FOREIGNERS IN A NOVEL(IST)'S LANDSCAPE

SCOTT ABBOTT
The man waiting for him was a translator from a foreign country who for some days had been tracing the itineraries of a book set in the region and now wished to ask the author a few questions.

Peter Handke, *The Afternoon of a Writer*

And twofold always:
May God us keep
From single vision
And Newton’s sleep.

William Blake, letter to Thomas Butts, 22 November 1802

**8 MAY 1989, SALT LAKE CITY**

Bursting with gregarious energy, “Elder” and “Sister” Smith find their places in front of me on the plane from Salt Lake City. Plastic name tags impose Mormon missionary identities on their pastel and wrinkled selves. “Going from Idaho Falls to London,” they tell their (perhaps) inquisitive neighbor. A crowd of children and grandchildren swarmed around them at the airport. Two video cameras recorded the proud departure. Their message will be the true gospel and the experience of twice six decades.

Over Chicago the weather is too rough for us to land. For an hour we circle blindly. The plane shudders through dark clouds. It banks steeply, then more steeply still, slipping down and around a slippery vortex. I lose every sense of direction, and attribute the same confusion to the pilot. I long for the ground. Simply to stand on the ground.

In New York’s Kennedy Airport, I walk behind the missionary
couple. Their shy gapings suggest that New York is far from the sheltered valleys of Idaho and Utah. (How can I, having braced against the bitter wind of Bear Lake for four winters as a child, fall for the cliché of sheltered Idaho valleys?) Nonetheless, trailing together up the concourse, the sweetly dedicated Mormons now breathe (and know they breath) the same lukewarm air that circulates through the moist lungs of rosy-faced priests, black-bearded Jews, brown-skinned women wrapped tightly in brilliant saris, black men wound into white turbans, long-limbed women jacked up on stiletto heels, well-fed men packed into immaculate business suits, sheared soldiers in uniform, young punks in their un-uniforms. A welter of inhaling, exhaling, perfumed, starched, garliced, sweating, diseased, powdered, angst-ridden, exulting, lusting, saintly, human beings.

Now the couple from Idaho Falls, he wearing his Boy-Scout-Council tie tack, she with her fine bone structure and seemly deference to the patriarch by her side, now these translucent-haired missionaries are cast into the World.

And I, a “worldly traveler,” set myself apart from these aged fellow Mormons. Pretending to Joyce’s “scrupulous meanness,” my mind and pen disclose the missionaries’ shallow innocence and reveal my own sagacity.

Despite my economy ticket, by some inexplicable grace, I have been assigned a “clipper-class” seat on the New York-to-Frankfurt flight. A wide seat with unlimited leg room. A single, quiet neighbor. Directly in front of me, in the nose of the 747, sit the first-class passengers. Even grace cannot bring a regular passenger that far.

While the plane drones across the Atlantic, I read Peter Handke’s novel *Repetition*. The protagonist, Filip Kobal, reads his brother Gregor’s notebook while searching for him in Yugoslavia.

If someone were to notice the book and ask me about my trip I would describe my work with Handke’s texts, my plan to travel in the Austrian and Slovenian landscapes of *Repetition* with Handke’s Serbo-Croatian translator.

In the next-to-last row of first-class seats a barrel-chested man works with an oversized black hand-bound book whose text has exploded across pale green pages, the dainty lines of which are unable to control the scattered words and rampant winged dots. Armed with thick red and blue pencils, the man struggles to order the chaos. Strong blue strokes cross out entire unruly sections. Powerful red strokes underline and lend weight to flighty passages. The fierce reading is disturbed only momentarily when the barrel-chested reader takes off
his shoes and stuffs plump feet into a pair of Pan Am slippers. A black silk shirt caresses his skin and a green-and-red sweater vest stretches across his broad belly. Measured against his girth his arms are an afterthought. His elbows reach only half way to what would be his waist. A weighty Rolex spans his upholstered wrist. Concentrating once again, he holds the book up to weak eyes. A florid man with thick glasses. Curly red-blond hair. A pointed nose.

Later, far over the Atlantic, the reader accepts a glass of wine from a flight attendant and for the first time sets the book aside. I can read the gold-stamped title: Tannhäuser. Several first-class passengers note the turn from book to wine and swarm to him. The airplane’s droning engines keep me from hearing the conversations, but I can follow the extravagant gestures: “Stupendous!” “Magnificent!” “Marvelous!”

My clipper-class neighbor sleeps the entire journey.

At the Frankfurt airport they wave me past without even glancing at my passport. They so blithely assume my innocence.

A cheap hotel, a hundred noisy meters from the train station—police sirens, ambulances, streetcars, automobiles, jackhammers, cranes, riveting guns. The manager gives me a key and explains that the front door will be locked at 11 p.m. I watch his one good eye jump from side to side while his other eye whitely stares (or doesn’t stare) straight ahead. He hands me a registration form with his left arm. There is no right arm. A small man. A humped back. I am not making this up. My room on the fourth floor has a twelve-foot ceiling. It is twice as high as it is wide, as high as it is long.

In the evening I see a film, La Lectrice. The pleasure of the text and the text of pleasure. Reading as sexual provocation. The beautiful professional reader offers her clients THE GOLDEN FLEECE. After the film I contemplate Europe as an erotic text, as a mysterious mistress. Intercourse with the abstraction “Europe,” I suppose, will not harm my marriage, such as it is. I pass the storefront office of an organization promoting sex education. Fastened to a wall is a machine dispensing free prophylactics—from the Greek “to keep guard before” (what a pedant). Simple devices to guard against disease and prevent pregnancy. At the same time they are advertised as decreasing in no sense the sensuous pleasure of the encounter. Competing values: sensitivity and protection. To experience this part of Europe as I want—with curiosity, openness, and sensitivity—I will expose myself
to disease and risk conceiving children. Or will I “guard against,” keeping my insular “self” intact?

Literature is mostly about having sex and not having children. Life is the other way around.

David Lodge

Feverish dreams. Shouts during the night in German, Turkish, and English. A violent thunderstorm. Finally I sleep long and well despite riots on the street and in my psyche—a naked man reads into an expanding condom until it stretches too thin and bursts, freeing letters and word fragments to impregnate the universe. Monsters are born.

A rainy morning. After breakfast I call Žarko to tell him when I will arrive in Tübingen. I am absolutely incoherent, stammering inanities in this language I am supposed to know. A Germanist who can hardly speak German. A stuttering professor.

Walking along the Main river, my eyes on a crude tourist map on which the hotel manager marked the Schirn Kunsthalle at my request, I try to blend in with the Europeans strolling sedately and knowledgeably along the gravel path. The map leads me finally to the art institute. I must still, however, wrestle conspicuously with four doors before I find one open. Did I miss a sign? Suddenly inside, I am standing too close to a man and a woman who lean against a counter. They stare at me. The man behind the counter raises his eyebrows (am I not supposed to be here?).

For a confused minute we try to establish whether I want one ticket, two tickets, or a combination ticket. I am not even sure what I am being asked, but I say yes and hand over some money. With combination ticket (DM 7) in hand I enter the building. Or try to enter. There are several flights of unmarked stairs. Behind a glass door in front of me swarm the knees and elbows and backpacks of a hundred school children. Inscrutable halls branch off in every direction. Doors bear indecipherable signs. I flee up the closest set of stairs. At the top, a sign on a glass door promises: “Gallerie.” Standing on a higher balcony overlooking the stairs, a woman watches while I pull and push the door. It is locked. I feel like an idiot. I look up at her, and she points helpfully to another staircase. Or is she laughing at me?
Even Frankenstein's monster hesitated at the threshold (to the hermit's hut).

Peter Handke, *Phantasien der Wiederholung*

Down I go, then up again. At the top I find, mercifully (whose mercy?), another woman who tears off my ticket stub and gestures toward an open door. Suddenly I am where I want to be—in Picasso's sketchbook: "Je suis le cahier."

After hours in the windowless womb of the Picasso exhibit, I wander through the gallery's other show: *Prospekt 89*. A selection of this year's best European art displayed in high, long, naturally lit halls. Outside it is raining hard. I take my time, sitting often along the long walls of windows, describing, reflecting, sorting through my reactions, writing with a black pen in a small notebook. What I see enflames my imagination.

A huge canvas: a man on a ladder rolls paint over the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, obliterating the figures. His shadow stretches over the disappearing work of art—"Triumph over Mastery." A black bicycle perches high on the corner of two white walls. A single red apple, a real apple, protrudes from one wall. On a podium, a second bicycle, a real bicycle. A Kandinsky painting "rides" the sturdy black bike. Behind the bicycle and up the white wall are scattered a trail of red apples, real apples—"Die suprematischen Reiter des Himmels. Triptychos post historicus."

Blocks of weathered stone—arranged like a sentence but calling sentences into question: DIE ORDNUNG DER GEGENWART IST DIE UN ORDNUNG DER ZUKUNFT. (THE ORDER OF THE PRESENT IS THE DISORDER OF THE FUTURE.)

Outside the gallery, sheets of rain drench the worn walls of a (real) Roman ruin. How to differentiate between art and the dynamic reality of ruins and rain? From somewhere the sound of tympani. A trumpet plays scales. The rain abates and a school of children clammers over the ruins. They flow from one end of the square to the other, reading the stone walls with feet and knees and palms. I trace the physical pattern and place it in the context of Roman history—and in the confrontational, playful, post-historical, disordering, triumphal context of the art behind me.

After hours among Picasso sketches and the most contemporary of art, I now sit outside and under the Schirn Kunsthalle at a table sheltered from the rain. Moving a second time among the Picasso sketchbooks I stood repeatedly next to or across from a woman.
Peripherally I could see dark hair, loose black pants, and a black jacket of raw silk. She drew me: her simple physical presence, her measured movements, her intense concentration, the mystery of her otherness coupled with the intimacy of our coordinated mental and physical stroll through Picasso’s sensual vision. When I left the gallery I passed close by her. She brushed past me in the gallery’s book store. And now she is sitting just inside the Kunsthalle café, half hidden behind a stone column and directly in my line of vision. Is she as aware of me as I am of her? I watch her turn the page of a book, raise a cup to her lips. She looks at me over the cup. I look down. She finishes her coffee. She leaves the café and walks right past me. I let her pass.

I mock my artistic and sexual Wunschträume.

11 May

On the train to Stuttgart. Quiet rain outside. Everything green. After the browns and reds and greys of my Utah desert homeland—a shocking green. The order and promise of spring fields and gardens. Along the tracks stretch colonies of meticulously tended Schrebergärten—tiny plots of planned paradise. Candide leaves Eldorado to tend to his garden—it’s an old European custom. Handke’s Gregor Kobal learns to tend orchards in Slovenia.

At the Stuttgart train station I again hear the soft Swabian sounds that surrounded me for three months in 1983. It’s like going back to the drawn-out vowels I knew in Nashville. The train connects Swabia’s melodious “ingen”: Esslingen, Mettingen, Plochingen, Wendlingen, Nürtingen, Bempflingen, Metzingen, Reutlingen, Tübingen. I reread Žarko’s interview with Handke in the literary journal Nachtcafé. It’s a rich narrative, a subtle story. Žarko reveals himself gently, unobtrusively. He stumbles, retraces his steps, laughs at himself. He uses Handke’s phrase as his title: “Die Welt in gewaltiger Schwebe halten” (“to hold the world in a powerful balance”).

A spray-painted red swastika burns the wall of a shelter at the Nürtingen train station. A rejoinder in black redirects a bit of fascist rhetoric: “Nazis raus.” (Loser, the protagonist of Handke’s novel Across, kills a swastika-sprayer with a rock. And must then find absolution.)

Žarko picks me up at the train station at 12:12, grinning and full of welcome. He looks just like I remember him: tall, dark-haired, high broad forehead, thick eyebrows. His voice is deep, his German rich—
slight, warm hints of his Slavic mother tongue.

In six years, however, some things have changed: Žarko has a car and a driver’s license. Handke, he tells me, still cannot or will not drive.

We have lunch at the University Mensa, just like old times. We talk about Handke, about the “intervening years,” about mutual friends, more about Handke. Žarko is full of projects—for example, he says, parallel diaries, yours and mine, as we spend the next weeks together, as we read Handke’s *Repetition*, as we travel Filip Kobal’s route in Slovenia, as we follow Handke’s biographical traces through Austria. Two separate yet simultaneous perspectives. Two foreigners writing about their experiences with an Austrian writer’s texts and contexts. I agree immediately, flattered by the thought of my text next to his.

In the apartment he shares with Zorica, Žarko gives me a copy of his translation of Handke’s *Child Story*. The dust jacket has a photo of the second “Triptychos Post Historicus” I have seen in two days, this one titled “Memories of Childhood 1983.” A framed photo of a little boy hangs on a block wall. Atop a square column in the right foreground sits a bust of a child. To the left, in a corner, lie two lions. The male lion glares at the camera. The artist is a Yugoslavian acquaintance of Žarko’s now living in London: Braco Dimitrijević.

At the end of his translation of *Child Story*, Žarko has included an anthology of child-related texts. Among an illustrious group of poems, short prose pieces, photos, and drawings I find my own essay: “From the Diary of a Father of Six and Husband of One (both numbers reprehensibly low in the nineteenth-century Mormon tradition the author’s ancestors helped establish).”

Zorica returns home from the physics institute at the Morgenstelle and welcomes me warmly. Her eyes are sharp, intelligent, honest. I know from experience she will say exactly what she thinks. I look forward to her opinions—with some trepidation.

We eat supper. The two of them tell me about rafting and hiking in Montenegro last summer. The photos are marvelous. More marvelous still are their faces as they describe the mountainous heart of their homeland and the crazy, poetic, philosophical genius of the Montenegrins. Žarko complains that his knees are still tender from the trip.

At my urging Žarko launches into a story about his recent interview with Handke. His train arrived at the Salzburg train station just before the interview was scheduled. Unshaven, in t-shirt and Levis, he ran to the Sheraton Hotel where Handke had arranged to meet him. Hardly inside the door, Žarko was again outside, confronted by the uniform of a Sheraton employee. Could I help you, sir? she asked forcefully. I have
an appointment with someone in the bar here, Žarko answered. Perhaps I could give him a message, she suggested. No, Žarko insisted, I need to see him myself. Not even slightly moved, she played her trump card: Who is this person you are supposed to meet? Peter Handke, Žarko replied. Suddenly she was another person. So was Žarko. Oh, Herr Handke! Yes, Herr Handke. Please, let me take you to his table. This way sir.

12 May

I woke up to a room flooded with sunlight and to the sound of a hundred birds. Summer mornings on my grandparents’ Colorado farm.

Lunch in the Mensa with Žarko, Zorica, and a Hungarian physicist. Zorica talks about her relationship with Žarko: We have divided up all necessary duties. “I am responsible for physics, money, the house, the car, shopping, politics, our social life. And Žarko takes care of art. It’s nice not to have to worry about art.”

I think she is hilarious. Žarko’s not so sure.

In the evening we go to a party for Tilo, a student celebrating his success on the state examination in French (after earlier exams in German and Philosophy). He is almost as old as I am and still has his dissertation in front of him. German Gründlichkeit. When he says he enjoyed my Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift article on Goethe’s Wilhelm Meister I like him immediately. During the next hour I meet Tilo’s brother, a young jazz musician full of questions and ideas, and also a junior editor for Metzler Verlag, stuffy beyond her years. She reminds me of Henry Miller’s Red-Notebook description of a fellow train passenger: the young man describes his early training in art and his more recent success in real estate; although he longs to return to his artistic career, he tells Miller that he can’t leave the security of his business. Caught in the bonds of security, Miller writes, and only 22! And I? Forty, a house, two cars, six children, tenure, and an adolescent longing to be an artist.

In this gathering of Germans Žarko and Zorica, who have organized the celebration, are unnaturally subdued.

On the way home Žarko and I, filled with Wanderlust, decide that we will begin our trip early in the morning.
13 May

Woke up at 6:30, but didn’t get underway until 10:30. Žarko and Zorica had something they had to work out (their heated Serbo-Croatian discussion made me feel like a kid whose parents are speaking a secret language). The woman at the car rental place had to fill out three different rental forms before she finally got one right. Her angry pen twice ripped into botched forms with vicious crossing strokes.

14 May

Early morning. I sit on the balcony of the Gostilna Rožić, a pension in Bohinj, Slovenia and watch the white-tailed swallows wheel around me. I know we are surrounded by mountains, but thick clouds and intermittent rain veil them completely.

In Handke’s novel, Filip Kobal rode a train through a Karawanken mountain tunnel to get from Villach, Austria to Jesenica in Yugoslavia. Out of the cultural terrorism of Europe into the fabled “Ninth Land” of Slovenia. We couldn’t exactly duplicate Filip’s trip with our Opel Kadett; but we would drive through a parallel tunnel, a tunnel that promised to deliver Žarko from the cultural exile the mountains proclaimed and enforced.

Somewhere near the tunnel we made a wrong turn and found ourselves driving along a long lake parallel to the mountains. Only fifteen minutes away, through the tunnel, was the promised land. Back and forth we drove, sometimes sure where we were because of correspondences between countryside and map, then suddenly, inexplicably, repeatedly lost. The tunnel was carefully marked on the map, as was the Autobahn leading to it, and the name “Karawanken Tunnel” stood in tiny red letters next to the marks that meant “mountains.” We could see the mountains. We could see the lake. We could drive through the streets of St. Jakob. But the map’s promised 7.6-kilometer tunnel (“toll required”) was simply not there. A black hole. The map’s code, which had so adequately represented “reality” up to now, had become meaningless. Absence where presence was promised. A signifier with no signified. A postmodern map.

Finally we threw away the text and asked an Austrian policeman how to get to the Karawanken Tunnel. When he understood that we wanted to drive through a tunnel to get to Jesenice he smiled so broadly that his thin moustache quivered. No such place, he said, not
until the Yugoslavs finish their half. He sauntered off, still smiling. The map had brought us, anticipating the 1991 completion of the tunnel, to a place that did not yet exist.

Still, we had to cross the mountains. Before we drove to the east and then south to the Wurzenpass, I turned the wheel over to Žarko.

Žarko had never driven a car through mountains before. As we climbed the steep, winding grade, he constantly had the car one or even two gears too high. Always on the verge of stalling. I made several rude suggestions as my patience wore thin.

At the border in an alpine meadow at the top of the pass, Žarko spoke with the guard and then pulled the car into a parking lot. You need a visa, he told me, and led me into a low, dark, dirty monument to bureaucracy. I felt like saluting the official portrait of Tito with a Bronx cheer. In the interest of time I restrained myself—experience at the East-German border had taught me that such jealously guarded borders can indeed be crossed, but also that a whole afternoon might be lost in the offing. At a high counter Žarko answered questions put to him by a uniformed official. I watched several men pay what looked like huge amounts of money at another counter. There were long silences as the official flipped through several old notebooks. Habsburg vintage? I thought of Josef K. and the castle. Žarko began to fidget. The official read my passport page by page. Much better than at the airport in Frankfurt, I thought. He looked up at me and I decided not to return his stare. I looked out the dirty window, focusing on nothing. My ears registered the tinny sounds of a bureaucrat’s radio playing somewhere in the building, broadcasting the immortal voice of Engelbert Humperdink: “Please release me, let me go, I don’t love you any mo’.” Now I was grinning. At the incongruity? No, at the congruity. I would like Yugoslavia. With a flourish the official stamped my passport.

Before we left we changed some money in the border branch of Ljubljanska banka, and for two fifty-dollar travelers checks I suddenly had more Dinar than I could fit into my back pocket. 12,000 Dinar per dollar. A millionaire.

Žarko drove again, down the winding road lined by thick forest. The official had been quite pleasant, he reported; and I told him about my memories of border crossings and the experience with Engelbert Humperdink. He laughed with me, and then added, quite seriously: you can’t compare Yugoslavia with East Germany.

Now the border was crossed, Jesenice just ahead, and Filip Kobal’s first experience awaited our retracing. Žarko was home. And yet not
home, he explained. This was Slovenia, and the people here spoke Slovenian. They learned Žarko’s native language, Serbo-Croatian, in school. (When I first met Žarko I assumed he spoke “Yugoslavian”—I’m still embarrassed at the thought.)

Scarcely a kilometer from the border we had to stop again, this time for two steaming cars whose front left bumpers and wheels were intimately connected. The one heading down the mountain was a new Jaguar. The other, headed up the mountain, was an Alfa Romeo. We walked down to where the two drivers, both well-dressed men, conversed in German. Conversed is the right word, for this was a civilized exchange. No blood was flowing. Tempers were under control.

We could hear the siren of a police vehicle from the direction of Jesenice, and soon two young policemen arrived in a tiny car to take charge of the situation. They stalked around, chests expanded, arm muscles flexed. They photographed the scene. They began to question the two drivers and the crowd, now over 100, closed in to hear. No one was hurt and the two crumpled luxury cars were surely fully insured, so we could fully enjoy our Schadenfreude.

We must have been enjoying it too much, for one of the policemen began shouting and waving his arms. We were to return to our cars. I could tell that without understanding a word. We walked back up the road. A young woman going the same way responded to our spoken German with accented German of her own: Do you know why it always takes two Yugoslavian policeman to do one job? she asked, her eyes bright and one corner of her mouth pulled into a sarcastic grin. No, we admitted. Because, she said, the one can only read, but not write. And the other can only write, but not read. We laughed, flattered that she would speak with us. A half hour later we watched the policemen, the drivers, and several other men lift, bounce, and drag the Alfa Romeo to the side of the road, opening up the way for us to descend from the mountains.

An eerily clear, colorless mountain river runs into the alpine city. Downstream, leaving town, the now opaque river percolates and fumes. A dark cloud, tinted chemical yellow, simmers above the city. Žarko drove straight through the steel-milling town. We would stay overnight in Bohinj, a mountain resort better adapted to the human breathing apparatus.

On the strength of the Italian cars parked outside its restaurant (Žarko said that was a sure sign of good food) we chose a pension. By the time we had put our things in a room it was 10 p.m. Famished,
First Repetition: Travel Reading

anticipating a Balkan feast, we hurried downstairs. The waiter refused to seat us. The kitchen is closed, he said. Žarko asked about other restaurants. Get out of my way, the waiter said, I have work to do. We had brought bread and cheese and apples with us, and in fact ate well; but Žarko was humiliated. It meant much to him that I like his country; and the waiter had acted like shit. Maybe the Slovenes simply don’t like Serbs, I suggested. No, Žarko said, he was a Serb.

Later that night we stood on the gravel shore of an enormously still mountain lake. The silky water mirrored the bright half-moon and the surrounding mountains. Standing there in silence, Yugoslavia’s highest mountain towering three-headed (Triglav) over us in the moonlit night, Žarko and I began to talk about standing and being. (The subject could just as well have been basketball, but we had covered Yugoslavs in the NBA while driving and now the bright darkness put us in a philosophical mood.) The entire day we had been traveling, racing along the Autobahn into Austria, up through the mountains into Yugoslavia. And now, on a lake shore where the slightest wave was a remarkable motion, we stood and talked about standing: the acrobats’ gesture in Rilke’s elegies, Handke’s evocation of the nunc stans in The Lesson of Mont Sainte-Victoire—that standing gesture created by the most concentrated artistic effort, that brief moment of achieved stillness between one motion and the next, that ephemeral moment of duration, of “true feeling.”

The youth, when attracted by nature and art, feels capable of entering suddenly, with a lively effort, into the inner sanctum; the man notices, after long travels, that he still finds himself in the outer courtyards. . . . Stair, gate, entrance, vestibule, the space between the inner and outer, between the sacred and profane—only this can be the place in which we and our friends will commonly dwell.

Goethe, preface to his art-historical journal Propyläen

Yesterday was Pentecost. We left the lake and its peaceful morning fog and drove down to the town of Bohinska Bistrica, the town where Filip Kobal reads his brother’s notebook on fruit-growing and discovers the Slovenian language.

Driving past grassy meadows we saw the “hay harps” Handke’s character admires: “those long, narrow wooden frames known as ‘hay
harps’: two wooden posts (perhaps made of concrete today) rammed into the ground, and embedded in them a number of parallel bars, on which, under a shingled roof, the first hay of the year was drying. This first crop was full of spring flowers, and the grey mass of hay was shot through with color.” I was thrilled by the sight of these objects I had seen only in Handke’s description. But isn’t that an odd reaction? What is so thrilling about a connection between text and reality? Doesn’t seeing the actual “hay harp” distract me from the language with which Handke describes them? Won’t the descriptive passage now revert to a shorthand or a cipher for something I have seen, rather than serving as a “thing” itself? What is now the difference between the description and the hay-harp souvenir lamps in local gift shops?

In town we heard bells and found people streaming out of a large church. The Pentecostal churchgoers were variously dressed: from tightly buttoned traditional black suits or black dresses to casual Levis, bright t-shirts, and tennis shoes. Inside the church, kneeling worshipers were still receiving the host from a priest. A choir sang with organ accompaniment. Žarko said the sacred music was flavored with Slovenian folk songs; and he gave me a lecture about Slovenes. There are about 2 million of them, mostly strong Catholics, their religion closely allied with their nationalism. Politically dominated by Hapsburgs and then Serbs, they have fought a heroic battle over the centuries to keep their language and culture intact. Handke says there are no Slovenian words for military commands. German and Serbo-Croatian words suffice.

From the church we followed some men into the town center, not a quaint old place but a rather faceless arrangement of concrete and glass. (Am I seeing the place through Handke’s eyes? He describes the place similarly.) The men congregated in a combination pastry shop and bar, a warm, steamy refuge from the rain. Where were their wives? We ordered pastry and tea and sat at a corner table. Young to middle-aged men stood at a bar. Their hands flashed in animated conversation. Around tables sat more quiet, dark-suited, little men. Even inside the café brimmed hats covered the older men’s fine, lean, wrinkled heads. As Gastarbeiter in Germany, shorn of language and homeland, these Slovenes and Serbs and Croats and Turks can appear “shiftless,” “stupid,” “dirty,” and “dishonest.” I wonder how I appear to these men here. My hair is not black. I have no mustache. My clothes and gestures and mannerisms belong to a different people. How do they interpret my difference? What nightmares does the German I am speaking evoke?
On the road back down to Jesenice we got a sense for the new Slovenia: “Tennis,” “Mini-Golf,” and “Ski-Area.” Back in the steel-milling city we sloshed through grey and yellow, chemically fortified rain to the train station restaurant where Filip Kobal sat one whole night drinking sweet, flat, east-block Cola. A picture of Tito figures prominently in the story, but yesterday we couldn’t find it. Disappointment. And yet the thought of political change was bracing. Žarko checked the WC to see if Handke got it right. He did.

We looked for the mouth of the train tunnel where Filip Kobal spends his first night, unwilling to leave the border, the threshold: “The tunnel did not strike me as an insane idea. I would go in where my train had just carried me out.” We drove and walked up a dozen blind alleys before a wet garden path almost accidentally brought us face to face with the tunnel. Standing in the streaming rain Žarko photographed the heavy stone arch and the black half circle it creates.

Later we ate the Slovenian meal Žarko had promised me the night before. Dark bread, tomato-and-onion salad, soup (with a raw egg yolk staring up at me), a tender, well seasoned Schnitzel. Prosperous, dour Slovenian families ate their quiet Sunday dinners at tables around us. Four soldiers drank at one table. A huge boar’s head and several sets of antlers hung heavy over the diners. Žarko glowed as I praised the food and glowed again as he drank a glass of Slivovitz. The meal cost 120,000 Dinar. But we were millionaires.

An uneventful trip across the border. “Where was the transition?” asks the narrator of Repetition. Just before crossing we spent the last of our money on Yugoslavian tomatoes and pears. From an official poster still tacked obediently to the back wall, Marshal Tito kept watch over the transaction.

In the late afternoon we drove through south-central Austria to Klagenfurt, the city where Handke finished high school. Exhausted from a hectic week of travel, I slept in the car while Žarko sought directions to Tanzenberg (the Catholic boarding school where Handke was a pupil for several years before moving to a school in Klagenfurt), found announcements of an exhibit of Constructivist art, and interviewed several passersby about whether they knew who Handke was (most of them didn’t, but one defended him as a national hero). We were both refreshed.

Almost 12 p.m. We have found a room in St. Veit an der Glan, a town not far from the Tanzenberg boarding school. Handke’s ex-wife, Libgard Schwarz, is from here. Four leather-clad motorcyclists share the next room. I can’t imagine them without their helmets and leathers.
Do they wear pajamas?

After not having seen one another for six years, Žarko and I have been together nearly every minute of two days now. Travel weary, I find his mannerisms increasingly aggravating. “What! What?” he asks, pretending, I suppose, not to have heard what I have just suggested because he would rather do the opposite. And yet we share good moments—even kinship. We talk before going to sleep about Žarko’s life in Germany. The eternal foreigner. Bureaucrats (and Germany is a nation of bureaucrats), noting his dark hair and registering his slight accent, call him “Du,” and raise their voices.


On the way from St. Veit to Tanzenberg we stop by a country soccer tournament. At least four teams have gathered, if I read the shirt colors correctly. Healthy-looking girls sell sausages and sodas from a little stand. Two teams race up and down the wet field. One goalie can punt the ball the entire length of the field. Heads crack together as players strain for the ball. Muscular legs drip blood. Feet control the ball delicately, with amazing precision, and suddenly punish it with terrifying force. A tall, thin player has his glasses ripped from his face. He picks them up and reenters the fray. Žarko photographs the goalies. We’ll analyze their faces later for the anxiety Handke describes in his early novel.

Tanzenberg, in Kärnten. More shades of green than I have names for. Bright white-and-grey clouds. Dark brown, rain-soaked earth. Broad fertile valleys bordered by hills. A wisp of smoke rises from a thick stand of trees. Overlooking a wide sweep of this exorbitant landscape stands the boarding school, a long, high, heavy, stone building. An architectural witness to institutional power. The natural beauty seems to exist for the greater glory of this institution set on a hill. I can imagine why a poor village girl would be attracted to the life of a nun here. She would be honored and protected in this house. She would be beautiful in her starched black and white habit.

The school is locked up for the Pentecostal holiday, but we find three of the nuns who will speak with us. The first is feeding a cat on the kitchen doorstep, the second two wander up a lane carrying wild flowers, pine boughs, and an unwashed head of lettuce.

The woman on the porch is very shy, yet her face is radiant. We ask her about the former student, Peter Handke. She wasn’t at Tanzenberg then, she says, but she knows who we are asking about. Beyond that she
tells us only that she is a simple woman, that she doesn’t read much, that she works in housekeeping and not in the school.

“Are you with the Boy Scouts?” asks one of the other two nuns, brash and fat and secure in her long black and white habit. She does most of the talking while her companion nun, much leaner, does most of the smiling. From the first answers to our queries it is clear that the one who speaks most “freely” is disposed in the “best interest” of the institution, to say the least. The one who smiles from behind and who manages only a few soft interjections sheds light with each honest, kind word (and aggravates her slyer sister to no end).

“Yes, of course” [“ja freilich”] they had known Handke. He was a bit strange [“ein eigenartiger Mensch”]—“like all the boys are these days,” she adds quickly. “We housekeepers don’t really have much to do with the Gymnasium; but when Handke’s book about his poor mother appeared we were as outraged as anyone. Yes, the professors at the Gymnasium were quite negative about it. No, none of the professors are around, all gone for Pentecost.—But Sister, Professor X. lives right over there.—That’s true, Sister, but he is not at home.—Yes he is, look, his car is in the driveway.—Well! We ought to be on our way. Auf Wiedersehen.”

Standing on the road between the boarding school and the stand of trees that evidently hides a Boy Scout camp, we strike up a conversation with a bearded bicyclist and his eight- or nine-year-old son. The man was himself a student in the boarding school until 1970. He knows Handke’s work well. His German teacher, he says, also Handke’s teacher, told the class that Handke would be a great writer. In my notebook he writes the teacher’s name: “Reinhard Musar, Villach,” and also the name and address of a friend working on liturgical structures in Handke’s works: “Harold Boloch, Graz.”

We ask what it was like as a boarding-school student. “I wouldn’t send my son there,” he says, although it is a superb Gymnasium. “Ten-year-old boys begin there in September and don’t see their parents again until Christmas, unless the parents have enough money to come for visits. The school exists to educate future priests. Five times a day the boys take part in religious services.”

“Do you know any good anecdotes about Handke?”

“Not long ago the school mounted an exhibition of the best student art over the past twenty years, including several of Handke’s works. But then Handke, living in France at the time, said something derogatory about Austria that got printed in all the papers. The art teacher, enraged, took down all of Handke’s work.”
(When Žarko interviewed Handke in 1985, Handke told him that he was a “religiously damaged boarding-school pupil. The five years in the school are not worth telling. The words homesickness, oppression, coldness, group imprisonment are enough.” Handke on his homeland: “The lard that strangles me: Austria”—this was quoted widely in the Austrian and German press.)

Žarko and I coo like adolescent girls on an outing. “We’re writing a book about Peter Handke. Could you tell us anything about him?”

“Griffen: 3000 inhabitants. Griffen is a beloved summer freshness between the valleys of the Drau and the Lavan, an inviting place for long walks. It is also visited eagerly by fishermen.” (Description from the map that showed a tunnel into Slovenia.)

“Griffen. The writer Peter Handke’s birthplace and childhood home.” So begins the entry on the town in Žarko’s traveller’s guide to Kärnten. Not bad, for a living author. There are advantages to being born in a village.

By the time I slow the car we have passed clear through the village. Before we reenter Griffen we drive up a country road into the surrounding low hills. It will give us a context, I argue, an overlook. A steep, winding, gravel road. Old farm houses, well spread out. Clouds sweep the hills. Fine grey and rich green. A castle ruin on a high hill dominates the town. On a ridge we stand at the edge of a newly planted field and look back and forth into two valleys. In the stillness I hear, for the first time in my life, the low call of a cuckoo. I will be 40 this summer.

Placid cows. Chickens. Cats. A heavy dog on a chain, too lazy to challenge us. We slow the car and he explodes. We joke that we have found Handke’s “friend,” the critic Marcel Reich-Ranicki, who Handke depicted as a vicious dog in The Lesson of Mont-Sainte Victoire. I photograph a beautiful pile of manure butting up against a rich brown reflecting pool and topped by a sturdy wheelbarrow. An old tin arrow pointing to a farm house announces the presence of a telephone.

I could spend the entire day in the hills above Griffen, but Žarko is ready to see the town.

By accident (or do the winding streets make that accident happen?) we begin our visit in the religious and touristic center of Griffen—the space shared by the church and the Tropfstein Cave. That double center, however, fails to attract us, for we have come in search of the peripheral.

In a pottery shop (“Terra Nigra! An Ancient Art Rediscovered”) we
ask about Peter Handke. Both the potter and his teenage assistant stand up when we say Handke’s name. With no more prompting they vie with one another to give us fragments of their versions of the Handke family story. When the potter changes the subject to his own discovery of the ancient secret of black earth the young man breaks in, impatient, and asks if he could have ten minutes off to show us Handke’s grammar school and the family house where Handke’s half-brother now lives. Sorry to lose his audience, the old man nonetheless says yes, and with a rush the boy leads us from the center of town.

The school, right on the town’s main street, is now a pizzeria. Our young guide enjoys our laughter. He directs us to a row of houses on a hill and then must return to the secrets of Terra Nigra!

Wedged in against a wooded ridge just outside of Griffen is Altenmarkt, Handke’s birthplace. (I sound like a tourist guide.) Below the ridge lie a lumberyard and a cemetery. The lumberyard must have been where the uncle had his carpenter’s shop. We spend 30 minutes in the cemetery looking for Handke’s mother’s grave. We never find it; but because the wall and the little chapel remind us of descriptions in Über die Dörfer, Žarko takes several photographs.

On the road just above the cemetery, a well dressed elderly woman responds to our query by pointing down the road to the last house on the last street in town. It is the half-brother’s birthday, she says and adds something about a house being torn down. She claims to have been the owner of the property. Afterward Žarko and I cannot quite agree on what she has said. We ask about Handke’s mother. The woman seems to know the family well: the mother’s maiden name was Maria Siutz and she is buried, not in the cemetery below, but in the cemetery of the Stift, up the road and around a corner. (So much for our photos.) The woman continues her stiff walk up the gravel road. I speculate on the relationship between this woman of property and Handke’s mother. If it includes scorn and social stigma, I hope we have revenged Maria Siutz, our presence a witness to the international stature the family has attained. Žarko photographs the woman as she walks away (a dark raincoat and thin legs), and then turns down the road and takes another photo, this time of the open garage door into which, from this angle, the road seems to lead.

Now we stalk the house at Altenmarkt 6, the half-brother’s house standing right at the end of the paved road, the last house in town. A black, sporty car—“Sprint!”—stands outside the garage. We peek into the doorless garage. The brother (we suppose) has painted cartoon figures on the walls. A sexy young woman, a virile young man, a
sensual cat, and the English phrase “Only you.” Walt Disney’s Pluto adorns the wall of a garden house. We want to go in and ask the brother about Peter; we itch to ring the doorbell. Instead Žarko takes several photographs as we walk past. What the hell are we doing here?

In the opening scene of William Golding’s *The Paper Men*, an aging, alcoholic writer nearly shoots a young would-be biographer who is rooting through his rubbish. The novel ends as the would-be biographer, repeatedly frustrated by the uncooperative novelist, shoots him.

Handke is an acquired taste, one American reviewer suggests. Reading Radaković and Abbott on Handke will require an even more assiduously acquired taste.

The Stift, a former monastery, is in disrepair. Crumbling bricks disfigure what was once a smooth plaster coat. Beer and sausage booths, part of Griffen’s Pentecostal celebration, are being dismantled by workmen in the rain. By some of the workmen. The others lift glasses in the pub that now occupies the southeast corner of the huge building.

Surrounded by a high, crumbling, brick-and-wood wall, the graveyard lies on the west side of the building. With little trouble we locate Maria Handke’s well-tended grave. No longer an outsider.

“Maria Handke / 8.10.1920—20.11.1971” it says on the smooth front of the otherwise uncut stone. A wooden cross fronts the stone: “Bruno Handke, died 21.3.88.” I photograph Žarko as he stands in front of the grave, umbrella at a slant, his hands busy with pen and notebook. He photographs me in a similar stance. Assiduous scholars. Pious pilgrims.

Over the church’s massive front door hangs a statue of Mary, her foot balanced delicately on the neck of a fine green dragon. We swing open the heavy worm-eaten door and enter a working church housed in a partial ruin. Rich altar rugs lie on platforms of unpainted pine. Oak pews shine with woodwax and use. The scent of mildew. Pyramidal piles of drifted plaster gather at the base of disintegrating walls.

Inside the entrance, German and Slovenian signs give directions to the confessional. German-language pamphlets are stacked in ragged piles on a table to the left and a table to the right displays similar pamphlets in Slovenian. The naïve paintings of fourteen stations of the cross circling the church have Slovenian captions: “1. Statio Jesus je k’smerti obsojen.”

Fat little red prayer and song books (*Gotteslob*). Woven from red,
gold, and purple threads, three attached bookmarks dangle from each volume. Leafing through one I find the stations of the cross. The book’s subtitle is “Eigentum der Kirche” (Property of the Church). I decide that is a misnomer and slip the book into my pocket (actually, Žarko’s pocket; he has loaned me a good wool jacket for the trip).

“Monastery Church Maria Ascension (Haslach): The church has its origins in the 13th century, but was much altered in the following centuries. It received its west facade (Baroque) in the 18th century. Inside Romanesque style dominates. The stone Madonna from 1520 is late gothic. Left and right from her, next to the high altar from the 18th century, are Saint Augustinus and Saint Norbert. In addition numerous gravestones and coats-of-arms from the 15th through the 18th century deserve attention . . . notable stuccos . . . scholars, however, do not agree whether these stuccos can be attributed to the artist Kilian Pittner (1700).”

Is this the kind of thing I will be doing to Handke? “Peter Handke has his origins in the decade of the Third Reich. He was, however, much altered in the following decades. . . . Within, postmodern style dominates. The book published in 1986, however, is post-postmodern. . . . Also deserving attention . . . scholars, however, do not agree, whether . . .”

However, however, however. It makes me want to throw up.

We leave the church and step out again into the dripping rain. It’s time to return to Tübingen; but we are not yet satisfied. We go into the pub to see if someone there wants to talk about Handke.

Only one drinker is still there, enjoying a last drink and talking with the bartender. We give them the spiel about our book and ask if they know Handke. The young workman says he knows “Peter” well. “I sat next to him at the soccer field across the street while he wrote The Goalie’s Anxiety. He sat there and stared at the goalie the whole time, just the goalie.” The bartender, who obviously knows more about the book, wants to have his say as well: “The story takes place in Frankfurt, but Handke got his ideas right here.”

“What does Handke ever come here?” Žarko asks.

“About once a year,” the bartender answers. “He sits alone at a table outside in the courtyard.”

“What does he drink?” I ask.

“Always a cheap white wine.”

“Do people around here read Handke’s books?”

The bartender says that he has read three of the books, but Handke is less read in Griffen than he ought to be. “A prophet in his own
country,” he says, “you know the story.”

In the car, driving along the bumpy country road between the Stift and the town, we laugh at ourselves and the information we have gathered. It all seems so trivial, yet we are fascinated by the details. We talk about the decaying Stift as an interesting place for Handke. The working church and the cemetery provide a tradition. The secularization of the cloister and the effects of entropy provide freedom from tradition.

We leave Griffen at six p.m. and head home. I sleep while Žarko drives through Klagenfurt and Villach, and when I wake up we are in the mountains. We need gas; but when Žarko passes up several opportunities to get off the Autobahn we are faced with almost a half an hour before the next exit. That tension near the end of a three-day trip gets to me and as we finally find an exit and an ARAL station I tell Žarko what an idiot he is. I offer insufferably arrogant responses to his friendly questions and well-meant statements. I am an asshole.

I drive now. In a long, two-lane claustrophobic tunnel, some kind of jeep drives up my tailpipe, although I’m driving 90 and the speed limit is 80. The impatient driver flashes his lights. When the jeep driver continues his antics I touch my brakes. He falls back. Outside the tunnel, at a toll booth where I again (as in the other direction) have to shell out DM 27, the jeep, carrying four bearded men and pulling a trailer, drives up close behind me. The driver begins to shout and swear and make obscene gestures out his window. I can’t even tell what language he is speaking; but I understand him well enough and flip him the bird as we drive on.

Leaving the mountains and the bearded jeepsters behind, somewhere between Salzburg and München, we watch the sun go down, a huge red ball. It balances for a silent moment on the sharp points of pine trees lining a hill, then eases down to light my family’s day in Utah.

In the dark we drive through the heart of München (Žarko insists that will be quicker than the Autobahn around the city), and then again onto the Autobahn. I drive 140-150 km per hour, passing trucks and slower cars. I have never driven this fast in my life. The speed gives me a sense of power. Power, that is, until terror takes over when a pair of headlights rushes toward me at light speed and a Porshe passes with a blast that makes our little Opel shudder. A whole fleet of cars, including, inexplicably, tiny Fiats, roar or whine past in the next hours, hell bent on destruction. In retrospect, I suppose that I too, in my own conservative way (Opel Kadett at 140 km per hour), was expressing my
own death wish.

A delicate slowness is the tempo of these conversations.
Nietzsche (epigraph in Handke’s Über die Dörfer)

Not on the Autobahn.
In the dark, speeding through Germany, Žarko dozes now and then, and even when he is awake we are quiet. We listen to jazz on the radio. Louis Armstrong and Ella Fitzgerald begin a song, a song I hear as a metaphor for our journals, our parallel, repetitive, individual texts. I come alive at even the faint possibility that our texts could play off each other like these two voices. Louis sings—deeply, roughly, warmly—“I’d like to do some fishing, in a river or a creek, but I’d rather be right here with you, dancing cheek to cheek.” A series of things Louis would like to do follows. Each phrase ends with a word rhyming with “cheek.” “But,” he sings, and returns to what he really wants. Then Ella sings through the same series, repeating the phrases in a similarly warm but entirely different voice—“I’d like to do some fishing, in a river or a creek, but I’d rather be right here with you, dancing cheek to cheek.” Simple words, easy rhymes, exact and varying repetitions. Finally the two singers join their voices, weave them together, voice playing off voice, repeating a third time the words that have become, through skilled repetition, much more than hack poetry. An intimate dance, cheek to cheek.

I returned the car early this morning while Žarko and Zorica still slept. I wanted to be alone. At the university, in the quiet, natural light of the Brechtbau, I read the description in Repetition of Bohinska Bistrica, the church there, and the inn where Filip stayed. Having just been there, I am a much different reader than when I first read through this. On first reading, I focused on ideas, skipping geographic details, specific ones at least. Now I look also for the concrete descriptions, the material sources of the ideas. And I find that the places and things become sources for thoughts of my own. The reception of Handke’s text (began as scholarly work) is becoming a more and more creative, self-creating task. What Žarko aptly calls a productive reception.

I came to Europe half hoping to interview Handke. An interview that would put the Imprimatur on my book. An interview that would give me direct access to the man and his works. From his own lips: the
answer. Failing that I would find answers in the places he has been, in the places he describes. Or, like Filip Kobal, in places next to the places where his brother was.

But from the first I have been hesitant. I don’t want to disturb Handke’s privacy. I feel inadequate. I fear sitting in front of him and stammering like an idiot. I sense that other published interviews have been provocative at Handke’s expense. I have plenty of texts with which to construct my Handke picture. I laugh at my eagerness for an interview as a source for unmediated knowledge. And I am grateful to have seen and smelled fragments of his material world.

Handke in Die Zeit, a wild interview with André Müller: “I would rather sense it than know it. Language is usually destructive. . . . No one will find anything really personal about me, and what I have published is a total disguise.”

I spend the afternoon in a park, still unwinding from the trip.

Heavy footed and breathing hard, a man in white shorts walks through the clearing right in front of me. Recovering from a run through the woods. Halfway across the clearing he stops and does a long series of sit-ups. Then he walks up and down swinging his arms high. Finally he jogs away.

A young woman appears suddenly, unexpectedly, magically in the middle of the clearing, like Venus out of the sea (or like some other powerful cliché), sitting up in the tall grass. She pulls her shirt over her head. I can see, after she lays down, only the tops of her bare thighs and her knees. Tall grass in clumps. Yellow flowers. An old tree branch. White spheres of dandelion seeds. And two round, tanned, disembodied thighs. The thighs disappear. Now and then a hand and forearm flick into view, brushing away flies, gnats. But mostly now there is only the clearing, the breeze, and I on the park bench. A fly. A white butterfly. A tiny green aphid. Bird song. A swarm of gnats.

10 a.m. Just got up. Last night a magical, late dinner in a garden overlooking the valley and across from the Österberg. Žarko and Zorica work the beautiful, steep piece of land for an old woman no longer up to the task. We ate grilled cutlets, grilled liver, tomato salad with garlic and onions, and drank cider and beer. Two neighbors, both pianists, came by. She dominated the scene even though her companion did most of the talking. Dancing, laughing eyes. Her tongue sliding across her lips. The young, firm curve of her forearm.
I sit and write and remember my middle-aged desire on the sunny third-floor balcony. Children play soccer on an asphalt field below. Mothers stride past. Their strong legs swing free under loose dresses as they thrust forward their babies in strollers.

Žarko works in his room. Now and then he appears with a text he wants me to read.

A breeze stirs the red and purple flowers growing on the balcony. Birds of various sorts punctuate space and time with their calls. When the breeze stops for a moment I can smell the flowers.

Žarko brings me a short piece he published in *Nachtcafé*. It describes an aimless, contemplative stroll through Tübingen, borrowing many of its phrases from a short text by Robert Walser. Language speaks us. A page of “sources” concludes the text, narrative in its juxtapositions. The citation of a book about frustrations experienced by foreign women in Germany, for instance, is followed by a reference to a book on Molotov Cocktails.

A white-haired, stooped woman walks under the balcony, a big black purse in her left hand, a little two-wheeled cart for carrying her purchases directed by her right hand. Six children, some carrying wild flowers, straggle down the path accompanied by two women in pants.

Žarko shows me a note from the writer Helmut Heissenbuttel in which Heissenbüttel snidely argues that to write about the productive Handke reception Žarko suggests would be a waste of time.

The sun eases across the sky. The balcony falls into shadow.

A hawk circles slowly over woods and meadows, dipping and swinging up again with only the most subtle of wing changes. In the distance, muted by haze, hills appear as a surrounding ring. Surrounding me—the center of the universe.

A fine, still morning.

At Tilo’s party and again last night Zorica and Žarko slipped quietly into the background—foreigners, shy, not as aggressive as the natives, pulling back into anonymity, out of the brilliance of their real personalities. Zorica, for instance, once told Handke she liked his books but that he made bad films. Žarko is a creative dynamo. On the trip, with another foreigner, he was open, forward, and witty. How I would like to see them in Belgrade among friends, speaking their first language.

Eight p.m. Žarko and I have stopped at the garden on the way home. I weed with him until he gets nervous about the good plants I am weeding out. Now I sit and watch the last sunlight play across the
Österberg. A herd of sheep enclosed by a square fence glows yellow-gold against the green grass, and then turns ivory. Most of the sheep graze placidly. Four lambs dart between them, energetic and playful. A bird flits into an old birdhouse fastened to a small tree. I remember building a similar birdhouse with my ten-year-old son Thomas. The memory brings with it a rush of love, responsibility, desire to make every sacrifice so his life can be good. And a tinge of guilt. I have not thought about my family. The sheep are turning grey. The bright green of the grass shades into black.

18 MAY

Eight a.m. Up two hours earlier this morning. Again the room sparkles with sunlight. Birdsong. What I hear as snatches of melody is the language of birds. When Žarko and Zorica speak Serbo-Croatian I hear only the pure form of music.

Last night’s dream: I moved among a group of baby hippos. Their skin was wrinkled and baby-soft. Two of them nuzzled up against me, nipping and sucking pleasantly at my arms. As one of the heavy mouths pulled at my left arm, however, I began to be afraid. It bit down harder and harder, and the sensation of gentle warmth turned to pain. I called for help. I began to panic. The dream ended.

Nine a.m. I sit on a bench atop the Österberg, just a short walk from the Brechtbau where I left Žarko. The hill that was green from across the way is, on closer observation, also yellow and white and brown and red and purple. In places the grass is knee high (why do I always describe things as they relate to me?), and almost waist high in others. The sheep are gone this morning, but where they grazed yesterday the grass is shorter and all the flowers are gone. No yellow daisies, none of the small yellow flowers with five rounded petals, no yellow dandelions, none of the tiny white flowers that grow tall in big bunches, none of the little purple flowers, and none of the high brown and red heads of grass seed. (I’m good with names.) The sheep must prefer the taste of the colors. In return for the meadow’s bounty they have littered the field with black, rounded, oblong droppings, a rich legacy for the summer and fall.

The sound of morning traffic rises from the valley. If the sheep were to eat the honking, farting, red and blue and white and orange cars there would be only the sound of birds and the breeze.

Silent swarms of bicycles roll along the path beside the canal. One
carries plastic cartons, stacked high, full of tomato seedlings. A heavy-bodied couple lumbers along on two tiny looking bikes, their fat child perched ponderously on a seat behind the man. A lithe, bearded man pulls a cart full of building materials behind his sturdy old bike. A young woman pedals swiftly by with her skirt pulled up high over strong brown legs. She leans back, her hands free of the handlebars, the wind swirling through her dark hair. A serious young man pedals steadily along with his child secure in a seat between his legs. A huge basket of fruit is strapped onto a rack over the back tire of the next bike. Another carries black bulging saddlebags. Finally a sleek yellow- and-black racing bike, its back tire flat, pushed along at a snail’s pace.

Not far below me stretches a row of perfectly tended gardens. Tall, naked poles stand ready for the bean tendrils that will embrace them. Berry bushes are already green. And the brown earth is lined with fuzzy green furrows. There are gardeners at work in several of them, and somehow that activity heightens my aimless pleasure.

My first experience with the erotic beauty of such a still, free morning was in Seal Beach, California, the summer of 1972. A week’s vacation from the clanging steel and chemical mud of the drilling rig. In the old VW I had just bought for $600 I drove with the derrick hand from Gila Bend, Arizona to California to visit his sister. I remember most vividly the deliciously unsettling evening with her friends in a garden where we ate vast quantities of pasta and I watched them drink what seemed like gallons of wine, and we sang “Roll me over in the clover, roll me over, lay me down, and do it again.” The song, in endless rowdy variations, aroused my desire, and my inhibitions as well. I had never been intoxicated, nor had I ever rolled in the clover. Still, shyly, I savored the evening. Up early the next morning while the derrick hand, his sister, and her lover still slept, I sat in the kitchen and tried to describe the slant of the morning sunlight and the quiet freedom I felt in my gut and in my mind.

A black bird skims across the hill, dropping a white cargo, like a crop duster, to further enrich the meadow. Bees and flies and other insects work among the flowers. The sun grows warmer, and I begin my morning work with Handke’s *Repetition*.

“The Blind Window”—Filip Kobal waits for the train that will take him away from home and into Yugoslavia: “I raised my head and saw in the end wall of the station a rectangle—a blind window the same whitish-grey color as the wall, but set in from it. Though no longer in the sun, this window shimmered with reflected light from somewhere. In Rinkenberg there was only one such window, and it happened to be
in the smallest house, the roadmender’s, the one that looked like the porter’s lodge of a nonexistent manor. It, too, was the color of the wall—yellow in that case—but was bordered with white. Whenever I passed, it caught my eye, but when I stopped to look, it always fooled me. Nevertheless, it never lost a certain undefined significance for me, and I felt that such a window was lacking in my father’s house. Now, at the sight of the Mittlern blind window, I remembered.”

He also remembers a frantic train trip his father and brother took from this station to a doctor in Klagenfurt to save his brother’s eye, a trip taken in vain, for from that time on “there was nothing in [the eye’s] place but a milky whiteness. But this memory explained nothing. The significance of the blind window remained undefined, but suddenly that window became a sign, and in that same moment I decided to turn back. My turning back—and here again the sign was at work—was not definitive; it applied only to the hours until the following morning, when I would really start out, really begin my journey, with successive blind windows as my objects of research, my traveling companions, my signposts. And when later, on the evening of the following day, at the station restaurant in Jesenice, I thought about the shimmering of the blind window, it still imparted a clear message—to me it meant: ‘Friend, you have time’.”

A window, I write, is generally transparent, as would be a signifier that reveals a transcendental signified. This window, however, is blind, even more opaque than the window/door Filip hopes his brother will step through in another part of the novel. The only window in the village similar to this one is in the roadmender’s tiny house, a house that makes Kobal think of a nonexistent Lord’s or manor house. The double motion of this signifier is characteristic of Handke’s work in general—the little house both brings to mind what could be the house of lost kings and reminds one of its nonexistence. This is precisely the novel’s stance in relation to metaphysics: it evokes the very thing it simultaneously reveals as absent. The roadmender was previously described in the novel as a liminal figure in the village whose work as a sign painter (artist, writer) fascinated Filip Kobal and who, along with Filip’s mentally handicapped sister, was said to embody in his liminality the (real) center of the village. But just what was the meaning of that decentered centrality? Just what did the so promising blind window express?

Whenever Filip stopped to decipher the message it meant, in fact,

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3 Handke, Repetition, trans, Manheim, 68.
nothing. But if there was no clear meaning, there was still (undefined) significance. Although Filip wanted a clearer message, the openness of this signifier is as important as the fact of signification. Filip’s father’s house has no such window of uncertain meaning, because, I suppose, he is a man of defined significance, a tyrant, an oppressive authority figure. Although the narrator suggests that the meaning of the blind window will remain indefinite, Filip nevertheless takes the window as a sign that he should return to his family. But as an indeterminate sign, the window is also interpreted as signifying the exact opposite—as a sign of his travels, of his leaving his family. The next day, in recollection, the contradictory messages give way to a third, enigmatic, statement: “Friend, you have time.”

Two hours later. The sun is much brighter and the white pages of the novel are beginning to strain my eyes. The haze has lifted some, and I can see into the valley beyond the Wurmlinger Kapelle. I make my way across the open hill, along little, shaded paths, down secret stairways, and suddenly I am back on the busy Wilhelmsstrasse.

Lunch with Žarko. We write a postcard to our friend John Smith at University of California, Irvine. Žarko’s note to John is a cryptic quote from *Repetition*.

8 p.m. Again in the garden looking across the narrow valley to the Österberg. I can see the bench where I sat this morning. After having sat among the yellow flowers I now know why the sheep enclosure is totally green; and I recognize that the yellow hue the sheep took on last night was the sun’s reflection off the brilliant flowers.

Žarko stands in front of me watering the garden. The water’s gurgling and the smell of the newly wet earth open and relax my mind and body. One of the pianists who joined us in the garden the other night is practicing in the apartment at the top of the hill. Her (or his) complicated rhythms play against the steady rush of the water. A woodpecker’s trilling knock breaks in twice as percussion. And from recent memory I add the soft double bass of the cuckoo.

I lean back against a set of overgrown stone steps. To my right stand clusters of five-petaled, tiny blue flowers. Next to them larger, darker blue flowers wave unkempt fingers around purple centers. Above these sway purple flowers with bright yellow faces. To my left peonies (Germans call them Pentecost roses) are about to burst into bloom, already a week later than the promised Pentecostal flowering.

The orthopedist whose garden borders on and calls this one into question (a strictly ordered French garden as opposed to the natural
(dis)order of this English garden) has entered the scene. Žarko turns off the water at a spigot the two gardens share. The orthopedist begins to tell him about how the water was left dripping the day before. “You must turn it firmly, turn it firmly so it won’t drip.” It still drips a little, even after Žarko has turned it as firmly as he can. He looks around for a tool and finds a ten-foot-long spiral of metal that, later in the summer, will support beans. He sticks the end through the spigot handle and, as the neighbor demanded, leans heavily on the end of his lever and turns it firmly. The spigot handle breaks. “Jetzt habe ich Scheisse gebaut,” Zarko says. (Oh, shit!)

On the way home I read Žarko a passage from Repetition in which Filip Kobal describes his inability to work with others. He inevitably breaks or rips things. He works too fast and gets too little done. His disgusted father always sends him away after a single, hesitant, false blow with a hammer.

19 May

Up at eight to help Žarko in the garden. In the storage shed we change into blue overalls and he gets out a long, heavy, wood-and-steel scythe. I don’t even know how to hold it. “Pull back with the left hand,” he says, “guide with the right. Cut a thin swathe with the tip of the blade. Work up the hill. Mow from the right to the left. This is how my grandfather taught me. And watch out for rocks.” He hands me a sharpening stone, then goes to hoe weeds in the vegetable garden.

With awkward unlinked sweeps through the knee-high grass I cut a ragged swath up the steep hill. Time passes. The smooth wood in my hands grows familiar. I begin to gain a feel for the balance point of the scythe. I swing the cunning tool crisply now to cut through 90 degrees of grass, and as my skill increases the stroke lengthens. The sound and tactile sense of the sharp blade ripping through thick grass are repeated pleasures. The sure blade swings parallel to the ground in a smooth sustained efficient arc.

Under the unblinking sun I begin to sweat rivers and my breath is coming now in greedy gasps. I stop and take off my shirt, pulling the suspenders of the blue overalls back over my cadaver-white skin. Still breathing hard I take the whetstone from my pocket to sharpen the curved blade. In my trembling hand the stone slips. Blood rushes from the sudden sickle-shaped cut in my index finger. Brilliant flowing color in the still garden. I suck at the salty wound. Finally the bleeding stops and again I swing the scythe through the morning air. The glittering
blade “bites hungrily” through the high grass. The old metaphors are as new to me as the mowing. For two more hours I mow. My body has taken over the process, my mind floats free. Eventually, gradually, my arms and back and legs lose their strength. Clumsy again, I strike a rock with the blade. I look down the hill to see if Žarko has heard the bright clang of steel on stone. Before noon I finish, and while he puts up high spiral stakes for tomatoes I lay back in the freshly mown grass and smell the sweet odor and let the sun ease overtaxed muscles and blistered skin. My heart beats in my index finger.

“The blind Slovenian photographer, Evgen Bavcar: Since his first visit in Salzburg six years ago he has met with Handke repeatedly. He feels an affinity to and has ‘read’ Handke’s last novel, Repetition, three times (that is, has listened to it on tape), in German, in Slovenian, and in French. An essay on Handke in the journal La Quinzaine littéraire is his most recent publication.” (From a Spiegel article.) A blind photographer who reads Handk’s Repetition in three languages with his ears. I wish we could get him to photograph us holding scythes next to a hay harp.

In the afternoon, while Žarko and Zorica plant tomatoes in the garden, I make a mad march through Tübingen carrying two plastic sacks full of my laundry. Zorica said she would do it in her little machine—“It’s no big deal, Mach kein Theater”; but to save her the work (and out of that constant desire I have to do everything myself) I fill the sacks and set off. I have three addresses of Wäschereien in my pocket, two in the center of town, one across the river. My way, on a hot, sunny afternoon, leads past the house where I had seen Hans Küng in 1983. He still lives there. This time I don’t see him or his BMW or his housekeeper. Beginning to sweat, I climb down the long set of stairs called Hohe Steige, walk past the university clinics, and am suddenly on familiar ground—the Herrenberger Strasse. Every day during the summer of 1983 I walked up and down this street on my way to and from the university. A sort of novel grew out of those walks, 300 pages of reflective prose (Küng, his BMW, and his housekeeper are the center of intrigue) which now adorn a spot on my bookshelf and on no one else’s.

I cross a little canal and am in another century. I walk the entire length of the first street on my list, now sweating freely, my shoulders in knots from the heavy bags, but find no laundry. Around the corner, in a narrow, dark, cobblestone street, sharing the block with what looks like a still radical Club Voltaire, is the second laundry on my list. They only take in laundry, the man says. I couldn’t do it myself and it would
be three days. I decide to cross the river. Behind the Stiftskirche I walk
down a pedestrian street and onto the Neckar bridge. I stand at the
railing, wishing I could join the carefree students having a water fight
in their curious long boats or lie in the grass under the plantain trees
on the strip of ground in the middle of the river. Instead I trudge along
the busy street, under the underpass by the railroad station (was this
here the last time I was here?), and into a new world.

Although the streets are named Uhland Straße, Hegelstraße, and
Schelling Straße, the people I see on these streets are black: several
black men walking along with German girls, three black men stooped
down at a corner blowing up a bicycle tire with a little pump, two black
men sitting on a bench while a German girl speaks to them in
English—"I thought I might invite . . . ." Between the Hegel and
Schellingstraßen stands a huge building housing foreign asylum
seekers. On the walls surrounding the building someone has spray
painted radical political statements attributed to Brecht and Engels.

The final laundry on my list is where the yellow pages promised,
but like the previous one, only takes in laundry. My calves ache. My
skinny arms send frantic messages of pain to my brain. My armpits
flood my shirtsleeves while my mouth bakes dry. I trudge back through
the town, up the hundreds of steps that I had skipped down, to what
greets me, after just eight days, as a most welcome home.

Neither Žarko nor Zorica is there. I drink three glasses of water,
scarf down a pear and a banana, collapse into a chair, and fall asleep.

Later, 6 p.m., with Repetition in hand instead of bags of dirty
laundry, I enjoy a quiet stroll down the Hausserstraße to the garden. I
stop to smell some lilacs and admire the gardens on garage roofs all
along the street.

Žorica, Žarko, and I drive to the Foyer, a restaurant for French
soldiers and dependents. The bartender is a Yugoslav friend of Žarko’s
who recently sent his children, now old enough for school, back to
Yugoslavia. He doesn’t want them to grow up as Gastarbeiterkinder
(children of “guest workers”).

After a slow and tasty dinner we join several people at a long table.
Žorica introduces them as fellow sauna habitués. I look at each one and
think of them naked in the sauna. I blush. Two women from Poland—one
lumpy and sallow, the other a blond beauty. A big Swede who has
just returned from China. A wrinkled, middle-aged Australian. A
young American in a University of Kansas t-shirt. A young, skinny
German who introduces himself as a theology student from Kiel.
Except for the latter, we are all foreigners. And in fact, Žarko jokes, in
Swabia the North German himself is a foreigner. We communicate in German, our single common language.

The Australian does much of the talking. He perorates encyclopedically and pedantically on whatever subject comes up. The solid and plain Pole tells awkward anecdotes about how lost she is in Germany without her language and lacking the culture within which she understood herself. The other Pole, sexy, stylish, lively, with a curiously attractive line along her lower lip, says she has no problems living in Germany. She has no identity anyway, she claims, and would have as many problems going back to Poland as she has in Germany. She wants to go dancing. With laughing eyes she castigates us coquettishly for just wanting to hang around. She is provocation incarnate. She laughs and flirts and talks. Every sound that comes through her curious lips is sexual. She plays on the word “randy” for a long time. When I tell our story of looking for a tunnel that doesn’t exist she intones slowly, in a deep, slightly accented voice like Marianne’s in Wings of Desire, “ah, a tunnel, the male desire to enter a tunnel.” She leans back and stretches, her body twisting like a cat’s. I ask her what she does. The Australian breaks in and explains that she just lives. Someone mentions something about her being married to a former theology student who is now a dentist.

My attention turns to the Australian and the young German theology student who have, inexplicably, begun to discuss Utah and Mormons. The theology student mentions stupidity, ignorance, superstition—the insanity of founding a religion on a false reading of the Old Testament. The Australian, always ready to take the other side in an argument, defends the Mormons in a long discourse on naively courageous missionaries who once tried to convert him, on the 19th-century pioneers and their communitarian spirit. I put in my two bits, asserting my own tenuous Mormonism, but it is no use. The theology student scorns the utterly irrational movement and asserts the irrefutable rational truth of his own religiosity.

Unmoved by the arguments from religious hubris, I return my attention to the beautiful Pole. I marvel at her physicality, at her manifest desire. I contrast that, with some irony, with my own (supposed) ability to sublimate my sexuality and to be a productive member of society. When the group breaks up for the night, or for the morning, she drives off in a Mercedes. Part of me goes with her.
Dream: I’m in a room. Storm outside. The wind blows so hard that animals and fish are being forced through the walls. I pick up a little soft-shelled turtle that has a beautiful pattern on its back and show it to my wife (who also seems like Zorica). She thinks it is wonderful. Later it somehow gets into my pants leg and attaches itself to the back of my upper thigh. I call Thomas, my ten-year-old son, to help. When he can’t get the turtle off (it is hanging on like a tick), I finally, worried that the head will come off but frantic to get it off, jerk it off. The head doesn’t come off. The jaws grip a great mass of skin and hair.

In a story Kenneth White sent Žarko for publication in Nachtcafé, he quotes these lines as the finest lines about love (if they are indeed about love): “There is nothing here but this cave in the field’s midst / A wild place, unlit and unfilled.”

A quiet morning walk from the apartment high on one hill down through the valley and then up the Österberg. Parachutists fly off the hillside. Tennis rackets pop and ping. A cart pulled along the path by a bearded man on a bicycle rattles. Bird song. This is a walk without a goal, in contrast to the forced march yesterday to find a laundromat. The aimlessness produces the inner stillness out of which forms and ideas grow.

I have a satisfying ache in my shoulders and arms when I tense the muscles that swung the scythe (the laundry pains are another matter). I have an exact, new knowledge of mowing, a pinpointing of precisely which muscles were at work and which tendons were stretched. Each pain reiterates one of yesterday’s movements (or is it already the day before yesterday?).

A small brown bird with black and white markings on its wings sits on a branch in front of me and warbles. “Warbles” is too passive a word for what the bird is doing. His throat pulses wildly and his whole body thrills with the effort.

Two ducks dive and bob in the swift water of the canal.

I hike up a trail that switchbacks through tall, well-separated trees. Scores of birds. My friends Dick and Mary Rorty would recognize these calls and markings. Avid birders, their extreme attention to detail creates a system that allows them to see more clearly. I remember a colleague’s description of a trip to Hawaii: a racing, hectic, unreflective gathering of experiences, events, places. Avarice. The retelling was a listing, a showing off of details and dates and exact knowledge. There is power in that sort of exactitude, and a powerful absence.
After my mowing, the tall grass and flowers of the Österberg meadow seem unending.

In the evening Zorica feeds us asparagus and ham with a cheese sauce, a huge loaf of Bauernbrot, and a Caesar salad. She tells me, when I ask her, about her work in theoretical physics. Particles in the nucleus can be described mathematically. She works in a group that . . . crystal structure . . . pentagons, rhombi . . . from five dimensions two and from six three. . . . She says she will bring me an article. Later, alone, I head down the hill to see a movie.

\textit{Bilder der Welt und Inschrift des Krieges}
\textit{[Pictures of the World and Inscription of War]}
Film by Harun Farocki
Tübingen Premier
Harun Farocki will be present for a discussion!

I found this advertisement on the Mensa table where I had lunch. Sure that there would be crowds, I arrive early. There are no crowds. When the film begins there are only ten people in the theater.

1858. Regierungsbauführer Meydenbauer hangs from a rope in a frail basket as he measures the cathedral in Wetzlar. The task is dangerous, and a near fatal accident stimulates his thinking about alternate ways to measure the high building. The result is the first photographically mediated measurement of a building. “It is dangerous,” the film’s narrator states, “to be physically present in the workplace.”

The film is a series of variations and repetitions on this theme. Mediation vs. direct confrontation. Computer imaging. A machine for studying wave motion. A drawing class with a nude model: “Think, draw, think.” SS photos documenting the division of Jews into those who could work and those who would be gassed immediately. Allied photographs of factories that accidentally revealed and yet didn’t reveal concentration camps. Photography used for “Aufklärung.” Enlightenment, the film demonstrates, is an ambiguous concept. The film is difficult, confusing, exhilarating, and enlightening. The plot is intellectual. Ideas are the characters.

The lights go up and half of the audience scuttles out. Five of us remain to discuss the film with the director. Together we trail into an adjoining bar and find a table. Everyone orders something and waits nervously for the drinks to come. Farocki too seems nervous. He must have been disappointed by the tiny audience. Loud music inhibits our
conversation. An attempt to have it turned down fails. Farocki laughs uneasily. “If you don’t have any questions,” he says, “I can read some from an interview in Zelluloid.” He opens a package of the film magazine. “They asked me to bring some of these along,” he tells us, apologizing. “They are DM 6, if anyone is interested.”

Finally someone has a question, about the soundtrack. “I did that by placing scissors across the tape to break up the sound. I tried to destroy the structure. The film is carefully ordered, so the sound track was meant to introduce chance, chaos.”

Farocki, born in Java, is now a Berliner. His dark hair is pulled back and tied behind his head. Even in the bar he wears dark glasses. A black, armless T-shirt. His jacket is draped over a chair. His Levis are worn. The zipper is half down. Dark socks and worn sandals.

Someone asks about the repetition in the film: “It is the same subject, but in new contexts it becomes new material.” A question about water: “Water is an old substance, little understood. Dikes built in 1961 with the best scientific methods are now ruined. The studies couldn’t take into account the complexity of the ocean. The ocean must still be confronted one on one. The models just don’t work.”

The film was shown in San Francisco, in Minneapolis, and in Houston at film festivals. It showed for three weeks in Berlin and on TV. In a year it has earned DM 600 in fees.

I ask about the hands in the film, hands at work reading photos with a lens or flipping through a photo album. Was that you? It was. Aufklärung [Enlightenment] has several meanings, including one related to police work. I ask if his use of the term is related to the Poiriers’ work with Spurensicherung: “Ah, the married couple,” he answers. “Yes, of course.” When I ask about philosophical influences he claims he can’t understand Derrida. Vilém Flusser, he says, is a strong influence. I don’t recognize the name Flusser.

The discussion turns to other recent films and Farocki sees a little girl, maybe eight years old, sitting in the open door leading to a fire escape next to him. She has long black hair and brown skin. She sits and watches us for a long time. Suddenly she is gone.

Someone mentions Wings of Desire and Farocki bursts into diatribe: “Films like that are like prepared, frozen, conserved, fast food. They have lots of additives, sweeping music, touching plot, awful camera angles, and no substance. What did Wenders think he was doing when he made that film? He thought he was making money, that’s what.” The invective “Hollywood” falls repeatedly.
Žarko has only showered one or two times since I arrived. He always wears the same t-shirt and Levis. He said last night he hadn’t brushed his teeth since Bohinj. There is, however, no olfactory evidence of this.

Scenes from a marriage: Bottles rattle in the back of the car. “Didn’t you take those out, Žarko? The heat will have ruined the wine. You can’t do one single simple thing right. I can’t trust you with any possible tiny little meaningless responsibility.” In the car passing the garden: “Zorica, you’ve got to weed every time you’re in the garden. Every time, Zorica.” Driving gives the one not driving the chance to comment, correct, criticize. “The choke, Zorica, you have to use the choke! There, see, you’ve killed it.”

Žarko has been nervous the last few days. Little time to write.

I sit here in the sunny kitchen and enjoy the peace while Žarko and Zorica are shopping. I would like to do some work for them, to ease the strain my presence brings. Maybe I’ll finish washing the windows Zorica started yesterday.

I sit at the desk with sunlight streaming through the clean windows. Žarko will sit here in coming days and enjoy the results of my work. While in the manual mode I also put together a hibachi for the barbecue in the garden this evening. Instructions in German, French, Italian. This model of hibachi is called “Sheriff.” The name evokes the myth of the American West, the adventure of the frontier. As the representative of law and order in the wild West, this hibachi will tame the chaos in their lives.

Žarko came home from the garden while I was working. I sent him into the living room with orders to collect himself and to write. The tensions will ease and he can enjoy the afternoon hike and garden party.

At noon, after recounting plots of several films and introducing me to Wolf Solent, a novel by John Cowper Powys, Žarko shows me reproductions of Anne and Patrick Poirier’s giant eyeballs and monstrous, mythological arrows of the artists (“the intentionally beautiful misunderstanding of antiquity”). Then he picks up the hibachi and says: “You know, I want to grill myself, or shall we grill someone else.”

Žarko gives me several of his newer texts to read. I am a poor reader, too tired from the exertions of the last days and the late nights to concentrate. I promise to read them again. I lay down on my back
on the rug in the study and take a nap.

When I wake up Zorica is there. She has brought several of her articles: “On the theory of collective motion in nuclei”; “Can the nuclear field be vortex free?”; “A geometric classical model of collective motion in nuclei”; “Orbits and coherent states of the symplectic group and collective theory”; “Molecular resonances and symmetries.” Who says scientists aren’t good with words?

In the afternoon we hike through the woods to Bebenhausen: Žarko, Tilo, Jörg (a young Swiss poet visiting Tilo and Žarko for a couple of days), Christian (a composer and translator), and Christian’s two-year-old son Malte (yes, his mother, Susan, is writing a dissertation on Rilke’s novel). Zorica stays home to get dinner ready for the evening. It is a beautiful Sunday afternoon and the trails are full of fellow hikers and strollers.

We walk along at a good pace. Our conversation is about translating, about Heidegger, about music, about Robert Walser’s walks, about children. While sharing abstractions we miss the woods, the high trees through which the wind blows, the purple and yellow flowers in the thick grass. We also fail to notice the crowds and the helicopter that hovers overhead like an angry Junebug. Tilo and Žarko recommend a book by Michel Leiris they have recently read and Jörg talks about the novel he has begun.

After an hour or two (our abstractions also compress time) we stop by a little pond smothered by lily pads. Perched on the lily pads is a huge, gregarious family of frogs. Between them, under them, after them (Žarko and I laugh at each other as we, foreigners, try to lay hold of the right prepositions) slithers an ominous water snake. Sitting on benches in the shade, relaxed, cooling down, laughing at Malte as he clambers up and down a little incline, we watch a man approach the pond. He stares at a map held open before him. When he arrives at the edge of the pond he looks alternately at the map, the pond, the map, and the pond. Assured, but not smiling, he walks off. Now he compares map symbols to the path and to the hill ahead. Is he an employee of the map company? An inveterate semiotician? A German?

We continue our walk. It is hot. Our rested legs and feet quickly grow heavy again. We feel like academics, musicians, and writers, not outdoorsmen. Conversation turns to what time it is, how far we have to go, whether we are on the right path. It is six p.m., we have been walking for three hours, and we are somewhere in the middle of a wild animal sanctuary.

While the others sit down on some long peeled logs stacked by
foresters, to rest and to study the map Tilo has brought (perhaps a map is not such a bad idea after all), I wander off the path, alone. I need rest as much as they do, but I also need rest from the ceaseless conversation.

A metal box gleams unnaturally between two posts. “Seductive trap for bark-beetles. Works ecologically. No poison. Please do not disturb.” Ecological seduction? One quarter of all living species are beetles. Someone has decided that the trees are more important than the bark-beetles.

Further into the woods, lured by green silence (ecological, no poison). I walk slowly. I empty my mind of everything not brought into it by my senses. A break in the tall trees, a small stream of water. The sun, where it strikes the water, renders it invisible. Only the faintest scent of brown. Where the light tends toward shade the water becomes a brilliant light brown. Where the shade grows darker so does the brown, a rich deep golden brown, then a dark coffee brown, and where the shadow is deepest, a thick, rippling brown only just distinguishable from black.

I follow the seductive stream and its soft liquid sounds. A quick gentle bird call. Silence. From far away the deep call of a cuckoo.

At the base of a brush-thatched mound I come upon the stream’s source. A secret, deeply shaded hole overhung by hairy, green-black ferns. Two long, soft, rounded, grassy hills flank the spring and the mound. A tall, erect ash tree stands over the entire sanctuary. Its long leaves shiver in a slight breeze. In the hollow—absolute stillness. The center of the universe.

Distant calls from my fellow hikers draw me, finally, out of this seductive place.

It is seven p.m. before we straggle back into Tübingen. Zorica has a feast waiting for us in the garden. The piano playing neighbors join us, as does Susan, the American Germanist whose son Malte bears the name of her enthusiasm. A soft red moon rises over the Österberg. The sauce from thick pork steaks drips over our chins and we devour Bauernbrot, tomato-and-onion salad, quark with fruit, and great quantities of wine and beer and carbonated apple juice. Our conversations wander from topic to topic, as delicious to me as the food.

The form of new music vs. the form and content of new literature.

The question of whether Western tonal music is naturally pleasing to humans, whether it is part of some harmonious cosmic scheme of truth. In this context Stefan, who accompanies Eurythmy sessions for local Anthroposophists, mentions a book about music and astrology. I
argue that all semiotic systems are arbitrary (an original thought, that).

Jörg recounts scenes from his childhood. When his father left in the morning his mother locked him in his playroom, letting him out only for lunch and again when his father came home. When he was four his father went to Sweden for a year. Jörg quit speaking. For the entire year he was mute. Now he is a poet.

Stefan describes his father, a painter. During the war he lost both hands and parts of his arms. Now he straps a brush to his arm stump. He is a famous painter, Stefan asserts. He changes styles constantly. He can’t button a button or tie a string. Recently a bum offered him five marks as he walked, disheveled, through a train station. I imagine Stefan playing Chopin with blunt arm stumps.

Susan begins talking about the film *Rain Man*: “The brother’s transformation into a caring person was unreal. . . . Dustin Hofmann, one of my favorites, was originally considered for the other role . . . he studied autistic people for a whole year. . . .” She sounds like she is quoting from a bad review. Humorless. She asks if anyone has seen the film. No one has. She waits for a moment, then repeats the entire clichéd spiel. A fellow foreigner, trying to be more German than the Germans.

Again Žarko and Zorica fade into the background, letting others tell their stories.

**22 May**

Midmorning, sitting in the Brechtbau. I look out a window and watch a woman approach the building through a courtyard. Thick legs encased in blue stockings. A green coat covering a black blouse. Long, stringy, dull hair. A stout body—skin stuffed with flesh and fat, like a sausage. A joyless hunk of flesh carrying a bulging pigskin briefcase stuffed with notes for an infantile dissertation.

Žarko, who got up early this morning and came to work in the peace of the Brechtbau library, shows me a passage from *Repetition*: “Thus traveling became my home, waiting at bus stops and in train stations, being underway in general.” This describes the last few days, Zarko says. From one place to another, always moving, rushing around in the car, never a moment of peace.

My experience has been almost the opposite. After the hectic arrival and two days in Frankfurt a peace has been growing in me, deeper than I have known, a green and brown stillness, a deep creative well sunk into my center from which I can draw sweet cool water forever.
After a heavy lunch in the Mensa, we drink coffee in a tiny coffee house in the center of town, 100 people in a room the size of a walk-in closet, shoulder to shoulder at narrow counters, a ritual ten minutes after lunch. Sociability, warmth, bitter coffee and sweet sugar.

In a bookstore I find a German Filmalmanach for 1989. I’m not sure how the book can foretell this year, but that’s what it says on the cover. I look up “Harun Farocki” in the index of the thick book. There it is, with a single page number. Excited to read about the man I met last night, I flip through the book to find page 576. I am surprised when it seems that it will be part of the index. In fact it is the very page of the index where I found the name “Farocki.” I read through the page and discover that the index is correct. On page 576 one can indeed find the name “Harun Farocki”—immediately preceding the number 576. Stimulated by my little adventure, I plan a book: an index of an index. Not an index of an index of a book, but a book that is wholly and only an index, with each entry the singular self-referential occurrence of the word. Perhaps I will create the words as well. And then, at the end, like a normal index, a number index: the number 1 to be found on page one and on the page of the number index, the number 2 on page two and in the number index, and so on. I will title my book Index “Harun Farocki” in honor of the occasion of my adventure.

I leave the bookstore with Vilem Flusser’s Für eine Philosophie der Fotografie and Michel Leiris’ Das Band am Hals der Olympia.

We decide to spend the afternoon in the garden of the Evangelisches Stift. Near the Seminary an enamel sign on a strong metal fence issues an order: “Do not lean bicycles against the fence!” Bicycles lean against the sign and along the fence. Across the street is a storefront office whose windows are plastered with calls to political action. Over the door a sign announces the Tübingen office of the anti-authoritarian Green Party—“Die Grünen.” That explains the bicycles.

We walk down into the outer courtyard of the Stift. I glance into the courtyard of the house where Hegel, Schelling, and Hölderlin lived and studied. Religious education for future pastors. But these “pastors” preached the Weltgeist, art, nature, and Greece.

Down steep stairs we enter a civilized paradise. Along the Neckar River stretches a well-tended strip of grass, dotted with shade trees and lined with beds of flowers. Fully dressed people sit on white lawnchairs at small tables, reading or writing. Others, less fully dressed, lie in the sun and sleep or read. Two children push one another along a flagstone path in a little car.

On the side of the garden opposite the river rises the Stift, six
stories high. Behind it rise the walls and tile roofs of bourgeois Fachwerk houses. One house has had its roof stripped off, exposing the old beams. New beams shine bright yellow among the grey timbers.

I sit under a tree, reading, writing, enjoying the quiet knocking of wood against wood from punts poled past by students. A slight splash of water. Žarko stretches out in the sun, shirt and shoes off, dozing, reading, looking around. The grey of his Levis intersects the white flesh of his feet and upper body.

I finish Repetition. Filip returns home to his village from the Karst where he has found a kind of ephemeral utopia. Full of stillness and newly-won knowledge and love, he is met by fellow citizens who, in the not distant past, had “tortured and murdered,” happy even now only if they have put someone in prison. The shock of return can be overcome, argues the calm narrator, through narration that provides a counter force to the prison house of language/culture/society.

In the beauty of the garden I experience the stillness and fullness I have come to Tübingen to find. This moment should last forever (pace Mephistopheles). Church bells ring three times. Three p.m. Behind me a rather unimaginative bird cheeps harshly, unvaryingly, endlessly: ch, ch, ch, ch, ch, ch, ch, ch. . . . From a house where tiles are being hung on a steep roof there comes a sudden sustained screeching, a warning shout, a curse, and a crash as the bundle of tiles shatters against pavement. The siren of an emergency vehicle wails from the Nekar bridge.

The children with the car begin to fight. The bigger child, a boy, drives away from his screaming sister. “I’ve got to go to work,” he yells back. “I’ve got to take the car to work. You stay home. You don’t need to work.”

A long boat slides past. A young woman in the boat looks up at me. A small grey cat slips furtively across the grass. From its mouth dangles a large bird, one wing hanging crooked from the body.

23 May

10 a.m. In the Brechtbau after an early-morning walk with Žarko. A seminar on Peter Handke at the university is advertised with the following pedantry: “It is necessary, then, to reconstruct Handke’s ‘family-novel’ in order to determine the aesthetic and poetological categories characteristic of his previous work.” That’s as bad as the generic title the University of South Carolina Press wanted for my book: Understanding Peter Handke. I’ll find another publisher.
Last night we drove through the Ammertal to Pfäffingen for dinner in a Greek restaurant. We enjoyed the view and the fresh air in the growing dusk, and then an array of stars in the clear night sky. We ate Greek food—grilled lamb, vegetables (okra!), thick bread, rice-stuffed grape leaves—and drank Retsina or apple juice.

We told jokes and discussed the Wenders/Handke film *Wings of Desire*. Zorica hated it: “Bruno Ganz just played the famous Bruno Ganz; a commercial attempt to exploit German/French relationships with the French actress; it had no bite, no teeth; Wenders was much better in his film *Hammet*.“ Žarko didn’t like it: “If you knew the current political situation in Europe you would know how bad the film is; it is a film about Berlin that has absolutely nothing to do with Berlin; and now he recasts Berlin through sentimental American glasses. Working in America Wenders has lost contact with Berlin.” Jürg liked the film as much as I did, and Tilo stood undecided between the two camps. Žarko and I argued about Handke’s view of truth. Moving personally from a religious center to the periphery, I claimed that Handke believes in no absolute truth. Žarko, trying to move in his life from an unrelenting periphery to a longed-for center, stated his strong sense for truth in Handke’s work. Not until this morning did we come to agree that we were representing different aspects of Handke’s attempt “To hold the world in a powerful balance.”

24 MAY

Zorica left early this morning to go to work. It will surely be a relief after 13 days of hosting me to settle back into her routine. As she left she said that I had been in Europe for two weeks and haven’t seen a single castle.

This is an inner tour. Europe/distance/time give me the chance to wander through my senses and thoughts. The castles along the Rhine I will pass later today are fleeting, unreal images compared to things I write and feel and see.

Žarko, Jürg, and I sit together at a table in the Brechtbau and an obliging student photographs us. We also photograph one another from where we sit, forming, photographically, several triangles, a group photo of sorts.

11 a.m. The overhead lights just flickered off. I now sit in natural light, no longer disturbed, made tense by the neon lights (I didn’t even
recognize there was any tension until they were switched off).

Žarko sits back in his chair. He reads Repetition and stares out the window. Jürg leans forward over a French newspaper.

After lunch in the Mensa Žarko has to teach a Serbo-Croatian class. He says goodbye with a warm hug. Already I feel an enormous loss.

I walk back up to the apartment. Zorica says that although the high-rise is an ugly presence on the green hill it doesn’t matter when you are in the apartment, for then you can’t see the building, just the view from its windows. Quickly I gather my things together. With all the books I have bought it is quite a different load than the one I arrived with. At one o’clock I leave for the train station.

The fact that I have to catch the 1:48 train ruins what should be a quiet stroll through town. With my heavy bag hanging from my right shoulder and with a big bag of books in my left hand, I trot heavily along streets, rushing down paths I should enjoy for a last time. I count the steps on the Hohe Steige (500) instead of looking out over the city to see the castle, the red/orange tile roofs, and the greenery in which it is nestled. I lurch sweatily through the most picturesque part of town. With 15 minutes left before the train is scheduled to depart, as I contemplate whether I will have time to buy a ticket or whether I should just get on the train, I lose my way. I need to get under the castle, through a pedestrian tunnel; but I simply can’t find the tunnel. I feel I am too close to the city center and turn to the right. I follow a young woman with bright bare legs under a short, full, black skirt. She ducks into a store, and I turn to the left again, headed straight for the hill with no tunnel in sight. At the end of the block I look in both directions, but find no useful information. I turn back toward the inner city, five minutes later than I already was. Next to a theater bookstore I finally find a tiny sign announcing a pedestrian and bicycle tunnel. It is cool in the tunnel, and as I slow my pace my sweat begins to dry. A dog coming from the opposite direction stops to pee on the wall.

Outside the tunnel, crossing the Nekar, I remember the night I left Tübingen in 1983. A friend walked with me from the Fichte Haus where we both had rooms. As we walked through this very tunnel I had a strong memory of having walked with her through that tunnel before. Déjà vu.

I am not sure just how far the train station is, so as I pass through the beautiful park along the Nekar I continue my hectic pace. Beside a large pond, however, its green-brown water dotted with swans, I give up the race. My watch says 1:50. I can hear a train leaving the station. I sit down on a bench in the deep shade under a chestnut tree.
After the forced march it is a pleasure to take off my shoes, put down my bags, watch the swans and the ducks, and apprehend the cool, soothing shimmer of light from the pond.

Five relaxing minutes on the bench give me a renewed sense of place. An old man puts down a mat he has carried on a strap over his shoulder and sits next to me. ‘Grüß Gott,’ he says, and I grunt in response. I don’t look up. Why did he sit here? There are three empty benches in sight. I slowly cool down from my exertions. After fifteen minutes he says, “Auf Wiedersehn,” picks up his pad, and leaves. He limps a little, and leans on a black cane. I move to sit in the sun on the grass among tiny white daisies. The sun, not 30 minutes ago my adversary, is now my ally. In minutes I am comfortably warm again; and I leave the park to buy my ticket.

Ticket to Bonn, DM 97. I sit in a car with ten children. One boy leans out the window, and in a voice he thinks sounds like the station announcer, barks a warning: “Achtung, bitte einsteigen und Türen schließen! Bitte, vorsicht bei der Abfahrt.” The children are loud and rambunctious, enjoying themselves immensely.

The train leaves the station, and Tübingen becomes a memory. Žarko and Zorica still go about their daily business. The Brechtbau library is again full of readers and writers. On the Österberg the sheep still graze, although their nylon pen now surrounds a different plot of grass. This evening Žarko and Zorica will find the notes I left, and for a moment I will still be with them. But tomorrow I will be with other people, in another place; and next week I will be a world away.

I had never thought it possible that I would lose this blind window; I had felt it to be an unalterable sign.

Peter Handke, *Repetition*

Fell asleep just outside of Tübingen, didn’t wake up until the train stopped at Nürtingen.

At the next station I look across the tracks where a man who looks like a Turk stands in the doorway of a large brick and stone house. Another dark-haired man carries a crate of bottles out of the house and together they walk off along a path. Beside the house is a garden with small fruit trees and rows of vegetables. A yellow cat moves in the garden, turning from side to side, back and forth. Stiffly. It is a stuffed cat, I finally see, a scarecrow cat, its back rigid, hanging by a string from a tree. Outside of old houses all along the tracks I see Turkish children.
Three old Germans, two women and a man, stroll along a narrow, tree-lined street. They all have grey hair and are nicely dressed. Behind them a similarly dressed grey-haired man stands in the grass away from the street and pisses into some high bushes.

In Stuttgart I change to an express train. The compartment has places for six. Two old men sit across from one another next to the window. One wears a black suit, white shirt, and a black pastoral cloth over the front of his shirt. A full grey beard and mustache. He dozes most of the time in the stuffy compartment. His hand lies on a Bible. The other old man wears grey pants and a dark blue shirt. His face is wrinkled, his glasses thick, his hair thin and ethereally white. He has his belt pulled tight so a long end hangs loose. He reads a book, *Everything Testifies of Jesus of Nazareth*.

Two business-suited men in their thirties put their briefcases in the compartment and then stand, talking, out in the hall. They each open a can of beer and talk loudly about a problem in chemical engineering. They finally sit down next to the dozing pastor and his Bible.

A young man in slacks and sweater takes the last free seat in the compartment. He listens intently to the engineers’ conversation and asks about the problem they are discussing. He has just finished his *Abitur*, he tells them, and has taken a two-week trip to München. One of the engineers pulls out a tiny Casio television and raises the antenna. The *Abiturient* is fascinated—these two men of the world have everything he can imagine. He (and the engineers) ignore the two old men like common fossils from an uninteresting age.

I remember something Jürg Beeler said: “Germans think because they don’t understand anything. And the reverse is also true: they don’t understand anything because they think.”

I fall asleep in the heat, like the old pastor. When I wake up the other old man is trying to get out but is having a hard time because of my outstretched legs. “Sorry,” I say in English. Awake, I think and speak in German. Asleep, I obviously revert to English. I am embarrassed at the unconscious slip. Later the same old man looks out the window, his eyes glowing. Good will radiates from his entire body.

The two old men are carefully prepared for the trip—reserved window seats, tickets in envelopes from a travel bureau. The conductor asks if they have their passports. They are on their way to Holland.

During the three-hour trip the engineers talk about technology, money, hotels, the USA, Moscow, France, vacations, cars, women, clothing, drugs, the cost of many things, computers.

I want to knock in their teeth. The two old men, in three hours,
exchange only four sentences.

Four people sit on a gravel spit in the middle of the Rhine. All in a row, facing the train. A single bicycle stands next to them.

29 MAY

I won’t go directly to Hölderlin’s grave. . . . My decision frees me, because my journey won’t have a goal.

Miroslav Mandić, a wandering Yugoslav poet

In the Frankfurt airport all the officials want to speak English with me. I refuse, holding on to the last vestiges of this experience.

The plane is crowded, and this time my seat is squarely in the middle of the economy-class ghetto. An old woman is struggling to put her luggage cart in the overhead bin. I offer to help. The cart cuts my thumb. The blood reminds me of Žarko’s garden. I sit back and congratulate myself on my goodness. (The virtuous one!) A young German asks if he can put a bag under the seat in front of me. I gesture at my long legs, note how long the trip will be, and send him packing. (The decisive, energetic one!)

I soon find I am surrounded by Russians emigrating to the U.S. They are tense. Before the plane leaves the airport three of them who have come from West Berlin to Frankfurt are called to the front of the plane for some reason. The man sitting next to me gets up and sits down ten times before the plane leaves the gate. In the air he seems relieved and walks around the plane. He talks loudly with the Russians in the seats in front of us and with another group behind us. After a while he asks if I am German and speaks to me in German—a bit broken, but understandable. He is sweating. He takes off his suit coat and reveals a white shirt and bright suspenders—red, white, and blue stripes laced with stars. Uncle Sam. Short grey hair, grey suit, short-sleeved white shirt, bright grey tie with red and blue stripes, bullet head. 52 years old.

He has a sponsor in Texas, Fort Worth, he tells me. He will work as a “Frigidaire mechanic.” He has been in Belgrade for nine months in a camp for emigrants, and finally has the papers to enter the U.S. Out of the overhead compartment he pulls a bright plastic UNICEF bag filled with various documents giving him the right to go to the U.S.

In response to my question he says Perestroika/Glasnost will take fifty years and he will be dead by then. House, car, money—he had all that, but freedom—he can’t live longer without it. He has bags of
peanuts that he eats while he drinks big cans of German beer. The peanuts still have their skins and are slightly to well burnt. He insists that I have some with him. He pours half a sack onto his tray. The skins and crumbs fly about. He has been working, he says, in a Belgrade factory where they roast them.

There are 24 Russian emigrants on the plane, he says. When he goes off to talk with some of them the woman on the other side of me asks about him. I tell her he is a Russian emigrating to the U.S. She tells me he’s not Russian, but Romanian. He is speaking Romanian, she says. I ask him later and he says his country has two languages—Russian and Romanian.

He asks where I am from. Yes, I know Utah, he says. On a napkin he draws a map—California next to Utah, then Arizona, Texas, a question mark, and finally Florida. Lots of Mormons in Utah! I tell him I am a Mormon. How many wives do you have? Seven. He understands immediately it is a joke. Mormons are good, he says, and draws another map with the Mississippi running to the left of Texas and slanting toward New York. To the left he writes Nord, and to the right Süd. In the war, he says, Mormons were good. I read it in a book. The black man wanted to go away, the Mormons helped. I wince and tell him I admire his sense for history.

He goes to the WC, returns with a friend. He introduces him—a friend, comrade, he says, a doctor—for teeth, and he points at his mouth. The man waves his hand, embarrassed.

The woman next to me is from Hungary, she says, on her way, for a second time in five years, to visit a daughter in Cleveland.

The Russian/Romanian leafs through The Economist, Fortune, Manhattan, Inc., and through a magazine for computer experts. I tell him they are for capitalist businessmen. Uninteresting, I say, and he puts the dangerous material back.

The movie Rain Man begins to play on a screen in front of us. A silent movie, for I have not rented a headset. I see it through the eyes of Harun Farocki’s film. A scene, of course, where Dustin Hoffman shows off his incredible memory. Crossing a bridge to show change of place. The beautiful Tom Cruise. Dustin discovers Tom and ? in bed and sets off a squabble. Dustin looks like a caricature of a handicapped person. Tom on the telephone—the many calls so Dustin can show off his knowledge of telephone numbers. Dustin causes trouble at the scene of an accident. There’s Tom on the phone again.

My neighbor’s UNICEF bag has a colorful picture of a rural St. Nicolas leading a sled-pulling donkey over a frozen pond. A cute
squirrel and a gingerbread village. The dark sky glows with huge stars. It doesn’t look much like Fort Worth.

Oh! Tom discovers that Dustin can count cards and they win big at blackjack. A sexy showgirl in a skimpy Egyptian costume shows us how powerful and virile Tom and Dustin are as they erect wonderful piles of chips. Oh no! Tom’s girlfriend (where did she come from?) is putting the moves on Dustin in a golden elevator. Dustin tries to look especially infantile here.

It’s Hollywood. Everything is explained. In Farocki’s film the viewer has to do the work, associating, drawing conclusions, moving from image to idea.

Isn’t that touching? The brothers with heads together, a light kiss on the forehead to show affection. And now Tom sends Dustin off on a train. Tom walks off sadly. Doesn’t he look cool in his sunglasses. Is that a smirk or a smile? Well, that’s all folks. Looney Tunes.

I recall the parachutists on the Österberg. The pull to fill the chute, the run to the edge of the cliff, the jump, the swooping flight, and the contact with the ground. One man fills his chute, runs, and is pulled back up the hill. Every time he tries he is higher than when he began. An updraft? The chute positioned wrong. With the exception of some ski trips and the pleasures of teaching my Handke seminar, the year was a blank. What did I write? What did I think? What did I feel?

For three weeks I have felt like a desert plant when the rain comes. An entire growth cycle in a few days. And now I return to the drought.

The Hungarian woman next to me has made me smile—she leaned over and asked if I was a writer. The whole trip you have been writing. Are you writing a book? I tell her that that is indeed the case, that I have just take a trip to Yugoslavia and am writing a book about the trip. It’s beautiful, I tell her, especially the Karawanken mountains. She tells me she worked for a travel bureau before she retired, that she made trips to Yugoslavia, Romania, Austria, Germany, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, and the U.S. Yugoslavia is the best, she says. Then Austria, then Czechoslovakia, and then (with a hint of apology) comes the U.S.

I ask her if she will write her name and address in my book. Oh no, she says, and as her mouth opens in a smile she covers her blackened, chipped teeth with her hand. I have already said too much, she says. You’ll write about me in your book.

The crew has announced that we will soon be in New York. The Russian/Romanian is beginning to reanimate. He has put on his suit coat and keeps trying to look out the windows, although from where we sit only the huge wings can be seen. I ask if his heart is beating fast.
He says, a little, and grins broadly.

10 JUNE, TRANSITION FROM DAY TO NIGHT

Sitting alone on a sandstone boulder under the towering cliffs called “Watchman” (Zions National Park, Utah).

In the last sunlight the sandstone cliffs above me flush vermillion, maroon, magenta, rust. The colors are already leaching out of the cliffs on the west side of the canyon. Bright, white wisps of cloud. A half moon: cold, white, sharply defined, quiet, passive. Unlike the aggressive red sun.

The last time the moon was in this phase I stood with Žarko on a moonlit mountain lakeshore in Bohinj, Slovenia. Awed by the dark reflection in the still lake, excited to be away from our routines, we reflected on standing, on stasis, and on being. Dastehen. Dasein. Standing as a created moment of transition, the place between one movement and the next. The brief moment when the moon floats free, full or new, neither waxing nor waning. The brilliant, fleeting, satisfying interstice. Zwischenraum.

Chattering, darting swallows hunt high-flying insects. Much higher, two tiny military jets turn silently to the southeast. Suddenly, briefly, their skins flash bright silver, mirroring the ball of flames below the horizon. Each jet trails a double vapor trail, white against the fading blue of the sky.

Below me Maren, Joseph, Nathan, and Thomas play catch with a football. Happy, nonreflective, simple play. A herd of six deer feeds along the road, slowly pursued by a boy in blue who wants to feed them and more deviously stalked by a woman with a camera. The deer keep the same distance from both. A seventh deer, a buck, stands aside, his antlers covered with velvet.

In the trees above me red-throated birds converse or exult or play or dispute or warn one another. Heard by my ears the foreign tongue has no content, but is the purely formal language of music. Like Žarko’s Serbo-Croatian.

For hours Susan and the babies have been playing in the cool eddies of the Virgin River.

The moon is brighter now. The vapor trails pink. Bats have joined the swallows in their hunt for insects. The black and brown mammalflutter and jerk through the sky, tracing ragged lines. The swallows wheel and sweep and dart. Smooth curved lines.
A cool breeze springs up. Two more deer wander by. The moon has a bright, clear, sharp, curved right edge and a much rougher, vaguer, flat left edge.

There have been insects sounding all day, but now, in the growing dark, as the colors fall silent, the chirpings and high hummings and buzzings and rasplings are more insistent.

The vapor trails and balls of clouds turn grey. Colors below coalesce into blackness. A stubby bat skims my forehead. The deer are just shapes now, visible only when they move. Two of them race by just below, their quick, thrusting sounds more visible than their shapes.

The children and Susan return from their games. I can sense their dark forms trailing in pairs across the field and hear them talk cheerfully about dinner as they climb the bank. A single cricket sounds loudly, incessantly. Like a dry quill on rough paper.

11 June, Transition from Night to Day

Early Morning Hike up the Narrows of the Virgin River—with Joseph, Thomas, and Nathan.

The water is cold! No room for a path. Just the canyon walls and the clear river rushing over its rocky bed, against its rocky banks. At 6 a.m. we are the only hikers. The early morning canyon is ours to discover. The rocks are slippery. Walking sticks give us a third point of balance. In some places wide curves and rock falls have formed islands on which we can take momentary refuge from the cold river. There are trees and cattails on the larger ones.

High above us the west wall blazes red with new sunlight. In the deep shadow of the canyon floor (can the swiftly flowing river we are walking in be called a floor?) we look back at a stretch of east wall wet with seeping water and find it glowing golden in the light reflected off the high west wall. A thread of water, perhaps as thick as my wrist, drawn thin by the two-hundred-foot wall down which it tumbles.

Stubby black birds wade in and skim over the water. Standing on a rock they dance, a repeated knee bend, a bounce. We bounce along with the birds and laugh to see one another repeat the gesture so well.

Standing in a deep shadow, the canyon walls overhanging so completely that they allow no glimpse of the sky, I find, about head high, a hollow worn into the rock. Inside is a perfect still life: two round stones the size of a baseball, one tan, the other red. Between them grows a single, thin plant. A tiny Zen garden.
Tunnel to Yugoslavia-Klagenfurt—Just before the beginning of the summer travel season, the Karawanken Tunnel opened today at 6 am. The 7864-meter-long tube connects the Austrian state of Kärnten with the Yugoslavian republic Slovenia. Motorists will no longer have to cross the steep mountain passes (Wurzenpass, 19% grade; Loiblpass, 24%). Access is only possible by way of local roads until 1992. Use of the tunnel costs 13 DM.