cloud coming." I looked. In the semi-darkness of the sky, a dark black spot was rising up from the horizon. My eyes were fixed on that spot and my ears were fixed on the sounds of the circle.

“Perhaps that same one is coming back. It won’t be here long. As soon as the rain comes down it’ll move on.”

“It’ll give us a good soaking.”

“But in this season?”

“Come on, do it quickly.”

“Move away from the soil.”

“Bring the light.”

“It doesn’t seem deep enough.”

“No, it’s enough. Where are you taking the light? Leave it here.”

“The depth ...”

“Who’s with him?”

Two or three voices at the same time gave the name of the father.

“Give him a little water to drink.”

“He won’t drink.”

“He’s an idiot. Well, don’t force him.”

“The soil’s falling”

“Move away from it.”

“The light ...”

“Look, it’s here!”

Raining, the cloud passed overhead with a loud rumble. Except for the sound of this rumbling moving off into the distance, it remained silent for some time. Then they started to talk.

“Do you hear that?”

“What?”

“The sound of a dog.”

Now I also heard the sound of a dog.

“It’s coming from the direction of the river.”

“Take this cloth. Wring it out.”

“No, toss out the wet soil.”

“Hold the light close.”

“Take out a little more soil.”

“No, it’s enough. Now bring him.”

And several voices said: “Bring him.”

After that, except for the rustling of clothes, I didn’t hear any sound for a while. The shadow of the rock I was sitting propped up against had become elongated in the shape of a black arch, and it was quivering slowly. There were tall shadows of humans moving on both sides of it. Sometimes several shadows would come together and form shapes of various kinds. Sometimes, from the middle of those shapes, a hand would emerge, suddenly become very large, and then fuse with the arched

shadow of the rock. Sometimes huge legs advanced nonstop toward the shadow of the rock, and for a long time I saw them crawling in the darkness in front of me; so much so that, after coming into the shadow of the rock, every shadow became invisible and I began to feel it touching my own body, and I stood up. But just then, from the other side of the rock, I heard the sound of someone crying and I sat down again. The one crying was also saying something in a choking voice that I couldn't make out. Now I heard some other voices.

"He won't come back from this?"

"Do you think we're all crazy? He's already dead."

"He's already dead?"

"Take another look. Bring the light close."

"Look."

"He's already dead."

"Now put the thought of him out of your mind."

"Come on, throw the soil in."

"Slowly."

"Move your feet."

"Move away from the soil."

"This direction."

"Enough, not this way now."

"This direction."

"Slowly."

"Move the light."

"Come on, smooth it out."

Then I heard the sounds of them brushing dirt off their hands.

"Okay, now don't cry."

"He can't go anywhere."

Now they were talking about me again. They were suggesting places to search for me, and all of them were sure that I wouldn't be found at my house. I got up crouching and went forward in the shadow of the rock. After the shadow ended, I moved into the cover of another rock and, in this way, taking cover in the rocks, I stayed out of the range of the lights. Cutting a wide circle, I reached the gate of the cemetery and went out.

*

I didn't meet anyone along the way. Coming to the turn for my house, I looked all around. It was desolate. I looked up toward my neighbor's house. His door was still open. I went inside my house leaving the door

unlatched. It was dark inside, but I left it that way. I lay down on the bare floor; its coolness seemed pleasant. For a long time the things that were said at the cemetery kept echoing in my ears. I heard their last sentence: "He'll have to tell us what he wants."

After that my thoughts suddenly became jumbled and I fell asleep.

7

Several times my sleep was interrupted for short periods. The first time, upon opening my eyes, I saw that it was morning. My eyes also opened near evening. The thought of the river and the cemetery flitted through my mind, but almost immediately I again fell asleep.

At first my sleep was dreamless, but later I had many. After being roused from every dream, I would think about it, but there was nothing in even one dream from the events of the past day and night. Many dreams were such that I didn't appear in them. Mostly I saw old faces that I recognized in the dream, but after waking I didn't remember when or where I had seen them. These faces would appear again and again, and they would stare at me silently for a long time as if they were waiting to hear some news from me. After having these dreams, I didn't feel anything at all. They were tranquil dreams because there was no difference between them and dark sleep. But there were some dreams in which my own face was present, and my own face began to seem very disagreeable to me. Waking from those dreams, I felt no desire to fall asleep again, but I kept lying there and eventually sleep would come.

One time when my eyes opened the darkness of the night had already become very deep. I got up, wandered through the whole house and came back. Sleep had already vanished, but not the desire to sleep more. I lay down on this same bare floor and closed my eyes. Just then I heard a light knock at the door. I stood up. The sound of a knock came a second time. It was a very soft knock. It occurred to me that the door wasn't latched from the inside and I immediately began withdrawing toward the remote sections of the house when the person knocking at the door opened it and stepped in. Turning toward him, I saw an unsightly figure standing in front of the dim light coming from outside and I failed to recognize him. The air of the late night brushed across my face, and I sensed that he still hadn't seen me. I was about to turn again when I heard the sound of very slow heaving and sobbing.

"Who is it?" I asked.

He came staggering straight toward my voice. After going a few steps he stopped and said, his voice catching in his throat, "Where are you?"

Now I recognized the father of the child.

"What's the matter?"

And he again came straight toward my voice. After he had gotten very close, his glance fell on me, and when he spoke his voice was trembling, "Isn't there a light?"

"What's the matter?"

But in reply he only continued panting. I was waiting for him to speak. At one point I felt like shoving my hands up against his chest and pushing him back outside, but just then he started sobbing again. He struggled to say something, but his voice was catching in his throat again and again. Finally, with great difficulty, he managed, "I've brought him."

And I saw that he was supporting something on his two hands.

"He hasn't gone bad yet." Then he said, "If you want ..."

And when I spoke my voice caught in my throat again and again.

"What is it?" I asked.

"If you want, he'll always stay with you. He hasn't gone bad yet. Please take him. No one will say anything to you. No one will say anything to you." Then he pleaded, "Please, now don't get angry."

Meanwhile, I had already gotten a light. I saw that a white cloth bundle was resting on his hands. The cloth was intensely white but the shadow of the folds had etched a web of black streaks on it. There were also spots of wet soil in various places, and some spots were tinged with dark red.

Holding on to the bundle carefully, he advanced toward me. His fingers were smeared with wet soil, but, even so, I saw clearly that the skin had been peeled off in a few places and a little blood was also oozing from some of them.

I stepped back.

"You took him out?"

"He hasn't gone bad yet."

"Take him back there."

"Please keep him with you."

"Take him back."

"He'll always stay with you. No one will say anything to you."

"Speak quietly," I said clenching my teeth.

"Okay, now don't get angry. Please keep him."

"He's already dead."

"But he hasn't gone bad yet. If you want ..." He stopped, held out the

bundle toward me and said, “Now he belongs to you.”

“He’s already dead. Take him back there. He’s already dead.”

Suddenly he screamed in a dreadful voice: “Why!”

And he stumbled. The bundle on his hands suddenly tottered and a small greenish foot protruded from beneath the layers of white cloth. The green color—which seemed extremely strange in the midst of the white, black, earth and red colors—pierced my eyes like broken glass, and I stepped back further. But he came forward and raised the bundle on his two hands over his head. A glint of wildness appeared in his dull, misty eyes and I thought he was going to toss the bundle on top of me. With one hand, I tried to grab both of his. My other hand had just barely reached his face when he again screamed in that same dreadful voice: “Why!”

I pressed his neck with both hands but he twisted about and freed himself from my grasp. While this was happening, I don’t know how, the bundle ended up in my hands. The body wrapped in the cloth felt as cold as ice to me.

“Take him,” I said walking forward.

“Please, now don’t be angry,” he said, and began crying at the top of his lungs. I had only just gotten near him when he bolted toward the door. His forehead collided with the edge of the open door and he fell flat on his face. For a long time he lay on the floor this way, feeling about with his hand and groping the ground with his palms like a blind man. Whenever his fingers touched the ground, a tremor went through his body, although his crying had stopped. I noticed that a trail of thick blood came out from underneath his head and flowed toward the door. He was trembling continuously. I sat down on the ground near him. His body was so hot that I felt the glow of the heat reaching my face.

“What’s the use?” I said. “Your child ...”

“I won’t take him back,” he screeched, and again he started crying at the top of his lungs. As he was crying he got up and, without looking at me, he went out the door. His pace wasn’t very fast. Until he had gone some distance, the sound of his crying could still be heard.

*

After he had gone, I realized that the bundle was still in my hands. I didn’t lay it down. I knew that the clamor coming out of my house had been heard some distance away and the sounds of the doors of several houses opening reached my ears, but I was in no rush. Holding the bundle care-

fully on one hand, I began examining the knots on it with the other, but then I stopped.

“What’s the use,” I thought.

I looked at the image of the opened hands on the wall. The drawing of the dog beneath one hand was still clear. The color of the leash, however, had faded. I held the bundle on both hands and went up close to the image. The pieces of charcoal lying on the floor crunched as they came under my feet.

“What’s the use,” I again thought and moved away from the image.

Outside my house people were calling to one another. Deep darkness had also spread outside now and someone called out to someone else to bring a light.

I put out my light and went out through the side door. I was holding the white bundle tightly. I became aware that although the lifeless body without hands might be small, it was still quite difficult walking while holding on to it, but I kept going.

I was heading toward the cemetery.

8

Finally, I reached the gate of the cemetery. Once inside, I remembered which direction I needed to go. I tried to listen for something, but there was no sound anywhere. I began moving forward carefully. After going some distance, I made a guess which direction the piled up rocks were and I turned that way—just then I saw a rather dim light ahead in the distance, but I continued walking that same direction. When I got close, I spotted the small hole near which the light had been placed. There was a mound of damp soil on one side. After taking a good look at the hole and the soil, I put out the light.

Without bending over too much, I lowered the bundle into the hole and began filling it. The damp soil seemed somewhat warm to me, and the sound as it fell onto the cloth didn’t resemble any other sound. After filling the hole, I spent a long time scooping up the soil that was around and plopping it on top. I kept pressing it down firmly, to such an extent that the ground there was much firmer than the ground in the rest of the cemetery. I circled around it several times, pressing it and making it firm on every side. Then I rubbed my hand around on it and made sure that the surface of that part was neither higher nor lower than the rest of the ground. After that, I got up and left. And then I stumbled for the first time.

I had forgotten the way and I couldn't figure out which direction I should go.

For a long time I stood rooted in one spot. The darkness in the cemetery was so deep and the silence so complete that the two seemed to be one. Several times I thought that I should start moving, but I also couldn't figure out how to move my feet. Slowly my senses began to seem useless. At one point the silent blackness of the surroundings overwhelmed me and it seemed as if I was dissolving into whatever was around me. I wanted to think, but I had even forgotten how to think.

Meanwhile something happened somewhere and I felt kind of a jolt.

Since I was facing the darkness and the silence at the same time, I couldn't tell whether it was some kind of sound or some kind of light. Nevertheless, something had definitely happened somewhere in the cemetery. I pondered that for a long time. Eventually I remembered that I had forgotten the way and I needed to get out of there.

Now, treading carefully on the soft earth, I began moving forward. I felt so disoriented that I kept walking in a straight line so that I would be sure to reach some boundary or other of the cemetery. There were no trees along my path and my pace was so slow that I was hardly even aware of the unevenness of the ground. Finally, my hand struck a wall and my fingers sank into the dry, puffed up earth between the bricks. Now that I had reached one boundary of the cemetery, it was easier for me: I would walk along the wall and reach the gate of the exit. I stopped briefly and looked and listened carefully. There was that same silence and that same darkness. However, after some time it seemed that the darkness had become several shades. I tried to distinguish these different shades, but I couldn't tell which of them was far away and which was near. I did see that one was shaking. It started moving in one direction—not my direction—but then one piece separated from it and moved straight toward me, without a sound. Convinced that this was all my imagination, I began moving forward with my hand on the wall. My fingers, by turns, kept feeling the hardness of the bricks and the softness of the puffed up earth between them. I didn't like this, but I didn't move my hand away from the wall.

In the cemetery, the wind was blowing now, but without a sound. My pace, perhaps, wasn't very fast, but I didn't turn to see where that piece of darkness was now. After going some distance, suddenly, a heavy scent came down on top of me like a sheet and, at that very same moment, some furry thing brushed against my feet.

Fear was spreading over my body like cold molasses when I heard,

“You have to turn and look.”

The voice was so alive and clear that the darkness in the cemetery diminished.

*

“You have to turn and look,” he said a second time.

We were near the symbolic grave of the drowned maiden and ash-colored blossoms had already bloomed overhead. I heard the sound of the dog panting but I didn't see him. His owner, however, both hands on his waist, stood in front of me like blackness incarnate.

“Who was it this time?” he asked. “Perhaps some other child, do you eat them?”

“No.”

“Then?”

“It's nothing.”

He remained silent, and I also remained silent. Only the sound of the dog's panting could be heard. “And this was that same child,” I felt compelled to say.

“The green one?” he asked. And there was surprise in his voice. I felt sure, there was surprise in his voice.

“The green one,” I said in a whisper.

Then I felt like telling him everything, so I did. Starting from when I saw the rubbed out image of the hands in my house, up to now when we were standing face to face in the cemetery, I told him everything.

He continued thinking for a long time, and then he came closer to me.

“You didn't kill him?” he asked slowly.

“No.”

“Why?”

Never before had a stranger question been asked of me. I was at a loss how to answer, but perhaps he didn't even care about the answer.

“I didn't come here following you,” he said. “The thought didn't even occur to me that I might find you here.”

The pre-dawn light was spreading and the whooshing of the wind was increasing. I looked at him and he was looking at me very intently.

“What's happening to you?” he asked.

“Nothing,” I said.

“Nothing!” he repeated and laughed strangely.

“I'm perfectly fine,” I said.

He bent down toward the ground and only then did I see his dog. He stroked the dog a long time and then he stopped and stood there looking straight into my eyes.

“I didn’t come here following you,” he growled. I had come to see where it goes.

“What?” I asked quietly.

But perhaps he didn’t hear. His eyes were still looking at me, but he was definitely not seeing me.

“Anyway, where does it go?” he said again.

“What?”

“That one that drenched us.”

“Just then I fell lifelessly onto the black wooden board, but I stood up immediately.

Nevertheless, when I looked toward him I saw nothing in front of me except the receding light of early dawn.

*

However, when I arrived home the black dog was there at my door. He allowed me to go inside the house. When I turned to close the door, he had already stretched his forelegs on the ground and sat down.

I left the door open.

II

I

I was sleeping a long time, perhaps for several days. During that time, whenever my eyes opened, I felt the discomfort of lying on the bare floor, but I didn’t move from where I was. Perhaps I just couldn’t move. I was well aware of where I was and I also felt the presence of the dog by the door. Once or twice I heard the faint voice of the dog’s owner and I sensed that the dog was eating something, but I didn’t look up. While I was awake no one came inside. Finally, at one point, while I was still sleeping, I kept feeling that someone was standing near me and slowly I woke up, but I didn’t open my eyes. I was waiting for whoever was near me to move away, but he didn’t stir and, in the end, I had to open my eyes.

The owner of the dog was standing at the head of my bed and the

door was latched from the inside.

“One has to wake up, newcomer,” he said and sat down near me. I also got up and sat. I was having difficulty guessing the time. From outside came the sound of scratching on the door. He got up to open it and the dog came in. Against the evening light behind him, the dog’s color seemed even blacker than before. Several times he sniffed the dark brown streak going toward the door, and I remembered everything. I realized I wasn’t feeling well and I had to lie down again. As before, the dog lay outside the door with his front legs extended.

I heard the voice of the owner coming from outside. After that he jumped over the dog and came through the door. Walking quickly, he came over to me and, bending down, he said, “Don’t sleep now,” then he went out.

I waited a long time for him to return, so long, in fact, that darkness fell. I stood up. The layout of the house had already faded from my mind. I tried to recall it, but I wasn’t successful. After I lit the lamp, the layout gradually came back to me. I wanted to look at the whole house but I felt exhausted. Several times my glance fell on the image of the hands on the wall, but I didn’t look at it closely.

Outside, the wind had become very strong. I heard it getting tangled in the trees and I could tell from the sound that it was blustering like an erratic dust storm. I had the strong feeling that time was passing, but just then I noticed the dog sitting near me. The owner was standing behind him looking at me intently. When he saw me looking at him, he came forward. Taking my hand he asked, “So, did you look at the house?”

“No,” I replied.

“This house is no longer yours, newcomer,” he said, and letting go of my hand he moved away. “I’ve said some things on your behalf. Your belongings aren’t here anymore.” He took my hand again and said to his dog, “Come on, let’s go.”

My glance fell on the image. I had a suspicion that the distance between the two hands was a bit more than before. Holding the owner’s hand, I went up close to the image. The distance was the same as before.

“Should I erase it?” he asked, but without waiting for my reply, he took me and went outside. A gust of wind smacked against my body and I felt everything changing. I looked up. He was also looking up, as if he was searching for something in the sky. He spent quite a while doing that. Then he said to his dog, “Come on, let’s go.”

And we began going forward quickly. The path was new to me and longer than I expected. After walking a long time in the strong wind, I

finally realized that we were going toward the river. After walking a bit further, I began hearing clearly the sound of waves breaking against the wind. We were approaching the banks of the river now, but I wasn't familiar with this part of it. It wasn't completely dark yet and, from the faint glow of the water spread out in the distance, I surmised that the river's first bend was at this spot. Just then, fatigue overwhelmed me and I stumbled and nearly fell on the dog.

"We're here," the owner said somewhat loudly placing his mouth near my ear, and he pointed in front of him. I saw the black shape of a large house. In no time at all, we arrived there.

"Rest a little," he said and disappeared somewhere. Despite my fatigue, I followed one wall of the house up to its end. The water was washing up against the wall that was beyond that. Suddenly the velocity of the wind intensified and I went back where I had been before. The owner was standing there waiting for me.

"Come with me," he said taking my hand. We entered through a large door. The house was pitch dark inside. In that pitch darkness, we climbed the stairs and came to the upper level. A dim light shone on one side. It was a somewhat dilapidated turret, the doors of which had been boarded up using an assortment of new and old boards made of some weak wood. These boards were shaking from the pressure of the wind. A bed had also been laid out here and he pointed to it.

"One has to sleep, newcomer," he said, and went away.

I lay down on the bed. The sound of the wind striking against the boards seemed very soothing to me, and listening to this very sound I began to fall asleep. I wasn't even sleeping soundly when a host of dreams assaulted me. All night long I kept seeing myself sailing on ships that were breaking apart.

2

The next day we were in the cemetery. First, the owner of the dog took me toward the place where many large rocks were piled up. When we got there he showed me a fresh grave. "This is the father," he said. After that we walked to the symbolic grave of the drowned maiden. For a long time we sat quietly on the black wooden board. This time again, he was scanning the sky searching for something. Perhaps it was a habit with him. Eventually I sensed that he was looking in my direction and was about to say something.

"They say you come here every day," he said.

"I like this place."

"And you go to the river every day too. The river also ..." He stopped in the middle and then he said, "You can't escape from the world by hanging around the riverbank."

"I also like the river."

"And the world?" he asked. Then he himself said, "Sometimes I wonder how the world seemed to her." He tapped his hand slowly on the board of the grave and began looking at me expecting an answer.

"She drowned in the river," I said.

"What was her story?"

I told him.

"Is that all?"

"All that I was told."

"That much I knew, but who was following her?"

"Perhaps she didn't tell anyone."

"It wasn't you?"

"The first time I heard her mentioned was after I arrived here."

"You didn't see her?"

"She had already drowned before I arrived."

"I did see her. Listen, newcomer." He again tapped his hand slowly on the board. "Her drowning upset me. I wonder what must remain of her now. Her hair was very nice. For a long time after she drowned, I kept wondering what must have become of her hair." He stroked his hand on the board. "If she were here ..." Suddenly he clenched his teeth and for a long time he said nothing.

"Sometimes I think about her too," I said after waiting for him to speak. "But other than the black hair going down in the water ..."

"Listen, newcomer." He placed his hand on mine, but again he clenched his teeth and said nothing.

After some time, he stood up. I saw the dog by his feet. Perhaps he had been with us from the very beginning. The owner sat down and, for a long time, he kept looking into the dog's eyes. I felt as if the dog was being shy and I even pointed that out to the owner. He started to laugh.

"Your eyes are distinctive, newcomer," he said. "After you're gone, perhaps I'll wonder what must have become of your eyes. Come on, let's go."

The whole way he kept talking about all sorts of ordinary things. He asked me a lot of questions, but he didn't insist on answers. Nevertheless, he, in fact, got answers to many questions. He also said many funny

things. Sometimes he would pick up a piece of some rock lying along the way and throw it off into the distance, and the dog would run after it. Several places along the way we ran into people from the hamlet, but it seemed as if they didn't see me at all. Meanwhile, we arrived at his house.

"As I had told you, newcomer," the owner said opening the gate of the house, "I've spoken on your behalf."

I was feeling sleepy again so I went to my quarters to lie down. Before falling asleep I heard the sound of his laughter for a long time. Perhaps he was playing with his dog.

*

For the next several days I slept most of the time, but whenever my eyes opened I found the owner standing by my door. Seeing me waking, he would come over to me and say something amusing. During this time, I didn't see his dog, but one day while he was talking to me he said, "Now she's here too."

He pointed toward the floor. I looked and saw my cat playing with his dog. I tried to coax her but she didn't pay any attention to me. The dog, however, came near me and started wagging his tail.

"You must know too, newcomer," the owner said, "that a cat is a friend of the house, and a dog is the friend of man."

"Did she come here on her own?" I asked.

"No, I brought her," he said. "Did you notice how I've made them friends? Now she isn't afraid of him. Newcomer, why is a cat afraid of a dog?"

"Perhaps she fears he'll eat her," I said, and just then the two animals started going out the door chasing after each other. But suddenly, the owner blocked their way.

"No!" he said looking angrily at the dog. "I'm the one who made you friends. The display of your friendship should be right in front of me too."

And it seemed as if the dog had understood every single word. He padded off quietly toward the cat, and when he got near he turned and looked at his owner. The owner was watching him like some stern father. And the dog, looking like a really frightened child, tapped his paw softly on the tail of the cat and then turned to look at his owner. I coaxed the dog and he began running circles around me happily. His owner gestured for him to go outside, and with one leap he was out the door. The cat tried to follow suit, but the owner put his foot under her belly and tossed her back.

“How do you like this place?” he asked me. “You’ll remember it, won’t you?”

“I might,” I said. “After living here a while....”

“Do you know anything about this place?”

I shook my head, “No.”

“In spite of that you’ll remember it?”

It occurred to me that he was only asking me questions because, with the help of my answers, he wanted to convince me of something, or make me disclose something, or just get some promise from me for the future—and this caused me to become a bit obstinate. Perhaps he discerned my thoughts. And now, contrary to his usual manner, he began saying, in a tired and somewhat disappointed tone, “The house that you remember ...”

“I don’t remember.”

“But you do,” he said as if trying to convince me. “For you, everything in the house you remember was strange.”

“No it wasn’t.”

“It was. Don’t be obstinate, otherwise I’ll start asking questions. Everything was strange, and you were accustomed to those strange things.” He came forward and placed his hand on my shoulder, “Or weren’t you?”

“I was,” I said.

“This is the very reason you remember that house. The house where you were ignorant about everything, you remember. Right?”

“Right,” I said without paying attention.

“So, where did the knowledge go?”

“The knowledge?”

It was clear that the plan of his questions had been spoiled and, as a way of ending the conversation, he said, “Knowledge is nothing, newcomer. The essential thing is to be familiar. Because of our own lack of knowledge, we call it knowledge.”

I was running my eyes over the ceiling and walls of this dilapidated turret when I heard him laughing and he said in that peculiar tone of his, “I’m also wondering what’s gained from these things. They’re useless, aren’t they?”

“Not completely useless, although some other time ...”

“Merely passing the time with you, so I can obtain *knowledge* about you.” He emphasized the word “knowledge” and started laughing. “And you should also become familiar with me, at least....” And, laughing that same way, he went out. The sound of his laughter could be heard for quite a while, then it stopped and I saw him standing by my door. The cat was going toward him.

“The essential thing is to be familiar, newcomer,” he said bending down toward the cat. “And the people of this hamlet are accustomed to me, not to you, although they don’t even know as much about me as they know about you.” He picked up the cat and left.

*

I spent most of my time right there in the turret. Sometimes I would go out with the owner and when I came back, I would go straight to the turret. There, I often found the cat sleeping on my bed. Once or twice during the day, the owner would also come with his dog. The two animals would play together and he would spend time talking to me.

One day, as he was talking, he stood up.

“Come with me,” he said. “Take a look at this place too.

I estimated that the area of the house was very large, but most of its stories had already collapsed. Many arches and several doors were half-buried in the ground. The colorful decorative work of the interior had already faded and the woodwork had all rotted. Perhaps because of the dampness, it felt very cold in these lower levels, although the coldness was uneven because of the sunshine that filtered through the broken ceilings.

I stood for a long time near one sagging door, and I had the feeling that it sagged a bit more while I was looking at it. I stepped back a little and looked at it closely and the owner said, “No, this is just an optical illusion. I too was deceived quite a bit in the beginning.”

“This house ...” I said.

“Palace,” he declared. “Didn’t you look at it from the outside?”

And really it was a veritable palace. By looking at the sunken floors and swollen walls for a while one could get an idea of their exceedingly intricate decorative work. And from the rubble one got an inkling of the layout of the dalans, the arches and the passageways. In the midst of these huge piles of rubble, one saw several levels that were still preserved and livable, but all were lying vacant. In the upper stories, perhaps only the turret that had been given to me to live in remained habitable. Eventually I had the feeling that I had been wandering around a long time looking at every single thing in this dilapidated building. I was becoming somewhat disconcerted and thought it would be dispelled by this careful examination, but I couldn’t figure out what I was disconcerted about.

“You didn’t figure it out either?” I heard the owner say. “This is the strangest thing about it.”

“What?” I asked.

“That even in this condition this palace doesn’t seem old.”

He was right.

“How did it become run-down?” I asked.

“Sometime look at its battlements from the outside. People say no other building can boast of such beautiful and delicate serratures.”

“How did it become run-down?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “As you see, now the river is swallowing it. But it was run-down from the start. The sinking began later, and the one who had it built ...” He became quiet and remained quiet a long time.

“Who built it?”

“He might be right here somewhere too.”

The owner ran his eyes over the swollen walls. And, again, I had a suspicion that one door had sagged a little more. The owner looked at me and smiled wistfully.

“I was here before you,” he whispered, “and even then it was in this same condition. But why doesn’t it seem old?”

“I don’t know.”

“But I do,” he said and buried his fingers in the soft earth of the crumbled floor. “No one has seen it intact. Perhaps it never was intact.” He grasped my hand and said in a secretive tone, “Listen, isn’t it possible that it was built exactly like this?”

“Run-down?”

“How can you say this is run-down?”

I wanted to reply, but I hesitated. The white curve of one arch was peeking out from a pile of rubble up ahead. One pillar of the arch rested against the curve.

“Suppose the builder wanted to build it exactly like this?” the owner said.

“Why?”

“Why?” he asked very inquisitively. “Precisely what I’d like to find out: the purpose for which it was built. For what purpose? I’m living here, inside these sinking walls, in order to discover this very thing.”

“To whom did this palace belong?”

“The river is swallowing it. Before long it’ll disappear.”

“You had said he was right here somewhere.”

“The one who built it? I don’t know who he was, but he ought to be here somewhere.”

“And you’re sure that ...”

“Yes, he built it exactly like this, although he didn’t think about the

river, otherwise ...” Suddenly he stopped and, awestruck, he looked at me.

“But it’s possible he knowingly ... newcomer!” He grabbed my hands and pleaded with me, “Imagine.”

I imagined—a palace being built run-down and, while being built, it was already sinking. I heard the voice of the owner. He was saying exactly what I was thinking.

“The one who built it couldn’t just abandon it and go.”

“But what was his purpose?”

“I don’t know.” A glint appeared in his eyes and his voice took on a slight growl. Letting go of my hand, he sat silently for quite a while, and once again it seemed as if he might be thinking about something and feeling disappointed. And once again I myself began feeling somewhat burdened with guilt.

“But why are you distressed?” I asked, and I didn’t know what I should say next. “What’s distressing about this?”

With great conviction he said, “It’s that if I myself were to build some structure, I would build one exactly like this.”

3

Although the river hugged right up next to my new quarters, I had almost entirely given up going to the part I used to frequent since that was quite far away. Not so with the cemetery, I went there several times. But seeing people inside every time, I would turn back right at the gate.

One day, as I was returning from the gate of the cemetery, it occurred to me that I still hadn’t seen the palace from the outside. In fact, I didn’t even know where the palace started becoming visible along the way that I was going. Meanwhile, the path turned and I saw a jagged outline on the horizon that disappeared when the path turned again. After some time there was another turn revealing a blurry image of the palace in the distance. Despite the blurriness, it seemed clear that up ahead there was a building topped with ornamental serratures and this building, in spite of being ancient, seemed perfectly intact. The path turned, the palace disappeared and then reappeared. Now it looked older and larger than before. The intricately designed battlements stretched from one end to the other. I halted right there and gazed at it a while, then I moved on. Now I was walking on a slope. For a long time the palace wasn’t visible. At one turn the slope ended, but still the palace couldn’t be seen. At the next turn, I

caught a slight glimpse of it. After that, it was continually appearing and disappearing between the trees and the hills. And now, with every glimpse, its dilapidation was becoming apparent and its ancientness was receding. I was approaching a run-down but newly-built structure. And this building wanted to reveal itself to me and hide from me at the same time. I felt as if I was playing with some bashful child. However, when I emerged from one alleyway, in the distance I saw the white bend of the river and my eyes became fixed on that. I began walking slowly toward the river. When I reached the dry, sandy soil of the bank, I tried to guess where the rock I used to sit on might be, but I couldn't even guess which direction might take me to that rock. As my eyes were scanning the river, I heard some sounds off to my right and I looked in that direction. The waves of the river were striking against very large columns of moss-covered stone and, with every strike, it seemed that the water was going down into the columns. My eyes moved upwards and there, right in front of me, was the palace. The design and carving of its battlements was really very delicate and unusual. Some serratures that merely supported other serratures seemed to be vibrating from the wind. I backed up a little. It was impossible to count the number of cracks in the walls of the palace. These cracks were creating all kinds of images and it seemed as if parts of the palace had been constructed separately and then placed on top of one another. For a long time I tried to distinguish those individual parts, and I became completely convinced that somewhere or other in the palace there was definitely some part which, if disturbed at all, would send the entire building tumbling to the ground. And if that part wasn't touched, it dawned on me, the palace would always remain standing this same exact way. Then a strong desire to discover that part took hold of me. These thoughts began confusing me and I started looking around. My eyes came to rest on a clump of trees that was in front of the palace gate. These trees were very close to one another, and the branches of all of them were badly tangled together. The owner was standing underneath those tangled branches and he had, perhaps, been watching me quite a while. When he saw me looking at him, he came toward me.

"You have to agree, newcomer," he said as he approached, "the state that it's in isn't the result of time or accidents."

"Yes," I said, "perhaps this was its original state."

"Even so, I wasted a lot of time wondering what its perfect condition should have been."

"But when this was its original state...."

"Even so, since it's somewhat dilapidated ... let me show you one

thing.”

He took me inside the palace and we went through a sagging door. The sound of the dog barking came from one corner and then he appeared in front of us and began hugging up close to his owner’s feet. After petting him a bit, the owner pushed him toward that same shadowy corner and then he looked at me and smiled.

“These days, he’s starting to love me a little too much,” he said. There was sadness in his smile. “Well, this way.”

We went through another sagging door. It was a large room with a damp floor and there wasn’t a single spot on the floor that wasn’t covered with footprints. Light filtering through very thin cracks had formed streaks on the wall ahead and from this I surmised that this room was on the outer side of the palace. On one edge of the ceiling there was a rather large crack revealing some portion of another broken ceiling above. The soft light coming through the crack was falling on a smallish platform made of white stone. There were some black things on one edge of the platform and the owner was looking at me with his two hands resting on them. He motioned with his head for me to come there.

“These ...,” he said and patted the black things slowly. I bent over and looked. At first I had some difficulty recognizing them, then I remembered those stone columns of the palace constructed at the edge of the river. On the white platform, small columns of the exact same design had been made from black stone. Pieces of different colored rocks were scattered around the platform. The owner bent over and picked some of them up, then he put his hand out toward me and opened his palm. They were teeny tiny bricks sculpted from colored rocks, and not a single one was intact. Mixed together on the owner’s palm, their different colors formed a design. Gazing at these bricks he said: “Were these broken while being made, or were they made and then broken, or were they just made broken?” I looked at the bricks closely. The owner was tossing them slowly on his palm. Over and over, the arrangement of their colors on his palm altered, and every altered arrangement produced a new design. This seemed to be an interesting pastime, but the owner wasn’t paying attention to that. He was looking at me as if I might know the answer to his question.

“As long as the thing they were made for isn’t here ...,” I began saying.

“It isn’t here,” he said sounding wistful.

I looked closely at the bricks again. “There’s no black color in these,” I said, “which is surprising since black stone is more abundant than stone

of these other colors.”

The owner tossed the pieces of bricks on the ground and fastened his hands tightly around the columns on the platform.

“These are black,” he said. And then he repeated, “These are black.” He grabbed my hand and pressed firmly, “And only these remained.”

“It’s possible that the stone of these columns ...”

“Only these remained, newcomer. Am I mistaken?”

He bent over and picked up the pieces again.

“Your eyes are really unusual, newcomer.” Studying the pieces he said, “Yes, there is no black, but there’s none of your green either.”

“But ...” After a long pause I said, “Did you bring me here just to show me these?”

“Yes,” he said. Then he said, “No.” Then he got lost in some thought.

“As long as that thing isn’t present. ...”

“I brought you here to show you the thing that isn’t present,” he said making a sort of roof with both hands a little ways above the black columns. “You look too, perhaps you’ll be able to see it as well.” Then he moved back several steps and said, “Let me just have a word with them.”

I was looking at the platform when the sound of the dog barking came from the direction of that shadowy corner outside the room.

“Good!” came the voice of the owner, then he laughed loudly. The dog began barking again and the laughter of the owner grew louder. I turned my head around and looked toward him. He was bending over looking at the dog sitting scrunched up. I continued watching the two of them for a long time. Suddenly I had a suspicion that there was something else on the white platform and I turned to look. The light coming through the crack in the ceiling had become brighter, and there was nothing on the platform except the stone columns. In the growing light, however, the color of those columns seemed to be a deeper black than before.

4

I had also begun venturing out alone now. As far as I was concerned, I and the people of the hamlet already didn’t exist in each other’s eyes. When I did go out, I would, of course, encounter many people, but they would walk by as if I was some invisible being. And I didn’t look at any of them either. Nevertheless, one day when I went out it struck me that I hadn’t seen any children in the hamlet lately. That day, I made a point of casting a glance at the doors of whatever houses I happened by along my

way, and that day I circled the whole hamlet several times. First, I passed near the house I used to live in and my feet faltered. The door was latched from the outside and no one was around. After thinking about it quite a while, I opened the door and went in. On the wall, the charcoal-drawn image of the hands was there as before; indeed, it seemed fresher. I turned my feet around and left and, after latching the door, I moved on.

My mind was blank. However, when I was returning to the palace, my glance fell on the open door of one house in front of which sat an old man. He appeared to be talking to someone who was behind him. I kept on walking, peering at the ground, when I heard the door of the house being slammed shut and the sound of some child crying behind it. I hesitated for a moment and then moved on. The old man was standing with his back thrust against the door and his head turned away from me. I had left the house behind me now and I felt the old man's eyes glued on me. Obviously, for him I wasn't some invisible being. I changed my route and began walking toward the cemetery instead of the palace.

That day, I found the cemetery empty. I wandered around inside for a long time. Its area was more extensive than I had imagined. The number of graves was large too, but still, many many plots of ground lay empty. Walking on these empty plots, I felt again and again that the ground was somewhat hollow. Once or twice I stomped my foot hard on the ground expecting my foot to sink deep inside, but it merely made a light impression. I wandered among the graves a long time and eventually, overcome by fatigue, I headed toward the cemetery wall that was near the drowned maiden's symbolic grave beneath the tree.

The grave's black board and the ground around it had been swept clean recently, but there was still a little dust on the board and faint marks, left by the hands that had swept it, could still be seen. I sat down on the board and tried to think about the drowned maiden, but the memory of the old man standing in front of the closed door and the sound of the child crying behind it came to me, and I stood up. After some time I found myself in the part of the cemetery where many large rocks were piled up. I searched for the grave of the child who had stern eyes for a long time, but I couldn't locate it. The father's grave was there, however. With its help, I tried to determine where the child's grave might be. Then I remembered that I myself had leveled the ground over the child's grave, and I began feeling anxious and I walked to the gate. For some time I couldn't decide which way I should go, then, without giving it much thought, I just set out in one direction.

Along the way I caught glimpses of the palace in various places. I was

in a hurry to reach my quarters because my feet had already become tired from walking and my eyes were bleary. Eventually I found myself facing the black stone columns of the white platform. I didn't see them clearly. When I strained my eyes in order to see them well, a wave of pain shot through my head. When I tried to contemplate that wave, I sensed that what I took for a wave was in fact the clanging of bells somewhere in the distance. When I tried to focus on that sound, I forgot what it was that I was focusing on.

"Something's happening to me," I thought, and I jerked my head again and again. Through my bleary eyes I saw the columns contract and expand and alter somewhat in form with every jerk of my head. Suddenly the blurriness cleared and the whole scene became bright. In front of me was the charcoal-drawn image of the hands on the white wall, and on my left, the main door of the house was wide open.

From now on, I decided, I'll live right here, and I began moving toward the remote sections of the house. But halfway, I turned and came to stand in front of the image again. The hands were spread open exactly the same way, but the holes left on the palms by the nails had already been filled in. To me, it seemed as if those small, opened hands were preventing me from going in any doors.

I touched the image slowly and went out the main door.

*

When I arrived back at the palace, I went straight to the turret. The owner was sitting on my bed. When he saw me, he started laughing. "A complaint has come about you," he said. "I was about to go out looking for you."

"Was I out a long time?" I asked.

"Did you go out looking for something?" he asked in reply.

"Just strolling...."

"Did you lose something?" he asked as if I were some child, and I felt a bit irritated.

"In order to lose something a person needs to go out carrying something in his hand," I said.

"There are many things, newcomer," he said, "both to carry in your hand and to look at."

"I don't have anything."

"There are many things," he said ignoring my comment, "but they all disappear." Then he held on to my hand and asked quite eagerly, "Tell

me exactly, newcomer, did anything of yours disappear?”

“A lot.”

“Or, has it been snatched away? Doesn’t this thought perplex you?”

“What thought?” I asked without thinking.

“That what doesn’t disappear, is snatched away; what isn’t snatched away, disappears. Am I wrong?”

“No.”

“But every snatched thing doesn’t, necessarily, also disappear. It happens a lot, newcomer. Something is snatched away from you, but it doesn’t disappear from in front of you. This is the worst thing of all.” He looked at me inquisitively. He seemed to have so much interest in this conversation that I thought I should say something too.

“It also happens,” I said, “that a thing disappears, but it isn’t snatched away.”

“That doesn’t happen, newcomer. A person thinks that, sure ... but ... perhaps this is worse than that because ...” He stopped and began thinking, then he said, “Although ... at least a person who thinks that can also think that what *was* snatched only disappeared, it wasn’t actually snatched.”

Afterwards, for a long time, we both remained silent, then he let go of my hand and started laughing.

“Many things, and we ...” He stopped laughing and said, “Sometimes it happens that we’re being made fun of, and the hope is that we’ll laugh at it too—at this snatching and disappearing of things.” Laughing again, he took my hand, “So then, why aren’t you laughing?”

“I don’t find these things amusing.”

“Neither do I,” he said becoming serious all of a sudden. “Newcomer, don’t be deceived by appearances. I don’t find these things amusing either.”

“You laugh a lot.”

“At these things? No. I laugh because there was a time when the thought of these things used to trouble me day and night, the same as you.”

“Not me.”

“And eventually I eased my mind somehow, the way you did.”

“How?” I asked. And his voice became harsh for a moment.

“How?” He stood up and I heard his dog growl. I hadn’t noticed that the dog had been sitting at the owner’s feet all this time. Now the dog got up and went out of the turret barking loudly as if he was pursuing some invisible enemy.

The owner watched him going, then he turned to me and said softly, "It's nothing to be angry about."

"I wasn't angry."

"I was," he said. "So, when the thought of these things began bothering me day and night, I did exactly what you did...." I tried to say something but he put his hand up and stopped me. "If nothing of yours disappears for a long time, you become complacent. If nothing is snatched away from you for a long time, you yourself, by your own hand, lose it or burn it or let it get blown away in the wind, or you bury it in the ground or let it sink in the water. You know that everything will be snatched from you or it'll disappear, and it's only because of this that you *want* everything to be snatched or to disappear. But when something like that does happen, then you cry."

"I don't cry."

"It isn't necessary to cry tears." His tone, which up to now had been somewhat dejected, became lighthearted. "One can cry a thousand different ways."

"I don't cry any way at all."

"So then you laugh."

"I don't laugh either."

"Not even at this?" he asked making a weepy face, and such a bout of laughter overwhelmed him that I began to get worried. Eventually his laughter subsided, and wiping his eyes with his palms he said, "Are you still annoyed? But newcomer, I wasn't talking about your things. I was only telling you that a complaint has come about you."

Then, holding on to my hand, he went down from the turret.

"I wanted to show you one thing," he said when we reached the bottom of the stairs.

"The thing that isn't present?" I asked.

"You do remember things, newcomer," he said, turning his hands over as though disappointed. Going through the sagging doors, we entered the room that contained the white platform. There was less light in the room now but I could see the platform. The stone columns, however, weren't visible. Nevertheless, since their blackness concealed the whiteness of the platform in various places, their presence was felt too.

The owner was still holding on to my hand and we were looking at the platform from a distance. I noticed that the blackness of one column stirred slightly. The owner noticed too and, letting go of my hand, he stepped forward. When he got near the platform he bent over and remained stooped a long time. I went up near the platform too.

“Here?” he said somewhat surprised, and I saw that his dog was sleeping between two columns. Sensing our presence, the dog opened his eyes and lazily clamored down from the platform.

“Let’s go.” Bending over, the owner placed his hand on the dog’s head and led him out of the room.

I turned and watched the two of them walking through the sagging door, and once again I suspected there was something else on the white platform besides the black columns. Turning back toward the platform, I fixed my eyes on the columns for the longest time. To me it seemed as if my eyes were becoming petrified and, along with that, it seemed as if a smallish building appeared above the columns for a moment and then vanished. This happened several times and I became convinced that the appearance of this building was only my imagination, and I also became convinced that I couldn’t actually see it in front of me. Once again, I fixed my eyes on the columns and, after some time, I sensed that this structure was built from those very same bricks of colored stone, pieces of which were strewn about under the platform. Then I had the sensation of beautiful, delicate parapets on this building, and along with that, I also sensed a very faint clamor somewhere in the distance. My eyes remained fastened on the columns. Just then, I heard the voice of the owner over my shoulder.

“Newcomer, are you looking at something?”

The building vanished. I stroked my hand on the black columns and said slowly, “I don’t know what it was.”

“*Seemiya*,” he said with complete assurance.

I turned toward him. He was just going to say something more when the sounds of scurrying feet drowned out his voice and someone shouted in the distance, “She’s rising!”

The sounds of feet were coming from outside the front wall. I noticed that the faint streaks of light filtering through the thin cracks on the wall were appearing and disappearing over and over. Behind these cracks, the sounds of feet were getting louder.

“She’s rising,” someone came right up near the wall and shouted, “in front of the palace!”

It seemed as if the whole hamlet had gathered at the riverbank, but the entire crowd was silent and the sound of the water striking against the

columns of the palace was clearly audible. At that moment, the glow of the setting sun spread like a red mantle over the river, and because of the small tangled waves, a light sporadic breeze seemed to be moving beneath that mantle.

On the other bank I saw thick black hair rising up and sinking down in the water. Several young men were quickly swimming toward it. From their hands going up and down again and again, something resembling splatters of blood were landing on the river.

When the young men reached the other shore, they stood on the dry slope. In the red light of the horizon they appeared to be black stone statues, and the thick hair was beneath the feet of those statues. However, through gestures, the young men asked where the hair was, which led to an uproar on that bank. Almost everyone was telling them something or other.

The owner stood silently clutching my hand. In the palace, after hearing the voices, we had started coming out to the riverbank without exchanging a word. Even along the way he hadn't said a thing. But now, in this uproar, he leaned over and placed his mouth near my ear.

"The cloud is rising," he said. "Let's get out of here," and letting go of my hand, he turned back.

We were heading toward the cemetery. After going some distance, I turned to look behind us. The cloud had already ascended and silence had spread over the bank of the river.

"Keep moving," the owner said, and he started moving faster.

As we were approaching the gate of the cemetery, the cloud came overhead appearing like thick black hair being arranged and rearranged. Without releasing any rain, it moved forward with a slight rumble and disappeared into the fog on the eastern horizon.

Precisely at that moment, we entered the cemetery.

*

"I was talking about *seemiya*," the owner said as he was sitting down on the black board. After entering the cemetery, we had gone straight to the symbolic grave of the drowned maiden. I was sure that he would talk about that cloud or the drowned maiden, but he acted as though nothing remarkable had happened from the time we left the palace right up to the present moment. The darkness of night was spreading quickly in the cemetery. Once again I began feeling that I was dissolving into whatever was all around me.

“Is something happening to you again?” I heard the owner say.

“No, nothing,” I replied.

“Well,” he said, “everyone will flock here now. They’ll move this board and clean the grave.”

“Should we go somewhere else?” I asked.

“No,” he said. “It’ll take a long time for them to arrange for the lights. And besides ...”

But his guess was wrong, or perhaps a lot of time had already passed since we came into the cemetery, because even before he was finished talking I saw the shadows of the trees sliding around on the wall up ahead, and I saw our shadows sliding right along with them. The owner put his hand on my shoulder to bolster me. “Do talk to them,” he said and quickly got up from the board. “They’re coming straight here.”

“I tried to get up at the same time he did, but I had the feeling that my feet were stuck underneath the black board. I bent down to look, but because of the shadow of the grave I couldn’t see anything. I looked up and wanted to say something to him, but now he was nowhere in sight. Again I tried to get up, but it seemed as though my feet didn’t even exist. I put my hand out and tried to feel my feet, but, in the meantime, a circle of lights had already formed around me.

For a long time they all looked at me without saying anything. Then they whispered among themselves and three men with lights hoisted above their heads came near me. Several times they opened their mouths to speak and then closed them again. Perhaps they didn’t know what to say, or perhaps they were trying to control their tone of voice.

“She was rising,” one of them finally said.

“Today she was rising,” another said, and they both turned their lights toward the river. Some other people also came near me and they all raised their lights up like weapons.

“She was rising,” several of them now said simultaneously.

“These lights will kill me,” I thought without sensing any real danger. One foggy-eyed old man came and stood in front of me. He didn’t have a light and he squinted his eyes as though he was trying to make out who I was.

“You were there,” he pointed his hand in one direction.

I attempted to say something but pain began surging through my head. Although I tried, I couldn’t prevent my head from drooping down and I had a slight feeling that they were all advancing toward me speaking very loudly. I heard their voices clearly, but in the midst of the surging pain I was sure I wasn’t hearing what they were saying.

“Buy this,” I heard. “Buy, buy.”

Suddenly they all fell silent. With great difficulty, I slowly lifted my head. The owner was standing between the crowd and me.

“Now he too can complain,” he said in a very clear, loud voice pointing at me. Then he grabbed my hand and said, “Get up.”

When I remained seated, he took hold of my shoulders and stood me up. Then he placed my hand on his shoulder. At that moment, the heavy scent of ash-colored blossoms wafted around the grave and, propping me up, he began moving toward the gate. After going forward a ways, he turned and said, as if ridiculing, “Yeah, yeah, she was rising; when she saw him she became a cloud, then what?”

He waited quite a long time for a reply, but no one spoke so he turned toward the gate again.

When we reached the gate, he stopped and, after adjusting my hand on his shoulder, he said, “I had suggested that you speak to them.”

“You already told me that you’ve spoken on my behalf.”

“Newcomer! Really you ...” He stopped in the middle and then said, “Let’s go.”

After that I found myself in the turret of the palace.

*

I had become convinced that the remainder of my life would be spent right here in this turret. Whenever I tried to stand up, sharp pain would surge through my head and it would feel as though my feet were pressed down under some heavy object. Several times every day the owner came to see me. Sometimes he would say a few words of comfort and leave immediately. Sometimes he would sit quietly on my bed a long time and then stand up silently, but when he got to the door he would stop. Without turning toward me, he would say something reassuring and then go down from the turret.

One day he got to the door and stopped.

“You’re spending your life as a captive in this turret, newcomer,” he said sounding dejected. “This doesn’t please me. I brought you here, and ...”

“You see to my every need,” I said.

“Even so, don’t you feel restless?”

“No,” I said, “but I used to be entertained by the animals. They don’t come and play here anymore.”

“No,” he said very calmly without turning toward me. “One of them

ate the other.” Then he turned toward me.

I had the feeling that the heavy object restraining my feet pressed down on them firmly once and then suddenly vanished. After shaking my feet and checking, I stood up. I turned toward the door but I had difficulty walking and the owner came forward and helped me along.

“Well, at least you’re free,” he said in that same calm tone.

“Just now you had said ...”

“I’m coming right back,” he said letting go of me and went out the door. The sound of his feet was still echoing in my ears when I saw him standing at the door again.

“You do read,” he said. “I’ve looked through your things.” In his hand there were some old papers. I had a vague suspicion that he had removed them from my things. I tried to recognize them, but in the meantime the owner came near me and put one large sheet in my hand. There wasn’t very much written on it, but I spent a very long time reading it. After I finished reading it once, I read it again and then again. The paper fluttered in my hand like some living thing, and my eyes went round the turret several times searching for the owner, but he was sitting right on my bed.

“What all have you already carried out from this?” I asked softly, and he replied just as softly, “By now his bones must have already separated.”

I recalled his dog’s eyes and their innocence, and once again my eyes became intent on the paper. I felt as though I was reading it for the first time. What was written on it went something like this:

Next comes the science of *seemiya*. There are a number of spells in it and their effect is this: what isn’t present is seen clearly, and this kind of seeing is not an optical illusion.

Hold some crow that is completely black under water until its breath goes out. Then, incarcerate some black dog, not even a single hair of which is another color, in a very large vessel and keep him hungry and thirsty for one whole day. On the second day, feed this dog the flesh of that same crow and give him the water to drink that the crow was drowned in. If he doesn’t drink, force him. Don’t give the dog anything except this up through the third day. On the fourth day, plunge some cat, entirely black like the dog, under water in the same vessel that the crow was drowned in, and kill it. For nine days, feed the dog the flesh of that cat and give him that water to drink. The dog’s eyes will roll back and he will begin to look dead. On the tenth day, mix the leaf of the hemp tree into the very same water and then pour the water into the mouth of the dog. He

will bark immediately and create a tremendous uproar. Now, tie up the hands and feet of the dog and suspend him in another wide-mouthed vessel. Fill the vessel with water and secure the opening tightly. Under the vessel, build a strong fire and don't let it die down until the dog disintegrates and his bones sink to the bottom. Take the vessel to the riverbank and tip it over into the water. Remove the washed bones and store them carefully.

The effect of this is that whenever one of these bones is suspended in the wind, the cloud will come immediately and it will start to rain. When the bone is taken and put away, the rain will stop, and not even a trace of the cloud will remain.

6

"How long have you been doing this?" I asked placing the sheet of paper in the folds of my bedding.

"Figure it out," he said, and perhaps he tried to calculate silently. Then he said, "Ever since you became a captive here in this turret."

"How long have I been here?"

"Calculate from that," he said tapping his finger on the corner of the paper peeking out from the folds. "I haven't kept track."

"How long?" I asked again. Then it occurred to me that the questions I was asking him weren't important, but I couldn't figure out what the important questions were that I was forgetting, so I stopped talking and started waiting for him to say something.

"I learned many sciences, newcomer, some true, some not." After a long pause he started saying, "Some I stored in my memory, others I put out of my mind. But this, *seemiya*, it seemed to me that no other science could compare to it and, because of this, I learned it after all the rest...."

"Is this true science?"

"In order to determine this ... but, newcomer, you're standing." I sat next to him on the bed.

"You did everything by yourself?" I asked.

"It wasn't difficult."

"The crow, how was it captured?"

"Lure."

"And the cat was the same one that ...?"

But again I sensed that the questions I was asking him weren't important, and again I made a useless attempt to think of what I should

ask him.

“I had thought that it wouldn’t be easy,” the owner was saying. “I had imagined I would have to use force with him, but he ate the flesh of the crow with great relish. Indeed, he even wanted to eat its feathers. Likewise the cat.... Newcomer, he was willing, but I was feeding him forcefully so he became angry with me, for the first time, and ...,” he put out his palm toward me, “this is what he did.”

There was a slight scratch on his palm. Once again the thought of his dog came to mind and I stood up.

“Where is he?” I asked.

“The same place,” he said.

I put my hand on his shoulder for support and we went down from the turret. Passing through the sagging doors, we entered the room containing the white platform. There was a large vessel near the platform with its wide mouth secured tightly.

We stood quietly looking at the vessel, then he went forward and, tilting it on to one side, he began rolling it. When I went forward to help, he stopped me.

“No, newcomer, why get involved in this?”

“I’m coming with you. At least ...”

“All right, up to the river, ...” he said maneuvering the vessel outside through the sagging door. The sound of light rumbling was reverberating in the palace from the rolling of the vessel, and in my mind it seemed as if I could hear the sound of whatever was inside being turned topsy-turvy even more clearly than the rumbling. He had a lot of difficulty getting to the river and several times he barely escaped being crushed under the vessel. Finally we reached the bank of the river. The sun was about to set and there was no one on the other bank. The owner set the vessel upright and went down the slope himself. Placing both hands on top, he tipped it toward him.

“You go, newcomer,” he said tilting it a little more. I continued standing quietly.

“Newcomer, you go,” he said again. “It’s getting late.”

Just then the sun set and I went back to the turret.

I sat on my bed for a long time. The corner of the sheet of paper was still peeking out from the folds of the bedding and I pulled it out. I intended to read it, but after just glancing at it I sensed that I already remembered every single word that was written on it and I put it back. Then I tried to imagine what all must have happened downstairs from the time the owner plunged the crow into the water up until today. Time and

time again I exerted my mind, but every time, the only thought that came to me was that during that whole period he was never unmindful of me and he continued tending to my smallest need. As I was thinking this, I fell asleep.

In my dream I didn't see anything. I just kept hearing the sound of rumbling, but I couldn't decide whether it was the sound of the large vessel rolling on the ground or the sound of the cloud thundering in the sky.

*

While I was sleeping, I had the feeling that there was someone near me. I opened my eyes and slowly got out of bed. The owner was standing nearby.

"Were you dreaming?" he smiled and asked in a comforting voice.

"Only sound," I said and tried to guess what time of night it was. I also tried to fathom why he had come to the turret at this hour. I looked at him intently and he was looking at me intently too.

"Nothing came of it, newcomer," he said and walked toward an outer door of the turret. Peeking outside through the crevice of a cast-off board stuck on the door, he again said, "Nothing came of it." But his tone was flat. Then he came and sat on my bed and started asking after me. He acted as if really nothing had happened.

"I'm okay now," I told him. "In a few days I'll be completely well."

"I ruined your sleep."

"No, I had my sleep."

"I thought perhaps you were feeling out of sorts, because here ..." He stopped.

I tried to say something in reply, but I also stopped.

"Start walking a little," he said, "not a lot."

"I will walk."

After that, for quite a while, he went on talking about this and that in his usual way and then he stood up.

"You aren't finished sleeping yet, newcomer," he said and went down from the turret. And the fact is, as soon as he left, I did fall asleep.

When my eyes opened, the turret was already light. I got up and stuck my eye against the crevice of the door's cast-off board. There was bright sunshine outside and the sky too, as much as I could see through the crevice, was a brilliant blue.

*

From then on I began going out without hesitation. I went to the cemetery several times. I also went out searching for the part of the river where I used to sit. I spent a lot of time there. The owner didn't accompany me on these strolls, but if I was out a long time he would come looking for me. Then we would sit at the riverbank on the rock that was half submerged in water, or on the black board in the cemetery, and we would talk a long time. In our conversation the subject of *seemiya* never once came up, and to me this seemed perfectly natural and expected.

One day, while I was sitting alone on the black board, it occurred to me that I had been out a very long time. Then it occurred to me that for the past several days I had started staying out longer and longer, and every day I went back alone. I waited for the owner quite a long time, then I got up and walked back toward the palace.

Near the palace, when I reached the clump of trees with the tangled-up branches, I felt my own feet getting snarled. It occurred to me that even before this when passing by those trees my feet had started faltering. Just then, I saw a white blur among the branches and I went up close to look. A short distance above my head, on a branch with long, narrow leaves, there was something dangling from a cord. I recognized the cord, it had come from my belongings and I had braided it with my own hands. The thing tied to it wasn't from my belongings, but I recognized it all the same. It was a bone that was washed clean.

Suddenly I was overwhelmed by a desire to have the owner talk to me about *seemiya*. I shook my feet and, taking long strides, I went through the gate of the palace.

I found him standing with his elbow resting on the white platform.

"Come here, newcomer," he said when he saw me. "Did you just get back?"

"Today, too, I stayed there a long time."

"I was thinking that I ought to go out searching for you," he said sounding tired. He looked feeble.

"How are you?" I asked.

"I used to ask you this question," he said with a vacant smile.

"How are you?" I asked again.

"I haven't been able to sleep," he said, and his eyes gazed at the black columns. "Newcomer, you must think of him too. He was also very attached to you."

"I was attached to him even more," I said, also looking at the black columns. And I noticed that the old papers were pinned under his elbow

on the platform.

“But why didn’t it come this time when I carried out the spell, like it usually does?” he apparently asked himself.

“How long was he with you?”

“He was born right in front of me. A long time ago, when I ...” Suddenly he stopped. A shadow flitted across his face and his whole body trembled. He placed both of his hands on the platform and the old papers came out from under his elbow and fell onto the floor scattering over the colored bits. I steadied him. His body was becoming warm.

“What’s happening to you?” I asked, and it occurred to me that this too was a question he used to ask me.

“Newcomer,” he said looking into my eyes, “he wasn’t black.”

“What’s happening to you?” I asked again.

He pointed toward the scattered papers on the ground. I bent over and gathered them up and held them out to him, but it seemed as if he had already forgotten about them. I shook the papers slowly. When he noticed, he spread out his hand toward me to take them. Then I saw that the scratch he had gotten on his palm had healed, leaving only a slight scar.

“In a few days even this will disappear,” I thought, and the owner held out a sheet of paper toward me that had even less written on it than the previous one. I didn’t spend a long time reading it, and after reading it just that once I had it memorized. Then I read it again. Apparently this passage had started on some other sheet because the paper in my hand had only this much written on it: “It is a simple science, but it comes after *seemiya*. In it, various types of conjuring are shown.” After that there was a list of five or six things followed by: “Take equal measures of everything, make a fine consistency and soak in water overnight. The next day, dye the whole body of some white animal with it—all the hair of the animal, indeed right up to the skin, will turn black permanently.”

I placed the paper on the platform and needlessly asked the owner, “Was he white?”

“Pure white,” he said.

Once again I didn’t know what I should ask him. Nevertheless, I placed my hand on the sheet of paper lying on the platform and asked, “Why did it come after *seemiya*?”

“I don’t know,” he said thinking. “Or, perhaps I do but it’s something that I learned and then put out of my mind.”

“He wasn’t black,” I told myself.

“And until three days ago, I was going crazy wondering and won-

dering why the spell didn't work when I performed it." The faint smile forming on his lips vanished and he pressed down on the scratch on his palm with the thumb of his other hand.

"You should rest."

"I don't need to rest, you do, newcomer. Listen." He put his hand on my shoulder and his body seemed warmer than before.

"I'll sleep," I said, "but you ..."

"Listen, newcomer," he shook my shoulder slowly, "isn't it possible that we might both forget?"

"Yes, this is my wish," I said.

"Go on. You go sleep too," he said, and going out the sagging door he disappeared into some other area of the palace.

I picked up the sheet of paper from the platform and turned to go back to the turret. My eye drifted toward one corner. There, next to the wall, a large vessel was lying upside down. Looking at it, I went toward the door and then my feet tripped and something crunched. I bent over to look and it was long, thin leaves, bright green but completely desiccated.

*

It was dark in the turret. After lighting the lamp, I sat on the bed with both sheets of paper in front of me and read them again and again, sometimes I would read one first, sometimes the other, and while I was doing this I fell asleep.

In my dream, I saw myself standing by the sagging door of the room with the white platform. The room wasn't very bright, but even in the dim light I saw that there was someone near the platform. One of his knees was down on the ground and his back was facing me. Grabbing the platform with both hands, he pushed, and the platform rotated slightly in one direction. To me it seemed as if the whole palace shook. He turned the platform a bit more, and from the remote sections of the house I heard the rumbling of collapsing ceilings.

"What are you doing?" I asked loudly.

With his hands still on the platform, he turned his face toward me, but I hadn't yet seen his face when I felt a glow of warmth on my own face. Someone shook me and I woke up.

The owner was looking at me with frantic eyes, and I could still hear the rumbling.

"He's come," he said nearly screaming. I got out of bed and stood up.

"The one who built it?" I asked.

“The cloud!” he said and sort of hiccupped, but the sound was drowned out by the rumbling that was coming from outside the turret.

“Is it raining?” I asked moving toward the outer door of the turret, and his body shivered from head to toe.

“Don’t mention it,” he screamed, “don’t mention it,” and hiding his face in my bedding, he started trembling.

“Lie down, lie down,” I said trying to get him to lie properly on the bed, but he pushed my hand away.

The cloud came near the turret and rumbled loudly. My bed shook violently and I felt the whole turret quaking. I began looking at the ceiling. Meanwhile the owner called out to me and I turned toward him.

“Newcomer,” he said with his face still buried in the bedding, “take it down, break the cord, hide it or throw it in the river.”

And as soon as the river was mentioned, it seemed as if someone twisted his whole body like a cord. I was afraid every single one of his bones would separate.

“Hide it, newcomer,” he pleaded. “But you don’t know. I’ll go.” He got up and ran toward the door of the turret.

“I’m going, outside.”

He hadn’t yet reached the door when the cloud again thundered loudly and he came running back and fell on my bed.

“I know,” I said. “Just today I saw it. You rest.”

After wrapping him well in my bedding, I went down from the turret. The cloudburst outside the palace drenched me. Underneath the clump of trees it was pitch dark. For a long time I continued getting drenched and searching blindly for the branch with the long, narrow leaves, but I couldn’t find it.

Finally I felt that the rain had stopped. I came out from under the tangled branches and looked up at the sky. There was no sign of the cloud anywhere. Quickly, I went inside the palace, but as I was coming to the door of the turret my feet halted. I thought of my drenched clothes and hair.

“He’ll notice,” I thought and slowly went down. There, I stood quietly a long time. Two or three times I had the feeling that the owner was coming down too. Eventually I went outside.

I passed the remainder of the night awake at the riverbank.

Well before the sun came out, the clothes on my body were dry, but I waited a while longer. When I saw the sunlight spreading quickly on the river, I stood up.

As I got near the clump of trees, my eye caught sight of the bone dangling from the cord and I stopped. I wrapped the cord around my fingers two or three times and pulled it toward me. The branch with the long, narrow leaves just bent. Then, from the pressure of trying to snap back, it began cutting into my flesh. With my other hand, I tried to undo the knot fastened to the branch, but because of the tension of the cord the knot had tightened. Even so, I spent a long time trying to wrestle with it. In the process, the bone slipped out of my hand several times. Eventually it dawned on me that I was doing it all wrong. I lowered the branch with one hand and untied the knot easily with the other. Holding the end of the cord, I whirled the bone around in the air two or three times and let go. At one spot in the river the water spurted up, and I entered the palace.

I went straight to the turret. It was empty and my bed had been made up neatly. The two sheets of paper were lying there. I put them inside the layers of bedding and went down to the room containing the white platform. That too was empty. Nevertheless, I searched for the owner in its shadowy corners. At one point, I suspected that the orientation of the platform had changed a little. I began looking at it closely and again, above the black columns, a smallish building appeared for a moment and then vanished. I went out. Now I began going around the whole palace, but I couldn't figure out the serpentine network of its passageways. I ended up in several sections that I hadn't seen before. I found my belongings lying haphazardly in one of them, but I didn't pay attention to them and continued wandering around the palace as before. Now I couldn't even fathom how to get outside. Just then, I noticed a few pots of water in front of a small, narrow room. "Who knows how long it's been," I thought, "since I last had a drink of water," and right at that moment I spotted the owner inside the room.

He was lying there by himself wrapped in covers from head to toe and his body was constantly twitching. Even though I approached him without making a sound and stood quietly, somehow he sensed my presence.

"Newcomer," I heard his muffled voice from under the layers of covers, "I wish you wouldn't look at me now." There was some indifference in his tone and I continued standing quietly.

“You didn’t ask, newcomer.” Then he said, “About what’s happening to me. Perhaps you know...”

“Didn’t you know,” I managed to say with great difficulty, “that he, your dog, had gone mad before he died?”

“Everyone goes mad before dying,” he said.

“The scratch on your palm, he ...”

“It’s already healed,” he said, and once again his body sort of twitched. Then he said, “There’s no need to watch over me, newcomer. After going out, walk toward the right. You’ll find the white arch that’s by the rubble. Beyond that the way is clear.”

“I will go,” I said slowly.

“Here, people aren’t accustomed to you.”

“I’ll go,” I again said slowly.

He drew a deep breath and said, “At the moment, I’m remembering your life, not my own, newcomer.” I sensed that he was having difficulty breathing, but he continued talking. “Many things happened in front of you, most of it you didn’t understand. Nevertheless, it affected you greatly. But this ... all this that happened, look how clear it all is. There’s no complication anywhere, or is there?”

“None anywhere at all.”

“Was the effect of *it* on you the same too?”

“Exactly the same,” I said.

“So, didn’t you understand this either?”

“You should rest now.”

“*You* need to rest, newcomer.”

“You rest.”

“Whether you understand or not,” he said, his voice fading, “the effect is the same.”

“Stop,” I said. “I don’t think that, now, my life ...”

“No,” his voice faded more, “not your life. I was talking about that, about *seemiya*.”

After that, he didn’t say anything. Wrapped in the layers of covers, his body was motionless, but after a brief time it trembled very slightly. Who knows how long I stood there silently watching. Eventually I began to think that perhaps it was my imagination. Just then I heard footsteps and I went outside.

A small crowd was advancing toward me. When they got close, someone in the crowd asked, “Where did he go?”

“He’s here,” I said and pointed with my head toward the room. Some of them went inside. Others started looking at the room over each other’s

shoulders. Then two men emerged and, pushing their way through the crowd, went out quickly. Some more men came out of the room and others went inside. Now there was also a crowd behind me and, pushing me to one side, several people from it went in. After a while, the sounds of footsteps echoed throughout the palace and the pots of water outside the room got broken. The crowd in front of me grew so large that the door of the room became hidden from my view. Moving me aside, people were going to the front and then moving back again.

Eventually I became convinced that they had already become oblivious to my presence. I turned right and went forward. Again, I turned right and went forward. After several turns, I saw the white curve of the broken arch peeking out from the pile of rubble.

Beyond that, as he had said, the way was clear. □

—*Translated by Jane Shum and Muhammad Umar Memon*