Lately, life has felt a bit like the bottom of the sea, when I brushed up against it, diving down with my eyes held tight, open against the water that tried to close them, and my lips shut tight to prevent my breathless, contorted heart from escaping. I had such a strong desire to see it clearly, the bottom of the sea, to define it within me: the smooth, caressing seaweeds undulating just beyond my reach, or the fine, silty sands recoiling at the slightest touch, or the firm outcrops of rock capped with fronded greenery. And smooth patches, ever so slightly textured like the breasts of a trembling young woman, silky tangles of vegetation, hard surfaces softened with swathes of downy fuzz; these things stayed with me—when I surfaced again to breathe, everything concretely defined in the sunlight—like waking dreams, or like a child's memory of a world, or part of a world, seen only through thick, frosted glass. No sound came from it, and it was so far away, and it would have been so wonderful to live there, wandering weightlessly in the oblivion of the rocking waters.

Sometimes, when I look at the white city, blinding in the stillness of the afternoon sun, or during the night when the frozen moonlight falls on its rooftops, I think that it too must be entirely buried at the bottom of the ocean, an ocean as clear and transparent as crystal. And I find it hard, when I am disturbed by the breathless urgency of people around me, to make sense of such activity—unless it's that all these people are out of their minds, busying themselves with meaningless tasks in the deafening aquatic silence. Compare my white, anaemic inertia—the perennial sensation in my chest of being shut off from the world—with the full-blooded vigour of others, the congested commotion of the daily necessities of the masses. And I really feel their every movement, their every gesture, every shout, so distantly and so out of tune, that I find it hard to imagine that there won't come a day when all of them—through a sudden, simple revelation—find themselves stunned, ashen-faced, immobile, stumbling through their astonishment. They will look into each other's eyes, like children who have waited for so long, with burning curiosity, to rip their dolls apart, and find themselves with nothing but stuffing in their hands.

So it is that certain evenings, walking the streets with the high spirits of one who has spent the day loosening the knots that have successively tightened around my soul, and so tired that feeling anything further is
simply impossible, I like to imagine that every face I encounter, happy or sad, frustrated or satisfied, bears the traces of that stupor, the marks of that day of universal disillusionment. And I smile very cordially, foreseeing that on that day the curled whiskers of this or the other man will melt off his chin, leaving him bald as a Chinese man; and that his taut, arrogant, rounded belly will be as flaccid as an empty wineskin, so that eventually I’m overwhelmed by a sense of extreme pity for all of them, and I want to go round touching them all on the shoulder, to tell them:

‘Yes, yes... come now, you poor thing, it’s best not to think about it. Really, I admire you, that you can go about your business with such high spirits... It must be one of two things; either you don’t have a clue about anything, and you’re as blissful as the ignorant. Or you understand fully, and that notwithstanding, you pretend not to understand, and in fact do everything in your power to forget, due to a sustained sense of desperation.’

‘In either case I feel great pity for you, because I feel an equal pity for myself.’

Were someone to deride my philosophy with a knowing smirk, or to judge it superficial and weak, I wouldn’t know how to go red, or get angry, or even to change it: because it’s already a great achievement that I’ve manage to put it into words. Eight or ten years ago, any existential observation thrown my way, whether in a café or a restaurant, whether by someone I was with or a nearby stranger, made me want to bend over with laughter, or spurn the unhappy person with a sneer. A cavalry officer for twenty years, I treated life like my favourite horse, smacking her lovingly on the rump, cracking the whip when necessary, sweetening her with sugar cubes after each whipping.

And yet, I remember that even then there was something inside me that was missing in others, and every now and again a thrill or a shudder would alert me to my exceptional sensitivity. On certain delicate spring mornings, I liked to ride alone on Fanny through the suburban streets, occasionally even wandering aimlessly in the open countryside, to a stand of sycamores or eucalyptus trees. I trembled with emotion even when the animal trampled the dead, spongy leaves littering the ground; I was overcome by a sweet tremor as the young branches brushed against my head as I passed, leaving a splash of fresh dew on my face. Sometimes I would even get down and throw myself on the ground, closing my eyes and dreaming in the scented silence, hearing nothing but the sound of Fanny chewing the chain on the bridle, and the birds whose voice rose and fell with the breeze, which rustled through the leaves every now and again.

How many noblewomen I saw then, coming towards me in delicate silk gowns fringed with gold, with youthful arms emerging from wide sleeves,
with blonde and wavy tresses, with rose-lipped smiles, bearing bouquets of lilies as gifts! I don’t know what sort of intoxicating excitability was influencing me so that in my dreams I would rack my brains trying to find a way to make love to the maidens in my fantasies.

Nothing could satisfy me, whether I got down on one knee to kiss her delicate hand and then to suck on her tiny fingers, her little pink nails; or whether, unbuckling her sandals, I held her tender little feet in my hands like some kind of fleshy tropical fruit. Certainly, waking up and returning to the world was painful to me; that evening, tapping my sword against the cobblestones in front of the lively café, my back erect and proud in a soldier’s posture, with indifferent or disdainful looks for the people seated and for passers-by, underneath the mask of my nonchalant superiority, I could perceive a nagging desolate sadness, an omen of some unbearable loneliness, which even the thought of Colette or Elviruccia, Dorina or Loletta couldn’t ease. Often, in the pink sitting room of one of the latter, I would think nostalgically of another, and when I went to this other, I felt equally frustrated, until each night, I found myself in a restaurant, with all shiny, mirrored surfaces, white plaster, and touches of gold, whose blinding whiteness forced me to yawn bitterly.

Despite being of an age to reflect and understand, I couldn’t identify the reason for my lack of satisfaction, why neither Loletta nor Dorina could take the place of the maidens I dreamed that morning under the pines, the beeches, the eucalyptus trees.

Not that they were ever rude or foolish towards me; in fact, they liked me a great deal, so much so that whenever I was there, they did nothing but try to find ways to make me happy.

Loletta, whose hair was as black as her brows and her eyes, and whose cheeks were as red as an apple, tilting her head one way, then the other, looked at me with a smile and a little flirtatious gesture that excited me. But, at the same time, my unhappiness was growing, because I was forced to reflect on my misfortune. There’s a very sweet girl right here who wants nothing but to be yours. She’s looking at you, batting her eyes, from whose intense, velvety heat drop ineffable promises of sweetness; and she has a delicate, shy little nose, with two small nostrils so dark they seem made on purpose to inhale the scent of youth; and now she’s nibbling some sweet things to make you laugh, now she’s saying something impudent and dropping her spoon on purpose, now she’s trembling all over with some alarming ‘ahs’... and it turns out to be only her shoes, which, no one knows how, are hurting, only (naturally) so you lean down to look at the jewels on her feet and her beige stockings... Such an inviting caress for you, and you’re
indifferent, as though the hands of time, brushing your temples over an
unbearable number of nights, won't end up leaving the indelible traces of
wrinkles at the corners of your eyes, on your forehead, around your mouth!

So one evening, having taken Loletta or Nennella to the theatre, I don’t
know which, I barely let the first act finish before I took her away again.
Having left her at home and back in my quarters, I crammed linens and
suits in a suitcase, which my doorman threw into the first car that came his
way, and the driver later made fly like a football into the net of a first-class
compartment in the very next super-direct train leaving the station.

‘Your ticket, sir. Without a ticket!...
‘Well, you can sell me one now, on the train.’
‘Very well: where are you going, sir?’
‘To the ends of the earth, if possible.’
‘The train doesn’t go that far! It can only take you to the border.’
‘Good, I’ll have a ticket as far as this train can take me.’

My desire wasn’t too different from what a boy might feel after a party,
having to return home half asleep. For me too, the lights had gone out, and
of the sweets I had eaten, only the bitter aftertaste remained in my mouth:
I wanted to sleep, simply to sleep, taken away by the train, in no particular
direction, with no particular destination in mind. I thought that at the
border I would take another train that would take me to another border,
and so on and so forth, until I found the one that would take me to another
planet.

And, in fact, I was already falling asleep, even though the last murmurs
among the furloughed soldiers on the benches had yet to die down, and
despite the banging, as the the last doors were shut and the train began
to move.

I woke up alone, in the middle of the night, having dreamed that my
coach had come across an Indian tribe, which, under a huge tropical sun,
circled the vehicle with bestial cries offering bananas, dates, open coconuts.
It was, instead, a dispute between a wheezing fat man and the conductor,
which was reaching its peak just at that moment, even though it had started
some time ago. They were discussing whether a pair of gloves could reserve
one’s place or not, and the fat man was arguing in favour as if he were
defending a dissertation in philosophy, and the conductor was saying not,
since otherwise he would never have dreamed of allowing the lady into the
compartment. In any case, the lady in question was suffering on account
of certain individuals who were smoking, and the fat man could have sat
in her seat, leaving her his. But I didn’t want to hear any more: all I cared
about was the fact that there was a lady, and that the lady might come to sit
in the place next to me. In the middle of the countryside darkness, in the faint turquoise light of the moving train that gave men’s faces a vague air of spectral distance, mystery entered the compartment with her.

In brief, once the argument had ceased, she really did come into the compartment, welcomed by the muttering of three others who, having been woken abruptly by the argument, were just falling asleep again. But she was ablaze in a halo of blonde hair, which, in the turquoise light, took on metallic reflections. Her brow furrowed, humiliated by the rudeness of the fat man whose seat she wouldn’t even have wanted any more, still nauseated by the crass behaviour of the smokers over there, offended by her treatment by the travellers here who had already started snoring again, she found my gaze calmly focused on her, and it seemed to me that she relaxed slightly, luxuriating in my gaze like in an oasis of freshness in the midst of so much aridity.

Nonetheless, we said nothing to one another. The glass door was shut, and we heard nothing but the anxious rumble of the train in the melancholy tranquillity of the night. Only later did I realize that although she was sitting as though she were trying to sleep, she wasn’t sleeping, but instead her eyes were open and fixed on one point as though lost in her memories, while the three men opposite, little by little, had opened their mouths and looked like three mummies marvelling at her beauty.

I leaned closer and said to her softly, with one breath:

‘Don’t be sad, miss, you must try to forget instantly the vulgarity of man: see? God has punished them. Asleep, they reveal their true idiotic appearance, and it seems that with their mouths open, they are astonished by you, by your beauty, while a short while ago, half awake, they were ready to insult you.’

She looked at me thoughtfully, unsurprised at my forwardness, and as though we had known each other for a long time. Then she smiled with so much melancholy that my heart was moved by it; and she murmured:

‘And yourself? Are you not yourself a man?’

‘Oh, certainly,’ I replied, ‘My God, I am a man just like them, but one who can understand what you must have felt in this little affair, and who can guess what bitter taste it left in your mouth.

She moved her lips as though she really did wish to swallow the bitterness to which I had just alluded, and she pressed a hand against her breast.

‘You are suffering,’ I said to her.

She nodded affirmatively, and she apologized: she loosened her corset and stayed that way for a while with her eyes closed, like a creature in need of air.
I don’t know why, but I felt in my heart the pain I had felt as a boy, in a tiny seaside village, when the nets were pulled back up the banks, and I saw the little fish gasping for air as if their ribcages were about to burst open. I would retreat to one side and cry, asking myself what those poor creatures had done that they deserved to die this way! And now the lump clutching my throat was restraining a similar sob: what harm had this white and blonde creature done, that at every turn her little hand should be stung by vulgarity? She who was so fine, so open, seemingly impossible to approach without adoration? Oh, from her open mouth searching for air, I could guess the entire course of her life! And when she told me that she had once been a soprano it seemed to me I already knew; when she told me a vulgar man had made her his wife, I had already guessed; when, with a single gesture, she acknowledged the countless trials of a miserable and wretched world, I already understood her martyrdom. And when she revealed to me that she, too, had left behind everything, renounced everything to live freely and modestly, I invited her with my hand, and she saw that it was so loyal, so frank, so sincere, that she put both her hands in mine, delicate, dear, soft. And she leaned into my chest like a little girl, with the pearly tears still on her lashes gleaming in the faint light, but also with a sigh of relief, freedom, gratitude, and with a desire to finally rest on this kindly heart, as if on soft grass...

At dawn she was sleeping sweetly, while the rosy glow of the sky warmed her hair and gave colour to her lips. There was, on her face, still a veil of melancholy, but so faint that it seemed nothing more than a memory of past sorrows.

The three men opposite, by contrast, seemed yellow and undone; they had the swollen eyes of drowned men, their mouths open and black.

She woke up slowly, without sudden movements, slowly regaining a sense of reality: all the same she remained silent for a long time. Then she told me where she would be getting off; and she knew that I could have gotten off with her. But I did not suggest this; neither did she acknowledge it as a possibility.

I whispered:
‘I think that I’ve been waiting my whole life to meet you.’

And she whispered:
‘I thank the Lord God and you, for this little time that I’ve been able to sleep: I think that I’ve been waiting my whole life for this respite.’

I could get off the train with you, now that you are free, I could live my life next to you, I thought in the meantime, all I needed was you, all I needed was a woman who had suffered greatly! I needed to feel the pain
of existence, to truly love! Why shouldn't I get off the train with you, now that I've rediscovered my soul?

‘Will you write to me?’ she asked me.

Right then, at a stroke, I thought: It’s over. She won’t even admit the possibility that I can get off with her!

‘I will write to you,’ I replied.

But maybe, I thought, seeing her turn pale at my words, she expected me to reply differently.

And to repair the damage, I added:

‘We shall remain friends.’ But I perceived immediately such a sense of distance and coldness in my voice, so I tried to make things better and said:

‘But more than friends... more!...’

She repeated it sadly, like an echo:

‘Yes, more than friends... more!...’

And we didn’t speak until the train stopped, and then, having recomposed herself, she got off. I passed her suitcases out to her; the doors were shut again; but she didn’t move away, no, she did not: she waited until the train had started moving once more to tell me:

‘Farewell, and God bless you. But don’t you see we must always renounce something? Thank you, in any case, thank you, now I shall be able to die in peace.’

Renunciation? So she had expected me to get off, that I not leave her alone, that I live with her by my side forever, forever! Despair! Now everything was broken, everything was finished; in one night the world had been built; my soul had been found once more, as had hers: and when Fate had finally offered us something with its generous hands, it destroyed it again in an instant: I had destroyed it! Even had I jumped off the moving train, without crushing myself, and had returned home barefoot, in penance, I couldn’t have cancelled out my misdeed, I couldn’t have overcome the distance that now separated us. My good fortune was irreparably damaged.

And so I travelled, I travelled for several more days and nights, no more peace, not a wink of sleep, tense in my muted soul, in my sluggish limbs.

It was nighttime when I arrived: a howling wind hurled the rain underneath the station roof and soaked the legs of those who were pressing themselves against the wall, awaiting their fate. I set off through the city
as though it were a forest, smelling the air, to discover if she had come this way. I inquired first at a hotel, to ask if a blonde lady like so and like so was staying there: 'Yes... perhaps, she was there; a Frenchwoman...’ ‘No, no, what are you talking about? A Frenchwoman!...’ And I moved on; a second, a third, a fourth hotel, until finally I was told precisely ‘yes’; but they maintained that she was a film actress of all things! The small city lived only for the cinema, and the blonde women who came here were all film actresses.

I wanted the same room in which she had slept. I went through every corner, the drawers, the wardrobe, to find any trace of her; then I threw myself on the bed, reasoning that she had almost certainly rested her limbs on it.

In the morning, I left the hotel, when the shoes of pedestrians were still lined up in rows behind closed doors, in silent hallways; and I wandered aimlessly around the little town, which, having been washed by the rain over the night, gleamed in the bright sunlight of the early hours of the day, decked in soft colours under an intensely blue sky.

I don't know why, but all that joy, seemingly intended just for me, made me yearn hopefully with every step I took. As if I were about to reach the apex of true happiness, I felt my spirits become so light that, there!, leaving my bodily wretchedness all of a sudden, it fluttered away like a butterfly, between the green tops of the tree-lined the street, under the sills of the shining windows with quaint green shutters and flowering shrubs in vases; or further up, further up, on the chimney tops where swallows were making their nests, chirping joyfully in the clear purity of the air to remind the little town, which was beginning to go about its daily business, that life was good, and that its citizens should not curse it, and that they should remember to take pleasure in it.

Oh, how wise those swallows were, even as they seemed delirious with joy! And instead, how much true madness there was in me, who had managed to live until that moment amidst the fervours of existence, not knowing how to savour its intoxicating essence!

So many thoughts, then, through the fevered streets of this town of love! I would have built my nest there too, right there, underneath the swallows', in a little rose-coloured house, with lots of carnations in the windowsills: and I never would have left, never! With her by my side, with my little swallow, I would have passed the years in sweet peace, without surprises; my scars would have healed over, hers too, and all the cinematic bitterness of the past would have faded in our thoughts, and we would have forgotten it... But yes, yes, it was really there; they had told me that it was right outside one of the town gates, with a little bridge just like in the olden days; a gate
that bore a strange warrior’s name, a warrior’s name... who, I don’t know why, appeared in my clouded, distant memories as an unfortunate who had, like me, been so good in life! And right beside it, in the middle of a vineyard, modern man had erected a huge, glass theatre, where all human emotions were feigned in mechanical and silent gestures, in the midst of the most outrageous disguises. Going in, the transition from the free air of the fields to the stuffy air enclosed in the glass panes warned of the false world one was approaching; and it immediately invaded my soul with a sense of melancholy and nausea, in which the naive joy from life outside was snuffed out.

It seemed, between the smell of freshly coloured sets, paint, make-up, the actresses’ perfume, that the sunlight filtering through took on a deadened, disenchanted air, became sadder as though before a sorrowful spectacle. Immediately, it seemed to me that the dreamlike state in which I had found myself coming here dissipated, flattened in that heavy air. And then on the stages there were ladies in low-necked dresses and men in coattails who were practically fainting from the most viscerally fake gestures, declaring to one another, silently, the most insincere sentiments. I, who had taken off my hat, retreated to one side to wait, almost afraid to find her, my blonde soul, somewhere in between those fake gentlemen in evening dress.

No, no, fortunately she wasn’t there. She wasn’t participating in that farce, she would never take a part in any such sham, because she would live by my side, without needing to subject her heart’s lovely smile to sadness in the midst of that horrible fakery.

And I began to look around me and fixated on God knows what kind of strange contraption, impossibly tall, which was perhaps supposed to represent the top of a glacier, because it was all white, and in certain places, it was covered in glass. In fact, right at the tip—where the canvas or paper covered a ladder, to simulate a winding path, broadened out in a pane of glass—the fake rock made of glass was broken, shattered. I began to tremble. That break was not supposed to be there, no, because in fact, it revealed the trickery, the fakery at its heart. But how had it happened that the rock had broken in that manner, as though a man, climbing, had felt the flats give way under his feet, and had fallen from that height to the floor of the theatre?...

When the scene was finished, and the actors came down with a distracted air, which contrasted with their finery, I realized they had on their face the shadow of some sadness... And I was coming closer, my hat still in my hand, and asking, as politely as I could possibly manage, after a blonde woman like so and like so... who had arrived in the city the certain day of a certain month... and who having sung for some time as a soprano, had dedicated
herself to *l’arte muta* (*the silent art*)... yet they did not answer, and in fact, one by one they dispersed, leaving me alone, astonished, with empty eyes and hat in hand...

It was true! The breaking of that infernal machine had told me everything...

She had been forced to climb up there, as part of the story, and she had climbed, climbed, poor thing, up the fake glacier, as though on Calvary, bearing the cross of her melancholy, her sadness at having to submit to such a pantomime in order to survive. And suddenly, the ground had given way, one single panel in the fake glacier, and she had been swallowed; yes, yes, swallowed by that travesty, only to plummet to the ground, injured in her entire lovely body by the spears, the nails, gasping breathlessly as great bursts of blood spewed from her mouth...

And on screen, of course, the tragedy appeared in the theatres of the city, in front of the public now; so real that the story became very popular, very popular indeed, even if the story as it had been originally conceived wasn’t supposed to have that ending...

I took the train again that very evening, and travelled without ever stopping. Only later was I overcome by such a strong sadness and a mad desire to see her that I stopped and wandered between the film houses until I saw her, her, my lost soul, who had climbed up the fake glacier and suddenly, in an instant... had been swallowed by fate!...

I don’t know if I’ve lost my senses, and perhaps reason still escapes me. But certainly, life for me is like the bottom of the sea, when I brushed against it with eyes wide open; or better, like a theatre made of glass, where fantasy cannot be distinguished from reality, and men in dinner jackets and ladies in dresses exchange sad, funereal looks; and a wooden glacier, laughably silly, appears suddenly to reveal Death.