

"Tainaron" by Leena Krohn, 1998

Tainaron - Mail from another city

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TAINARON - MAIL FROM ANOTHER CITY

by Leena Krohn

Dedication

Leena Krohn - "Tainaron: Mail from another city"

Translated by Hildi Hawkins

You are not in a place; the place is in you.

Angelus Silesius

For Elias, J.H. Fabre and the house of the Queen Bees

The meadow and the honey-pattern - the first letter

How could I forget the spring when we walked in the University's botanical gardens; for there is such a park here in Tainaron, too, large and carefully tended. If you saw it you would be astonished, for it contains many plants that no one at home knows; even a species that flowers underground.

But most of all I like the meadow attached to the gardens, where only wild flowers grow: cornflower, cotton thistle, toadflax, spiked speedwell. But you would be wrong if you supposed them to be ordinary flowers of the field. No, they are some kind of hybrid, supernaturally large. Many of the knapweeds are as tall as a man, and their corollas are as broad as a human face; but I have also seen flowers into which one can step as if into a sunny bower.

It gives me pleasure to imagine that I might one day take you there, beneath the thistles. Their lovely corymbs are veiled by a downy web, which floats high above like the crowns of trees on a beach promenade.

You would enjoy a visit to the meadow, for in Tainaron it is summer and one can look at the flowers face to face. They are as open as the day itself and the hieroglyphs of the honey-patterns are precise and clear. We gaze at them, but they gaze only at the sun, which they resemble. It is so difficult to believe, in the warmth of the day's heart - just as difficult as before the face of children - that the colour and light of which they are made are matter, and that some time, soon, this very night, their dazzle will be extinguished and will no longer be visible.

Much happens in the meadow; it is a stage for fervent activity and a theatre of war. But everything serves just one purpose: immortality. The insects who are pursuing their own interests there do not know that they are at the same time fulfilling the flowers' hidden desires, any more than the flowers understand that to the insects, whom they consider their slaves, they are life and livelihood. Thus the selfishness of each individual works, in the meadow, for the happiness of all.

But it is not only the ordinary hover-flies and sawflies that come to the meadow of the botanical

gardens to amuse themselves: the idle cityfolk spend their free moments here, whiling away their time in a way that is undeniably strange to us.

‘Admiral! Admiral!’ I heard Longhorn shout delightedly one Sunday, when once again we were wandering along the paths that criss-cross the meadow. 16

I looked around me past the flower-stalks - some of them were as strong as the trunks of young birch trees - but I could not see whom Longhorn had been talking to until he pointed to the corolla of an orchid-like flower. On its brilliantly red, slightly mottled lips there sat - or rather, skipped about on the spot - someone who seemed very anxious and very happy. 17

This Tainaronian waved all his legs at Longhorn, and began to whine earnestly: ‘This way, ladies and gentlemen, please don’t be shy!’ 18

I must admit that his behaviour bewildered me, for he went on with his unsteady dance, bouncing from one petal to another and from time to time rubbing his backside against it. All of a sudden he dropped limply flat on his face and seemed to chew enthusiastically on the fine, downy fluff that straggled around the base of the lip. Well, we were in a public place, and I turned my face away from such debauchery. 19

But Longhorn peeped at my face and began to smile; and that only made me more angry. 20

‘What a puritan!’ he said. ‘You disapprove of lonely people’s most innocent and cheapest weekend amusements? They make love to the flowers and the flowers make them drunk; they go from flower to flower and at the same time pollinate them; is that not beneficial to the entire meadow, the entire city?’ 21

At that very moment Longhorn’s friend leaned over toward us from the broad, generously curving lip of the orchid, which swayed and rocked violently beneath him. Now I could see that he was stained from head to foot with sticky pollen, and when I looked upward, shading my eyes from the sun, a sweet droplet trickled from his long, fumbling proboscis and on to my lips. I licked it away; it was not unpleasant, but at the same time I remembered some lines I had read long ago. 22

Appeased, I would have liked to have recited them at once to Longhorn, but his friend was now speaking incessantly. 23

‘My dear friends,’ the Admiral stammered, ‘I wager you have never seen nectaries like these, aaaah, follow me, quickly, I know the way...’ 24

And with that he disappeared into the depths of the huge corolla, so that I could make out only one of his hind legs, wriggling deep in the quivering cavity. 25

‘No,’ I said finally, ‘I will not go in there.’ 26

‘Well then,’ said Longhorn amicably, ‘let us continue on our way. Perhaps I may introduce you some other time. Let us continue now, and see whether the meadowsweet has flowered.’ 27

As we wandered beneath the flowers, I knew their desire and their thirst, knew that what was visible of them, all their finery, was merely a stepping-stone for their seed. And I could not stop myself from teasing Longhorn by reciting the lines that the foolish Admiral had just recalled to my mind: 28

For what are anthers worth or petals 29

Or halo-rings? Mockeries, shadows 30

Of the heart of the flower, the central flame! 31

He seemed absent-minded as he listened, and finally he interrupted me. 32

‘Can’t you hear?’ 33

Quite right, I thought I could distinguish a desperate howling that came from the south, from the other side of the field. This was what Longhorn had been listening for, throughout my recitation. 34

We had turned in the right direction, for we did not have far to go before we heard an anxious voice panting, ‘I’m here, here!’, and we saw, once more, a flower as big as a room, this time a glowing ultramarine, where a little mannikin was struggling, apparently stuck in its funnel-like stigma. 35

‘Well, well,’ said Longhorn, glumly, ‘this is just what I expected. This is a vincetoxicum, a fly-trap.’ 36

And he directed his words to the ensnared creature: ‘You are not the first to have met this fate.’ 37

And Longhorn climbed nimbly into the sparkling blue corolla, leaning on the axils of the stem. Without delay and briskly he grasped the victim beneath the arms. Hup! - and at the same moment there was a hissing sound like silk tearing, the corolla sagged downward, and both the helper and the flower’s prisoner rolled on to the lawn. 38

But before I could reach them under the broken herb, both had risen to their feet and were brushing pollen off themselves, so that the air was dusty with a glittering haze. 39

‘But you are limping,’ said Longhorn sternly to the shy creature he had saved. 40

‘Just a little accident,’ said the luckless one, glancing at the ravaged plant as if a sudden attack could still be expected. ‘There was some kind of trap in there....’ 41

‘Never trust a flower,’ Longhorn advised. ‘Next time, think where you put your head.’ 42

I do not believe that the flower’s victim intended ever to return to the meadow. He was already limping off under equally treacherous plants, and had forgotten to say thank you. Longhorn linked arms with me, and I was grateful, for I felt I needed support, as if it had been me who had suffered in the prison of the vincetoxicum. 43

The meadow murmured around us as I thought, and its scents began to make both of us feel faint. We walked under a clouds of meadowsweet - they were indeed in full flower - but at that moment I would rather have been walking on regular, hard, reliable paving stones. 44

But before me there constantly rose new eddies, glowing with light, strange, incomprehensible in their silence. I saw the silky glimmer of the flowers, their wings and carinas, I saw their dull down and their purple lustre and their seeds, which a gust of wind hurled from their tight 45

capsules. Ouch! one of them hit my cheek, hurting me; it was as big as a cartridge, while others popped as they opened so that I jumped into the air. I heard thuds as nutlets fell from their open hulls, and sulphur-yellow spurs and swollen lips barred my way. My neck was tickled by the fleecy tips of bracts, bristles and seed-down, and the searing colours forced their way in through my pupils, however much they tried to shrink, and into my nostrils, palate, ears the cries of the honey-pattern and thousands of impudent scents.

‘No, we do not know them,’ I said to Longhorn, and he inclined his head silently. 46

Across the ground, which hid all the roots, the cold of the approaching evening began to move. 47
While the sun still blazed on those large faces, which were now closing, I had not doubted or asked. But as soon as the first pale portent of withering rose toward the sky and we turned toward the city, all I knew with certainty was that I had was as lost as I had been before.

The hum of the wheel - the second letter 48

At night I awoke to a rattling and a ringing from the kitchenette. I am sure you know that 49
Tainaron is located in a volcanic zone. Scientists claim that we have already arrived in a period when a large eruption is to be expected, so fateful that it may mark the destruction of the entire city.

So what? Do not suppose that it effects the lives of the Tainaronians. The shudders of the night 50
are forgotten, and in the dazzle of morning, in the market-place through which I often take a short cut, a honeyed haze glows in the fruit baskets, and the paving beneath my feet is eternal once more.

And in the evening I look at the enormous Ferris wheel, whose circumference, centre and radii 51
are marked out with thousands of points of light, like stars. Ferris wheel, wheel of fortune.... Sometimes my gaze fastens itself to its spinning and I seem to hear, until sleep comes, the constant humming of the wheel, which is the voice of Tainaron itself.

I do not believe that I have ever seen so many ages and so many gods at the same time as in 52
Tainaron. Where else but Tainaron can the eye encounter, in a single glance, the vanishing spires of cathedrals, the liquid gold of the cupolas of minarets and the pure capitals of a Doric temple? Here they rise, side by side and yet incomparable, each of them alone.

But in many buildings here there is something ill-proportioned, something that is almost ridicu- 53
lous and makes one think of theatrical scenery. Where does that impression come from? The decoration of the friezes of the palace of supreme justice is ridiculously ornate, while essential parapets and canopies have been omitted from the chamber of commerce. And sometimes, when I begin to grow tired on my walks, I feel dizzy in streets and at crossroads, for the buildings look as if they are leaning and moving in the wind....

Yesterday I walked through an arcade, airy and light, stepping on paving laid by a master, and 54
my gaze caressed the resilient columns, the glittering mosaics of the window recesses. The arcade came to an end, I crossed the square - and got a slap in the face. Before me there swaggered a concrete wall raised on elephants’ feet, a featureless, gloomy variation of the colonnade I had just left, insulting and crushingly heavy. But it, too, is part of Tainaron, like the

piece of ancient stone wall at the eastern edge of the city, in whose crevices a sand martin nests.

Do you know, I am sometimes startled when, from amid the throng, a snout-like face sways toward me, above which fumble antennae, supple as lashes, or when, in a café, a waiter approaches my table, his mandibles protruding just like those of a dragonfly-grub. And yesterday in the tram, a creature sat down next to me, his form recalling that of a leaf; he looked so light that I could have blown him away into the air like a dry weed. 55

I have met someone who supplies a special thread for the needs of the whole of Tainaron. It is so fine, so durable and so elastic that no industrially produced thread can bear comparison. He secretes it from the rear of his body, as much as 150 metres in 24 hours. The glittering filament, finer than a hair, is far less than a denier in thickness. When a ray of sunlight struck it at the window at which I was examining it, I saw the thread blaze with all the colours of the spectrum. 56

I should like a dress made only of this thread; a garment lighter, more festive or more beautiful I could not imagine. 57

But it is a childish dream: I shall never have such a dress. For the filament is so sticky that it would stick to my body like a corrosive glue. 58

So what is this thread used for? Do not ask me; I do not know, and I do not wish to know. 59

Shimmer - the third letter

 60

And then the lights of evening are lit, with hundreds of reflections in water and eyes and windows. You know, don't you, that there are creatures who light up their vicinity with the glow of their own organs or parts of the body: fireflies in the gardens of the south, the glow-worm on its blade of grass and the creatures who live in moats, who carry lamps on their monstrous foreheads. Colder still is the vast lustre of rotten wood covered in honey fungus.... 61

But here in Tainaron, too, there are those who, at evening, draw glances because they secrete a fine veil of light and at times, when they become agitated, glimmer and flash. I gaze at them with admiration as they hurry past me in the street - always quickly, with almost dancing steps. They emerge from their houses only at evening, and I have no idea what they do until then, the livelong day - perhaps they merely sleep. 62

I have never seen any of them alone; they move in flocks and free groupings as if participating in some kind of formation dancing in the squares. But if it rains or if there is a fresh breeze, the sparklers go out like candles and disappear beneath the roofs. Difficulties and a severe climate, tiring work and unexpected upheavals are not for their sort. Whenever I see them I find myself thinking that there must be a party somewhere and that lots of fun is to be expected. They look so cheerful and carefree, and their rose-pink or yellowish glow would embellish any ballroom. 63

In the middle of the city there is a stairway around which Tainaronians gather in the evenings to converse or merely to watch one another. It is here that the most colourful, the strangest, the most elegant, the richest and the most tattered of all meet, on these broad steps, worn over many centuries. The Fireflies, too - is that not a good name for these little shimmerers? - are seen here as soon as darkness falls, as long as the weather is calm and warm. 64

I feel melancholy when I look at them, but I have never tried to approach them. I do not even believe that they speak any of the city's official languages; I do not know whether they speak at all. They are as graceful as dawn, as fine and light as the first flush of youth that no one has ever lived. 65

Recently I have betaken myself on many evenings to the steps to rejoice in their glimmer. They do not notice me, but when they pass - dance! - past me and past the beggars and past the pomp of the blue-belted knight, hope quivers and the spirit of spring gusts around them as freshly as if nothing had ever yet been lost forever. 66

But I must tell you, too, that when, yesterday morning, I crossed the square on the way to a certain side-street, I saw in the ditch a dusty rag, with a few pitying backs bowed over it. I passed it by without stopping, but when, at the corner of the street, I stopped to look, I saw it being lifted from the ground and carried away. It was only then that I understood that I had seen one of the sparklers, but this time quite alone. It was no longer glimmering, even palely; it was just a small, dark mass. The spark of joy, the gleam of life itself, had been extinguished. Wherever, whenever I happen to witness its destruction, bitter pain, seemingly incurable, weakens my sight and eats away from me, too, the small days of life. 67

But tonight in the city the Fireflies were on the move once more, as many in number as flocks of birds in spring, more joyful and glimmering more strongly than ever before. 68

Their mother's tears - the fourth letter

 69

There are strange houses in one of the suburbs. They are like goblets, very narrow and high, and to a certain extent they recall piles of ashes; but their reddish walls are as strong as concrete. In them live a countless mass of inhabitants, small but very industrious folk, who are in constant motion. They all resemble each other so closely that I should never learn to recognise any of them. One, however, is an exception. 70

It is already a long time since I asked Longhorn whether, one day, he would take me to one of those houses. 'Why do they interest you?' he asked. 'Their architecture is so extraordinary,' I said. 'Perhaps you know someone there? Perhaps I could go there with you sometime?' 71

'If you wish,' said Longhorn; but he did not look particularly keen. 72

Yesterday, at last, Longhorn took me to one of those dwellings. At the entrance was a doorman with whom he exchanged a few words and who set off to accompany me. 'We shall meet this evening,' shouted Longhorn, and disappeared into the gaudy bustle of Tainaron. 73

I was led along dim and intricate corridors that opened on halls, warehouses and living spaces of different sizes. Past me rushed large numbers of people; all of them seemed to be in a hurry and in the midst of important tasks. But I was taken to the innermost room of the house, at whose door stood more guards. There was no window in the room, but it was nevertheless almost unbearably bright, although I could not see the source of the light. 74

I certainly realised that there were other people in the room, but I could see only one. She was immeasurably larger than all the others, monumental, all the more so because she stayed in one place, unmoving. Her dimensions were enormous: her egg-shaped head grazed the roof of the vault and, in its half recumbent position, her breadth extended from the doorway to the back of 75

the room. As I stepped inside and stood by the wall (there was hardly room anywhere else), there came from her mouth a creaking sound which I interpreted as a welcome.

‘Show respect for the queen,’ hissed my guide, and knelt down. Unaccustomed to such gestures, I felt embarrassed, but I followed his example. 76

Some time passed before any attention was paid to me. By the walls of the room, around the queen, rushed creatures whose task was evidently to satisfy all her needs. I soon realised that they were necessary, for the queen was so formless that she herself could hardly take a step. And I concluded that she could not possibly have gone out through the door; she must live and die within these walls, without ever seeing even a flicker of sun. Her plight horrified me, and I wanted to leave the glowing cave quickly. 77

At that moment the creaking voice startled me. I realised that the queen had turned her head a little so that she was now staring at me languidly, at the same time sipping a milky fluid from a goblet held under her infinitesimal jaw. 78

The straw fell from her lip, and new croaks followed. With difficulty, I made out the following words: ‘I know what you’re thinking, you little smidgeon.’ 79

‘I’m sorry,’ I stammered, and vexation made me flushed. 80

‘You think, don’t you, that I am some kind of individual, a person, admit it!’ 81

As she went on speaking, her voice grew deeper, and it was as if it began to buzz. It was a most extraordinary voice, for it seemed to be made up of the murmur of hundreds of voices. 82

‘Yes, indeed, I mean....’ I grew completely confused for a moment and sat down on my heels, as kneeling on the hard floor was too tiring. 83

‘Quite so, of course,’ I said rapidly, completely puzzled. 84

‘Didn’t I guess?’ she said, and burst into laughter, which sometimes boomed, sometimes tinkled in the corridors so infectiously that in the end all the inhabitants of the building seemed to be joining in, and the entire house was laughing at my simplicity. 85

Suddenly complete silence followed, and she said, pointing at me with her long proboscis, ‘So tell me, who am I?’ 86

Before I could even think of an answer to this question, I realised at last what was happening in the back part of the room, which was filled with the queen’s great rear body. I had, in fact, been aware all the while that something was being done incessantly, but the nature of that activity hit me like a thunderbolt. Bundles had been carried past me, but it was only at the third or fourth that I looked more closely and saw: they were new-born babies. 87

The queen was giving birth! She was giving birth incessantly. And just as I realised that, I seemed to hear from all around me the din of a hammer, commands, the chirrup of a saw, and everywhere there hovered the stench of building mortar. I realised that more and more storeys were being added to the house, and that it was reaching ever higher into the serenity of the sea of air. The sounds of construction reached me even from deep under the ground, and in my mind’s eye I could see corridors branching beneath the paving stones like roots, greedily growing from day to day. The tribe was increasing; the house was being extended. The city was growing. 88

‘You are the mother of them all, your majesty,’ I replied, humbly. 89

‘But what is a mother?’ she squealed, and suddenly her voice rose to a piercing height, as one of her antennae lashed through the air above my head like a whip. 90

I retreated and pressed myself to the wall, although I understood that she would not be able to come any nearer. 91

‘She from whom everything flows is not a someone,’ the queen hissed through her wide jaws, like a snake. I gazed at her, bewitched. 92

‘You came to see me, admit it!’ she growled, more deeply than I dared think. ‘But you will be disappointed! You are already disappointed! Admit it!’ 93

‘No, not in the least,’ I protested, anxiously. 94

‘But there is no me here; look around you and understand that! And here, here in particular, there is less of me than anywhere. You think I fill this room. Wrong! Quite wrong! For I am the great hole out of which the city grows. I am the road everyone must travel! I am the salty sea from which everyone emerges, helpless, wet, wrinkled...’ 95

Her voice chided me warmly, like a great ocean swell. As she spoke, she glanced languidly behind her, at her formless, mountainous rear, from whose depths her latest offspring were being helped into the brightness of the lamps. They were all born silently, as if they were dead. 96

But suddenly I saw something gush from her eyes; it splashed on to the floor and the walls and wetted all my clothes. 97

She was no longer looking at me, and I rose and left the room, wet with the queen’s tears. 98

The burden - the fifth letter 99

I have not told you that I am already living at my second address here in Tainaron. There were some difficulties with my first apartment, so vague that I have not written about them earlier, but at the same time serious enough to force me to move. 100

For my first week I lived in a northern suburb, in a building which must once have been plastered in pale green, but had since fallen badly into decay. The plaster had split off in great flakes, and the spaces they left behind them brought to mind faces and patterns seen long ago. At first, nevertheless, I liked both the house and the apartment a great deal: a room and small kitchen on the first floor, with a window opening on to a short, peaceful street. 101

Then, one night, I woke up. It was perhaps my third or fourth night. My upstairs neighbours were making a noise, and it was this which had woken me. Someone was moving a heavy piece of furniture - that is what it sounded like, at least - dragging it back and forth across the floor above my ceiling. I looked at the clock: it was a little past one. For some time I lay awake, waiting for the noise to end, but when the din went on I got up, angry and tired, to look for something with which to knock on the ceiling. I could not find anything; I had not yet bought even a broom for the apartment. 102

I opened the door that led to the stairway and listened: it seemed to me that the whole house must have woken up. But the noise was much fainter in the stairwell, and no one else had got 103

up to wonder what it was. The calm light of the street-lamp drew a beautiful ornament in the cracked marble of the wall of the stairway.

I lay down once more and stared at the ceiling. It looked at me as if it were shaking under the heavy thumps that went on, one after another. I thought I had lain there for a long time, I thought it was already morning, when the noise suddenly ceased and it was as if everything was abruptly interrupted. When I glanced at the clock, I realised that it had all lasted for less than an hour. 104

The following night as I went to bed, I had already forgotten the matter. But my sleep was interrupted again by precisely the same kind of sound as on the previous night, and at exactly the same time. I tried to remain calm, and took up a book. I even leafed through it (it was the flora you gave me long ago), but the incessant knocking prevented me from understanding anything. The hands of the clock moved as if some nocturnal force were hindering them, but when they finally reached two, peace returned as suddenly as it had been broken. 105

The next day, I saw the upstairs resident in a small neighbourhood shop opposite our house. She was a fragile old spinster with astonishingly thin limbs, who supported herself with a slender stick with an elegantly turned head - it represented a creature with a beak and horns. The lady was known well in the shop and was served with respect. In the midst of her purchases she turned to me and asked, in a surprisingly strong, trumpet-like voice, 'Well, how do you find us?' 106

I had not in the least expected that she would know who I was. My landlord had only once pointed her out to me, through the window, when I was signing the rental agreement. 107

'That old lady lives above you,' was all he had said, and I had glanced at my neighbour in passing from my first-floor perspective. 108

'I am Pumilio,' the old lady said now, and now it was my turn to introduce myself; but I am sure that I was unable entirely to banish the quiver of suspicion from my face as she continued, immediately: 'Have you settled in to your new apartment?' 109

As she asked the question, quickly and animatedly, I thought her gaze held real curiosity, quite out of proportion to the formality of the question. 110

I hesitated, but managed to say: 'Thank you, it is a comfortable apartment. But at night I find it difficult to sleep.' 111

I took fright at my own boldness, and watched her closely. 112

'Really? Just fancy, and you are still so young. I am already quite old, as you see, but I sleep well. Quite well!' she repeated, examining me through her wide, motionless pupils. 113

I did not know what to think. She left the shop before me, leaning on her beautiful stick, and proceeding with some difficulty. But on the threshold she turned: 'Tonight I am sure you will be able to sleep.' 114

And she smiled, her mouth closed. 115

I hoped it was some kind of promise. I fell asleep quickly and, it may be said, in good faith, but my sleep was interrupted again in the same way and at the same time as on the previous 116

two nights. Exhaustion and rage pounded at my forehead, but now I listened to the sounds from the floor above more closely than before. In particular, I tried to make out the tapping of Miss Pumilio's stick on the floor, for it seemed to me that it would be very difficult, if not impossible, for her to move without support. But all I could hear was heavy thumps and dragging sounds, and in addition I could see clearly in the light of the reading-lamp that the ceiling-lamp, a glass ball, was rocking slowly in its mount.

It began to seem incredible to me that Miss Pumilio, who was old, frail and, what is more, an invalid, could be capable, night after night, of the kinds of trials of strength that the noisy events upstairs would seem to presuppose. But above all I asked myself: why would she do anything like that? What reasons could force her to move furniture around in the middle of the night? 117

I could think of only two reasons, and both of them were linked with fear. First: Miss Pumilio feared something so strongly that, every night, she built a barricade in front of her door, using her heaviest furniture. Did that seem likely? Not really, because things were dragged above my head in a number of different directions - remember this - , and besides, the mornings, when she would have had to have taken down her fortifications, were silent. Second: Miss Pumilio wanted me to be afraid, perhaps because, for one reason or another, she wanted me to move out. 118

On the fourth night, as soon as I awoke - and it happened a few dozen seconds before the noise began (and this time I was absolutely certain it would happen again) - I was extraordinarily afraid. It was as if the consuming fear that I had imagined Miss Pumilio felt (or that she wished me to feel) had, that night, been transferred to me. Most repugnant of all to me was that the noises always began at the very same stroke of the clock. I remember saying to myself, many times: 'But it is unnatural! It is unnatural!' 119

This time, however, I did not get out of bed, and the most difficult thing of all for me would have been to try to do anything to stop the noise. I would not have gone upstairs for any price, or rung Miss Pumilio's doorbell and enquired what the matter was and whether she could not do whatever she was doing at some more civilised hour. 120

Why was it so impossible for me? I will tell you at once: because my mind was afflicted by a suspicion that was difficult to dismiss. You see, I suspected that if I really did go upstairs, if I really did ring Miss Pumilio's doorbell and say the words I intended to say to her, she would look at me with the dim eyes of a sleeper who has just been wakened from slumber and would not understand at all, at all, what I was talking about and what had given me the right to dare deprive her of her much-needed sleep. 121

And in fact this was the ultimate reason that cast me into despair and why I never examined the origin of the noise any more closely. 122

From time to time I saw Miss Pumilio in our street or in the little neighbourhood shop. She always greeted me amicably, but no longer made conversation with me. But sometimes when I had passed her on the street, it seemed to me as if she turned to look after me, and as if her bluish mosaic eyes glowed with a feeling or thought that I did not understand. But it could also be the case that she was looking through me, and was not even thinking about me. 123

At night, I stayed awake. And to keep up my courage, I repeated to myself: 'It's nothing! Nothing! I just don't happen to understand what is behind this, but I am sure it is something' 124

quite insignificant and ordinary. I am sure I would laugh if I found out what it is, and laugh heartily.'

But above my head the rumbling continued like a very localised storm, and along the creaking floorboards was pushed and pulled something that was heavy and recalcitrant and immense, something so formless that it resembled human life. At last came night and, staring at the shaking ceiling, I felt the foundations and the cellar of the house respond to the thundering sound from above. I fled those two sledge-hammers, of which one was the earth itself, to the open air, and have never returned to that address. 125

The seventeenth spring - the sixth letter

In Tainaron, many things are different from at home. The first things that occur to me are eyes. For with many of the people here, you see, they grow so large that they take up as much as one third of their faces. Whether that makes their sight more accurate, I do not know, but I presume they see their surroundings to some extent differently from us. And, moreover, their organs of sight are made up of countless cones, and in the sunlight their lens-surfaces glitter like rainbows. At first I was troubled when I had to converse with such a person, for I could never be sure whether he was looking at me or past me. It no longer worries me. It is true that there are also people whose eyes are as small as points, but then there are many of them, in the forehead, at the ends of the antennae, even on the back. 126

Like their eyes, Tainaronians may have a number of pairs of hands and feet, too, but it does not seem to me that they run any faster than we do, or get more done in their lives. Some of them, it is true, have a jumping fork under their bellies, which they can, whenever necessary, release like a lever and thus hurl themselves forward, sometimes by dozens of metres. 128

The hustling forest of antennae and pedipalpi in the streets at rush-hour is certainly an extraordinary sight for people like us, but most difficult of all is to accustom oneself to a certain other phenomenon that marks the life of the majority of the inhabitants here in the city. This phenomenon is metamorphosis; and for me, at least, it is so strange, to my very marrow, that even to think about it makes me feel uncomfortable. For, you see, the people here live two or many consecutive lives, which may have nothing in common, although one follows from the last in a way that is incomprehensible to me. 129

We, too, change, but gradually. We are used to a certain continuity, and most of us have a character that remains more or less constant. It is different here. It remains a mystery to me what the real connection is between two consecutive lives. How can a person who changes so completely still say he is in any sense the same as before? How can he continue? How can he remember? 130

Here you can bump into a stranger, and he will come up to you like an old acquaintance and begin to remember some past amusing coincidence that you apparently experienced together. When you ask, 'When?', he laughs and answers: 'When I was someone else.' 131

But perhaps you will never discover with whom you have the honour of conversing, for they often change comprehensively and completely, both their appearance and their way of life. 132

There are also those who withdraw into total seclusion for as much as seventeen years. They 133

live in tiny rooms, no more than boxes; they do not see anyone, do not go anywhere, and hardly eat. But whether they sleep or wake there, they are continually changing and forsaking the form they had before.

Seventeen years! And when, finally, the seventeenth spring arrives, they stop out of their hermit caves into full sunlight. And there begins their only summer, for in the autumn they die; but all summer long they celebrate all the more. What a life! Do you understand it? 134

But sometimes I feel a little envious: to be able to curl up in a pupal cell without hoping for dreams, knowing that one spring one will step before the eyes of the world, new, refreshed, free from the past... 135

Farewell once more; my head is heavy and I believe a thunderstorm is brewing. I ponder the reasons why you do not reply, and there are many. Are you dead? Have you moved? The city where you lived has perhaps disappeared from the face of the earth? And can I trust the mail of Tainaron; who knows on what back-garden compost-heap my letters are languishing? Or you stand on your doormat turning my letter over in your hands; turning it over and then putting it aside unopened, on top of the pile of newspapers and advertisements that grows and grows in the dusty corner. 136

Burning on the mountain - the seventh letter

Behind the hillock where the amusement park of Tainaron is built rises another hillock, dim with distance. From time to time, at midnight moments, I have seen a fire blazing on its highest peak, small but very bright. 137

How I loved to look at it once. I thought about campfires and guitars, shared meals and hikers resting and telling stories after the exertions of the road. But later I began to suspect that it was perhaps not, after all, a campfire, but some kind of beacon, for it always lit so high up and it can be seen so far away in every direction; particularly, however, down in the city of Tainaron. 139

Some days ago I happened to mention the fire on the mountain to Longhorn, and I immediately felt embarrassed, for my question made his face grow harsh and severe. I had hardly ever seen such an expression on his calm face. 140

‘Do not look at it; it is not for you,’ he enjoined me quickly. ‘When the time of the new moon comes, draw the curtains and go to sleep.’ 141

The time of the new moon.... Longhorn was right. I had last seen the fire about a month earlier, and that night there had been a new moon. The earth had cast a long shadow, and perhaps it was for that reason that the fire blazed so large and solitary. And had not two cycles of the moon passed since the earlier blaze? 142

Even though Longhorn had grown so uncommunicative-looking, I made so bold as to ask: ‘Tell me: who lights those bonfires?’ 143

‘They are no bonfires,’ he said, and his voice did not grow any milder. ‘They are not intended to delight the eye, and their ashes are not used for baking root vegetables.’ 144

‘What are they, then?’ I asked, and I realised my voice had dropped to a whisper. 145

‘Burnt offerings, sacrifices. They are sacrifices,’ he replied. 146

I felt I had known before I asked. 147

‘Who is sacrificed?’ I asked. In admiring the blaze, had I not noted a light smell hovering over the city? 148

‘Why do you keep asking?’ Longhorn cried, growing angry. ‘They set fire to themselves.’ 149

But I could not stop; I went on, stubbornly: ‘But who are they? What do they want?’ 150

Longhorn had turned his back to me and was pretending to examine my books. The conversation seemed repugnant in the extreme to him, and I was ashamed of my own tactlessness. Nevertheless, I felt that if I could solve the mystery of the fire I would also understand why some people chose destruction as if it were a privilege. 151

But Longhorn shrugged his back-armor wearily. 152

‘What do they want, you ask. They are sectarian delusions. To redeem Tainaron, I suppose that is what they want. That the Tainaronians should live differently from how they do. That they should wake up from their sleep; that is what they say. Mad!’ 153

And he shook his fists at the mist-clad mountain that bowed over the city. ‘How many innocent souls will they yet take with them to the pyre?’ 154

Yesterday it was new moon once more. Early in the evening, I had done exactly as Longhorn had instructed me: I had drawn the curtains across my windows. But after I had gone to bed I could not sleep, and it seemed to me that a red colour was shining through the curtains. 155

Then I got up, went on to the balcony and immediately saw the balefire, high on the mountain in the darkness of the new moon. None of the lights of Tainaron - not its neon colours, not the lights of its Ferris wheel - burned as brightly as the fire on the mountain. There it blazed, attracting the gazes of the city-dwellers as a lamp attracts moths. Even from miles away it was dazzling, and made my face glow. 156

Last night was calm, and the sacrifice burned evenly. It was a candle on the table, the night’s focus and its terrible purifier. Who was he who was burning with such a high and unwavering flame? What did he believe he knew that no one in the valley of Tainaron knew, which was more than life, more than his own boiling tears and his scalding eyes? Was it as clearly visible to him as the fire on the mountain was to me? To me, lingering on the balcony; to me, who could not take my eyes off the fire, was no justification to him, no expiation, no comfort. 157

And I had gazed on the blaze as if it were a midnight flower, rejoicing! 158

No, as long as the sacrifice burned, I could not go to sleep, could not concentrate on anything. I stood on the balcony until he, whoever he was, had turned from fire into embers and from embers into ashes. 159

Will there ever be a new moon when there is no need to light a fire high on the hill? 160

Their innumerable dwellings - the eighth letter 161

Tainaron is full of voices of a kind I have not heard anywhere else. Here I have come to realise that there is no clear dividing line between music and language. For the citizens, you see, secrete their voices from themselves which can be interpreted sometimes as speech, sometimes 162

as music. I do not mean they sing; that is, at least, not very common here. Neither do they play instruments of any kind; instead, their voices are created with the help of muscles, glands and guts or chitin armature.

Their voices may well up from a surprising depth, as if from leagues away, so that it is no wonder that they are often so difficult to locate. For, you see, the Tainaronians' way of life is a very curious one. You will perhaps not have heard that they often have a number of dwellings, but not only in the way that we have city apartments and summer villas. No: the people here are able to live in many dwellings at the same time, as in a nest of boxes. Some of them carry their innermost apartment, a one-roomed flat which fits their dimensions like a glove, with them everywhere. But this has the drawback that one cannot always make sense of what they say, for it echoes and reverberates from the walls of their private apartments. It is also vexing to me that I cannot always tell where the dwelling ends and its inhabitant begins. 163

Poor things, who never come among people without this innermost shield. It reflects the terrible vulnerability of their lives. Their little home may be made of the most diverse ingredients: grains of sand, bark, straw, clay, leaves.... But it protects them better than others are protected by armour, from every direction, and it is a direct continuation of themselves, much more so than clothes are to you or me. But if it is taken away from them, they die - perhaps simply of shame, perhaps because their skins are too soft for the outside air, or because they do not have any skin at all. 164

Who would be so cruel as to tear from them this last shield! Oh, I have heard that such things, too, happen here in Tainaron; I have been startled by the moans of death-throes in the deeps of the night. 165

But I have my own theory concerning why this happens. For, you see, those who constantly drag their houses with them remain unknown to other people. Once can gain only a brief glimpse of them, if that; they are always in hiding. 166

And then there are those who cannot bear such a situation, those who wish to see everything face to face and to reveal, open, show the whole world the nakedness of things.... Now and then the temptation becomes overwhelming to them, and they split open the house of some poor unfortunate. I awake to shrieking, sigh and turn over - and soon fall asleep again. 167

Like burying beetles - the ninth letter

You do not reply. It is something that stays in my mind almost incessantly. The reasons for this silence are perhaps independent of you; or then again not. But I continue writing - that freedom I do allow myself - and I believe, I trust - well, no more of that! 168

There is much here that reminds me of former things, particularly of the city in which we once lived, close to each other. For example, a particular office window brings to mind another shop window on the far side of the green and white Oceanos. 170

I walked past it almost every day, but I never stopped in front of it, because it was always the same. Behind the glass hung a skilfully draped blue curtain; in front of it were set a stone urn and a wreath of flowers tied with a white silk ribbon. 171

There is such a shop in Tainaron, too, but its windows display not urns but small, very beautiful 172

boxes. One day I went inside with Longhorn, who continues to guide me patiently from day to day in this city.

Someone had died, someone who I heard only now had been alive and who had known Longhorn, perhaps well, so that it was his task now to care for the funeral arrangements. I followed Longhorn because I had often, passing by, looked at those small boxes, and I wanted to examine them more closely. 173

The shop was empty as we stepped inside, but on the shelves that ran along the walls I saw more boxes, of all shapes, some smaller even than matchboxes, and the largest the size of books. They were covered in multicoloured fine fabrics, or painted or engraved with marks and symbols whose meaning I did not understand. What astonished me the most was their smallness. Among the Tainaronians, it is true, there are some very small races, but even for the smallest baby these boxes were far too small. 174

‘Are these urns?’ I asked Longhorn, who was examining brochures at the counter. ‘Are they used for dead people’s ashes?’ 175

‘Ashes? No, there is no crematorium here,’ he said. ‘They are used for a single organ, often an eye or an antenna. But sometimes the family may chose part of a wing, a part with a beautiful pattern.’ 176

I fingered one of the boxes. It was as delicate and pretty as a confectionery box, and lined in white silk. I remembered that I had once, as a child, received just such a box, in which there had been sweeties. It had been Easter morning, and I had just been allowed to get out of bed for the first time after a bout of bronchitis. I am still seeking the purity, the silken whiteness and the colours of the metallic foil of that convalescent morning, its pussy-willows, its feather-tufts, in the world. 177

‘What happens to the rest of the body?’ I asked, wrapped in my thoughts, but Longhorn did not reply, for out of the back room, at that moment, stepped the funeral director, a very imposing man. Most noticeable about him was, however, not his size, but his colours: they were as bright as the complicated patterns of the boxes. His chest ranged from green to lemon, while the knobs of his antennae were as yellow as clementines. He bowed elegantly, and was surrounded by a cloud of scent which I recognised only after a moment: it was undoubtedly musk. 178

He became absorbed, with Longhorn, in a conversation conducted in low voices, in conclusion of which one of the boxes was chosen from the shelf, round and grass-green, with sky-blue crescent moons. 179

When the funeral director turned to tap at the cash register, I went up to Longhorn and asked once more: ‘What happens to the rest of the body?’ 180

I was a little startled at Longhorn’s look, for it betrayed irritation, from which I understood immediately that my question was unseemly. All the same, I waited for his answer. 181

‘Do you really want to know?’ he asked. 182

‘Why not? I am interested in everything,’ I said with some hauteur, and when he continued in silence, I asked again, with real curiosity, ‘Is there something secret about it, then?’ 183

‘Very well,’ said Longhorn, somewhat coolly. Suddenly he stepped up to the funeral director 184

and whispered a couple of words to him, pointing in my direction.

The funeral director looked at me strangely, from head to foot, bowed once more in his cultivated way, and asked me to follow him. I looked interrogatively at Longhorn, and he growled: 'Go on, I'll stay here.' 185

The funeral director had already reached the back room and was waiting for me, silent but smiling. He opened a door leading to a badly lit stairway, which smelt of cellars and fish; or that is what I thought then. The funeral director gestured for me to walk in front of him, but when I shook my head he stepped past me into the gloom. My curiosity had now completely disappeared, but I followed the strange figure lower and lower down the steep and uneven stairs, regretting my frivolous wish for information. The deeper we went, the more uncomfortable I felt, above all because of the increasingly strong smell. Finally I stopped, intending to return to ground level without delay, but as it turned out the funeral director was now behind me, so close that his yellow chest was nearly touching my back and his musky vapours mixed with still odder scents. I continued my descent unhappily, for one way or another the man was pushing me forward, gently enough, it is true, but so firmly that it was no longer impossible for me to retreat. 186

'The fish is rotten,' I thought, but the smell of decay had already grown to a stench that filled my lungs with nausea. I scarcely realised that we had arrived in a great vault, and that it was filled with an extraordinary bustling. 187

I could no longer see my guide anywhere. I felt faint, and pressed my back against the damp stone wall. I already realised that I had been brought into a sepulchre. Before me on the earthen floor lay carcasses without number, but about them was such a ceaseless bustle that at times it looked as if there were still some degree of life in them. Around me moved dozens of creatures that were reminiscent in their appearance of the funeral director, but whose clothing was - if possible - still more brilliant. The more closely I examined them and their work, the more they reminded me of the toil of burying beetles. 188

I had descended into the Hades of Tainaron. I had asked: 'What happens to the bodies?', and the answer to my question was now before my eyes. One of the most prosaic and indispensable of the functions of the city of Tainaron was carried out here, shielded from the gaze of passers-by; but as I looked at their toil, my horror gave way and made space for impartial examination, even respect. 189

I spoke of Hades and a sepulchre, but in reality the space in which I found myself served the opposite purpose: it was a dining room and a nursery. Those who toiled here were not merely workers; they were also, above all, mothers. Now I could see that around every larger form flocked a swarm of smaller creatures, its offspring. As they did the work that had to be done for life in this city to be at all possible, these workers were at the same time feeding their heirs; and if the way in which they did it was not to my taste, where would I find more convincing proof of the never-broken alliance between destruction and florescence, birth and death? 190

So: there was a carcass, of which one could no longer detect who or what it had been when it was alive, so decomposed were its features. But I no longer felt sick, although I saw one of the mothers poking about in its pile of dross. For that was where the mother sought nourishment for her heirs, her snout buried in the stinking carcass, and look! there glistened a dark droplet, 191

which one of the little ones drank, and after a moment the second received its share, and the third; no one was forgotten.

And here, then, was their work: to distil pure nectar from such filth, to extract from the slimy liquid of death health, strength and new life. How could I ever complain about what took place in the Hades of Tainaron. Truly, it is a laboratory compared to which even the greatest achievements of the alchemists are put to shame; but all that is done there is what the earth achieves every year when it builds a new spring from and on what rotted and died in the autumn. 192

‘Have you seen enough?’ someone asked behind me. I turned and saw Longhorn, who was standing at the mouth of the corridor, looking at me in a troubled way. I do not know whether his expression was caused merely by the stench, which my own nose hardly sensed any longer, or whether it was real grief. For his friend had just died, and I had hardly spared a thought for his feelings. But when our eyes met, I, too, felt the bite of suffering. 193

The kindness of his eyes! How had I never noticed it before. And they were so dazzlingly black, so wise and alive.... But in fact I have seen just such a gaze before, and more than once. I have seen it - do not be shocked - in your eyes, too, different as they are. I have encountered it - or seen it pass me by - among acquaintances and strangers, at parties, in department stores, in my own home, in trains, on stations and in lecture-halls, shops and cafés; in summer, in the great lime trees in the park, where cast-iron benches have been placed for the citizens; and I am sure that at unguarded moments it has also resided in my own eyes. 194

That it ever disappears! It was the impossible, and unbearable, thing that, as I turned to look behind me and met Longhorn’s eyes, was relentless in us both, and the strange meal we were following as onlookers offered no solution. 195

The soundless glitter of immense treasures - . That it could be extinguished and sink into the cold mass of raw material is if it had not been anything more than the moisture of lachrymal fluid on the surface of the cornea.... 196

‘Come away,’ said Longhorn, with unexpected softness, and we left Hades without looking at each other again. 197

The charioteer - the tenth letter

I have received a card from my home country. Yes, it was not from you; we know that. The bronze statue on the card is two thousand four hundred years old, but he whom the card shows is a mere youth. His forehead is encircled by an ornamental ribbon, and his hair curls, lightly gilded, over his ears. He holds a pair of reins in his hands, and his eyes are dark stones, glittering, mysterious and surprised. 198

But what life and riches shine from them! It is hard for me to believe that what I see is merely coloured light reflected from stone. What a coincidence that it arrived just as I had sent you my last letter! For, don’t you see, he has the same gaze, the one I was talking about, which hurts me, which I recognise everywhere. 200

But this young man is astonished at something; even his mouth is astonished, already ajar and about to open. I am sure I am not mistaken in remembering that I once saw a similar expression 201

on the face of someone who was dying; all the tubes had been disengaged, and his eyes were wide open. The same concentration marks both their faces and forces both of them forward in an invisible race.

Why is it that it is in the form of this young man's face that I should most like to remember the face of humankind.... 202

Tracks in the dust - the eleventh letter

203

Have I told you that Tainaron has a prince? As a foreigner, I was unexpectedly offered the opportunity to attend his reception. I asked Longhorn for advice as to how I should dress for the occasion and what behaviour was expected. I felt his answer was vacuous, and did not help me one bit. 204

'You can go in whatever you like,' he said. 'You can ask whatever you want.' 205

And then he added: 'It's not important, after all.' 206

'Not important?' I was astonished. 'Do you just go there as you are, straight off the street, and say whatever comes to mind to the prince?' 207

But he did not give me any more clues, and I went there by myself, in my best dress of course, but distinctly nervous. 208

The prince lives in the middle of the city, in his palace, which is surrounded by a moat. The drawbridge was down, and there were no guards to be seen. People were going in and out, and no one paid any attention to me. I had been given a piece of paper, a promissory note which I tried to proffer to some of the passers-by whom I guessed to be members of the palace staff, but no one wanted to accept it; everyone just waved their hands vaguely: 'It's not necessary.' 209

'Where does the prince hold his reception?' I asked three different times, and it was only on the third occasion that I was directed to the right place; but no one bothered to come with me as a guide, and the corridors along which I walked were empty. Through doors that had been left open I saw various different rooms: tambours, halls and stairwells, new colonnaded corridors and courtyards where landscape gardens had been built with pavilions, artificial lakes and bridges. 210

The prince received visitors in the tower at the heart of the palace, in the donjon. I saw him from a distance from the dim passageway on whose stone floor my shoes tapped alarmingly noisily. 211

The door to his reception room was wide open, and I could not see anyone else in the vicinity. 212

The salon was oval in shape and small. At its centre was a single chair, on which the prince sat. The room was very high, in fact as high as the tower, so that the prince looked as if he were sitting at the bottom of a well. 213

I stopped before stepping across the threshold, for I did not know how I should approach him. He sat motionless, but seemed to be looking me straight in the eye. He was very old and frail. The way in which the light fell around him and on to his domed head from the upper windows made the vision desolate and melancholy. 214

I think I stood there for a long time, anxiously, but just as it began to seem to me that the 215

prince was sleeping with his eyes open, his forelimb rose in an encouraging gesture, slowly and ceremoniously. I stepped into the room.

‘Your highness,’ I began, ‘I have come....’ 216

‘Yes, yes,’ he interrupted me before I had time to begin. ‘It’s perfectly clear. You can ask whatever you want.’ 217

I had prepared many kinds of questions concerning both domestic and foreign policies, trade links and tax reform, but at the moment they all fell out of my head. 218

‘May I ask, may I ask,’ I mumbled, ‘how you are?’ 219

This was, of course, completely inappropriate, I understood that myself. But I could not get anything else out of my mouth, and I looked at him, dumbly, waiting for him to rise and announce that the audience was over. 220

Strangely enough, he seemed on the contrary to be engrossed by my question, as if it were completely apt for that time and place. 221

‘As to my health, I have nothing to complain about,’ he said, in such a low voice that I had to lean forward to hear. ‘But I am worried about my ears. There is a murmuring in them all the time. Or else a ringing, of a little silver bell.’ 222

And he suddenly shook his head, so that the fluffy blue collar that surrounded his neck hissed and rustled. 223

‘And then there are the nights, they are definitely too big. They have grown larger and larger since the princess left, and the princess left thirty years ago, in her prime. You will not believe how small they were when she was still here. This small!’ 224

He stretched out two of the downy pincers of his forelimb for me to see: they were almost touching. I looked at them with polite interest and nodded. 225

The prince leaned backward in his chair and spoke now more audibly, as if with greater warmth: ‘When the princess had died, I often went into the city incognito, in strange armour. I stood by the bridge and did not let anyone by without inspecting him or her thoroughly from head to feet. But I never saw the princess again, for I should have known her in any disguise, even if she had been through the most comprehensive of metamorphoses, that you may believe. For the images of shared secrets had remained in the princess’s eyes, and they, at last, would have revealed her immediately, but in the uninterrupted flow of oncomers there flowed only the loam of strange memories....’ 226

And the prince’s voice fell. I suspected that the audience should have ended long ago, and it tired me to stand before me as the only hearer of his ancient yearning. No one came to fetch me away, and in the palace there was a soundlessness as if there were no one else there. 227

‘Do you know why we have been forgotten?’ the prince whispered unexpectedly, and his choice of words surprised me: why that ‘we’, it was not really right in this situation, and why did he lower his voice in such a familiar way? 228

‘Because it is all the same to them,’ the prince whispered, ‘what I do now, where I go or what I say, everything is permitted now. Do you understand?’ 229

‘No, I do not believe it, your highness,’ I said hesitantly, but his forelimb crooked and beckoned me closer. 230

I bent obediently toward him and came so close that I thought I heard the little silver bell he had mentioned, as well as the scent of some bitter herb. Then he whispered into my ear: ‘In reality, I am no longer the prince.’ 231

He drew away to see the effect of his words on me. I can say that they did not really have any effect. I was convinced he was speaking the truth. Only thus did the emptiness and indifference which I had encountered in the palace - and earlier - make sense. 232

‘I see you believe that I...,’ the prince said heavily. ‘But do not worry, that is not the case, not in the least. Know this: times change, but each is only one time of many. So what; it can be changed, like a change of clothes. Today I still sit in my palace. But often I ring my bell for a long while and no one comes. My shirt still bears the arms of Tainaron, but the wine which is brought to me is no longer of the same quality as before. So what. For tomorrow I shall be in exile, or my body will lie in that landscape garden on the little wooden bridge and the national guard will have pierced it with newly sharpened bayonets.’ 233

Now he finally rose to his feet - I had been expecting it for a long time - and I realised, with relief, that the audience was over. I bowed respectfully, and when I turned, I saw only my own footprints in the heavy dust that completely covered the stone floor of the donjon. 234

Their solitude proved to me with complete clarity that no one had visited the room for ages, and that the prince himself had not left it. 235

He was a lost cause. 236

The day of the great mogul - the twelfth letter 237

I do not know why I pick up my pen again. No longer because I might expect return mail. But I would like to tell someone that something strange has happened, some curious, unpleasant changes, and I have no idea what has caused them. Perhaps it is temporary, and my life will return to how it was before. Perhaps, too, the days that were like prizes, long ago, will return. 238

I have not travelled anywhere, but this city is now different. The change does not please me. When I look out, I see that it is as if it has been unclothed. The most important thing is absent; the thing that once, just a moment ago, made me strong and happy. I look at the ground, I look at the sky, and everywhere is the same absence, in the eyes that crowd the streets and the department stores as if they were seeking their lost pupils in the windows and sales counters. If I were to send you photographs of Tainaron before and Tainaron now, you would say no difference is visible, and perhaps it is so; but nevertheless I know that everything is decisively different. 239

If the sounds of the city were to be muted for a moment, I could hear a secretly crumbling sound as if a trickle of sand were falling from the side of a sandpit. And the vital force, which I believed to be inexhaustible, runs and runs somewhere where no one can use it. 240

Is this is what is known as growing old? Do I see it everywhere, although it exists only inside myself? And what once was happiness around me, was it too a mere reflection? But in that case how can I know anything of what Tainaron is, what it is like? 241

Today the book I open describes the great mogul Aurangzeb, who was a cruel tyrant. Fifteen
of his elephants fell into a cleft on a mountain road, and on the back of one of them was his
favourite wife. 242

‘Remarkable,’ writes the great mogul, ‘empty-handed I came into this world, and now, as I leave
it, I drag with me an enormous caravan of sins.... My sorrow mortifies me. Farewell, farewell,
farewell.’ 243

I force myself to get up and open the door and step out into the street. I have decided to eat,
but from the window table of the café the passers-by look as if they are dragging burdens which
are invisible but nevertheless heavy. The liquid glimmers in my cup, and soon I shall have to
swallow it. I look at it as if it were the goblet of today. 244

Under the marble table my legs wait, motionless, symmetrical, side by side. I do not know
whether I have ever sensed their existence as such. They are alive, and all at once I am scorched
by hot pity. My legs, my poor legs! Modest, sturdy and resilient, my own pillars, you too will
wither! 245

Small days, small days. The woman who, in the tramcar, takes a comb from her handbag and,
pulling it through her stiff hair, complains: ‘The comb doesn’t work, no. The concrete eats the
hair so.’ 246

A friend who sways toward me, his coat open, shaking his fingers. There was a time when he
ran from table to table, his face flushed, to proclaim that his dogma was the youth of the world.
What he says now is something quite different, quite different, but I do not listen; I mourn. The
youth of the world! 247

How we secrete words around us, so that the eye of reality may not see us! In vain! So
hopelessly thin and tattered a veil does not hide anything, and we writhe in the brightness of
destiny. No shield, no armour, and neither will flesh ever return to the word. 248

And when I pass by the statue of the Great Sleeper, around it billows a tired song: 249

Sweet is my sleep, but more to be mere stone, 250

so long as ruin and dishonour reign; 251

to bear nought, to feel nought, is my great gain; 252

then wake me not, speak in an undertone! 253

My poor friend! I saw his finger fall and he wavered across the frosty wasteland and shut
himself up in the fortress of the telephone kiosk in the square. 254

It happened there, not here in Tainaron, for these are different statues, but the days are as small
everywhere and their shape is that of a funnel. 255

I wonder if you too have noticed: there are moments when you do not wish to wish and then
you look inward and what is it that you see? An endless sequence of wishes, infinitely many 256

yous, and all of the yous are threaded on to the tough thread of memory, and in the end you yourself are no more than that thinnest of thin threads, and it quivers, tensed....

But today I walked past a chirping flock of sparrows and it fell silent as a wave of nausea swept across me and suddenly the earth gave way beneath my feet and I remembered once more that beneath Tainaron is nothing but a crust, as insubstantial as one night's ice. 257

Proof copy - the thirteenth letter

258

The rapist panted in my pursuit, reducing the distance between us with horrifying speed. Then I remembered that what I was seeing was a dream and that I therefore had an opportunity: with all my strength, I forced my feet to leave the ground, and as the murderer's filthy paw fumbled for my ankle, it slipped beyond his grasp and past the highest branches. 259

My unbelief had saved me, but the poor creature who believes that everything is true is the victim of his dreams. 260

Today I remembered that many years - many grace-filled years ago, I should say, for that is what they have been - we were walking up a street between two churches, and you said: 'The soul is what is visible.' Do you remember? 261

When I happened to look in the mirror a moment ago, you said it, from a long way off, but as clearly as you did then. I seldom look in the mirror, but always there is someone there who gives me my eyes. And the root of my nose is bluish; a line has inscribed itself at the corner of my mouth like a drypoint groove. But this is no proof copy, and the acid of everyday life corrodes, prepares that which is the soul. 262

Once you said, moaning: 'I would love you even if you were someone else.' 263

You are crazy! How the word reassured me, how calm it made me. 264

But yesterday morning I stood in front of a large department store where I planned to go and buy clothes, and the sun had just risen behind the roofs of Tainaron. I came to a halt because I happened to glance at my legs, for no particular reason; and from them grew two shadow-trees, and both of us were whole, I and the other. 265

Oh, I have something wider than a prairie, wider than Oceanos. I do not know where to put it, to whom to present it. I cannot show it; I cannot use it. It is too wide for this city; one life is too small for it. No one needs it, but today it has me flying and singing. 266

Sand - the fourteenth letter

267

The new day dawned low and cloudy. In my melancholy, I set out for a walk - alone - for Longhorn, after all, has his work, of which I know almost nothing; but I assume it is some kind of business activity. 268

I wanted to see something I had not seen before, and for that reason I set out toward the eastern part of the city, although I well remembered that Longhorn had urged me to stay away from those parts. When I asked why, he merely said that it was not safe to go there alone. 269

But it was midday, after all, and I was walking along a broad esplanade bordered on both sides 270

by high poplars which were still green. Looked at from a distance, they recall the crowns of some other tree, standing on their bases. I walked past the theatre, on whose eaves snouty caryatids slumber; that building has a particular charm. I came to a cross-street full of expensive specialist shops and pretty little cafés. I myself have often sat at their clean tables, but now I did not stop. I was in a hurry, as if on my way to some agreed meeting.

Now I came to streets which were unfamiliar. I could no longer see business plaques or inventively decorated shop windows. The buildings became more closed, dilapidated and lower. I sank into melancholy, and for a while I went on hardly glancing around me, but the unevenness of the gravel under my heels startled me. Now I realised that the streets in this part of the city were not paved, or even asphalted. They were deeply rutted, in an almost unpassable condition, but neither did there seem to be any kind of traffic any longer in these parts. Pavements, too, had been left unbuilt, and between the buildings there meandered indistinct lanes. After a few steps I was forced to ask myself: were they buildings? For is it not the case that the buildings in which we live and our friends live have straight and solid walls? Are their roofs not covered in slates or tin and are their windows not made of glass? 271

As I walked, I remembered entrances and heavy front doors whose handles were of brass, gutters that drummed in the rain, and chimneys and chimney-pipes which, seen from an attic window, looked like solitary people. And behind the window panes? There should have been the glimmer of white curtains, eyes, cats and the dim perspectives of the life of strange rooms.... 272

But there was nothing of the sort to be seen. The habitations past which I walked were lacking in all the characteristics of proper dwellings. First of all, there were no straight lines. Everything curved and twisted, meandered without direction, without clear corners. The dwellings rose from the earth, earth-coloured, made of clay and loam. They had indefinitely shaped openings in place of windows and doors. Where were the columns and capitals which one could admire in almost every square in the centre of the city? Where was the rosy golden glow of the cupolas, and the window recesses with their rich mosaic patterns? The wall-niche and the sandstone shapes that beckoned to them? The slender roof-groins and the pointed arches? The pilastered galleries and the atriums with their flowering trees? 273

I realised that there were two Tainarons, or perhaps even more, who knows.... This was a Tainaron lacking in everything that is called culture, everything which joy and hope, prosperity and ambition, can build and embellish on Earth. 274

I cannot say I liked it. 275

I walked faster than before. My intention was now to traverse this obscure and peripheral part of the city as quickly as possible and spend a moment at the sandy beach of which I had heard. After that I decided to return to the centre of the city via the northern causeway, although it is long and dull. 276

The light increased, and from somewhere the shimmer of water was reflected over the nests, cells and systems of caves that were hollowed out of the sand and the rock. From in front of me I heard an incessant rustling and scouring, as if the earth were being swept with a large brush; but there was nothing to be seen. A couple of times I heard, from behind a stony hillock, the sound of dragging and something buzzing; I was certain that a lizard or reptile was hiding 277

among the stones. I saw a couple of passers-by; they were small and fragile, dragonfly-like creatures. The last dwellings I passed were just low mounds and holes. They would offer shelter only to the most insignificant and modest beings, and they soon sank and merged into the fine, golden sand, which was certainly beautiful to look at, although it made my steps heavy and insinuated its way into my shoes and even into my mouth, making me thirsty.

Nevertheless, I decided to walk a few steps further, although I had already admitted to myself that my trip was not exactly fun. The sand spread before me in gently swelling dunes. I could no longer see any signs of the city around me. The sand radiated the same simple severity as the snow-fields at home, the allure of inviolability, dreams and emptiness. 278

As I gazed at one particular sandbank, its shape reminded me of a sledging slope which, long ago, rose in the courtyard of my childhood home. I began to be very tired, and I felt like sprawling for a moment in its softness. Suddenly I was so sleepy that my thoughts became confused: what if I freeze? 279

I took a couple of steps toward the ridge, and at the same time my attention fastened on some insignificant protuberances that were at first hardly distinguishable from the surrounding sandy plain. When I went nearer, I saw earthworks of various sizes, all of them in the form of circles, forming concentric rings. At their centre was a conical pit, symmetrical and apparently purpose-built, for wind or water could not possibly have built such exact forms. Those hollows reminded me of something.... Long ago, I must have seen something similar; but it was quite painful that I could not bring to mind where it had happened. 280

Behind the sandbank I saw yet another earthwork, larger than all the others. I climbed up to its ridge and the sand immediately began to move under my feet. Small avalanches fell down the walls of the pit here and there, soundless falls and swifter torrents, making a rustling sound as if a woman in evening dress were rushing, complete with train, through a thicket. 281

It was not until a moment later that I noticed that there was a hole deeper in the pit. At first it looked infinitesimally small, but that could not be the case, for in fact I was still so far from it that it could well be wider than the circumference of my head. It looked immeasurably deep. The grains of sand that were displaced by the heels of my shoes as soon as I moved in the slightest fell over its fragile edges. I stood where I was - insofar as there was a definite place to stand, for something was continually happening on the ridge of the earthworks, so I did not have a firm foothold - yes, I stood where I was, and I could not take my eyes off that round hole. At first I felt that the movement I thought I noticed came from the shadow of my eyelashes, for my eyelids were fluttering. Then I saw it quite clearly, without any doubt: something was moving in the hole, very deep beneath the sand; and then the walls of the pit, too, began to undulate. 282

At that moment I believe I executed a very strange and, in relation to my strength, supernatural leap, for my foothold was finally giving way and I felt myself slipping with the sand toward the grave-dark hole. 283

On no account did I climb; I made a half-vault backward, for the next moment I found myself behind the earthwork, looking at the panicles of a tussock of grass, which moved lightly at the level of my eyes. I turned my head so that I now saw nothing but sand: dim quartz granules, deep red grains of granite, crushed snail shells. The clouds had dispersed; the sun shone on the 284

shadowless sand. I felt as if I had never looked at anything so closely, because the gold of a particular vein of mica shone into my pupil, red as the embers of a fire.

I had thrown myself on the sand through the sheer weakness of fear, for I had been able to glimpse how some kind of point, a claw covered in fur or prickles, or perhaps a tooth, had flitted past the edge of the hole, but had immediately disappeared back into the darkness. 285

Later I got up and my feet took me back, but I do not remember the road; and it is of no importance. I have not yet met Longhorn, and I have no intention of telling him what happened today. 286

At this moment I could be hollow, as empty as the ants from which ant-lion grubs suck the innards and vital fluids. In writing this, I am a little ashamed, as if I wanted to disturb you by telling you this; but it is true, after all. 287

I examine my nails and the skin on the backs of my hands closely, knowing that they could be among the fragile and dry skins that are thrown over the ridge of the earthworks and which crumble to dust and disappear among the sand. 288

But the wind! It rises and distributes both dust and sand over the towers of Tainaron, and the dunes shift once more some distance toward the interior. From a high hillock a grating sound is heard, and I see the Ferris wheel spinning in the wind, but guess that its cogwheels, too, are now grinding sand from the shore. When I think about the buzzing, the sea of air that undulates around the antennae and the towers and which sets the papers in the gutter dancing, I am no longer at all afraid. Its reinvigorating breath passes through personal happiness and unhappiness, and they are no more than a couple of steps in the great dance. 289

But have I not just returned from a beach where I have no memory of water? Was it really the case that I did not even glance northward, across the expanse of Oceanos, but that the waves and details of the sand swallowed all my attention, just as they will one day cover the city of Tainaron? The skuas must have shrieked then, too, and the waves roared, but I, absent-minded, saw nothing but the sand and the claw.... 290

White noise - the fifteenth letter

Sometimes, when I find myself in the street's densest throng, I am surrounded by such a confusion of voices that I feel like covering my ears with my hands. Someone croaks; someone else drums; from a third passer-by come snapping sounds that combine to make a kind of monotonous music. And what about the strange bellowing or shrill cries that from time to time pierce the spaces between the houses and rebound from one wall to the other. I understand them as little as I understand the screaming of birds, the silence of fish. 291

The state of confusion in which I often move in this city makes me remember and long for something. I remember the radio, whose place was on a low rosewood shelf in the bay window. I often sat on the floor in front of the radio for quite long times and listened. 292

But that happened only when I was able to be alone in the room. When the other children came to listen to the radio, I found other things to do, for I did not care for storytime, or for quizzes or sports commentaries. Why, then, did I dawdle, turning the knobs of the radio for so long that my mother often lost her temper and told me to stop? 293

Beside the radio there grew, in a large earthenware pot, a crown of thorns, and as I listened I liked to finger its sturdy prickles; they were shiny and amazingly sharp, as hard as bone. 295

‘That’s nothing but noise,’ said my older brother, stepping into the room. ‘Let me try.’ 296

And he bent over the receiver and adjusted the vertical pointer to a station that broadcast music or sports commentaries or news. 297

‘Is this what you wanted to listen to?’ my brother asked, and out of politeness toward my brother, or rather in order to be left in peace the more quickly, I answered: ‘Yes, this is it.’ 298

But as soon as my brother had gone, I turned back to the dimly glowing pointer board and ran the red line through all the cities of Europe. I heard them murmur and sing, but their invitation did not move me. Although I did not understand their distant languages, I knew that they said the same things as in our own language, and at that time I doubted whether that could be used to say anything really important. 299

For precisely that reason, I did not pause at any of the big cities, but adjusted the pointer to the empty space between the radio stations, where no one was sending anything. To these regions, which were as deserted and roadless as the spaces between stars, I returned again and again. As I wandered through their integrity, I felt the happiness of an explorer, and I was bewitched by the ceaseless humming that rose like vapour from their nameless seas. It was secreted from the receiver as a radiation of the same strength, almost unchanging in wavelength, which brought to mind honey and the homes of thousands of bumblebees. It swayed before me like a curtain, like dancing dust; it was ceaseless happening, but nothing changed in it. 300

So I wandered through the forest, peaceful and alone. The language I listened to was so full of meaning that once I even felt my intestines pausing in their work in order to understand better. 301

If I had been asked then, ‘But what does it mean?’, I should not have replied. For I could not have said anything but: ‘It means everything’, and even to my own ears such an answer would have seemed senseless. 302

But that was precisely how it was. The roar that lured me was the chimera of all languages and all voices. 303

Once I heard the same storm rising elsewhere. I had a fever, and I was standing in line in the school playground. Faintness made me black out and dizziness thrust me to the ground. But I did not feel myself hit the gravel, for in my eyes and my blood there rose, roaring, such a plenitude and suction of voices that I dived into it head-first as if into the sea, and there, too, ‘everything’ lived. 304

But from time to time as I listened to the noise of the radio, I could distinguish individual voices and call them to me. I did not always succeed, but sometimes all I needed to do was listen, and a whisper or a note would detach itself from the density of the cloud of voices and float in the foreground. But nothing I heard was unambiguous, so that often I wanted to tear the roaring aside as if it were a stage-curtain. But that, of course, was impossible: the voices were born and lived only in the fog, and if it lifted, ‘everything’ disappeared immediately into a deathly silence. 305

But one day I could hear the seagulls shrieking above the reef, and on another the trains dashed 306

forward. It happened very far away, and I admit I was a little afraid.

Everything floated and changed; something was always happening. I could exert only the tiniest influence on what was born and died behind the calm fabric that covered the radio loudspeaker. Some events were terrible: cities destroyed by earthquakes, assassinations, collapsing stars. One eruption sparked another, the echo of ceaseless explosions never seemed to weaken. It was as if one were hearing, from afar, the birth of matter itself. 307

Then my fingers reached out once more for the spine of the cactus and tightly pressed its sharpest point, in extent warmer than a nail, living, steady. 308

Once I remembered, in front of the receiver, that I had a heart: that whatever I did, that heart beat and beat, ceaselessly. And as if in answer, through the tempest, I heard the beats of another heart, dull, even and self-assured. Then I found myself looking at the fabric that hid the loudspeaker behind it, but it did not sigh like my own chest; it did not even quiver. 309

Or I remembered the name I had once been given, and at the same time I was called by that name, but from a place so far off that I could never have reached there, even if I had set off immediately. 310

And when the dishes clattered in the kitchen, I was already sitting at table like the others. 311

The Mimic - the sixteenth letter

In Tainaron I have a balcony where I sometimes sit and bask when the sun shines and I have no reason to go into the city. For you it is autumn, but for us it is still high summer. 312

Yesterday the dazzle closed my eyelids and set fiery landscapes rolling beneath them. There was a book on my lap, but I did not turn its pages. Here in the courtyard grows a great tree whose name I do not know, and the blaze of the sun was extinguished only when it was snared by the branches. 314

Look! At that moment I saw below me a group of stones. They were largish cobblestones, grey ones, dappled and reddish ones, granite or possibly gneiss. The centre of the courtyard was paved with them, and they were beautiful stones; but that was not why I was looking at them. It seemed to me that new stones had been brought to the courtyard and that some kind of a hillock had been built, which had certainly not been there before. 315

Just as this little riddle was beginning to trouble me, Longhorn stepped on to my balcony. 316

‘Look under the tree,’ I said to him. ‘Do you understand why a hill like that has been built there?’ 317

He looked, and began to smile - if the slow withdrawal of his jaws to the side of his face can be called a smile - I never get used to it. 318

‘Perhaps you find it amusing,’ I said, a little irritated, ‘that all sorts of obstacles are built on the thoroughfares; I myself can see no sense in it.’ 319

When I glanced at the pile of stones again, I was downhearted, for I thought it began to look like a small grave. 320

‘Do not worry,’ said Longhorn reassuringly, resting his light forelimb on my shoulder. ‘I see 321

you do not yet know the Mimic. If you wish, I will introduce him to you.'

'Who is he?' I asked, and my mood was cheerless, even though the day was bright and autumn was still far off. 322

'It is him you are looking at,' Longhorn said amiably. 323

I did not blink, but nevertheless something happened in my eyes, for now I could see that what was in the courtyard in the shade of the tree was no pile of stones but a living creature, motionless, whose back was covered in a reddish-grey, lumpy carapace. 324

I wanted to ask something, but Longhorn made a gesture with his hand. He has, you see, a habit of moving wonderfully gracefully and elegantly, and his movement silenced me indisputably. 325

'Now look,' he ordered, and there was no longer anything or anyone in the shade of the tree. But a round knoll had appeared on the strip of lawn beside the wall, and it, too, was as green as new grass. 326

'Is it...?' I began. 327

'Yes, he is quick,' Longhorn acceded. 328

'I do not understand,' I complained. 'Is he someone, then? Who is he?' 329

'My dear,' Longhorn said, and looked at me, waving the extensions of his antennae, 'do you believe that the Mimic could have a personality? Today he is one thing, tomorrow another. Wherever he is, that is what he is - stone a moment ago, now the summer's grass. Who knows what form he will take tomorrow. But come, let us go; I shall introduce you to one another.' 330

'No,' I said, feeling an obscure rage. 'I do not wish to. I have no intention of making the acquaintance of such a person. It certainly takes all sorts...'

'Really,' said Longhorn, without showing any kind of sympathy, in fact teasingly. 'So you want everyone to be someone. You want what someone is at the beginning to be what he is at the end.'

'But surely! There has to be some kind of continuity!' I shouted. 'Development, naturally, but at the same time - loyalty!'

I attempted to continue, but I could already feel my irritation slipping away into the summer day that embraced Tainaron from all directions. Soon I was feeling the desire to protect the unknown creature. 334

'In a sense I understand him,' I said with some considerable forbearance. 'He is seeking his own form.' 335

'Is that so?' said Longhorn, and we both leaned over the rail and looked downward. There was no longer any kind of hummock in the courtyard, but beside the large tree stood another tree, but much smaller and sturdier. 336

'Does he know we are here?' I asked. 'Does he do it for us, or for his own amusement?' 337

'It is his work,' said Longhorn, but I do not know if he was serious. 338

'Why are you laughing?' asked Longhorn in turn. 339

‘How I love this city!’ I said. ‘Perhaps I shall stay here for ever.’ (What on earth made me say it?) 340

‘Yes, stay here forever,’ Longhorn said, but his voice darkened to such a depth that I forgot the Mimic and turned toward him in astonishment. 341

The great window - the seventeenth letter 342

It was evening once, and I was a child, out in the street. All the lights were on, street lamps, shop windows, car headlights; and I was standing in front of a toy shop. You know the shop; it is still there, in the centre of town, and you must have passed it many times, or perhaps you have even been inside it in the days before Christmas. 343

That window! It was lit with prodigal brightness, and along the glass flowed glistening drops; a rainstorm had just passed over the city and everything was clean, never before seen. In front of the dolls, cars, balls and games, immediately behind the glass, a large selection of marbles had been set out in the shape of the petals of a flower. Some of them were transparent, others brightly coloured, others as white as milk. 344

I had never owned any marbles, and their glow captivated me; I admired them for a long time, but all of a sudden, from far away and without warning, the terrible knowledge slid between them and me - that one day my mother would die. 345

When this pain hit me, I was looking at a particularly beautiful shimmering blue marble, and something happened: it changed. Its colour did not vary, its size was the same as before, and it remained steady in its place; but all the same it was quite different from before. Something had fallen away from it, something which only a moment ago had made it desirable, the most important thing of all. The marble was no longer of value; it was merely junk, and there was no longer anything in the entire shop window to interest me. It was as if stage spotlights had been extinguished in the middle of a performance and a curtain had been drawn from earth to heavens in front of all the magnificence, a curtain whose name was VOID. 346

Even the street in which I stood was now a strange street in a strange city; but I went on standing in the same place. A vague desire for knowledge forced me to make an experiment. I wanted to see whether I could make the marble change back to what it was before. Gazing at it unwaveringly, I began to struggle to disperse the thickness of night which, unseen, dominated everything I looked at. 347

I did not believe the darkness, I said, it is not true; and soon it was indeed not true; it paled and lifted like a night-mist. And the marble glowed before me, lovely as ever. 348

But then I understood that the plenty of the shop window, all the jewels of its treasure trove, were only a tiny foretaste of what life would bring me with both hands - no, a hundred hands! a thousand! 349

And I have never left that shop window. I stand and stand, I look and look at how it shines, and goes dark, and shines again. There is night and there is day, and I see both hell and heaven through the same window. 350

The work of the surveyor - the eighteenth letter

351

Today I have looked through my window at the work of the City Surveyor. I have already watched him in another part of the city, fulfilling his professional responsibilities, and now, this morning, he has reached our street. He measures the lengths and widths of streets, the diameters of squares and the heights of buildings. I do not know why he measures them, but I suppose the information he produces is stored in an archive somewhere and that interested parties can consult them there.

352

His territory is rather large and he is very hard-working, but he has only one measuring device: his own body. It is a long, green body, and he uses it extremely skilfully; I have previously had the opportunity to admire such agility only in the performances of acrobats. Sometimes his body forms a large loop; the next moment it has stretched out again to a long, straight stretch and he has covered quite a distance along the street. He also has no trouble in climbing vertical brick walls, right up to the eaves, and he does not seem to suffer from vertigo of any kind.

353

As I came from the shop and took a short cut through the park, I saw the Surveyor eating his lunch on a bench. On his head was the white cap worn by city officials, decorated with spiral patterns. I asked if I might sit with him for a moment, and he willingly made space.

354

‘Would you like some?’ he asked, opening his lunch box. But I had already eaten, and refused, with thanks. There was something I wished to ask him.

355

‘Do you find your work interesting?’ I asked, for something to say.

356

‘Extremely,’ he replied, munching his sandwich. Behind us, in playground, the children of Tainaron, screaming, were playing the games played by all the children in the world: running away, being had, and then exchanging prisoner for persecutor.

357

‘Have you been doing it for long?’

358

‘Ever since I reached my full height,’ the Surveyor replied, pouring a steaming, sweet-smelling drink from his thermos flask into his cup.

359

Bells rang out from the cathedral, the children left the playground and disappeared into the shade of the trees. It was already almost noon, and the siesta was beginning. I could not see any movement anywhere, and heard only the booming of the bells. It felt as if life were standing still, resting and reviving like the Surveyor.

360

Through the incessant ringing, I heard his even voice: ‘My father did the same work, and his father and his grandfather and his grandfather’s father. A new City Surveyor is chosen from each generation; now it is I.’

361

And he added something which I did not hear, for the power of the bells swelled to numb the ears.

362

I bent over toward him and his flat face neared my mouth. Now I could hear what he said: ‘I am the measure of all things.’

363

But he did not say it haughtily, merely stated it, brushing the crumbs from his chest.

364

‘But this part of the city is old,’ I thought aloud. ‘Was it not surveyed many generations ago? What could there be to measure here?’

365

He looked at me in disbelief. ‘What is there to measure?’ he asked. ‘It was a different time then. A different time, and different measuring devices. I and my grandfather are not at all the same size, as you may have thought.’ 366

He took a large piece of fruit from his bag, sinking his many rows of healthy teeth into it. I no longer knew what to say, and felt a fool. 367

When the Surveyor had sucked the stem clean and dropped it into a rubbish bin decorated with the city arms, he rose decisively and felt it his duty to remark: ‘Back to work!’ 368

He, the measure of all things, hurried energetically to fulfil the demands of his job, growing smaller and smaller on the park path, and a straight, clear furrow was left in its raked sand. He went as official representatives of the people go, or as those who know that everything has its measure, and more - what and who he himself is. 369

And, following the Surveyor’s example, time too moved on; a dry leaf fell before me on to the dust and it was the first leaf of autumn. The season had changed. 370

The bells had stopped echoing, but the city radiated its own sound, like a busy bumble-bee. The brightly coloured Ferris wheel of the Tainaron funfair, which was motionless for a moment at midday, started to spin once more. I saw it from the bench on which I was sitting, alone; it can be seen down in the harbour and in all the squares and markets, so high has it been set up, in the constant wind. 371

The bystander - the nineteenth letter 372

This morning as I woke up, in bed, I was overcome by a prurient restlessness whose reasons I could not immediately divine. For a long time I sat on my bed and listened. Although it was already late in the morning, the city was silent, as if not a single citizen had yet woken up, although it was a weekday and an ordinary working week. 373

I dressed myself in yesterday’s clothes and, without eating my breakfast, went down to the street, seeking Longhorn’s company. 374

But before I could open the front door a surprising sight opened up through the round window of the stairwell: the pavement in front of the building was full of backs, side by side, broad and narrow, long and sturdy; but all were united by stillness, the same direction and position. 375

All at once I thought of a picture which I had once seen, perhaps in a book, perhaps in a museum; I cannot remember. Perhaps you too have seen it? The crowd in the picture had a common object of interest, which was not visible; it was outside the edge of the picture, perhaps in reality too. But more than the invisible event and its observers, my attention was drawn to a man in the background of the picture who was looking in the opposite direction to all the others. Do you remember him too? 376

When I then stepped out on to the outside step - and I can tell you that I did it hesitantly, almost unwillingly - I can confirm that a fair number of people were standing in front of the opposite block, too, but that there too silence prevailed. I do not think I have yet mentioned that the boulevard on which I now live runs from east to west. When, this morning, I eyed it from my front door, it looked as if the entire city had gathered along this long, wide street and had been 377

standing there silently - that was my impression - perhaps from the middle of the night onward. The din that, with such numbers of people, generally rises like puffs of smoke, is impressive, but the rage or joy of the crowd could not have dumbfounded me as completely as its silence.

Since autumn is already approaching here, the sun was hanging, at this time in the morning, fairly low at the eastern end of the street, but as far as I could see every single citizen was staring in the opposite direction, at the point in the distance where the boulevard shrinks to a small yellow flower: where the linden trees stand in their autumn glory. 378

The street was empty. I have often examined its surface, skilfully patterned in stone, but now, as it spread, deserted, before me, when not a single walker was crossing it and no vehicle was rolling along it, I hardly noticed its unique beauty. In the pure dawn of the new day the tramway rails sparkled as if they were made of silver. 379

Then it occurred to me that perhaps some national day was being celebrated in the city, and that the boulevard was closed to traffic for a great festival parade. It might be that we should soon see the prince himself - if he is still alive - driving past us, perhaps acknowledging us with a slender hand.... Or were we expecting a state visit to the city? Would a procession of closed carriages glide past us, taking noble guests to a luncheon reception at the city hall? 380

But I was soon forced to abandon such thoughts. For nothing about the appearance of the Tainaronians suggested great festivities. There were no bunches of flowers, no balloons or masks. Not a single child was blowing the kind of whistle which, whining shrilly, unwinds from a roll to a long staff, and no one was flying a miniature Tainaron flag, a white pennant printed with a spiral (or perhaps a nautilus; I have never been quite sure which). 381

Yes, they went on standing silently, and the eastern sun infused the strong heat of copper into their back-armor. 382

Despite the disapproving glances which were cast at me, I pushed right through to the front row and found myself balancing on a narrow kerb-stone of the pavement. 383

Beside me stood a gleaming black shape that reminded me of a diver. I knocked echoingly on his polished surface and said: 'Excuse me, but please would you tell me what day today is?' 384

He glanced at me, disturbed, and after making the rapid and sullen reply, 'The nineteenth', he turned back at once toward the west. 385

I was none the wiser, but I had only myself to blame - the timing and phrasing of my question had been badly chosen. 386

Then, my dear, there was a sudden gust of wind, and the Tainaronians suddenly began to crowd around me, so that I had to stand with one foot in the gutter. That did not matter, since I had managed to secure a lookout spot for myself. For something was now happening at the point where the boulevard dived into a dusky tunnel under the linden trees. From that direction, some kind of procession was approaching, something very long and pale; but however much I screwed up my eyes I could not make out any details. 387

It progressed slowly, and our moments stretched with it, but inch by inch it approached our building; and the better I could make it out, the more astonished I was. 388

What a parade it was! I could see no glittering carriages or brass bands. Quite the reverse: as 389

it approached, the silence deepened still further, for on the broad boulevard of Tainaron silence combined with silence; the silence of the procession merged with the stillness of the crowd. No flags or streamers, no songs, shots or slogans. But neither did this procession have any of the solemn brilliance of a funeral cortège; not a single flower or wreath gave it colour, and there were no candle flames to flutter and smoke.

When head of the endlessly long ribbon, which took up almost the entire width of the street, reached us, new battalions rolled forth far away from under the trees. Battalions, I call them, but even today I still do not know whether these were in any sense military. I shall now try to describe to you what I saw before me this morning. 390

The procession was so uniform that it recalled a snake, but in fact it was made up of countless individuals. Its speed was leisurely, so that I had plenty of time to examine the beginning, which broadened like a reptile's head and which - apparently like the entire procession - was covered by a transparent, slightly shiny membrane, like an elastic cellophane bag. Inside this membrane, in rows and fronts, marched small creatures; as far as I could see from where I stood they were like grubs, almost colourless and about as thick as my middle finger, but a little longer. I shuddered slightly as I watched them as one shivers when one comes inside from the cold. 391

The procession was made up of two or even three layers: those below carried the surface layer, which moved more slowly than the lower layer along a living carpet. I think what happened was that when those on top reached the head of the procession, they joined the bottom layer and, in turn, carried the others. It was impossible to estimate the number of members of the procession, but I should imagine that it was a question of millions rather than hundreds of thousands of individuals. 392

As I gazed at the torrent that surged before me, I remembered that a few nights previously I had dreamed a dream in which this same street had become a river. Now I was, of course, tempted to see it as a prophetic dream, although I do not habitually do that. 393

I tell you, I would like to understand the nature of the silence with which the city greeted the march-past of this mass. Was it respect? fear? menace? Now, when I remember our morning, I am inclined to think that it included all those emotions, plus something else, which I shall never understand, for I am in the end a stranger here. 394

I - like the others who stood around me - saw at the same time that a small figure had appeared in the middle of the roadway, some kind of weevil, which stared dispiritedly at the approaching flattish serpent's head. There was nothing that was open to interpretation about its motionlessness: it was pure terror and catalepsy. The great head, which glistened unctuously in the sun, by now shining from high above, and which was made up - as I have already said - of hundreds of smaller heads, drew ineluctably nearer to the point on the cobblestones where the poor creature stood. At that petrified moment it did not even occur to me that I could have dashed into the roadway and dragged the creature to safety. For my part, I was convinced that the weevil would become food for that living rope; or, if not, that it would at least be an unwilling part of that strange procession. 395

But what happened was this: when the slowly undulating river reached the creature - which 396

looked as if it was benumbed into a hypnosis-like state - its head split in two and left a space for the weevil without even brushing its unbudging form.

There was a sigh - it was unanimous - and the front part of the snake merged once more, but in the middle of the broad flow the little creature stood like an island, while the masses that seethed around it flowed, glistening, onward. 397

I do not know whether you will find this description strange. Have you ever, on your travels, encountered anything comparable? You have told me so little about the time when we did not yet know each other... 398

For my part, I am still bewildered by my morning experience. I do not know how long I stood on the spot, one foot on the pavement, the other in the gutter, as new battalions, divisions, regiments, rolled past us. I should like to say, too, that (with the exception of the case of the weevil) nothing about the procession suggested that anyone in it might have seen or noticed us, that we, the citizens of Tainaron (I am, after all, in a sense one of them) existed in any way for them, let alone that this great march was organised with us in mind. 399

If you were to ask, I would answer that I do not know. No, I really have not been able to find out what it was and why it went through Tainaron, where it came from and whether it had a destination. It could be that it was searching for something; it could be that it was fleeing something. If the others know something, if you receive any information about this matter, then tell me; do not hide anything! 400

When the tail of the procession, so thin that its tip was formed of just a few individuals - and they themselves were unusually slender and transparent - had finally slipped out of sight beyond the square where the boulevard terminates to the east, the crowds dispersed incredibly quickly. I looked around me and stood there, alone on the kerbstone, and the sun was at its highest. Everything bustled around me as before; the shops opened again and vehicles rolled both eastward and westward. Some dashed to banks and offices and secret assignations and others to meetings or to prepare the day's dinner. But in the middle of the street - as far as the eye could see, in either direction - ran a moist, slimy trail. 401

This afternoon, when I walked across the boulevard, I could no longer see it. It had dried up and was covered in the same sand and dust that dances before winter in each of the streets of Tainaron. 402

King Milinda's question - the twentieth letter 403

My immediate neighbour, on the same floor, is an extraordinarily old person; much older than the prince. Some people claim he is already over one hundred and fifty years old, while others, like Longhorn, say that he is only one hundred and twenty-five or one hundred and thirty. But everyone who sees his frailty understands that he has lived past his own time, and it is incomprehensible and even cruel that he must continue living here in the city of Tainaron. 404

He has a servant - or perhaps he is one of his descendants - who takes him out every morning. He is dry and light and has shrunk so small that he is carried in a kind of bag or sack. The bag is set in the sun on a park bench and its sides are turned down a little so that the old man can take the air and look at the flowers and the passers-by. There he is left, and after a couple of 405

hours he is taken home again. In his bag he looks, with his thin limbs, like nothing but a bunch of straw, as dry as kindling.

Do you think there is a place where people do not grow old? I wonder if I ever met an inhabitant of such a country when I was quite young? And will he meet me again when my age is as great as that of the old man in the sack? 406

What a shock he will get. 'My dear friend,' he will stammer. 'What dreadful thing has happened? Who has treated you so badly? Where is your thick hair? Why do you walk so slowly and with such a stoop? Tell me who is to blame, and I shall make him answer for his deeds.' 407

Childish, ignorant person! Let him go back to where he came from! 408

I have seen a vision that came from the sack. It looked just as if there were a mirror in it. And the straw rose to give a sign; it beckoned to me. And so of course I went, I went and sat down next to the sack, which was very humble considering that one hundred and fifty years fitted inside. 409

The sack's voice was so weak and hoarse that I could not immediately understand it. The sack asked where I was from, and said that it had not been born in Tainaron either. And I had only sat there for a moment when I realised that the bag contained someone alive and remembering. And when I had sat there for another moment, I knew that he was not old. Old age was merely his disguise, as childhood had once been. I knew it as I once knew that a certain very small creature was right when she shrieked: 'I am not a child! I am not a child!' I knew it because I had not been a child myself, either; I knew it because I shall never be old. I knew it because I had heard King Milinda's question: 'Was he who was born the same as he who died?' and heard the answer, which was not yes or no. 410

And now the park's trees waved the shadows of their fluttering over my years and over the years of my companion, leaves that were still fastened to their branches, but were already yellow and would soon be dead, detached, absent. 411

I asked what had been most difficult in life, and the bag answered: 'The fact that everything recurs and must always return and that the same questions are asked again and again.' 412

But before I could ask more of the same questions, the servant or descendant approached us with purposeful strides. Lightly he lifted his burden - its years were feathers to him - and, grinding the gravel under his feet, took him back home. 413

I had got hot and, forgetting the old man in a moment, strolled slowly toward the harbour. There I saw the same white ship that once brought me to Tainaron; but why, I cannot remember. 414

Not enough - the twenty-first letter 415

How are you? How are things with you? That you are so implacable in your silence makes you gradually become more like gods or the dead. Such is your metamorphosis; and it is not entirely repugnant to me. 416

For let me tell you what has happened to me. What has happened to me is that people are no longer enough. They are not enough, be they ever so great or beautiful or wise or complicated. 417

They are not enough, even if their antennae were to stretch further than radar beams and their clothes were to be stronger than armour.

For that reason I confess that everything I say contains the unspoken hope that it is linked with all my actions as well as to the moments when I just sit and look. Ardent hope! Incorrigible hope! That gods and the dead might hear. That gods and the dead might see. That gods and the dead might know.... 418

But there is only one who can make them hear their song. But he was one who became truly unhappy and was torn to pieces. 419

Last night I returned to you after long years, from such a distance and over many obstacles. Barricades and brushwood fences, barbed wire obstacles and piles of stones rose up in my path. Craters, chasms and stinking trenches opened up before my feet. But my speed was so dizzying that I flew over peaks and depths and sped along the bright, frozen channel that led straight to your door. 420

The bell rings through the house, through the darkness of the winter's day, and you open the door, the same as before. How happy we are! How we embrace each other! 421

But at once I notice how absent-minded you are. You are expecting something completely different; yes, I am right: you listen over my head, which is pressed against your chest. And now I, too, hear footsteps approaching below in the stairwell. 422

Then the light of a living flame spreads across your face as you ask: 'Are they coming here? Are they not close? Are they not familiar footsteps?' 423

But I do not reply, and you would not hear what I said. Your arms have already loosened around me, and I have returned on the same road along which, just now, I sped toward you, trembling with anticipation. 424

Dayma - the twenty-second letter 425

Yesterday I wished to try, for my morning drink, the Tainaronians' favourite sweet, foaming dayma or daime, which is drunk through a straw. They like it so much that they drink it at every possible opportunity, cold or hot, and in addition to dayma they have dozens of other names for it. I have heard it said that in large quantities it has curious effects and that some may see strange and even improper things after drinking it. 426

For my part, I did not notice any such effects. But everything I see here is strange, even without drinking a drop of dayma. 427

I remembered a particularly pleasant little cake shop on the side of a canal where Longhorn took me soon after I arrived in Tainaron for the first time. I also wanted to try those particularly crisp herb pastries, as light as wafers, which smell of smoke and which I believe are not made anywhere else but in that bakery. My desire was so strong that my mouth watered and I had to swallow when the memory of the little pastries spread on to my tongue. 428

To my disappointment, I could no longer find the cross-street of the ring boulevard on which the café was located. I thought I was following the correct route; I turned at the same street corner as before, and carried on along the side of the canal, but soon I found myself in quite unknown 429

quarters. There were unfinished buildings and enormous industrial shells from which the sound of turbines and the fumes of combustion engines rose into the air. The people there also looked completely different, poorer and smaller than the Tainaronians who had sat on the terrace of my favourite café. At last I found a glum coffee bar where badly foamed dayma was served in thick handleless cups and where the bread was dense and heavy.

‘I should like to have a map of Tainaron,’ I said yesterday to Longhorn. ‘It would be much easier to wander here alone, and you would not always have the bother of being my guide. I could not find a single map in the department store. Could you perhaps find a map somewhere? Would it be possible?’ 430

‘Unfortunately it is impossible,’ he answered. 431

‘Why impossible? Have all the maps sold out?’ 432

‘That is not why,’ he said. ‘No comprehensive map of Tainaron has ever been made.’ 433

‘What? No proper map has been made? But that is very strange,’ I said, dissatisfied and astonished. 434

‘It is not at all strange,’ Longhorn said abruptly. ‘It would be sheer impossibility to draw up such a map, a completely senseless project.’ 435

‘Why so?’ I asked, increasingly irritated. ‘To me a kingdom which has no map is not a real kingdom but barbary, chaos, mere confusion.’ 436

‘You still know very little about Tainaron,’ he said quietly. ‘We too have our laws, but they are different from yours.’ 437

I felt a little abashed, but that did not wipe away all my irritability. 438

‘A map cannot be made,’ he continued, ‘because Tainaron is constantly changing.’ 439

‘All cities change,’ I said. 440

‘None as fast as Tainaron,’ Longhorn replied. ‘For what Tainaron was yesterday it is no longer today. No one can have a grasp of Tainaron as a whole. Every map would lead its user astray.’ 441

‘All cities must have maps, at least of some kind,’ I continued to argue. 442

Longhorn sighed and looked at me kindly, but a little wearily. 443

‘Come!’ he said, and took me gently by the arm. ‘Let’s go!’ 444

‘Where to?’ I asked. 445

‘We are going to the observation tower,’ Longhorn said. ‘To make you understand.’ 446

The observation tower was built on the same hill as the funfair. I had not noticed it until now, for the movement of the Ferris wheel had taken up all my attention. We had to climb for an agonisingly long time up the narrow wooden stairs which circled the outer wall of the tower like a creeper. I do not like such high places, and I felt as if the wind were rocking the frail construction. We climbed and climbed. As we circled the steps, the Ferris wheel, too, kept returning before my eyes; its carriages, now empty, shook and swayed, and its movement made my dizzy. We climbed, and I regretted that I had taken up Longhorn’s offer. 447

Midway, I said to Longhorn: ‘Now I cannot climb any farther. Let us stay here. We can see 448
enough from here.’

But Longhorn’s ears were deaf, and he continued his astonishingly agile clambering. At times 449
he seemed to glide upward - but of course he did have more pairs of legs than I. He did not even
glance behind him, and I had to follow him. I went on climbing.

At last! We were standing on the upper platform, but I had grown dizzy and did not immediately 450
go right up to the rail. My eyes were sore from the wind and sunshine which, up here, seemed
blindingly bright. I tried to breathe slowly; I swallowed and fastened my eyes on the fibres of
the platform’s planks. I had decided that I would not complain any more; for I suspected that
Longhorn now considered me spoilt and bad company and by no means did I wish him to tire
of acting as my guide.

But I could not help hoping that Longhorn would put one of his narrow, long upper limbs around 451
my shoulders. He appeared not to have noticed my uncertain state, but was gazing absorbedly
and - so it seemed to me - with eyes moist with pride the panorama that opened up before us.
He began to hum a wordless song which I had never heard before, and its monotonous melody
and the peaceful wave-forms of the timber fibres restored my balance.

I gathered my courage and looked downwards. We had been climbing for a long time, but I was 452
still astonished that we were so excessively high up. I shaded my eyes and saw, in the dizzying
depths, the plain of Tainaron, patterned with the shadows of frantically scurrying clouds. I
also realised that the tower must be a little skew, for the horizon was clearly slanted. Directly
below us was the little funfair, today deserted, with its gaudily coloured tents. Even the highest
carriages of the Ferris wheel were far below us. Far away glass and steel glittered, bronze and
gold glimmered, when a shimmering ray lit up the windows of a skyscraper or the cupolas of
churches. This was Tainaron, his city, theirs - never mine.

But it was an astonishing city! Longhorn’s pride was understandable. I had never understood 453
how enormous Tainaron was. I saw the cone-like areas which I had once visited, only to be
dampened by the queen’s tears, I saw the prince’s palace park with its paths and pagodas, and
in the east the endless, muddled skeins of the slums.

We were so high up that from below all that could be heard was the occasional shriek, isolated, 454
a shriller cry than the rest, and mysterious clinking sounds which I had also heard at night and
whose origin I had never been able to trace. It sounded as if someone were tapping a glass with
a silver spoon in order to make a speech. A little farther up, and everything would have been
completely silent.

‘Here is everything I have,’ Longhorn said. ‘You, too.’ 455

The shining belt of Oceanos with its stripes of foam encircled us on all sides. A haze hid 456
the horizon to the south, but to the north a high, silver-glowing cloud formation was visible,
so motionless, in contrast to the clouds that slipped over Tainaron, that it looked like a metal
sculpture. Its shape was like that of a human torso.

‘Is there a storm brewing?’ I asked. 457

‘It is not a storm,’ he said. ‘Worse. It is winter. Although it will be a long time before it reaches 458
us. But when it is here, I pity those who have not already gone to sleep!’

I already felt cold now, in full sunlight. We looked in silence at the majestic shape of snow and ice. To me it still did not look as if it were changing shape or approaching Tainaron. 459

‘Perhaps it will not come this time, after all,’ I said to Longhorn, half in earnest, and hopeful. 460
‘Perhaps it will stay up there in the north.’

‘What a child it is,’ Longhorn said in an aside, as if there had been a third person with us on the platform. Then he continued, turning to me once more: ‘I did not bring you here only to look at the coming of winter. Do you see?’ 461

Longhorn gestured toward the northern edge of the city, below the winter, where there swelled a cluster of dwellings of different heights and shapes. It must have been because of my sore eyes that their outlines looked so indefinite. As we looked, it seemed strangely as if some of them were in motion. 462

‘What is happening there?’ I asked. 463

‘Changes,’ he said. 464

That was indeed how it looked. Clouds of dust spread on the plain - and in a moment all that could be seen where the crenellations of towers and blocks had meandered were mere ruins. But there had been no sound of any explosion. 465

‘That part of the city no longer exists,’ he said calmly. 466

‘Not an earthquake, surely?’ I asked fearfully, although I could not yet feel any tremors. 467

‘No, they are merely demolishing the former Tainaron,’ Longhorn said. 468

Longhorn raised his finger and pointed westward. And there, too, I saw demolition work, destruction, collapse, landslides. But almost at the same time, in place of the former constructions, new forms began to appear, softly curving mall complexes, flights of stairs that still ended in air, solitary spiral towers and colonnades which progressed meanderingly toward the empty shore. 469

‘But...’ I began. 470

‘Shh,’ Longhorn said. ‘Look over there.’ 471

I looked. There, where a straight boulevard had run a moment ago, narrow paths now wandered. Their network branched over a larger and larger area before my very eyes. 472

‘And this goes on all the time, incessantly,’ he said. ‘Tainaron is not a place, as you perhaps think. It is an event which no one measures. It is no use anyone trying to make maps. It would be a waste of time and effort. Do you understand now?’ 473

I could not deny that I understood that Tainaron lived in the same way as many of its inhabitants; it too was a creature that was shaped by irresistible forces. Now I also understood that I should never again taste those smoke-scented wafers which I had wanted so much this morning. And yet I understood very little. 474

‘I am thirsty,’ I said to Longhorn, longing once more for the foam of dayma. 475

The Dangler - the twenty-third letter

476

I really must say that many of the inhabitants of Tainaron have the most extraordinary habits, at least to the eyes of one who has come from so far away. Quite close to here, in the same block, lives a gentleman, tall and thin, who is in the habit of hanging upside-down from his balcony for a number of hours every day. This strange position does not seem to interest passers-by in the least, but when I passed under him for the first time I was so startled that I immediately thought of running for help. I thought, you see, that there had been an accident and that the man was clinging to the wrought-iron decorations of the balcony with his feet. Longhorn, who was beside me, remarked coolly that he had selected his pose through his own free choice and that I would be wise not to interfere so eagerly in other people's lives. I admit that I was offended by his remark, but recently I have begun meekly to take his advice.

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I see the man most days, and whenever I walk under his balcony I greet him, even though he never responds. In fact, I think he is either asleep or meditating. In his chosen state he is so limp and floating that he recalls a garment that a washerwoman has hung out to dry. With incomparable calm he suspends his head above the busy street without stirring, even when the fire brigade drives under him, sirens wailing. He always looks the same: a bright, even gaudy, green, so that one can make him out from the broad steps of the bank at the end of the state like a living leaf against a red brick wall...

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Does he dream as he hangs there, sometimes suspended from just one limb, but nevertheless apparently completely relaxed? I believe that is exactly how it is. I know from my own experience the difference between the immobility of fear and the immobility of the hunter, but this is neither. I believe he dreams, dreams swiftly, passionately and incessantly, dreams with death-defying intensity without sacrificing even a jot of consciousness to the struggles of everyday waking life. I believe he must long ago become convinced that all action is unnecessary, or even dangerous.

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There are days when I think that this gentleman is admirable and his way of spending moments of his life most enviable. On such days I, too, would like to concentrate on sweet communion with my private visions as headlong and with the same kind of mental calm as he. But do not imagine that it would be possible. In the evenings, even if I shut my window tightly, turn out my lamp and fill my ears with cotton-wool, this city teems before me, still more restless and colourful than in full daylight. Then I should like to get up and go to see whether the green gentleman is still hanging head-first from his balcony. I should like to climb up there myself and position my limbs just like his. Then, with my blood flooding my head, all of Tainaron would begin to dissolve into the mists and I, too, should begin a dream, endless and leaf-green....

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But if, in the morning, my nocturnal experiences return to mind, if I have idled through agonising labyrinths, I know that I would not wish to spend my life in the city of dreams. If, on such a morning, I pass under the Dangler's balcony, I am more inclined to pity him than to admire him.

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Then I know that in my dreams I can never capture the same sun-glow and that the air that I breathe can never, there, flow as freshly in my cells, and I can never see so sharply or so far; and I believe once more that what is true can be seen by everyone, everyone.

482

The Guardian of the Oddfellows - the twenty-fourth letter

483

I admire her; I call her the Queen Bee. But Longhorn has another name for her, the name of an already forgotten saint: The Guardian of the Oddfellows. And indeed that is the nature of the Queen Bee: she cares tenderly for those whom many here in Tainaron consider strange and to be avoided: street singers, beggars and ladies of joy, people who are cracked in various ways or lost in their own drug-worlds.

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All sorts of people visit the Queen Bee, both by day and by night. The light is always on in her house and the door is always swinging - to and fro, for it is a double-hinged door of the kind that one sometimes finds in obscure cafés. There is no threshold or latch, and the hubbub and singing from the Queen Bee's house can be heard distinctly a couple of blocks off.

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There is room for everyone, although her house is not large. No, it is very, very medium in size and as modest in its external appearance as countless other houses outskirts of the city.

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But sometimes, although the house is full of people, it is very quiet, and then the neighbours say that the Guardian of the Oddfellows is holding a Great Day of Remembrance once again.

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'Whose memory are they celebrating?' I asked Longhorn, and it became clear that it was not a question of any particular dead person. The matter is as follows: the Queen Bee gathers memories; she lives off memories, and it is perhaps only on account of memories that she receives so many people of so many different kinds. But she is not satisfied with any old memory; no, she can use only happy, sweet memories that sparkle with happiness, and if anyone were to try to offer her something cold and gloomy I think she would drive them mercilessly from her house.

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Longhorn said that everyone who needs it receives both a meal and a bed for the night at the Queen Bee's house, but on certain days of the month everyone must bring her at least one happy memory in payment. That is the rent she demands, and there is no haggling.

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On that day the Queen Bee spreads a white cloth on the table and lights dozens of candles so that it looks as if Christmas has come. But the table is not set, for on the Great Day of Remembrance no food is offered, only memories.

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'But they really do satisfy your appetite,' says the Queen Bee, and all her drunks and madmen and beggars agree, as they must in order to be able next day to partake of a proper meal.

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'Can I, too, participate in the Great Day of Remembrance some time?' I asked Longhorn.

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'Everyone can,' he said, 'but not everyone wants to. And remember to take a really happy memory with you.'

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'Oh, I have plenty of them,' I said light-heartedly, and when the next Great Day of Remembrance dawned I was sitting in the Queen Bee's house side by side with her Oddfellows.

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I had already heard a few things about my table companions, so I sat a fair distance away from the Pickpocket (as if I had something valuable with me!) and even farther (although I felt ashamed of myself) from a black and spotted creature whom all the people of Tainaron dreaded, and who was called the Disease Carrier. But as I glanced around me, the Queen Bee's Oddfellows did not look to me any stranger than the people of Tainaron in general, and it was my turn to feel embarrassed when I realised what curious and even suspicious glances were

495

being directed at my own person. I, too, was now one of the Oddfellows, perhaps the most obvious of the entire company in my foreignness. I, who have always believed I can merge into almost any crowd, who have always believed I can examine others while myself staying in the background, was now experiencing what it was like to be the object of the Tainaronians' attention.

But the Queen Bee was sitting opposite me and, once I had recovered from the confusion, I could at least gaze at her as much as I liked, her motherly form and her tight, tiger-striped dress, and her tousled, dark face, lit by the hazy glow of her seeing tubes. 496

'Let us begin!' shouted the Queen Bee in her resonant bass, which brought to mind the buzzing of a sunny meadow. 'Psammotettix, you are the first.' 497

I turned and saw that with this handsomely reverberant name she was addressing a greying, modest and clumsy-looking gentleman who had, since the beginning of the session, been mumbling incessantly to himself. I suppose he was repeating the memory he had chosen so that he would not forget it at the decisive moment. 498

With extraordinary speed, Psammotettix began a long story of which I understood scarcely a word, for it was interrupted - perhaps for effect - by a remarkable smacking and croaking noise which, at points of emphasis - so I supposed - became a rough croaking. The few words I could understand, because Psammotettix repeated them a number of times, were 'foam' and 'bubble'; but that was all. 499

On the other hand, the other participants in the Remembrance Festival followed Psammotettix's performance with interest, and when it was over they showed their approval in an extraordinarily wide range of ways: by clicking the chitin plates of their backs together, drumming, glowing, changing their colour or clapping their limbs together. 500

The Queen Bee raised a little hammer or club which gleamed gold in the candlelight, knocked it on the table and said: 'Accepted!', at the same time turning toward the Pickpocket, motioning him to start with a gesture of her hand. 501

'Once I went abroad,' the Pickpocket began hurriedly in a small voice, obviously nervous. The other Oddfellows interrupted him, howling: 502

'Not true! Not true!' 503

Then the hammer fell again, the others fell silent, and the Pickpocket began: 'Once in a foreign country, in a big city, my job took me to a certain department store. It was the eve of a great festival, and the people were swarming about, announcements and music flooded from the loudspeakers and the shoppers' attention was taken up with the brilliant displays and the shouts of the product demonstrators. The conditions were perfect, one could say, and for that reason that day was perhaps the most productive of my entire career.' 504

At this point the Pickpocket paused; grumbling began to be heard around the table and I saw the Queen Bee purse her lips. 505

'I cannot accept this,' she was beginning, but the Pickpocket shouted hurriedly, 'I have not finished, that is not all. You see, just as the department store was closing and I was already leaving with my swag, a fine lady swept past me with a bag on her shoulder, decorated with 506

pearls. My practised eye noticed immediately that its silver lock only seemed to be closed and in a second I had caught up with the lady. I did this (and he waved a sharp nail in the air), the bag opened soundlessly, and in my own pocket there was - so I thought - a fine wad of the country's currency. But (and the Pickpocket raised a limp, demanding silence, for the guests had begun to babble once more) what did I see when I examined my trophy more closely? The notes were merely thin piles of paper, quite empty all except one. On it was written, on it was written....'

And here the Pickpocket's voice fell and he began to writhe on his chair, looking beseechingly at the Queen Bee. 507

'Carry on,' she said, nodding approvingly, but this did not seem to calm the Pickpocket. 508

'No, I can't, not with all these people listening,' he managed to mutter, gesturing at the other guests. 509

'He has forgotten his memory!' came a shout, and another: 'That's not a happy memory at all!' 510

'Come here,' ordered the Queen Bee. 'Whisper it in my ear. I shall consider the matter.' 511

And the Pickpocket went up to the Queen Bee and whispered a couple of words into her ear. I tried to prick up my ears, but I was far too far away, and I regretted my choice of place, for I desperately wanted to know what could have been written on the paper that could turn the Pickpocket's disappointment into a happy memory. 512

'Accepted!' acceded the Queen Bee, and to my horror she turned to look at me, and the lenses of her seeing tubes glittered with strange colours. 513

Then something unexpected happened to me: my past disappeared. It sank among millions of other pasts, so that I could no longer distinguish a single one of my own memories, happy or sad, from among the swarm of countless memories. 514

It was as if walls and fences had fallen, as if dams - very necessary - had burst, and in the flood-water there floated long-forgotten fragments of conversations that I had happened to overhear, remarks from novels and films and a vortex of human faces and destinies which sped past me like bubbles in a surging wake. 515

Through it I could, however, see the unwavering face of the Queen Bee, which was still waiting in front of me, majestic and demanding, a trace of dissatisfaction already apparent in her expression. Desperately I grabbed one of the memories that spun around me and, extraordinarily enough, I knew its origin: it was a survey from a weekly magazine whose readers were asked to remember star moments from their lives. Praying mentally that it would be good enough for the Queen Bee and that my deception would not be noticed, I began: 516

'This happened ten years ago. My lover was massaging my face. Then, suddenly, I was seized by a sensation of lightness. Before my eyes a door opened, and behind it was a lighted room. Such a light room I have never seen, before or since. I went into the room. I have never felt as good as I did then.' 517

That was all. But as I set the sentences of the little interview one after another, from memory, which now worked with the accuracy of a photograph, I realised that it was no deception. What 518

had happened had happened, all of it, to me, and I remembered the smell of my lover's fingers and the fact that it had been the first cool, high day after a long summer.

And, dumbfounded by the superabundance of my life, I fell silent, and waited for the rap of the golden gavel. 519

'Accepted,' the bass of the Queen Bee rang out, and I saw a veiled smile spread over her face as if something inexpressibly sweet had just dripped on to her palate. In such a way my memory, too, although stolen, was added to her collection, to the great store of honey which was the basis of her economy, to the honeycombs from which she drew her happiness and her hospitality and which no thief would ever empty. 520

The cloaked moth - the twenty-fifth letter 521

Do you remember the entomologist who thought he saw a cloaked moth on the ground? He was delighted, and picked it up, only to realise that it was no more than a piece of rotten wood. Then, of course, he threw it away in disappointment. 522

I wonder why - already preparing to leave - he nevertheless crouched to seek once more the piece of branch he had thrown away. But how diligently and closely he had to examine it before he saw: it was a cloaked moth after all. 523

Tonight the earth carries the city steadily on its shoulders. Even the heavens are motionless, and the buildings have long roots. I confess: I have countless times been forced to return and fetch home what I have abandoned and thrown away as worthless. Other colours glimmer from beneath the camouflage coat, and who knows which of them is right. 524

When I open the curtain, I see a half-darkened street, and nothing is happening there, but in the emptiness which is not now fractured by steps the restlessness of the first step and the exhaustion of the last combine. 525

Tonight I see in the half-light as if it were broad daylight; I see so far and so clearly that I can make you out too, cloaked moth. 526

The gate of evening - the twenty-sixth letter 527

Yesterday Longhorn and I visited the city museum. I wandered rather absent-mindedly through the echoing halls and corridors, which were full of the utensils of times gone by, tools, clothes and furniture. A flood of dates and names of kings flowed from Longhorn's mouth - his memory is astonishing - but hardly a detail lodged itself in my memory, although it would have been an opportunity to learn a great deal about Tainaron's past. 528

Weary, I happened to stop in front of a glass case where only one object was on display: a cap of some kind. It was deep black, but magnificently embroidered with stars, moons and suns. Gold and silver thread glittered as if the head-dress had just been sewn, but from the label fixed to the case I read that it was many hundreds of years old. In the centre of the cap - or perhaps it was a calotte - was a small hole. 529

'What kind of cap is that and why is there a hole in it?' I asked Longhorn, finally interested in what I saw. 530

‘It is called the Gate of Evening,’ Longhorn answered, delighted at the interest I showed, and immediately eager to give me all his information. ‘In the old days, when Tainaronians grew old and frail and it was time for them to depart, one of their heirs brought them a cap like that. The dying person put it on their head, and it eased their last moments.’ 531

‘How on earth?’ I asked. 532

‘Because the hole is a gate, and it showed them the direction in which they were to go and so they did not stray from the right road.’ 533

In the next room, too, there was something that aroused my interest: a row of masks. They were not demonic masks of the kind one often sees in folk museums; they were not grimacing or cruelly decorated or spattered with blood. I saw quite ordinary faces of the citizens of Tainaron staring peacefully out of point or compound eyes, antennae gently outstretched. One could see hundreds of such faces as one walked in the city; and that was what was most extraordinary about the masks. 534

‘What are these used for?’ I asked Longhorn. 535

‘Ah,’ he said thoughtfully. ‘There was a time when a peculiar festival was held in Tainaron at the time of the autumn equinox, the day when day and night are equally long. These festivals gave employment to an entire profession: mask-makers. For the revellers had three kinds of mask: the first represented their faces as they were when they were quite young, the second showed their faces as they were at the midpoint of life, and the third mask as they would be when they were very old. They used the first mask in the morning, the second at midday and the third from evening to midnight. 536

‘So at some time of the day their mask was like their own face?’ I understood. The custom seemed very strange to me. 537

‘Yes, it was the day of the equinox,’ Longhorn said. ‘It spanned a whole life.’ 538

‘And when were the masks taken off?’ I asked. 539

‘The masks were taken off at midnight,’ he replied. ‘They had fasted all day, but then they were allowed to eat and drink. There was everything in profusion, and beggars, too, were permitted to come to any table they wished.’ 540

It was late at night by the time I returned from the city, and the vault of the sky was as black as the calotte which I had admired during the day. But behind the reflections of the city I could sense the promises of other lights, perhaps as deceptive as they. Here, too, their distance is as flabbergasting and strange as on the harbour pier where once, pierced by them, we lingered. 541

But I shall need no other gate of evening. 542

The umbellifers - the twenty-seventh letter 543

We grow cold and look inward, for the frost has breathed on us and the city is making ready for a long hibernation. The season is over and the city people withdraw to their homes, doors are locked, conversation decreases. In the streets there are fewer and fewer people and vehicles, and all of them have particular destinations. 544

In many shop windows I have already seen a careless scribbled notice announcing that the shop will next open in the spring. Only one in three or four street lamps are lighted in the evenings, and later - so I have been told - only squares and crossroads will be lit. 545

Tourists are scarcely to be seen any longer. Who would be amused, after all, by touring a cold, dark city. 546

It is sad, sad. I think the lights of Tainaron should shine now that the sun is seen only seldom, more plentiful and colourful than before, but instead the city becomes dimmer and more impoverished. Life stops in a thin crust of ice like frozen water and in the eyes of the few passers-by there is only the glimmer of the need for well-earned rest, but I am restless and wish to live. I wish to come and go, I wish to do something with these hands I see before me on the table so pale and helpless; I wish to debate important questions and eat and clink glasses. 547

Too late! Longhorn, if I mention my wishes to him, merely shakes his head and reassures me: 'In the spring! When the winter has gone.' 548

And I see, of course I see exhaustion in his black jewel-eyes, I see that he himself would already prefer to withdraw to his home and stays on his feet only because I am here and in a way his guest. Always, before I meet him, I intend to say: 'Go, do go, you do not have to stay awake for my sake; I shall manage very well here.' But the words stick in my throat, for I know I shall be lost when he is gone. 549

And one cannot even see the fireflies here any longer; they have completely disappeared from the streets, and that, more than anything else, shows what hard times await us. Even the house of the Queen Bee looks bolted, and I cannot imagine where all the Oddfellows have scattered. But today when I went past the house's battened-down shutters, I saw a little light coming out of one of the cracks. I got up on tiptoe and peered inside, but I did not see the Queen Bee. But the empty room was filled with a warm, rosy glow whose source is in the honeycombs of memory. Perhaps its warmth will suffice for the Queen Bee, however long and hard the winter. 550

The Dangler's balcony, too, is empty, and the street below it, one of Tainaron's busiest thoroughfares, cuts through the city, empty and clean. Just occasionally a hawkmoth or two rushes past me in its late refitting. Elsewhere it is quiet, but in my head clatter the melancholy words: chippings and clay! Chippings and clay! 551

The spring tide is over, and Oceanos is murmuring its winter story. It is unlikely that I shall ever again come to gaze longingly over its swelling waters. 552

If now it were to happen that a letter were to drop on to my doormat, I know what it would say. You would write: 'Why do you not go away?' 553

I can hear you say it, rather coldly and a little didactically, as if you were offering me something on a plate, but looking away at the same time. And I admit that I have heard those words before; I have asked myself the same question. And perhaps, if someone were to say the word, I would go. I taste the word in my mouth; how fresh and pure it tastes. 554

I had my reasons for coming to Tainaron; I am sure they were important reasons, but I have nevertheless forgotten what they were. 555

'Come!' What if I were to say that to you? It would be in vain, quite in vain, for all I could 556

show you would be the wintry stalks of the umbellifers in the meadow at the Botanical Gardens.

Upright like them, I remain in this land of sleepers. 557

Date as postmark - the twenty-eighth letter 558

Today I opened the door, and before me rose the Rhinoceros beetle, as gloomy and simple as a mountain. He is a friend of Longhorn, but I have only met him in passing before. 559

‘Come inside,’ I asked, but he went on standing on the spot, swaying, and I could not fathom what he wanted. 560

‘Have you seen Longhorn recently?’ I asked at length, for I had not seen Longhorn for many days. 561

‘It was Longhorn who sent me here,’ he responded, and fell silent once more. 562

‘And how is he?’ I asked, becoming a little impatient. 563

‘He told me to come here and ask if there is anything I can do for you,’ the Rhinoceros Beetle managed to say, swaying in ever greater circles. I think he must weigh more than one hundred kilograms. 564

‘Thank you, but I do not need anything,’ I said in astonishment. ‘But where is Longhorn himself?’ 565

‘I thought you already knew,’ said the Rhinoceros Beetle, suddenly standing still. 566

‘I do not know anything,’ I said, fearing the worst. ‘Has something happened to Longhorn?’ 567

I felt like shaking the Rhinoceros Beetle, who remained motionless, but he was too wide. I thought I understood. 568

‘Ah, he is already asleep,’ I said, and was very offended. It was not polite to retire for the winter without even saying goodnight. 569

‘He is in his pupal cell,’ said the Rhinoceros Beetle, becoming even more massive than before. 570

This information came as a shock to me. For the sake of the Rhinoceros Beetle, I managed, with difficulty, to restrain myself, for I would have liked to have cursed him: ‘Damned longhorn beetle! How dare you!’ 571

The Rhinoceros Beetle left, but I went on standing in the doorway. I should never meet Longhorn again; not the Longhorn who had for so long been my patient guide in this strange city. If he were to return and step before me, I did not know who or what he would then be, or even when it would happen, for everything here has its own time and particular moment, unknown to others. 572

I should never again be able to turn to him, but when he nevertheless stepped before me, into the place where the Rhinoceros Beetle had just been standing, stood there and began to grow as the dead grow. 573

Then I saw that I had never known him and that I had never even wanted to know him. And 574

as he grew, he became thinner and more indistinct; his form slipped into the darkness of the stairwell and he no longer had shape or mass.

But his eyes, his eyes remained, and his gaze, which is as black and piercing as it ever was, and as impenetrable. And when I look into the darkness of his eyes they gradually begin to sparkle like double stars, like the planets on which the sun shines and on which there are seas and continents, roads, valleys and waterfalls and great forests where many can live and sing. 575

Then I went inside and closed the door, a little less sad. For it was, after all, now clear that although I had lived beside him from the beginning to the end, not just one life but two or three, I would never have learned to know him. His outline, which I had once drawn around him, in order to be able to show him and name him, had now disappeared. It liberated the great stranger who was a much realer Longhorn than the person I once knew, small and separate. 576

Such is my farewell to Longhorn today, date as postmark, in the city of Tainaron. 577

Passing bells - the twenty-ninth letter

What a rumbling! Over all of Tainaron it spread, echoing from wall to wall, shaking the window-panes and resonating in my own chest. When I pressed my fingers against the table, I could even feel the sound of the ore bells in my fingertips. And my toes, the soles of my feet, my elbows heard it, for the floor, all the soil of Tainaron quivered and resounded. 578

The prince had died, and now in all the churches, cathedrals and temples of the city, the many of them that there were, passing bells were being rung. They roared from morning to night as if to restore to the deceased the respect which no one had accorded to him before his death. 580

‘What happened to the prince?’ I asked the Rhinoceros Beetle. For the cause of his death had not been divulged on the news. 581

‘Him? He just died,’ the Rhinoceros Beetle answered, turning his slow gaze upon me. ‘It was high time. He was an old man.’ 582

‘But was it not almost too fitting a time?’ 583

I had seen, in the heart tower, what I had seen: the thin, expectant form of the prince, huddled on a simple chair which had been set in the middle of the floor without the company of adjutants or even the most lowly guardsman. His cloak was surrounded, like another cloak, by the aura of his fast approaching end. And it was not a natural end. 584

‘Did it not happen very suddenly?’ 585

‘No more suddenly than anything else,’ the Rhinoceros Beetle growled, even more dully than usual. 586

Slow-blooded, simple-minded creature! How could Longhorn ever have imagined that the Rhinoceros Beetle could have replaced him as my guide to Tainaron? 587

‘I should like to know what will happen next,’ I said. 588

‘Now power will change hands,’ the Rhinoceros Beetle said. 589

‘Yes, of course,’ I said impatiently. I knew that, of course, but I wanted to find out what it would 590

mean in practice and what kind of leadership Tainaron would now receive. But as I looked at the Rhinoceros Beetle I realised that it was not worth pursuing the subject. I could already see that nothing could have interested him less.

At that moment he glanced at me askance, and behind the membrane that covered his black eyes there flashed something - like amusement. Was the Rhinoceros Beetle really capable of being amused by something? For a moment I felt I might have been mistaken in regard to him, as if his dullness might veil completely different characteristics which he hid for who knew what reason. I tried to find the light again, but his gaze extinguished, as normal. Perhaps the fleeting impression was caused merely by the lighting or by my own state of mind. 591

‘Will you go to a memorial service in one of the temples? What religion do you belong to?’ I found myself asking, for I wished to change the subject, which had proved fruitless. 592

‘Each in turn,’ he said. ‘Naturally.’ 593

‘Each in turn? Surely that is not possible,’ I said, stunned. And ‘naturally’ - surely that was too much. 594

‘Why not?’ he said, chewing something in his massive jaws. ‘One must be impartial. At the moment I belong to the temple of the highest knowledge. Next month I shall move to - oh, I do not think I can remember the name of the parish.’ 595

‘But if where you are now has the highest knowledge, why is it worth moving to another parish?’ 596

He did not answer, but chewed and swallowed some tough and gluey substance which from time to time stuck his jaws together. I could still hear the ringing of the passing bells, from both far and high, both low and from quite close by. 597

‘Do you recognise the bells of your own temple?’ I asked. 598

‘I think they are the ones that clattering quite close by,’ he said. ‘Or else those where you can hear a double ring between the low strokes. No, listen, I think after all that they are those slower ones from farther east, that always ring three and one, three and one,’ he said. 599

I listened in vain. I could not distinguish the bells from each other; all I could hear was a roaring in which they were all mixed up. These Tainaronians! I do not suppose I shall ever learn to understand them. I am beginning to be weary of my long visit; yes, now I am weary. 600

The Rhinoceros Beetle has gone, but the prince’s passing bells are still booming. And why should I not admit that today I am plagued by home-sickness. I am sick with home-sickness. But Oceanos is freezing for the winter, and not a single ship will leave the harbour before spring. 601

The tall trees of my home courtyard are now tossing in the grip of a storm. The slanting brightness of autumn falls into my room. I see the room’s books and pictures and carefully chosen things; I remember its calm and its secret joy. It was at just this time of year, before winter, long ago, that you came into my room. 602

You came into my room as the morning dawned, and I did not know whether I slept or woke. I did not stir, but you, you squeezed your hard, salt-weathered lips silently to my throat, where 603

the pulse beats, and then they pressed my temples and moved, hot, over my eyelids, until finally you felt for my mouth and opened it with your own lips. Then I tasted your taste, the taste of your thirst, and I answered, and answered, and moaned.

The pupal cell of my home - the thirtieth letter

604

How long I searched for a home back than. Before me furnished and cold rooms opened, broken rental agreements fell, houses with destruction orders collapsed, and the endless queues of housing offices wound in long roads without issue.

605

Now all that is in the past. In the room in which I now live I have everything I need, and more: if I step on to my balcony, I see the white pennants and golden cupolas of Tainaron, the cloud-girt mountains and the blue heart-waters of Oceanos.

606

Nevertheless, I have now started to prepare a new dwelling for myself, just in case. Yes, it is almost ready for me to move in, my little pupal cell; it can no longer be unsuccessful. It has the fresh smell of mud and algae and reeds, for I have gathered almost all the materials myself from the beach where I once almost found myself in the jaws of death. I have done it all with my own hands, and when I look inside I am satisfied. It is just my size, like a well-fitting garment which does not pull anywhere. It is small on the outside but spacious inside, just as a good dwelling-place should be.

607

It is dark there. When I peer in through its only opening which, when the occasion arises, I shall close from inside, I am overcome by irresistible sleepiness. I do not believe that the lack of space will trouble me, for once I reach it it will be as wide as the night.

608

The mail will go on being delivered for some time, so I have heard, but the city now seems dead. More and more people are withdrawing for their winter rest, some of them - like Longhorn and, before long, I myself too - will be away for much longer. I spoke of sleeping just now, but of course we shall not merely be resting, but changing. Will I know how? Will it be hard work? Will it bring pain or pleasure or will it mean the disappearance, too, of all regrets?

609

Some change imperceptibly, little by little, others quickly and once and for all, but everyone changes, and for that reason it is in vain to ask whose fate is the best.

610

My entire room stinks like an estuary! There was something I still had to tell you, but the smell of the sludge dulls my thoughts. I shall remember it once more when it is spring, and that will come soon, soon, the seventeenth, and all around will sparkle - droplets! and I shall rise; and we shall see again...

611

About the Author

612



613

Leena Krohn was born 1947 in Helsinki. She studied philosophy, psychology and literature at Helsinki University. She lives as a free writer in Helsinki.

614

Leena Krohn has written about twenty books, novels, short stories, fantasy stories for children, poems, essays and radio plays.

615

Krohn's collection of stories and essays, *Matemaattisia olentoja tai jaettuja unia* (Matematiska varelser, transl. into Swedish by Susanne Hellsten, Sahlgrens 1995), was awarded the Finlandia Prize (1992).

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Leena Krohn's readers have access to a number of her writings and works via the World Wide Web where her home page is located at <http://www.kaapeli.fi/krohn/>

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