

## Foreword

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**S**tart with the title. Which means . . . nothing. There is no character in the novel called *Ferdydurke*. And this is only a foretaste of insolence to come.

Published in late 1937, when its author was thirty-three, *Ferdydurke* is the great Polish writer's second book. The title of his first, *Memoirs of a Time of Immaturity* (1933), would have served beautifully for the novel. Perhaps this is why Gombrowicz opted for jabberwocky.

That first book, whose title was pounced on by the Warsaw reviewers as if Gombrowicz had made a shaming confession inadvertently, was a collection of stories (he'd been publishing them in magazines since 1926); over the next two years more stories appeared, including a pair ("The Child Runs Deep in Filidor" and "The Child Runs Deep in Filibert") that he would use, with chapter-long mock prefaces, as interludes in *Ferdydurke*, as well as a first play, *Princess Ivona*; then, in early 1935, he embarked on a novel. Had the title of his volume of fanciful stories seemed—his word—"ill-chosen"? Now he would *really* provoke. He would write an epic in defense of immaturity. As he declared toward the end of his life:

"Immaturity—what a compromising, disagreeable word!—became my war cry."

Immaturity (not youth) is the word Gombrowicz insists on, insists on because it represents something unattractive, something, to use another of his key words, *inferior*. The longing his novel describes, and endorses, is not, Faust-like, to relive the glory days of youth. What happens to the thirty-year-old who, waking up one morning roiled in the conviction of the futility of his life and all his projects, is abducted by a teacher and returned to the world of callow schoolboys, is a humiliation, a fall.

From the start, Gombrowicz was to write, he had chosen to adopt a "fantastic, eccentric, and bizarre tone" bordering on "mania, folly, absurdity." To irritate, Gombrowicz might have said, is to conquer. I think, therefore I contradict. A young aspirant to glory in 1930s literary Warsaw, Gombrowicz had already become legendary in the writers' cafés for his madcap grimaces and poses. On the page, he sought an equally vehement relation to the reader. Grandiose and goofy, this is a work of unrelenting *address*.

Still, it seems likely that Gombrowicz did not know where he was going when he began the novel. "I can well remember," Gombrowicz declared in 1968, a year before he died (*did he remember? or was he massaging his legend?*),

*that, when I started Ferdysdurke, I wanted to write no more than a biting satire that would put me in a superior position over my enemies. But my words were soon whirled away in a violent dance, they took the bit between their teeth and galloped towards a grotesque lunacy with such speed that I had to rewrite the first part of the book in order to give it the same grotesque intensity.*

But the problem was less (I suspect) that the first chapters needed a further infusion of lunatic energies than that Gombrowicz did not anticipate the freight of argument—about the nature of eros, about culture (particularly Polish culture), about ideals—his tale would carry.

*Ferdysdurke* starts with a dreamlike abduction to an absurd world, in which the big become small and the small monstrously big: those great buttocks in the sky. In contrast to the landscape Lewis Carroll conjured up for a prepubescent girl, Gombrowicz's wonderland of shape-shiftings and re-sizings seethes with lust.

*Everything was expanding in blackness. Inflating and widening, yet at the same time shrinking and straining, evading something, and some kind of winnowing, general and particular, a coagulating tension and a tensing coagulation, a dangling by a fine thread, as well as transformation into something, transmutation, and furthermore—a falling into some cumulative, towering system, and as if on a narrow little plank raised six stories up, together with the excitement of all organs. And tickling.*

In Alice's story, a child falls into an asexual underworld governed by a new, fantastic but implacable logic. In *Ferdysdurke*, the grownup who is turned into a schoolboy discovers new, puerile freedoms for giving offense and owning up to disreputable desire.

Starts with an abduction; ends with an abduction. The first (by Professor Pimko) returns the protagonist to the scene of true, that is, unmanageable, feeling and desire. The second abduction shows the protagonist making a provisional flight back into so-called maturity.

*If someone were to spot me in the hallway, in the darkness, how would I explain this escapade? How do we find ourselves on these tortuous and abnormal roads? Normality is a tightrope-walker above the abyss of abnormality. How much potential madness is contained in the everyday order of things—you never know when and how the course of events will lead you to kidnap a farmhand and take to the fields. It's Zosia that I should be kidnapping. If anyone, it should be Zosia, kidnapping Zosia from a country manor would be the normal and correct thing to do, if anyone it was Zosia, and not this stupid, idiotic farmhand . . .*

*Ferdydurke* is one of the most bracing, direct books ever written about sexual desire—this without a single scene of sexual union. To be sure, the cards are stacked from the start in favor of eros. Who would not concur in the silencing of *this* social babble by the clamor of rumps, thighs, calves? The head commands, or wishes to. The buttocks reign.

Later, Gombrowicz referred to his novel as a pamphlet. He also called it a parody of a philosophical tale in the manner of Voltaire. Gombrowicz is one of the super-arguers of the twentieth century—"To contradict, even on little matters," he declared, "is the supreme necessity of art today"—and *Ferdydurke* is a dazzling novel of ideas. These ideas give the novel both weight and wings.

Gombrowicz capers and thunders, hectors and mocks, but he is also entirely serious about his project of transvaluation, his critique of high "ideals." *Ferdydurke* is one of the few novels I know that could be called Nietzschean; certainly it is the only comic novel that could be so described. (The affecting fantasia of Hesse's *Steppenwolf* seems, in comparison, riddled with sentimentality.) Nietzsche deplored the ascendancy of slave values sponsored by Christianity, and called for the overthrowing of corrupt ideals and for new forms of masterfulness. Gombrowicz, affirming the "human" need for imperfection, incompleteness, inferiority . . . youth, proclaims himself a specialist in inferiority. Swinish adolescence may seem a drastic antidote to smug maturity, but this is exactly what Gombrowicz has in mind. "Degradation became my ideal forever. I worshipped the slave." It is still a Nietzschean project of unmasking, of exposing, with a merry satyr-dance of dualisms: mature versus immature, wholes versus parts, clothed versus naked, heterosexuality versus homosexuality, complete versus incomplete.

Gombrowicz gaily deploys many of the devices of high literary modernism lately re-labeled "post-modern," which tweak the traditional decorums of novel writing: notably, that of a garrulous, intrusive narrator awash in his own contradictory emotional states. Bur-

lesque slides into pathos. When not preening, he is abject; when not clowning, he is vulnerable and self-pitying.

An immature narrator is some sort of candid narrator; even one who flaunts what is usually hidden. What he is not is a "sincere" narrator, sincerity being one of those ideals that make no sense in the world of candor and provocation. "In literature sincerity leads nowhere . . . the more artificial we are, the closer we come to frankness. Artificiality allows the artist to approach shameful truths." As for his celebrated *Diary*, Gombrowicz says:

*Have you ever read a "sincere" diary? The "sincere" diary is the most mendacious diary . . . And, in the long run, what a bore sincerity is! It is ineffectual.*

*Then what? My diary had to be sincere, but it could not be sincere. How could I solve the problem? The word, the loose, spoken word, has this consoling particularity: it is close to sincerity, not in what it confesses but in what it claims to be and in what it pursues.*

*So I had to avoid turning my diary into a confession. I had to show myself "in action," in my intention of imposing myself on the reader in a certain way, in my desire to create myself with everyone looking on. "This is how I would like to be for you," and not "This is how I am."*

Still, however fanciful the plot of *Ferdydurke*, no reader will regard the protagonist and his longings as anything other than a transposition of the author's own personality and pathology. By making Joey Kowalski (as the Polish name of the protagonist-narrator is here rendered in English) a writer—and the author of an unsuccessful, much derided book of stories entitled, yes, *Memoirs of a Time of Immaturity*—Gombrowicz dares the reader *not* to think about the man who wrote the novel.

A writer who revels in the fantasy of renouncing his identity and its privileges. A writer who imagines a flight into youth, represented

as a kidnapping; a discarding of the destiny expected of an adult, represented as a subtraction from the world in which one is known.

And then the fantasy came true. (Few writers' lives have so clearly taken the shape of a destiny.) At the age of thirty-five, a few days short of the fateful date of September 1, 1939, Gombrowicz was dropped into unexpected exile, far from Europe, in the "immature" New World. It was as brutal a change in his real life as the imagined turning of a thirty-year-old man into a schoolboy. Stranded, without any means of support, where nothing was expected of him, because nothing was known about him, he was offered the divine opportunity to lose himself. In Poland, he was well-born Witold Gombrowicz, a prominent "vanguard" writer, who had written a book many (including his friend, the other great Polish writer of the same period, Bruno Schulz) considered a masterpiece. In Argentina, he writes, "I was nothing, so I could do anything."

It is impossible now to imagine Gombrowicz without his twenty-four years in Argentina (much of which was spent in penury), an Argentina he made to suit his own fantasies, his daring, his pride. He left Poland a relatively young man; he returned to Europe (but never to Poland) when he was nearing sixty, and died six years later in the south of France. Separation from Europe was not the making of Gombrowicz as a writer: the man who published *Ferdydurke* two years earlier was already fully formed as a literary artist. It was, rather, the most providential confirmation of everything his novel knows, and gave direction and bite to the marvelous writings still to come.

The ordeal of emigration—and for Gombrowicz it was an ordeal—sharpened his cultural combativeness, as we know from the *Diary*. The *Diary*—in three volumes in English, and anything but a "personal" diary—can be read as a kind of free-form fiction, post-modern *avant la lettre*, that is, animated by a program of violating decorum similar to that of *Ferdydurke*. Claims for the staggering genius and intellectual acuity of the author vie with a running ac-

count of his insecurities, imperfections, and embarrassments, and a defiant avowal of barbaric, yokel prejudices. Considering himself slighted by, and therefore eager to reject, the lively literary milieu of late 1930s Buenos Aires, and aware that it harbored one indisputably great writer, Gombrowicz declared himself "at opposite poles" from Borges. "He is deeply rooted in literature, I in life. To tell the truth I am anti-literature."

As if in agreement, shallow agreement, with Gombrowicz's entirely self-serving quarrel with the idea of literature, many now regard the *Diary* instead of *Ferdydurke* as his greatest work.

No one can forget the notorious opening of the *Diary*:

Monday

Me.

Tuesday

Me.

Wednesday

Me.

Thursday

Me.

Having got *that* straight, Gombrowicz devoted Friday's entry to a subtle reflection on some material he had been reading in the Polish press.

Gombrowicz expected to offend with his egocentricity: a writer must continually defend his borders. But a writer is also someone who must abandon borders, and egotism, so Gombrowicz argued, is the precondition of spiritual and intellectual freedom. In the "me . . . me . . . me . . . me" one hears the solitary émigré thumbing his nose at "we . . . we . . . we . . . we." Gombrowicz never stopped arguing with Polish culture, with its intractable collectivism of spirit (usually called "romanticism") and the obsession of its writers with the national martyrdom, the national identity. The relentless intelligence and energy of his observations on cultural and

artistic matters, the pertinence of his challenge to Polish pieties, his bravura contentiousness, ended by making him the most influential prose writer of the past half century in his native country.

The Polish sense of being marginal to European culture, and to Western European concern while enduring generations of foreign occupation, had prepared the hapless émigré writer better than he might have wished to endure being sentenced to many years of near total isolation as a writer. Courageously, he embarked on the enterprise of making deep, liberating sense out of the unprotectedness of his situation in Argentina. Exile tested his vocation and expanded it. Strengthening his disaffection from nationalist pieties and self-congratulation, it made him a consummate citizen of world literature.

More than sixty years after *Ferdynand* was written, little remains of the specifically Polish targets of Gombrowicz's scorn. These have vanished along with the Poland in which he was reared and came of age—destroyed by the multiple blows of war, Nazi occupation, Soviet dominance (which prevented him from ever returning), and the post-1989 ethos of consumerism. Almost as dated is his assumption that adults always claim to be mature.

*In our relations with other people we want to be cultivated, superior, mature, so we use the language of maturity and we talk about, for instance, Beauty, Goodness, Truth . . . But, within our own confidential, intimate reality, we feel nothing but inadequacy, immaturity . . .*

The declaration seems from another world. How unlikely it would be for whatever embarrassing inadequacies people feel now to be covered over with hifalutin absolutes such as Beauty, Goodness, Truth. The European-style ideals of maturity, cultivation, wisdom have given way steadily to American-style celebrations of the Forever Young. The discrediting of literature and other expressions of "high" culture as elitist or anti-life is a staple of the new culture ruled by

entertainment values. Indiscretion about one's unconventional sexual feelings is now a routine, if not mandatory, contribution to public entertainment. Anyone now who would claim to love "the inferior" would argue that it is not inferior at all; that actually it's superior. Hardly any of the cherished opinions against which Gombrowicz contended are still cherished.

Then can *Ferdynand* still offend? Still seem outrageous? Exception made for the novel's acidic misogyny, probably not. Does it still seem extravagant, brilliant, disturbing, brave, funny . . . wonderful? Yes.

A zealous administrator of his own legend, Gombrowicz was both telling and not telling the truth when he claimed to have successfully avoided all forms of greatness. But whatever he thought, or wanted us to think he thought, that cannot happen if one had produced a masterpiece, and it eventually comes to be acknowledged as such. In the late 1950s *Ferdynand* was finally translated (under auspicious sponsorship) into French, and Gombrowicz was, at last, "discovered." He had wanted nothing more than this success; this triumph over his adversaries and detractors, real and imagined. But the writer who counseled his readers to try to avoid all expressions of themselves; to guard against all their beliefs, and to mistrust their feelings; above all, to stop identifying themselves with what defines them, could hardly fail to insist that he, Gombrowicz, was not *that book*. Indeed, he has to be inferior to it. "The work, transformed into culture, hovered in the sky, while I remained below." Like the great backside that hovers high above the protagonist's half-hearted flight into normality at the end of the novel, *Ferdynand* has floated upward to the literary empyrean. Long live its sublime mockery of all attempts to normalize desire . . . and the reach of great literature.

## Translator's Note

**F**or several years the question has been whether *Ferdydurke* could be translated into comprehensible English, and if so, would it still be *Ferdydurke*?

*Ferdydurke* was published in Poland in 1937 and translated into Spanish in 1947 in Buenos Aires, the result of a collaboration between Gombrowicz and his Hispanic literary friends. In the early 1960s it was translated into French and German. An English version was derived from the French, German, and possibly the Spanish translations, but some of the most beautiful and important passages were omitted. This is the first unabridged English translation, and it is taken directly from Gombrowicz's original text. I hope that it will establish that it is possible to translate *Ferdydurke*, at least for the most part.

I arrived at the task of translating *Ferdydurke* by a circuitous route. I was born in Poland, and my mother tongue is the language in which Gombrowicz was creating his works and on which he was already exerting an influence. I began to learn English at the age of thirteen when, as a refugee during World War II, I found myself living in England and Ireland. I settled in the United States in 1959

and began, some years later, to write short stories in English—rather idiosyncratic in content and style—and discovered an affinity with Gombrowicz's writing. After reading Gombrowicz's last novel, *Cosmos*, in Polish, I thought that it would sound beautiful in English. I translated the first chapter of *Cosmos*, as well as some of Gombrowicz's short stories, and began to explore the possibilities of having them published. This brought me into contact with publishers and scholars, and with Gombrowicz's widow, Rita Gombrowicz. They all encouraged me to translate *Ferdydurke*, Gombrowicz's first major work.

I decided at the outset to use American rather than British English because it is less formal and therefore better suited to Gombrowicz's style. My own English is influenced by my having learned it in London and Dublin. For this reason, and also because the translation was going to be from a native language to an acquired one, it became apparent that I would need the assistance of a born speaker of American English. My husband's reviews of the many drafts proved to be most useful in this respect. In some instances, however, when he would interject, "But we don't say it this way," my reply would be, "In Polish we don't either; it's pure Gombrowicz"—and this would be the final court of appeal. Clearly I was dealing with yet another language: Gombrowicz's Polish.

Gombrowicz had availed himself of four idioms: colloquial Polish; literary Polish; the language of the intelligentsia and the landed gentry; and the language of the peasantry. But he also introduced his own idiosyncrasies by playing *with* and *on* words, by changing nouns into verbs and adjectives, by using unusual phraseology, and by inventing new forms, some of which have entered colloquial Polish. Had I not worked as a psychiatrist with English-speaking schizophrenics who invent their own languages, I may not have felt comfortable "neologizing" English in such crucial words and phrases as "proffed" and "he had dealt me the *pupa*." The Polish word *pupa*

(pronounced "poopa") presented a special problem. It means the buttocks, behind, bum, tush, rump, but not one of these (nor any others that I considered) adequately conveys the sense in which Gombrowicz uses "pupa" in the text. While the "mug" is Gombrowicz's metaphor for the destructive elements in human relationships, the pupa is his metaphor for the gentle, insidious, but definite infantilizing and humiliation that we inflict on one another. We made the decision to stay with the Polish word.

*Ferdydurke* is a tragic-farce, in which events are often tragic and comic at the same time, and in which the mug and the pupa are the metaphors for violence and belittlement. Names of body parts are given meaning beyond the usual, often through wordplay. This wordplay is, whenever possible, translated literally. Some plays on words are impossible to translate—for example, Gombrowicz uses the fact that the Polish term for fingers and toes is same word to create wordplay between "fingers" and "tiptoeing."

I had to bear in mind that in English the sequence of words is crucial to meaning, whereas in Polish there is a more complicated grammar that clarifies the meaning of a sentence. Mishaps such as "he threw his mother from the train a kiss" do not occur in Polish.

Gombrowicz delighted, it seems, in compressing the abstract into the concrete: it is not the thought of the farmhand but the farmhand himself that "paints the morning in bright and pleasant colors," or, "she was generally a bit disgusted with mother," instead of "mothering."

Gombrowicz's long sentences and paragraphs, frequent use of dashes, and his grouping of entire conversations into single paragraphs were part of his style, and I preserved these. The same applies to his repeating a word rather than providing its synonym; by doing so he evokes a sense of emphasis and rhythm.

I was equally faithful to Gombrowicz's changes of tense between past and present in the same paragraph and even in the same sen-

tence. The metamorphosis of a thirty-year-old man into a teenager is often indicated by past tense becoming present. Also, the change of tense imbues the story with a surreal sense of time.

In translating idioms I sometimes had to use an English one that had the same meaning as the Polish but was entirely different. For *z palca*—"from the finger"—I substituted "out of thin air." However, the English idiom "the end justifies the means" was changed to "the end sanctifies the means," preserving a nuance of the Polish.

In Polish, the use of diminutives imparts, in many instances, an aura of affectation and artificiality, and they often sound ridiculous. Gombrowicz spared no effort in pointing this out by his frequent and exaggerated use of diminutives. I have tried to capture this with diminutive adjectives, as in "cute little head," or by using the ending "-ie."

In Poland, French was not the language of the aristocracy, as it had been in Russia until the early 1800s, but the occasional use of French and other languages was, nonetheless, a common affectation and a fruitful field for Gombrowicz's satire. I have followed Gombrowicz in not offering a translation of familiar foreign words and phrases.

Two important names—Kneadus (from the verb "to knead") and Youngblood—were translated into English because they have definite connotations in Polish that contribute to the meaning of the tale. The title itself, *Ferdydurke*, has no meaning in Polish, although there is some conjecture that the word was a contraction and alteration of the name Freddy Durkee, the chief character in Sinclair Lewis's *Babbitt*, which was widely read in Poland in the early 1930s. Gombrowicz himself never explained the title.

Gombrowicz has presented us with a remarkable novel in a bold and innovative style—with élan, humor, beauty. No translation is final, but it was incumbent on me to make a valiant effort to transfer the original text to the English-speaking reader with fidelity and with

the verve inherent in the original; my guiding principle was to approach Gombrowicz with humility and the reader with audacity.

The following texts were used in this translation.

Witold Gombrowicz, *Ferdydurke* (Paris: Institut Littéraire, 1969). Includes changes by Gombrowicz.

Gombrowicz, *Ferdydurke*, translated into English by Eric Mosbacher (London, 1961).

Gombrowicz, *Ferdydurke*, translated into French by George Sédir (Paris, 1973).

Gombrowicz, *Ferdydurke*, translated into Spanish, based on 1947 translation (Buenos Aires, 1964).

Gombrowicz, *Polish Reminiscences and Travels Through Argentina* (in Polish).

Gombrowicz, *Diary* (in Polish).

Michał Głowiński, *Witold Gombrowicz's "Ferdydurke"* (in Polish).



## 10 Legs on the Loose and New Entrapment

**N**ext morning, after a stormy night tormented by dreams, I jumped out of bed at the crack of dawn. Not to school, however. I hid behind a coat rack in a small vestibule that separated the kitchen from the bathroom. Following a relentless call to battle, I decided to attack the Youngbloods psychologically, in the bathroom. Hail, pupa! Hail, queen! I needed to muster all my resources and energize my spirit for the final encounter with Pimko and with Kopyrda. I trembled, sweating—yet a struggle for life and death cannot choose its means, I could not afford to lose my trump card. Catch your enemy in the bathroom. Look at him and see what he's like then! Look him over and remember him! When his attire falls off, and with it, like an autumn leaf, all his glitter and pretense of chic, swank, and pizzazz, your spirit can pounce on him like a lion pounces on a lamb. You mustn't overlook anything that might arouse and energize you, thus enabling you to overpower the enemy, the goal sanctifies the means, so fight, fight, fight above all, fight using the latest methods available, nothing but fight! That's what the wisdom of nations has always proclaimed. The entire household was asleep as I lay in wait. No murmurs came from the

girl's room, she slept without rustling while Mr. Youngblood, the engineer, in his light-blue bedroom, snored like an official from the provinces or some other dunce . . .

The housemaid begins puttering around the kitchen, sleepy voices are waking, the family is getting up for their morning ablutions and other rituals. I strained all my senses. My spirit gone wild, I was like a wild civilized animal in a *Kulturkampf*. The cock crowed. The first to appear was the Youngblood woman in her pale gray dressing gown and slippers, her hair brushed down a bit. She walked calmly, her head raised, her face lit with a particular wisdom, I'd say, the wisdom of plumbing. She even walked with a certain reverence in the name of sacred naturalness and simplicity, and in the name of rational morning hygiene. Before she entered the bathroom, she veered into the john for a minute where, her brow raised high, she vanished—wisely, consciously, intelligently, and with culture—like a woman who knows better than to be ashamed of her natural functions. She came out more proud than she went in, as if—strengthened, made brighter, made human, she emerged as if from a Greek temple! I then understood that she had also entered it as if it were a temple. It was indeed a temple from which modern Mrs. Engineers and Mrs. Attorneys ladled up their power! Every day she came out of this place better, more cultured, wielding high the banner of progress, here was the source of the intelligence and the naturalness with which she tormented me. Enough said. She crossed over into the bathroom. The cock crowed.

And then Mr. Youngblood ran up at a trot, in his robe, clearing his throat noisily and hawking, all done briskly, not to be late for the office, with his newspaper, to save time, glasses on his nose, towel round his neck, cleaning his fingernails with a fingernail, clapping his slippers, and whimsically flashing his bare soles. Noticing the door to the john he giggled with his backyard, backside giggle, same as yesterday, then he sashayed into the john like an engineer and a working member of the intelligentsia, coy, jocular, amazingly witty.

He lingered there a long time, smoked a cigarette and sang the *Carioca*, but he came out thoroughly demoralized, a typical intelligentsia yokel, his mug so facetiously cretinlike, so disgustingly gross and offensively muttonlike that I would have pounced on that mug of his had I not forcibly restrained myself.\* What a strange thing—the toilet had worked on his wife constructively, whereas on him it seemed to work destructively, even though he was a construction design engineer.

"Hurry up!" he called lasciviously to his wife, who was washing herself in the bathroom. "Hurry up, old girl! Vicky is in a hurry to get to the office!"

It was the visit to the toilet that made him call himself Vicky, in the diminutive, he then left, towel in hand. I cautiously peeked into the bathroom through a chink in the frosted glass. Mrs. Engineer, naked, was wiping her thigh with a bath towel, while her face, of darker complexion, sharp and wise-looking, hung over the fatty-white, calf-like, innocent, hopeless calf of her leg like a vulture over a calf. And here was a terrible antithesis, it seemed that the eagle was helplessly circling, unable to seize the calf that was bleating to high heaven: this was Mrs. Engineer Youngblood, hygienically and intelligently beholding her old woman's hunk of a leg. She jumped. She assumed a position for aerobics, hands on her hips, and she made a half-turn with her torso from right to left, inhaling and exhaling. Then from left to right, exhaling and inhaling! She thrust one leg up—her foot was petite and pink. Then the other leg with the other foot! She set off into sit-ups! She executed twelve sit-ups in front of the mirror, breathing through her nose—one, two, three, four, so that her boobs clapped and even my legs twitched, and I was tempted to begin a cultural, hellish prance. But instead, I jumped behind the coat rack. The schoolgirl was approaching with light steps, I lay in ambush as in a jungle, all set for a psychological pounce, gone bestial . . .

\*A very popular tune in the 1930s from the film *Carioca*.

inhumanly, more than inhumanly bestial . . . Now or never, nab her right out of sleep, while she's still warm and untidy, disheveled, I'll destroy her beauty within me, her cheap, schoolgirl charms! We'll see whether Kopyrda or Pimko can save her from annihilation!

She walked whistling, she looked funny in her pajamas, a towel round her neck—all with a quick, precise motion, all action. One moment and she was in the bathroom, and I pounced on her with my eyes from my hiding place. Now, now or never, now, when she's her weakest, her most sloppy self!—but she was so quick that no sloppiness could cling fast to her. She stepped into the bathtub—turned on the cold shower. She shook her curls, her well-proportioned nudity trembled, ducking and splashing in the stream of water. Ha! So it wasn't I who caught her, it was she who caught me by the throat! The girl, unforced by anyone, first thing in the morning, before breakfast, took a cold shower and subjected her body to spasms and twitches so that she could, with a youthful splashing on an empty stomach, regain her daytime beauty!

In spite of myself I had to admire the discipline that was involved in the girl's good looks! With all swiftness, precision, and dexterity she managed to dodge that most difficult transition—between night and day—and she floated like a butterfly on motion's wings. And if that weren't enough—she subjected her body to cold water, to a sharp and youthful splashing, instinctively sensing that a dose of sharpness would annihilate anything slovenly. When all is said and done—what could harm a girl vigorously puffing in cold water? When she turned off the faucet and stood naked, dripping with water, panting, she began as if anew, as if the other had never been. Hey!—if instead of cold water she had used soap and warm water, it would have served no purpose. Only cold water could, by gushing, force oblivion.

I crept out of the vestibule like a sleaze. I dragged my despicable self back to my room, convinced that further peeping would accomplish nothing, on the contrary, it might prove disastrous. Damn it, damn—

yet another defeat, at the very bottom of intelligentsia hell I was still suffering defeat. Biting my fingers until they bled, I swore to deny the Youngbloods victory, to go on driving and energizing myself, and I wrote in pencil on the bathroom wall: *Veni, vidi, vici*. Let them know I had seen them, let them feel that they've been seen! Their enemy is not asleep, he lies in ambush. Energize, vitalize! I went to school, nothing new there, Ashface, the bard, Mizdral, Hopek and *accusativus cum infinitivo*, Galkiewicz, faces, mugs, pupas, the toe in my shoe, and the daily universal impotence, boring, boring, boring! As I had expected, my letter left no mark on Kopyrda's face, he seemed to wiggle his legs a little more, but I wasn't sure, I could have been imagining it. My schoolmates, however, looked at me in disgust, Kneadus even asked:

"For God's sake, what sort of a mess have you got yourself into?"

Indeed, after all this dynamizing and energizing, my mug became so dumb that I didn't really know which end was up, but never mind, forget it, soon it would be night, it was the night that mattered most, I awaited the night in trembling, the night would settle it all, the night would decide. Perhaps the night would bring a turning point. Will Pimko yield to the temptation? Will the seasoned, double-barreled prof be thrown off balance by the girl's sensuous letter? Everything depended on it. Let Pimko lose his balance, I prayed, lose his head, but suddenly, terrified by the mug, the pupa, by my letter, by Pimko, by what had been and what was yet to be, I tried to make a run for it, I kept jumping to my feet in the classroom, like a complete idiot—then I sat down again—because where would I run, backward, forward, to the left or right, from my own mug, from my own pupa? Shut up, shut up, there's no escape! The night will decide.

During lunch nothing noteworthy happened. The schoolgirl and Mrs. Engineer were tight-lipped, not throwing about their modernity, as they usually did. They were scared. They must have felt my energy and vitality. I noticed that the Youngblood woman sat stiffly in her chair, with the dignity of someone whose sitting was under

surveillance, funny, this gave her a matronly air, I had not expected this effect. In any case there was no doubt that she had read my inscription on the wall. I watched her keenly, and I made the remark, in a miserable, sleazy, and detached tone, that I was noted for an exceptionally sharp and piercing vision, which is able to go right through a face and exit on the other side . . . She pretended not to hear me, while the engineer burst into giggles in spite of himself, and he went on giggling for a long time, mechanically. As a result of recent events Mr. Youngblood manifested—if my eyes did not mislead me—a tendency to messiness, he spread butter on large slices of bread and stuck huge pieces into his mouth, making smacking noises as he chewed.

After lunch I tried peeping at the schoolgirl from four until six o'clock—to no avail, however, because not once did she come into the perimeter of my vision. She must have been on her guard. I also noticed that the Youngblood woman was spying on me, because she walked into my room several times with some lame excuse, she even suggested, rather artlessly, that she would treat me to the movies. Their anxiety grew, they felt threatened, they scented enemy and danger, although they didn't know what was threatening them, nor what I was up to—they caught the scent and were demoralized by it, its shapelessness provoked anxiety that, in turn, gave them nothing concrete to hold on to. And they couldn't even talk among themselves about the danger, because their words sank into a shapeless and ill-defined darkness. Groping her way, Mrs. Engineer tried to organize some sort of defense, and, as I found out, she spent the whole afternoon reading Bertrand Russell and gave her husband Wells to read. But Mr. Youngblood declared that he preferred reading the yearbook of "The Warsaw Figaro" and Boy Żeleński's *Words*, and from time to time I heard him burst out laughing. All in all, they couldn't settle down. Finally, Mrs. Youngblood decided to busy herself with household bills, thus retreating to the solid ground of fiscal

realism, while the engineer hung around the house, sat down on one piece of furniture, then on another, all the while humming rather frivolous tunes. It bothered them that I sat in my room, not showing any signs of life. I therefore tried all the more to keep silent. Quiet, quiet, quiet, every so often the silence mounted in intensity and the buzzing of a fly sounded like the blowing of a horn, shapelessness seeped into the silence, creating murky swamps. Around seven o'clock I saw Kneadus slipping between the fence posts toward the housemaid, signaling in the direction of the kitchen window.

By evening, Mrs. Engineer also began flitting from one chair to another, and the engineer had a few nips in the pantry. They couldn't find the right form nor space for themselves, they couldn't sit still, they kept sitting down and jumping back up as if prodded with a hot poker, and they walked hither and thither tense and wrought up, as if pursued from behind. Their reality, under the powerful stimulus of my action, was swept off its course, it bubbled and spilled over, roared and groaned numbly, while the dark, absurd elements of ugliness, of disgust and sordidness became more and more tangible and grew on their rising anxiety as if on yeast. Mrs. Engineer could hardly sit at dinner, all her concentration having gone into her face and upper regions, while Mr. Youngblood, on the contrary, came to the table wearing just his vest without a jacket, he tucked the napkin under his chin and, buttering thick slices of bread that he had gnawed off, he told quasi-intellectual jokes and giggled. The awareness that he had been spied upon tumbled him into vulgar infantilism, he totally attuned to what I saw in him, he became a petty, coquettish, amused little engineer—a jolly, cuddlesome, spoiled little engineer. He also kept winking at me and sending me witty, knowing little signals to which—of course—I didn't respond, and I sat looking pale and miserable. The girl sat tight-lipped, indifferent, she ignored everything with truly girlish heroism, one could swear she knew nothing—oh, I was frightened as I watched that heroism,

which only enhanced her beauty! But night will give the verdict, night will decide, and if both Pimko and Kopyrda default, the modern girl will most certainly be victorious, and nothing will save me from slavery.

Night was coming, and with it the decisive encounter. I couldn't foresee what would happen, there was no set program, all I knew was that I had to act in unison with each disfiguring, absurd, murky, grotesque, and disharmonious element that would emerge, with each destructive component—and I was steeped in a rancid, sickly terror, compared to which the powerful fear of being murdered is a mere trifle. After eleven o'clock the schoolgirl went to bed. Earlier in the day I had used a chisel to widen the angle of sight through the slit in the door, and now I could see that part of the room which, so far, had been inaccessible to my vision. She quickly undressed and turned off the light, but instead of going to sleep she tossed and turned on the hard mattress. She lit a lamp, picked up an English crime novel from her bedside table, and I could tell that she was forcing herself to read. The modern one looked attentively into space as if visually trying to decipher the danger, to guess its shape and see at last the configuration of horror, to realistically understand what was brewing against her. She didn't know that the danger had neither shape nor sense—senseless, shapeless, and lawless, a murky, jumbled-up, elemental force devoid of style was endangering her modern shape, and that was all.

I heard raised voices coming from Mr. and Mrs. Engineer's bedroom. I quickly ran to their door. The engineer, in his underwear, all a-giggle, cabaret-style, was again telling anecdotes aimed at having the distinct flavor of the intelligentsia.

"That's enough!" The Youngblood woman rubbed her hands. "Enough, enough! Stop it!"

"Wait, wait, Joannie—just a little more . . . I'll soon stop!"

"I'm no Joannie. I am Joanna. Take off those underpants, or put on your pants."

"Panties!"

"Shut up!"

"Panties, shmanties, hee, hee, hee, panties!"

"Shut up, I tell you . . ."

"Panties, pants . . ."

"Shut up!" she abruptly switched off the lamp.

"Switch it on, old girl!"

"I'm no old girl . . . I can't bear to look at you! Why did I ever fall in love with you? What's the matter with you? What's the matter with us? Get hold of yourself. We're surely marching together to the New Days ahead! We are the champions of Modern Times!"

"Sure, sure, you fat fish—hee, hee, hee—you're my dish. Fatty, creamy, yet so dreamy. But his heart has ceased to thump, 'cause she's turned into a frump . . ."

"What's this? Victor! What are you saying?"

"Vicky is so cheery! Vicky's having fun! Vicky frisks at a trot!"

"What are you saying, Victor? The death penalty!" she exclaimed, "the death penalty! Our Era! Culture and progress! Our aspirations! Our transports! Victor! oh, not so fatty, not so racy, not so diminutive either . . . What has entangled you? Zuta? Oh, this is so hard! Something's wrong! Something fateful is in the air! Treachery . . ."

"Treachy-reachy-rie," Mr. Youngblood said.

"Victor! Stop using diminutives! Stop it!"

"Treachy-letchy-rie, Vicky says . . ."

"Victor!"

They broke into a free-for-all!

"The light," the Youngblood woman panted, "Victor! The light! Switch it on! Let go of me!"

"Wait!" he panted and giggled, "wait, let me smack you, let me give you a smack in the scruff of your neckie!"

"Never! Let go, or I'll bite you!"

\*Based on excerpts from *Boy Żeleński's Words*.

"I'll smack you, smack you in the little scruff of your neckie, your scruffie, your little scruffie . . ."

And he suddenly spat out all the bedroom love diminutives, beginning with sweetie-pie all the way to little pussy . . . I retreated in fear. Even though I lacked none of my own disgusting jargon, I couldn't bear this. The hellish *b e l i t t l e m e n t* that had so powerfully affected my fate was now making their life miserable. This was the little engineer's devilish excess, oh, it's horrible when a petty engineer takes the bit between his teeth, what are these times we live in? I heard a smack. Did he hit her in her little scruffie or slap her in the face?

It was dark in the girl's room. Was she asleep? All was quiet in her room, and I imagined her sleeping with her arm over her head, halfway under the covers, all worn out. Suddenly she groaned. She groaned but not in her sleep. She moved abruptly, anxiously on her couch. I knew she was huddling up and that her wide-open eyes were fearfully searching in the darkness. Had the modern schoolgirl become so sensitized that my gaze could strike her in the darkness through the keyhole? Her groan was incredibly beautiful, torn out of the depths of night—as if the girl's ill-boding fate itself had groaned, calling for help in vain.

I heard her groan again, numbly, desperately. Had she sensed that at this very moment her father, depraved by me, was smacking her mother? Had she become aware of the odiousness that was besetting her on all sides? I thought I saw her in the semi-darkness, wringing her hands and gnawing on her forearm until it hurt. As if she wanted to grab with her teeth the beauty within. The depravity surrounding her and lurking from all corners excited her charms. What treasures, what charms she possessed! The first treasure—the girl. The second treasure—the schoolgirl. The third treasure—modern. And it was all locked up in her like a nut within a shell, but she couldn't reach her arsenal, even though she felt my heinous gaze, and knew that a

spurned admirer would naturally want to befoul, ruin, destroy, and psychologically deface her girlish beauty.

And I was not at all surprised that the girl, sensing the threat that I secretly wished her to become ugly, went berserk. She jumped out of bed. She threw off her nightshirt. She pranced all over the room. She no longer cared that I was spying on her, indeed, she seemed to be challenging me to a fight. Her legs nimbly and lightly lifted her body, her hands fluttered in the air. She tucked her little head this way and that. She enfolded her head in her arms. She shook her curls. She lay on the floor, then rose again. She sobbed, she laughed, she sang softly. She jumped on the table, from the table onto the couch. She seemed scared to stop even for a moment as if chased by rats and mice, as if eager for the lightness of her movement to lift her above all horror. She no longer knew what to hold on to. She finally grabbed a belt and began whipping her back with all her might, anything to subject herself to youthful pain . . . Something caught me by the throat! Oh, how her beauty tormented her, drove her to do things, hurled and threw her about, rolled her around! I stood dead still by the keyhole, my mug absurd and loathsome, equally split between rapture and hate. The schoolgirl, hurled about by her beauty, turned into a hellion. All the while I adored her and hated her, I quivered with delight, my mug spasmodically expanding and contracting like stretched gutta-percha, my God, so this is where love of beauty will drive us!

Midnight struck in the dining room. There was a quiet knocking on the window. Three times. I froze in fear. The whole thing was about to begin. Kopyrda, Kopyrda was here! The schoolgirl stopped jumping about. The knocking repeated, insistent, quiet. She went to the window and pulled back the blind slightly. She stared . . .

"Is that you? . . ." a whisper came from the porch in the night's silence.

She pulled on the string of the blind. Moonlight poured into the room. I saw her standing in her nightshirt now, tense, watchful . . .

"What do you want?" she asked.

I admired her command of the situation, the magpie that she was! Because this was a surprise—she hadn't expected Kopyrda to arrive at her window. Another girl in her place, an old-fashioned one, would have gone on with trite questions and exclamations: "I beg your pardon! What's the meaning of this? What do you want at this hour?" But this modern one sensed instinctively that to show surprise would have ruined it . . . that it would be more beautiful without surprise . . . Oh, mistress of the situation! She leaned out the window unceremoniously, cordially, like a good sport.

"What do you want?" resting her chin on her arms, she repeated in the subdued tone of a young female.

Since he had addressed her informally, she replied in kind. And I admired the unbelievably abrupt transition in style—from jumping up and down into sociability! Who would have guessed that only a moment ago she had been jumping and throwing herself about? Modern though he was himself, Kopyrda was somewhat put off by the schoolgirl's remarkable matter-of-factness. Yet he immediately tuned in to her tone and, boyishly, nonchalantly, with his hands in his pockets, he said:

"Let me in."

"What for?"

He whistled and said rudely:

"Don't you know? Let me in!"

He seemed excited, and his voice trembled slightly, but he tried to hide his excitement. All the while I shuddered at the thought that he might spill the whole thing about the letter. Luckily, talking a lot or being terribly surprised wouldn't be in keeping with the modern way, they had to pretend that it all went without saying. Nonchalance, brutality, terseness, disdain—this was poetry, just as sighing, moaning, and mandolins would have been to lovers of yore. He knew that the only way to possess the girl would be with disdain, that without disdain—nothing doing. His face was in the vines that were

creeping up the wall, and with a hint of sensuous, modern sentimentalism in his voice he added longingly, emphatically, numbly:

"You wanted it!"

She made a move to close the window. But suddenly—as if this move actually provoked her to do the opposite—she stopped . . . She tightened her lips. She stood still for a second, only her eyes moving from side to side, slowly. The expression that came over her face was . . . an expression of supermodern cynicism . . . And the schoolgirl, excited by the expression of cynicism, by eyes and lips in the moonlight, in the window, suddenly leaned out halfway, and with her palm—nothing humorous in her gesture—she tousled his hair.

"Come in!" she whispered.

Kopyrda showed no surprise. This was no time to show surprise at her or at himself. The slightest hesitancy would have ruined everything. He had to act as if the reality that they were creating between them were something ordinary, everyday. Oh, what a master! And so he acted accordingly. He clambered onto the windowsill and jumped to the floor of her room exactly as if he were in the habit of clambering every night to visit a newly met schoolgirl. Once in the room he laughed softly, just to be on the safe side. She, however, took him by the hair, pulled back his head and with her lips devoured his lips!

The devil, the devil of it! What if she's still a virgin?! What if the girl is still a virgin?! What if she's a virgin, and she's about to give herself without ceremony to the first man who knocks on her window. The devil of it, the devil! Something caught me by the throat. Because, if she were an ordinary tart and a slut, well, no harm done, but if she's a virgin, then—I must admit—this modern one was able to elicit incredibly wild beauty from within herself and from Kopyrda. To be able—so impudently and quietly, so brutally and effortlessly—to grab the boy by the hair—and to grab me by the throat . . . Ha! She knew I was peeping through the keyhole, and she stopped at nothing as long as she was victorious through her beauty. I was shaken. If only it were he who grabbed her by the hair—but it

was she who grabbed him by the hair! Hey, you young ladies, marrying with pomp and after much ado, you trite ones, who allow a stolen kiss, look how this modern one goes after love and how she treats her own self! She threw Kopyrda onto the couch. I was shaken again. No holds barred! The seventeen-year-old obviously played her beauty as her trump card. I prayed that Pimko would arrive—if Pimko lets me down I'm lost, never, never will I be free of this modern one's wild charms. She was choking me, strangling me, yet all along it was I—I was the one, when all was said and done, who wanted to strangle her, to conquer her!

Her girlhood in full bloom, she and Kopyrda meanwhile went on hugging each other on the couch, and, with his help, she was about to reach the climax of her charms. Casually, slapdash, lustfully, and without love, without any respect for herself, just to grab me by the throat with her wild, schoolgirl poetry. The devil of it, the devil, she was winning, winning, winning!

At last there was a godsend knock on the window. They stopped hugging. At last! Pimko was coming to the rescue. This was to be the final reckoning. Will Pimko manage to spoil her beauty and her charms—or will he enhance it all? That's what I was thinking as I was preparing my mug behind the door to intervene. For the moment Pimko's knocking brought relief because they had to stop their orgy and frenzy, and Kopyrda whispered:

"Someone's knocking."

The schoolgirl jumped to her feet from the couch. They listened, wondering whether they could resume their frenzy. More knocking.

"Who is it?" she asked.

There was ardent puffing and huffing at the window:

"Zuta, dear!"

She pulled back the blind slightly, signaling to Kopyrda to step back. But before she could say anything Pimko frantically clambered into the room. He was afraid of being seen at the window.

"Zuta, dear!" he whispered passionately, carnally, "little Zuta! Oh,

my schoolgirl! Oh, little one! Call me by my first name! You're my colleague! I'm your colleague!" My letter must have gone to his head. The double-barreled and trite prof's lips were painfully contorted with poetry. "Yes, by my first name, Zuta, dear! Will anyone see us? Where's Mama?" But the danger was intoxicating him even further. "Look at her . . . such a little one, so young . . . yet so insolent . . . with no regard for age or status . . . How could you . . . how dare you . . . toward me? Do you find me exciting? Call me by my first name! Yes, yes! Tell me what you fancy in me."

Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, what a lustful pedagogue!

"What do you want? What's the matter with you, sir? . . ." she stammered. The other matter, with Kopyrda, was over, it came to naught.

"Someone's here!" exclaimed Pimko in the semi-darkness.

Silence was the only response. Kopyrda was mum. The modern one stood between the two of them in her nightshirt, senselessly, playing the little la-di-da.

Whereupon I screamed from behind the door:

"Thieves! Thieves!"

Pimko twirled around a couple of times as if pulled by a string, then ran for cover to the closet. Kopyrda tried to jump out the window, but he didn't make it and hid in the other closet. I ran into the room as I was, just in my shirt and underpants. I caught them! Red-handed! Behind me the Youngbloods, he—still smacking her, she—being smacked.

"Thieves?!" he shouted like a bourgeois, dime-a-dozen little engineer, barefoot, in his underpants, his sense of ownership riding high.

"Someone came in through the window!" I exclaimed. I turned on the light. The schoolgirl lay under her comforter, pretending to be asleep.

"What happened?" she asked half-asleep, her style perfect, deceitful.

"Yet another intrigue!" exclaimed the Youngblood woman, in her



nightgown, casting a basilisk glance at me, her hair a mess, dark blotches on her cheeks.

"Intrigue?" I exclaimed, picking Kopyrda's suspenders up off the floor. "What intrigue?"

"Suspenders," the little engineer said numbly.

"They're mine!" the Youngblood girl exclaimed insolently. The girl's insolence had a soothing effect, but of course no one believed her!

I jerked open the closet door, and Kopyrda's lower body appeared to those assembled—a pair of lean legs in pressed flannel pants, wearing lightweight sport shoes. His upper body was wrapped in dresses hanging in the closet.

"Aah . . . Zuta!" the Youngblood woman was the first to speak.

The schoolgirl tucked her cute little head under the covers, only her legs and the mop of her hair showing. How skillfully she played it! Another girl in her place would have mumbled something under her breath, would have looked for excuses. But this one just stuck out her naked legs, moving her legs to and fro and playing on the situation—with her legs, with her movement and charm—as on a flute. Her parents looked at each other.

"Zuta," Mr. Youngblood said.

And they both began laughing. All the smacking, vulgarity, and vileness left them, and a strange beauty set in. The parents—amused, animated, thrilled, quite at ease, and laughing indulgently—looked at the girl's body while she went on fussing and timidly hiding her pretty little head. Kopyrda, realizing that he need not fear the strict principles of yore, came out of the closet and stood smiling, jacket in hand, a nice, fair-haired modern boy, caught in the act with the parents' girl. The Youngblood woman squinted at me maliciously. She was triumphant. I must have been jinxed. I wanted to dishonor the girl, yet the modern boy had not dishonored her at all! To make me feel totally superfluous, she asked:

"And what are you, young man, doing here? Our young man shouldn't be concerned with all this!"

Thus far I had deliberately refrained from opening the closet where Pimko was hiding. My intent was to let the situation stabilize until it reached the fullness of the young and modern style. I now opened the closet in silence. Pimko, crouching, had hidden himself between the dresses—only a pair of legs, a professorial pair of legs in crumpled trousers was visible, and those legs stood in the closet, incredible, crazy, tacked on . . .

The effect knocked them out of their socks, bowled them over. The laughter died on the Youngbloods' lips. The whole situation shook as if struck from the side by a murderer's knife. Idiotic indeed.

"What is this?" whispered Mrs. Youngblood, her face paling.

From behind the dresses came a little cough and a conventional tittering with which Pimko prepared his entrance into the room. Since he knew that in a moment he would appear foolish, he was ushering in his tomfoolery with foolish laughter. The tittering from behind the girl's dresses was so cabaretlike that Mr. Youngblood chuckled once and got stuck . . . Pimko stepped out of the closet and bowed, feeling foolish outwardly, miserable inwardly . . . I felt a vindictive, furious sadism inwardly, but outwardly—I burst out laughing. My revenge dissolved in laughter.

But the Youngbloods were dumbfounded. Two men, one in each closet! What's more, in one of them—an old man. If there were two young ones! Or, for that matter, two old ones. But no, one young and one old. An old man, and Pimko to boot. The situation had no axis—no diagonals—no commentary could be found to fit the situation. They automatically looked at the girl, but the schoolgirl played possum under the covers.

Suddenly Pimko, wanting to clarify the situation, cleared his throat, grinned pleadingly, and began to explain something about a letter . . . that Miss Zuta had written to him . . . that it was just

about Norwid . . . but that Miss Zuta wanted it to be informal . . . informal . . . on first-name basis . . . with him . . . that's all he wanted too . . . Well, I've never heard anything so obscene and at the same time so idiotic in my whole life, the little old man's secret and private ravings were impossible to understand in a situation so clearly illuminated by the ceiling lamp, but no one wanted to understand him anyway, so no one understood. Pimko saw that no one wanted to, but he'd gone too far already—the prof thrown off balance as a prof was utterly lost, I couldn't believe that it was the same absolute and seasoned double-barreled man who had once dealt me the pupa. As he was drowning in the sticky mess of his explanations, his ineffectiveness evoked pity, and I would have pounced on him, but I gave up. Pimko's dark and murky ravings pushed the engineer into officialdom—and this was stronger than the legitimate distrust the engineer would have felt for me in this situation. He exclaimed:

"What are you doing here, sir, at this hour, may I ask?"

This in turn dictated the tone to Pimko. For a brief moment he was back to form.

"Do not raise your voice, sir."

To which Mr. Youngblood replied:

"What? What? You dare correct me in my own house?"

But Mrs. Engineer looked out the window and squeaked. The bearded face, twig in mouth, appeared above the railing. I had totally forgotten about the beggar! I ordered him to stand with the twig today as well, but I forgot to give him the zloty. The bearded man steadfastly stood until nightfall, and when he saw us in the illuminated window he showed his "face for hire" and, decked in greenery, reminded me to pay him! The face slid between us as if on a platter.

"What does this man want?" exclaimed Mrs. Engineer. The sight of a ghost wouldn't have had a greater impact. Pimko and Mr. Youngblood fell silent.

The wretch, who for a moment became the center of attention, moved the twig as if it were his mustache, he didn't know what to say. So he said:

"A favor for the beggar."

"Give him something," Mrs. Engineer dropped her hands and spread her fingers wide. "Give him something," she screamed hysterically, "so he'll go away . . ."

The engineer fumbled for change in his pockets but didn't find any. Pimko, clutching at every possible activity, quickly took out his wallet, and, perhaps reckoning that, in the general confusion, Mr. Youngblood would accept the change from him, which of course would make further hostilities rather difficult—but Mr. Youngblood did not accept. Petty accounting tore in through the window and raged among people. As for me, I stood there with my mug, carefully watching the unfolding of events, ready to jump, but actually I watched it all as if through a magnifying glass. Oh, whatever happened to my revenge, and to my messing up their lives, and to the roar of wrenched reality, and to style bursting open, and to my frenzy atop all the wreckage? The farce slowly began to wear me out. I thought about irrelevant things, for example—where does Kopyrda buy his ties, is Mrs. Engineer fond of cats, how much does it cost them to live here?

All this time Kopyrda stood with his hands in his pockets. This modern boy didn't come up to me, his face showed no signs of recognizing me—he was already too annoyed by Pimko being coupled with the girl to say hello to a schoolmate dressed in nothing but underwear—neither coupling suited him in the least. When the Youngbloods and Pimko began looking for change, Kopyrda slowly turned toward the door—I opened my mouth to shout, but Pimko, noticing Kopyrda's maneuver, quickly put away his wallet and followed him. Suddenly, when the engineer saw them both absconding so swiftly, he bounded after them like a cat after a mouse.

"I beg your pardon!" he exclaimed, "you're not getting off scot-free!"

Kopyrda and Pimko stood still. Kopyrda, now infuriated by being coupled with Pimko, moved away from him; Pimko, however, under the momentum of Kopyrda's movement, automatically moved closer to him—and so they stood like two brothers—one younger . . . one older . . .

Mrs. Engineer, totally unnerved, grabbed the engineer by the arm.

"Don't make a scene! Don't make a scene!" Which of course provoked him to make a scene.

"Forgive me!" he roared, "but I am her father, aren't I! And I ask you—how and with what in mind did you two gentlemen find yourselves in my daughter's bedroom? What is the meaning of this? What is this?"

Suddenly he looked at me and fell silent, terror creeping over his cheeks, he realized this was grist for my mill, the mill of scandal, and—he would have stopped talking, he would have—but having started it . . . he repeated once more:

"What is the meaning of this?" softly, just to round things off, secretly pleading that the issue go no further . . .

There was silence because no one could answer him. Everyone had his own understandable rationale, but the whole made no sense. In the silence the nonsense was stifling. And suddenly the girl's hollow, hopeless sobs came from under the covers. Oh, how masterful! She sobbed, sticking her naked calves from under the covers, her calves which, as she sobbed, slid out more and more from under the covers, and the crying of an underage girl united Pimko, Kopyrda, and her parents, and threaded them on a string of demonism. The whole matter, as if cut with a knife, ceased to be funny and nonsensical, it made sense again, a modern yet murky, black, dramatic, and tragic sense. Kopyrda, Pimko, and the Youngbloods felt better—while I, caught by the throat, felt worse.

"You have . . . defiled her," the mother whispered. "Don't cry, don't cry, child . . ."

"Congratulations, Professor!" the engineer exclaimed furiously. "You'll answer to me for this!"

Pimko, it seemed, breathed a sigh of relief. Even this felt better than not having been placed anywhere at all. So they've defiled her. The situation turned to the girl's advantage.

"Police!" I exclaimed, "we must call the police!"

This was a risky step, because police and an underage girl had for a long time formed a rounded, beautiful, and grim whole—and so the Youngbloods proudly raised their heads—though my goal was to scare Pimko. He paled, cleared his throat, and coughed.

"Police," the mother repeated, savoring the image of police standing over the girl's naked legs, "police, police . . ."

"Please do believe me," the professor stammered, "please believe me, all of you . . . There's some mistake here, I'm being accused falsely . . ."

"Yes!" I exclaimed. "I'm a witness. I saw it through my window! The professor walked into the garden to relieve himself. Miss Zuta looked out the window, the professor said 'hello,' and then came the usual way through the door, which Miss Zuta opened for him!"

Pimko broke down in fear of the police. Despicably, like a coward, he clutched at this explanation, regardless of its sickening and shameful meaning.

"Yes, that's right, I had the urge, I stepped into the garden, I forgot that this is where you live—and Miss Zuta happened to look out the window, so I pretended, hee, hee, hee, I pretended that I came to visit . . . You understand . . . in this drastic situation . . . it's a *quid pro quo*, a *quid pro quo*," he kept repeating.

It struck those assembled as vile and revolting. The girl pulled her legs under the covers. Kopyrda pretended not to hear, the Youngblood woman turned her back to Pimko, but, realizing that she had

turned her back to him, she quickly turned to face him. Mr. Youngblood blinked—ha, they had again fallen into the throes of that deadly part, vulgarity returned full steam, I watched its return with interest, and how it was bowling them over; was it the same part in which I had recently been wallowing, yes, the same part perhaps—except that this time it was strictly between them. The Youngblood girl gave no sign of life under the covers. And Mr. Youngblood giggled—who knows what tickled him—maybe Pimko's *quid pro quo* brought back memories of a cabaret under that name that had existed in Warsaw—he then burst into that ultimate giggle of a petty engineer, that backside, ghastly, pantomime giggle—he exploded and—furious at Pimko for his own giggling—he jumped toward him, and, with a swift, arrogant, little engineer's slap, he whacked him in the mug. He whacked—he froze, panting, his arm still in the air. He turned serious. Rigid. I brought my jacket and my shoes from my room and began to dress slowly, not letting the scene out of my sight.

Having received the slap in the face, something gurgled in Pimko's throat, corked him up—yet I was convinced that deep down he was grateful for the slap, it somehow defined him.

"You shall pay for this," he said coldly, visibly relieved. He bowed toward the engineer, the engineer bowed toward him. Eagerly taking advantage of the bowing, Pimko turned to the door. Kopyrda quickly joined in the bowing and followed Pimko, in the hope of also slipping out . . . Mr. Youngblood sprang up. "What? There are consequences to be faced here, a duel, while this scoundrel Kopyrda wants to leave as if nothing had happened and to shirk all responsibility!" And so punch him in the snoot too! The engineer jumped toward him with his arm outstretched, but in a split second he realized that he couldn't very well slap a sniveling brat in the face, a schoolboy, a whippersnapper, his arm followed an awkward twist and, unable to counteract the momentum he g r a b b e d Kopyrda, instead of hitting him he g r a b b e d him by the chin. This illegal hold infuriated Kopyrda more than if he had been slapped in the face, and what's

more, the false move—a foul after a long quarter-of-an-hour's nonsense—released his most primitive instincts. God knows what had hatched in his head—that the engineer caught him on purpose, "if you me, I you"—some such thought must have gripped him, therefore, according to a law that one might call "the law of the diagonal," he bent down and swept the engineer below the knee. Mr. Youngblood came down with a thud, whereupon Kopyrda bit his left flank, he hung on to him with his teeth and wouldn't let go—he then lifted his face, madly sweeping the room with his eyes from one end to the other and biting into Mr. Youngblood's flank.

I was tying my tie and putting on my jacket, but I stopped, intrigued. I had never seen anything like it. Mrs. Engineer rushed to her husband's rescue, she caught Kopyrda by the leg and pulled on it with all her might. They all swirled and tumbled down in a heap. What's more, Pimko, who stood a step from the swirling heap suddenly did something exceedingly strange, almost beyond telling. Had the prof finally given up? Had he surrendered? Had he run out of determination to keep standing while others lay? Did lying down seem no worse to him than standing on his legs? Suffice it to say that he voluntarily lay down on his back in a corner and raised his four paws in a gesture of complete helplessness. I tied my tie. I wasn't moved even when the girl threw off her covers, sprang up sobbing, and proceeded to jump up and down around the Youngbloods, who were rolling about with Kopyrda, as if she were a referee at a boxing match, pleading through her tears:

"Mommy! Daddy!"

The engineer, stupefied by the rolling about and looking for a handhold, unwittingly grabbed her leg above the ankle. She fell. The four of them rolled on the ground quietly, as if in church, because shame wouldn't let them do it otherwise. At one point I saw the mother biting her daughter, Kopyrda pulling Mrs. Youngblood, the engineer pushing Kopyrda, then Miss Youngblood's calf flashed on top of her mother's head.

At the same time the professor in the corner began to display an ever stronger predilection for swarming—lying on his back, all fours extended upward, he definitely began to gravitate in their direction and oscillate (seemingly without moving) toward them, doubtless the swarming and rolling about became for him the only viable solution. He couldn't get up, and why should he?—yet he couldn't lie on his back any longer. Just to get some sort of hold would be enough, and when the family and Kopyrda rolled closer—he caught Mr. Youngblood in the vicinity of the liver and was pulled into the vortex. I finished packing the most essential things into a small suitcase and put on my hat. I was weary of it all. Farewell, oh modern one, farewell Youngbloods and Kopyrda, farewell Pimko—no, not farewell, because how could I say farewell to something that didn't exist anymore. I was departing with a light heart. Oh, how sweet, how sweet it is to shake the dust off my shoes and depart, leaving nothing behind, no, not depart, just go . . . Was it so that Pimko, the classic prof, had dealt me the pupa, that I had been a pupil at the school, a modern boy with a modern girl, that I had been the dancing one in the bedroom, the one pulling wings off a fly, the one peeping in the bathroom, tra la la . . . ? That I had been the one with the pupa, with the mug, with the leg, tra la la . . . ? No, it was all gone, I was neither young nor old, neither modern nor old-fashioned, neither the pupil nor the boy, neither mature nor immature, I was neither this nor that, I was nothing . . . To depart and go, to go and depart and carry no memories. Oh, blithe indifference! No memories! When everything dies within you, and no one has yet had time to beget you again. Oh, it is worth living for death, to know that all has died within us, that it is no more, that all is empty and barren, all quiet and pure—and as I departed it seemed to me that I was going not alone but with myself—and right next to me, or maybe within me or around me, walked someone identical and cognate, mine—within me, mine—with me, and there was no love between us, no hate, no lust, no revulsion, no ugliness, no beauty, no laughter, no body parts,

no feeling nor anything mechanical, nothing, nothing, nothing . . . But only for one hundredth of a second. Because as I was crossing the kitchen, feeling my way in the semi-darkness, someone called softly from the servants' quarters:

"Joey, Joey . . ."

It was Kneadus sitting on the servant girl, hurriedly putting on his shoes.

"I'm here. Are you leaving? Wait, I'll go with you."

His whisper struck me from the side, and I stopped as if a bullet had hit me. I couldn't see his mug distinctly in the darkness, but judging by his voice it must have looked horrible. The servant girl breathed heavily.

"Shhh . . . be quiet. Let's go." He climbed off the servant girl. "Here, this way . . . Careful—here's a basket."

We found ourselves in the street.

It was getting light. Little houses, trees, railings stretched in orderly fashion as if on a string—and the air, limpid near the ground, thickening above into a desperate mist. Asphalt. Space. Dew. Emptiness. Next to me Kneadus buttoning his pants. I tried to avoid looking at him. From the open windows of the villa—a pale electric light and a continuous shoving of bodies rolling about. A piercing chill, a sleepless cold as if on a train; I began to shiver, my teeth chattered. Through the open window Kneadus heard the Youngbloods shoving and asked:

"What's that? Is someone getting a massage?"

I didn't answer, and he, noticing the small suitcase in my hand, asked:

"Are you running away?"

I lowered my head. I knew he'd catch me, he'd have to catch me because there were just the two of us, next to each other. But I couldn't move away from him without a reason. So he moved closer, and with his hand he took me by the hand.

"Are you running away? I'll run away too. We'll go together. I've

raped the servant girl. But that's not it, that's not it . . . A farmhand, a farmhand! Let's run away to the countryside—if you want to. To the countryside we'll go. There are farmhands there! Out in the countryside! We'll go together, do you want to? To the farmhand, Joey, to the farmhand, the farmhand!" he went on repeating frantically. I held my head straight and stiff, not looking at him.

"Kneadus, what good is your farmhand to me?"

But as soon as I began walking he went with me, and I went with him—we went together.

## 11 Preface to "The Child Runs Deep in Filibert"

And again a preface . . . and I'm a captive to a preface, I can't do without a preface, I must have a preface, because the law of symmetry requires that the story in which the child runs deep in Filidor should have a corresponding story in which the child runs deep in Filibert, while the preface to Filidor requires a corresponding preface to Filibert. Even if I want to I can't, I can't, and I can't avoid the ironclad laws of symmetry and analogy. But it's high time to interrupt, to cease, to emerge from the greenery if only for a moment, to come back to my senses and peer from under the weight of a billion little sprouts, buds, and leaves so that no one can say that I've gone crazy, totally blah, blah. And before I move any further on the road of second-rate, intermediate, not-quite-human horrors, I have to clarify, rationalize, substantiate, explain, and systematize, I have to draw out the primary thought from which all other thoughts in this book originate, and to reveal the primeval torment of all torments herein mentioned and brought into relief. And I must introduce a hierarchy of torments as well as a hierarchy of thoughts, and provide analytic, synthetic, and philosophical comments on this work so that the reader will know where

the head is, where the legs, the nose, where the heel is, so that I'm not accused of being unaware of my own goals, of not marching straight and stiffly forward like the greatest writers of omnitime, but that I've senselessly gone bonkers. But which of the torments is the chief and fundamental one? Where is this book's primeval torment? Where are you, oh, primeval mother of all torments? The longer I probe, study, and digest these things, the clearer it becomes that the chief, basic torment, as I see it, is simply the torment of bad form, of bad *exterieur*, or, in other words, it's the torment of platitude, grimace, face, mug—yes, that's the source, the wellspring, the beginning, and it's from here that all other suffering, frenzy, and torture flow harmoniously, without exception. Or perhaps one should really say that the chief, basic torment is nothing other than the suffering that comes from our being constricted by another human being, from the fact that we are strangled and stifled by a tight, narrow, stiff notion of ourselves that is held by another human being. Or, perhaps at the base of this book is the major and murderous torment of the

not-quite-human greenery, of little sprouts, leaves, and buds  
 or the torment of development and not-quite-development,  
 or maybe the suffering of not-quite-shaping, not-quite-forming,  
 or the torment of our inner self being created by others,  
 or the torment of physical and psychological rape  
 the suffering of driving, interpersonal tensions  
 the biased and unclarified torment of psychological bias  
 the lateral torture of psychological wrenching, twisting, and  
 miscuing

the unceasing torment of betrayal, the torment of falsehood  
 the mechanical agony of mechanism and automatism  
 the symmetrical torment of analogy, and the analogous torment  
 of symmetry

the analytical torment of synthesis, and the synthetic torment of  
 analysis

or maybe the agony of parts of the body and the disruption of the  
 hierarchy of its individual organs  
 or the suffering of gentle infantilism  
 of the pupa, of pedagogy, of formalists and educators  
 of inconsolable innocence and naiveté  
 of departure from reality  
 of phantasm, illusion, musings, idle notions, and nonsense  
 of higher idealism  
 of lower, shabby, hole-in-the-corner idealism  
 of daydreaming on the sidelines  
 or maybe of the very odd torment of pettiness and belittlement  
 the torment of contending  
 the torment of aspiring  
 the torment of apprenticeship  
 or perhaps simply the torture of pulling oneself up by one's boot-  
 straps and straining beyond one's ability, and hence the torture of  
 inability, general and particular  
 the agony of giving oneself airs, and of blowing one's own horn  
 the pain of humiliating others  
 the torment of superior and inferior poetry  
 or the torture of the dull psychological impasse  
 the devious torture of craftiness, evasiveness, and of foul play  
 or rather the torture of the age in its particular and general sense  
 the torment of the old-fashioned  
 the torment of modernity  
 the suffering resulting from the emergence of new social strata  
 the torment of the semi-intelligent  
 the torment of the nonintelligent  
 the torture of the intelligent  
 or maybe simply the torment of petty-intelligent indecency  
 the pain of stupidity  
 of wisdom

of ugliness  
of beauty, of attractiveness and charm  
or maybe the torture of cutthroat logic, and of consistency in  
foolishness

the anguish of reciting  
the despair of imitating  
the boring torture of boredom, and of talking in circles  
or perhaps the hypomanic torment of hypomania  
the ineffable torture of ineffability  
the aching lack of sublimation  
of pain in the finger  
in the fingernail  
of toothache  
of earache

the torture of horrifying interrelation, interdependence, and dependence, of interpenetration of all torments and of all parts, and the torment of one hundred and fifty-six thousand, three hundred and twenty-four and a half other tortures, not counting women and children, as an old French author of the sixteenth century would have said.

Which of those tortures is to be the basic primeval torture, which part is the integral, by which of its parts is one to seize this book, and what should one pick from the above parts and torments? Oh, accursed parts, will I ever be free of you, oh, what an abundance of parts, what an abundance of torments! Where is the chief, primeval mother, and should the basis for the torment be metaphysical or physical, sociological or psychological? And yet I must, I must and I cannot not, because the world at large is about to consider me unconscious of my goals and to think that I've lost my bearings. But perhaps, in this case, it would be more rational to develop and bring out the genesis of the work with words, and not on the basis of torments, but in the face of, with regard to, in relation to that it arose:

in relation to pedagogues and schoolboys  
in the face of half-witted wise guys  
with reference to deep or high-level beings  
with regard to the leading writers of contemporary national literature, and the most polished, structured, and rigid representatives of the world of criticism  
in the face of schoolgirls  
in relation to the mature, and to men of the world  
in interdependence with men of fashion, dandies, narcissists, aesthetes, haughty spirits, and men about town  
with regard to those experienced in life  
in bondage to cultural aunts  
in relation to urban citizens  
in the face of the country citizenry  
with reference to petty physicians in the provinces, engineers and all servants of narrow horizons  
with reference to high-level civil servants, physicians and lawyers  
wide horizons  
in relation to ancestral and other kinds of aristocracy  
in the face of the rabble.

It's also possible, however, that my work was conceived out of a moment from associating with an actual person, for example, with the distinctly repulsive Mr. XY, or with Mr. Z, whom I hold in almost contempt, and NN, who bores and wearies me—oh, the terrible torment of associating with them! And—it's possible—that the motive and goal for writing this book is solely to show these gentlemen my disdain for them, to agitate, irritate, and enrage them, and to get them out of my way. In this case the motive would seem to be clear-cut, personal, and aimed at the individual.

But perhaps my work came from imitating masterworks?  
From inability to create a normal work?  
From dreams?  
From complexes?



Or perhaps from memories of my childhood?  
and perhaps because I began writing and so it happened to come  
out

From anxiety disorder?  
From obsessive-compulsive disorder?  
Perhaps from a bubble?  
From a pinch of something?  
From a part?  
From a particle?  
From thin air?

One would also need to establish, proclaim, and define whether the work is a novel, a memoir, a parody, a lampoon, a variation on a fantasy, or a study of some kind—and what prevails in it: humor, irony, or some deeper meaning, sarcasm, persiflage, invective, rubbish, *pur nonsens*, *pur claptrapism*, and more, whether it's simply a pose, pretense, make-believe, bunkum, artificiality, paucity of wit, anemia of emotion, atrophy of imagination, subversion of order, and ruination of the mind. Yet the sum of these possibilities, torments, definitions, and parts is so limitless, so unfathomable and inexhaustible that one must say, with the greatest responsibility for one's words and after the most scrupulous consideration, that we know nothing, chirp, chirp, little chickie; and consequently, whoever would like to better understand, to gain deeper insight, I invite him to read "The Child Runs Deep in Filibert," because my answer to all these tormenting questions lies in its hidden symbolism. Because Filibert, positioned conclusively and in analogy with Filidor, conceals within its strange unity the final, secret meaning of this work. And having thus revealed it, there is nothing to stop one from venturing somewhat deeper, into the thicket of those separate and tedious parts.

## 12 The Child Runs Deep in Filibert

At the end of the eighteenth century a peasant in Paris had a child, and this child had a child, then this child had a child, which had a child; and this last child played a tennis match as the world champion on the court of the illustrious Paris Racing Club, in an atmosphere of great excitement and to the accompaniment of unceasing and thunderous applause. However (oh, how incredibly treacherous life can be!), a certain colonel of the *Zouaves*, sitting in the crowd on the side bleachers, suddenly became envious of the two champions' impeccable and thrilling game, and wishing to show off in front of the six thousand spectators (and especially in front of his fiancée, sitting next to him) unexpectedly fired his pistol and hit the ball in midair.\* The ball burst and fell to the ground while the champions, so suddenly deprived of their object, continued to swing their rackets in empty space; however, realizing the nonsense of their movements now that the ball was gone, they pounced on each other with their claws. A thunderous applause rose from the spectators.

\**Zouaves*—the name given to certain infantry regiments in the French Army, first raised in Algeria in 1831 (Encyclopaedia Britannica, vol. 23, 1970).

And this surely would have been the end. But something else happened—the colonel, in his excitement, forgot or did not take into consideration (oh, how careful one must be!) the spectators sitting on the other side of the court, on the so-called sunny side of the stands. He thought, God knows why, that the bullet, having punctured the ball, would have spent itself; however, in its further trajectory it unfortunately struck a ship owner in the neck. Blood spurted from a ruptured artery. The wife of the wounded man, on first impulse, wanted to pounce on the colonel and snatch the pistol from him, but since she couldn't (she was trapped in the crowd), she simply slapped the mug of her neighbor on her right. And she did it because she couldn't vent her agitation in any other way, and because, in the deepest recesses of her inner self and motivated by purely feminine logic she thought that, as a woman, she was at liberty to do so, and why not? Not so, as it turned out (oh, how unceasingly one must take everything into account), because the man was a latent epileptic who, due to the psychological shock of the slap in the face, went into a seizure and erupted like a geyser in jerks and convulsions. The hapless woman found herself between two men, one spurting blood, the other foam. A thunderous applause rose from the spectators.

Whereupon a gentleman sitting nearby suddenly panicked and jumped on the head of the lady seated below, she in turn took off and, carrying him on her back at full speed, bounded into the center of the court. A thunderous applause rose from the spectators. And this surely would have been the end. But something else happened (oh, how one must always anticipate everything!)—a modest pensioner from Toulouse, a man given to dreaming in secret, sat relaxing not far off, and, for a long time and at every public event, he had been dreaming of jumping onto the heads of people sitting below him, yet, by sheer willpower, he had thus far restrained himself. Now, carried away by the example, he instantly mounted a woman sitting below him, and she (a minor office clerk from Tangiers),

assuming that these must be proper city manners and quite the thing to do—also carried him on her back, taking pains to make her movements appear totally relaxed.

Whereupon the more sophisticated sector of the public began to applaud tactfully so as to cover up the gaffe in front of the delegates from foreign consulates and embassies who had thronged to the match. But this led to yet another misunderstanding, because the less sophisticated sector mistook the applause for a sign of approval, and they too mounted their ladies. The foreigners showed increasing astonishment. So what could the more sophisticated sector of the company do? As if nothing had happened, they too mounted their ladies.

And this almost certainly would have been the end. But then a certain marquis de Filiberthe, sitting in the grandstand with his wife and her family, was suddenly roused by the gentleman within and stepped into the center of the court in his light-colored summer suit and, pale yet determined, he coolly asked if anyone, and if so who, wished to insult his wife, the marquise de Filiberthe? And he threw into the crowd a bunch of visiting cards inscribed: Phillipe Hertal de Filiberthe. (Oh, how terribly careful we must be! How difficult and treacherous life is, and how unpredictable!) Dead silence ensued.

And suddenly no fewer than thirty-six gentlemen began riding up at a slow canter, bareback on their elegantly and ornately dressed women—thoroughbred and slim at the fetlocks—to insult the marquise de Filiberthe and to feel themselves roused by the gentleman within, just as her husband the marquis himself had been roused by the gentleman within. Panic-stricken, the marquise miscarried—and a child's whimpering was heard at the marquis' feet and under the hooves of the trampling women. The marquis—so unexpectedly made aware of the child that ran deep in him, and realizing, just at that moment when he was acting singly and as a gentleman mature within himself, how sustained and replenished he had been by the child—was overcome with embarrassment and went home—while a thunderous applause rose from the spectators.

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