# PETER WEISS

## FROM THE AESTHETICS OF RESISTANCE VOLUME III

TRANSLATED BY MICHAEL LIPKIN

She knelt in the snow, but she was not cold. Maybe it was soft, white sand. The hands grasped deeper and deeper, the light was blinding, even though the sky was overcast. Their arms were already sinking in up to their elbows, were lifting themselves, and flakes were falling from their hands. It was a constant up and down, a regular motion. Others knelt before her, she saw their backs, wrapped in gray, ragged cloth, she saw their naked feet, saw soles and toes stick themselves halfway into the white of the snow, and the hands went deeper and deeper. It must have been a beach they were kneeling on, facing away from the sea, whose edge was close, though there was no lapping of waves. Complete silence reigned. They were like children digging a moat, there were also children among the women kneeling before her. In the warmth some of them had removed articles of clothing, the skin on their shoulders and hips glistened when they bent their bodies and stretched them, and so it went on, no one stopped. My mother's face was empty and dull, her mouth was half-open, her eyes stared forward and didn't recognize me. My father sat next to her in silence, her hands in his. Outside, behind the window, the pruned trees in the schoolyard were turning green. My mother knew that this digging couldn't go on forever, but she held herself back from what was coming, the glimmer around the faces stirred from the summer day's warmth, the heat of the bodies, this could not be winter. Nonetheless she felt something behind her made of leather, something metallic, it was there and it was watching, the more strongly she felt it, the more impossible it became to turn around. She knew, however, that it had heads and claws, and that it didn't even need to touch her a single time to completely annihilate her. A tiny movement, a breath would have been enough to make all of them straighten up, for her too, there was nothing left but to release herself from the digging, which was almost soothing. So she knelt, she saw how their backs straightened themselves up, how the children's feet, their toes bored into the sand, and no one looked around. My father got up and walked to the window. He waved me over and pointed diagonally past the school to the freshly painted, light-gray façade of the factory on the street across from ours. This line, from the room of the apartment to the factory where he had found work, supported his existence, and it was as though a year of the darkest wandering did not lie between my parents' departure from Varnsdorf and their arrival in the small industrial city in the west of Sweden. On the way from the train station he had told me how, after the occupation of Bohemia, he had been assured the job at the textile printers, which was to be built in Sweden by the owners of the Varnsdorf factory. We were walking along the deserted platform, under the low, blue-gray clouds that were lit up only in the west, where the rays of sun had penetrated the gaps in the clouds. I had wanted to spend the weekend with my father and my mother as soon as I received my father's message. That he picked me up alone did not yet unsettle me, though in the sharp light of the late afternoon I could read signs of

agitation on his face. The station manager with the red signal sign had returned to his office in the train station, which was crowned with a little tower, crates were being loaded slowly and sleepily out of the freight car perpendicular to the ramp, the train rolled past us, it had become smaller on the ramrod-straight tracks and disappeared from view between the rolling woods and a shimmering lake. Young people stood in groups in front of the train station, leaning on bicycles, the levers of the bells on the handlebars were in constant motion. Music sounded from the open windows of the veranda of the city hotel, and the sun illuminated a strip of chestnut trees along the edge of the path, caused the multitude of still-yellow leaf buds to sprout forth, like sticky insect wings just emerged from the cocoon, and at the same time cast black shadows into the depths of the foliage, where the pinpoints of light were becoming more and more sparse. Behind the street, a figure poured in bronze rose up in the middle of the marketplace, and to the right a row of sheds joined a wooden manor, whose overhanging upper story rested on white columns. On the way down to the park around the waterway, which, coming down from the brewery beneath the railroad embankment, expanded before us into a pond where strangely artificial-looking swans swam between clumps of foam, my father spoke of dismantling and packing up machines and printing equipment in Varnsdorf, preparing drawings for the rebuilding of the dye works and the workshops where finishing was made. At that time, he said, as we found ourselves on one of the stone bridges that arched over the oily, shimmering water, a remnant of the Czechoslovakian state still existed, whose citizen he could have remained, in the disused factory, surveilled by the German state. There was still foreign capital invested in its velvet printers, there on the high-walled riverbed of the Mandua, which became torrential in the spring, and since the occupying forces were interested in foreign currency, the owners, who had emigrated to England, had been able to buy back the repossessed inventory, and received authorization to take it out of the country. In February of thirty-nine, my father had arranged the shipping and seen to the travel arrangement of the engineers and managers, but my father, whose specialization should have proved useful to the resumption of the enterprise, was surprised by the arrival of the German troops on the fifteenth of March, when he was staying with my mother in Prague to pick up his papers at the union office and at the Swedish consulate. We walked on the long plangata, at whose end lay, as my father indicated with an extended arm, the factory that he called his, like the factory in Varnsdorf, we went by a house decorated with artful carpentry, Beth's boarding school, where my parents had rented a room, they were then asked to leave when my mother became sick, and we reached the long wooden house in which my parents now lived. As he asked me about my work, explained his tasks at the printers, the wage rates in Sweden, discussed the situation of the unions, he wanted to affirm a practical kind of commonality

between us before he spoke about my mother's dazed state, and explained to me that the aftereffects of the experience still held her prisoner. As we passed through the doorway to the apartment facing the courtyard, I saw that tears were running down his broad, worn face. If the peace, the perception of safety could just last long enough, he said, as we stood beside one another at the window, then she would overcome her apathy, see us once again, and once again be able to speak with us. More than two and a half years had passed since we had last seen each other. We sat down at the table next to my mother, who remained motionless in her armchair, and I told her about Stockholm, Spain, Paris, and if these were only tenuous hints of an abundance of experiences, and the silence of my mother nearly paralyzed my voice, my father nonetheless asked me to keep speaking, and I learned to direct my words, as my father did, to my mother, as though she could understand what we were saying. Her left hand lay in her lap, as though broken off, with the palm turned up, her right hand was raised into a gesture by her arm, which supported itself, like she wanted to stop something that was approaching. It struck me that the room's carpet was the same green as the paint on the walls of our kitchen on Pflugstrasse in Wedding. At the mention of the kitchen in Berlin, the attic apartment on Grünenstrasse in Bremen, the basement parlor in Bohemian Varnsdorf, there emerged a sensation of nearness, which took away the severity of that which had not yet been said. That for a long time we did not know anything of one another, and had no way of letting each other know that we were still alive, belonged to the condition that we shared with many others. If I could see distress in my father as we hugged on the platform, he nonetheless showed himself to be composed and confident in the presence of the sick woman. Never had I seen my parents so devoted to one another as I did this Sunday evening in May, nineteen hundred and forty, just as the news came of the German offensive against Belgium, Holland, and France. My father spoke slowly, as though he wanted to make certain that every word imprinted itself on my mother. The measured, friendly way in which he spoke allowed the events to appear as though they were something everyday. My parents' departure belonged to the great wandering, the gazes directed over and across the oceans, towards other continents, harbors like Marseilles, Genoa, Rotterdam, Lisbon, Odessa were oracular places, places of magic hope, consulates and embassies became temples, their thresholds damp with kisses and tears. It was the natural thing, the normal thing, this begging for certifications of approval, endorsements, for a place in the quotas, a visa signified absolution, and this came only to those who possessed the money to buy mercy. The masses of those who had no more to offer than their despair swelled, and despair was the most worthless of all superfluous things, and soon there were to be found among the dispossessed those who were well-to-do yesterday, there was only the tumble into aimless wandering, with no rest and no way out. It was noted offhandedly, already

blotted out of his description of the last hours in Prague, how, after the destruction of the republic, in the midst of the confusion that ensued from the clearing of the union offices, my father had learned of my presence in Sweden. One of my letters, sent by the trade association from Stockholm to Prague, remained lying between the files, had fluttered up in the wind from the train when my father was given a card with a recommendation to the Swedish organization. At the party headquarters, my father still consulted with Taub, with the leader of the German Social Democrats in Czechoslovakia. This man, who intended to go in a sealed wagon with the other members of the leadership to Warsaw, in order to fly from there to Sweden, assured him that he would see to the journey of my parents right away. We, too, were supposed to try to reach Warsaw, said my father, and to get ourselves to the Swedish embassy, where Taub was to leave behind instructions. And yet, how were we, we who belong to the masses of those without influence, to make it through Poland and bring our cause to the Swedish ambassador, he said, and brought the coffee cup up to my mother's mouth. She saw the backs before her, naked or covered with tatters, wide, round backs and small, slender ones, she saw how they were shaken by an invisible force and were slumped forwards, at which point an indistinct beam shot out of their flesh, and how their hands had dug in so deep that they disappeared into the ditch. My father held the back of her head, passed her a piece of biscuit with care, and wiped off her chin. At the end of March nineteen hundred and thirty-nine, my parents successfully reached the so-called Tripoint, where Silesia, the Czech zone and Poland bordered one another. They had no baggage with them, only the advance that my father had sewn into the lining of his jacket. Amid the random movement in which they were caught up, another force, an overpowering one, made itself felt, a force that shook their nerves and tendons, that drove them forward and bore them along with it, a force that, exactly calculated, ran according to certain schedules, and while those in flight still clung firmly to the thought that borders could be crossed, countries traversed, goals reached, the paths and the highways were already leading them towards a machinery that would divide them up, separate them from one another, designate them for slower or quicker extermination. While they still gave themselves and the surroundings through which they moved names, they had already become numbers, and the regions were renamed, the divided-up corpse of Czechoslovakia had yielded a Bohemian and a Moravian protectorate, as well as a supposedly autonomous Slovakia, the Sudetenland had become part of the body of the Reich, Poland and Hungary had snatched up its crumbs, border stations were moved, it was unclear to whom the land on which they tread belonged, even those who had felt before that they belonged to their nation as a race, even as the first signs of persecution became visible, those who still believed that they were in good standing, were now forced to recognize themselves as outcast and condemned. These people, who

still dragged recollections of their own lives along with them, now began to stumble blindly, in the eyes of hidden observers they were nothing more than a herd, to be butchered in the cheapest manner possible. Against this tide, which advanced towards the East, creeping, shuffling through the blooming landscapes, and whose waves were the dust kicked up by their graying shoes, floods rolled into the homeland of the Reich with waves of leaf-laureled, flag-decked trucks, here surging cries of "Heil!", of victory frenzy, there a pause in the stream of wanderers, an evasion before the crushing onrush, exhausted, misshapen accumulations, then more panicked advances, from which they were to run until they had tired themselves out, so that later, when the appointed time came, they would let themselves be caught more easily, or push themselves into the traps of their own accord. However, before they had put the border behind them, my parents were arrested and taken to a prison from Ostrava, together with Jewish dealers and craftsmen. They could have counted themselves among the members of the German nation, but my mother wanted to remain among those who had been driven out. In the dusklight of the evening, which left the corners of the room in darkness, I now saw that my mother's lips were moving, and for several seconds it was as though her eyes lingered on us searchingly. The sound of my father's voice made me think of the evening hours we had once spent at the kitchen table, once again I felt the feeling of consolation that there had been on Pflugstrasse, high over the railyard of the station in Stettin, or in the basement room of the villa on Niedergrunder Strasse in Varnsdorf. My father was speaking of a cramped cell. My mother's fingers were moving. They stroked the grooves, the graininess of a stone wall. A moldy smell rose from the loamy soil, covered with wood shavings. More than a hundred people were in the cell, packed together. Use of the two cots was divided by the hour. The children, the women nursing infants, the sickly lay there. The bucket in which people relieved themselves ran over. Several elderly people died, were pulled to the doorway through the feet of those who were standing. The bodies clung to each other, asleep and awake. My mother felt the thick warmth, she belonged to these sweating bodies, she grasped one of the hot hands, clasped its fingers, and as the hands released one another, she pushed her face into a damp cheek. Arms, breasts, hips, shaggy beards, a jumble of limbs, beating hearts, wheezing breaths, and the fact that she was in the midst of them gave her strength. For her, the foul perspiration was like a blossoming, she drew the smell deeply into her, she lived in this organism, she would never want out of this closeness, a separation would have ruined her, been her downfall. One week, I heard my father say, went by in this dungeon. My mother would have stayed, had my father not pulled her over to the crowd of those who could prove themselves to be of German origin, when they were driven out into the yard and made to stand in rows in order to be transported to a camp. My father spoke forcefully, he emphasized the words

from the enemy's vocabulary with particular care. In the green room over the school yard, in which a pair of children were playing soccer, my father put his hands in the pocket of his pants, took it out again, and opened it. There lay the Iron Cross second class that he had been awarded in Galacia in 1917. He had brought along this cross, along with its certificate and the confirmation of his war injuries, as his only possession. And so he had become the young guards' comrade. Why had he waited so long to say something, they asked him. My parents were led to the commissariat, they were issued a convoy notice, and they obtained tickets to Trenčín, to their jurisdiction in Slovakia, they were also given provisions. So, instead of going toward Warsaw, they went south, where they found shelter for the summer as field workers. They had to save the sum of money necessary for a new attempt at reaching Warsaw. In the middle of August, said my father, as dull blows against the ball could be heard from the schoolyard, a guide led us by night through the mountains into Poland. They crawled carefully, anxious not to start the little stones along the slope moving, a few times, however, the stones slipped off into the debris, and an avalanche rumbled into the valley, they lay there, holding their breath, until it became silent once again. They wandered for another two weeks, often with groups of Czech and Slovakian Jews, in the direction of Oświęcim, the place where all the railroads knotted together, where they would wait for a train to Warsaw. Finally Bielsko Bialo lay nearby, which my father knew as Bielitz from his time in the Austro-Hungarian army. In the early morning, on a path in the field, they heard the noise from an airplane. Something dark fell out of the machine. Someone just fell out of there, my mother said. It was a pointed chunk that made the earth burst. They threw themselves into the dried-out ditch and remained lying there for a long time, because a buzzing could be heard, as though from the motors of larger air squadrons still farther away, a droning that was still coming closer and only increasing in volume. The fields of grain were shining in the morning sun, there wasn't a cloud in the sky, no breeze stirred the ears of grain, though far below, between the blades of grass, the poppy flowers, there was a scurrying and a flitting, tiny animals swished by, lizards, mice, rabbits, snakes, too. The noise grew into a clanging and roaring, as though thunder- and hailstorms were coming down, but still the sky remained clear and empty. They pressed their hands to their ears for fear that the clanging might make their ear drums explode, and they believed that the trembling earth was about to open itself beneath them. Suddenly the grain fell, as though from the sweep of a scythe, and gray monstrosities rolled towards us, on revolving treads, with arched armored backs, in dense rows, my mother pressed herself into the crumbling earth, through the grass she saw how the advancing tubes pushed over her into the grain, the steel bodies mowed their way through and receded into the distance. Sand ground in her teeth, the bits of earth before her were full of furrows and cracks, an ant,

carrying another dead ant, flailed its antennae over an abyss, jumped over it, its forelegs outstretched, a black beetle clambered up a blade of grass until it drooped down and it crawled off once more. My father, however, turned his attention from the hour of the first morning of the war to the two coming months. Just as he had attempted, technologically and economically, to secure his living in the little city of Alingsås by returning to the world of work, so too did he attempt to make the events in which he and my mother had been caught up lucid by means of mathematical calculation. Starting with the assumption that the exact number of all those torn out of their familiar lives could be fixed, he estimated the sizes of the various forces. Initially, he might have made these tens of thousands, these hundreds of thousands, tangible, they came from particular cities, one of them had left behind a certain address, and there were still traces of their work everywhere, but then they lost their faces in the masses. Again and again, in the vague hope that shelter might be found somewhere, unable to sense that they were wandering into their own annihilation, swept along by a superhuman force, not delivered to a natural catastrophe, not compelled by hunger and need to leave their countries, not in the search for a new land that might be built up, but rather swept away by a violence contradicting any reason, giving everything up that might have given their life order, not as pilgrims or pioneers, but having become overnight the lowest of the low, robbed of any aspirations, any dignity, now existing solely in a world that consisted of points of embarkation, transport, trans-shipment points and detention centers, they flooded eastward, through the provinces that Germany had lost to Poland in nineteen eighteen, and had now snatched for itself again. And as millions they became still more formless, together with the Polish Jews driven out of their villages, crossed by the deportations of captured workforces towards Germany, and the trains of people of German descent from the Baltic and Belarussia, who were to settle in the areas that had been cleansed of Jews. It was only in October that something like a destination became apparent for those in flight, the area between the Vistula and the Bug would be placed at their disposal, as it were, as a reservation. My mother seemed to hear nothing of what my father was recounting, although he was holding forth forcefully. She sat in the armchair, upholstered with worn green velvet, as though there was no reaching her anymore. Before her the straight white trunks of a forest of birches stretched into the murky depths, she ran between the trunks, sometimes straight ahead, sometimes sideways, the bark she brushed against was of a silky smoothness, and the thudding of the steps was closing in, the panting and chattering, once again she was among many, she ran over moss and crunching wood, and the others ran right and left, loaded with bedding, baskets, pots and utensils, a trampling and a hissing, flapping dresses with children clinging to them, a pair of riders, the horses damp with sweat, soldiers without helmets or weapons, cows, calves, poultry, there

was a screaming, a bleating and cackling, and it was like every other time, something was behind them, something overpowering was coming closer and was just about to pounce on them, and at the same time there was no end, it was like their kneeling in the sand, like the crush in the dungeon, the lying in the ditch by the road, it was all happening at the same time, they were inside and there was no way out. For a while, said my father, we pulled a cart behind us with the children, the elderly and the sickly. It went over the hills and over the mountains, this was in the old Austrian-Silesian country, in the country of mixed people, here Polish, Russian, German, Ukrainian were spoken, and Yiddish, the craftsmen, the shopkeepers, the innkeepers everywhere were Jewish, the Poles there were the farmers, they loosed their dogs on those seeking shelter. My father paused, after he had attempted to bring into recognizable coherence that which threatened to perish in strangeness. In the calamity that had befallen him and my mother in the spring of nineteen hundred thirty-nine, he saw the result of perfectly determinable forces. In their Voivodeships the Polish aristocracy were only continuing what had been arranged the year before in the old industrial zone between the Ore Mountains and the Bohemian forest, the peaceful provincial life had suddenly turned into a zone where one side, furnished with all the power, could unleash their fury on the other. What my father saw in Varnsdorf, as Jewish manufacturers were bound by their works to the horses of their coaches and dragged over the pavement accompanied by roars and jeers, or as shopkeepers were carried out of their stores and made to stand on display with signs around their necks in the marketplace, already attained such a magnitude at that stage that it could only lead to worldwide devastation. He, as an individual, rejected the system that had always tried to leave him and those like him in despondency and paralysis. He had not allowed himself to walk in the dirt. He paced back and forth, his face gray. He had never been able to sit still in Wedding or on Niedergrunder Strasse in Varnsdorf, when he saw this violence carried out in the name of one class over the others. The violence that he now invoked was the violence of a pestilence, and in naming it, he also diagnosed the sickness to which my mother had fallen victim. It was asserted again and again that this pestilence, which caused convulsions every three, four decades, came out of nowhere, out of the inexplicable, and yet it was always planned down to its tiniest details. The fever never disappeared between its peaks, even when it could hardly be perceived, somewhere it brought trembling and terror along with it. The epidemic that came from Moloch was spread in innumerable ways, from the deceitful kiss to brutal defilement, and already carried away more lives than any other pestilence. As long as it could not be erased, for my mother, too, there would be no cure. If a scream were to awaken in her, no living person could bear it. But this scream, like the scream of all those who had gone beside her, was stifled before long. At first those who spread the poison had taught

them silence, wherever the disgust wanted to come up it had been beaten down into silence with a single blow. And now, said my father, I am once again working for those who have oppressed me for my whole life, and I am still thankful to them that I can provide a tiny contribution for the maintenance of their bases, because it provides me my pitiful income. If it was my father's will to cling to that which could be verified, that which belonged to groups of numbers, orders, then my mother had distanced herself from everything with which we surrounded ourselves. And yet we were troubled by the question of whether she did not know more than we did, we who had preserved reason, and whether everything that was explicable by our standards did not become obsolete in light of a looming upheaval of thought. My father, who had remained standing, had once again turned to the late spring in Poland, while my mother drifted through images, none of which was able to evince a single sound of dismay from her, so far removed was she from any recollection of the familiar. Once, said my father, we came to a Catholic church, wanted to spend the night there, the priest refused us, foaming at the mouth, the children threw themselves pleadingly onto him, he struck at them with a crucifix. Only Jews, who were still located in this region of Krakow, could occasionally divide up the little that they had, they too wanted to leave for the east, toward the Red Army. German troops in wedge formation pushed past them with their baggage train in tow, they burnt down what was left of the cabins and stables, carried away sacks of grain, turkeys, piglets and now, this was near Gorlice, at the foot of the Carpathian Mountains, my father had lain there in the combat of nineteen fifteen, there the imperial-royal troops had pushed back the czar's army, from there his regiment had marched on to Przemyśl and Lviv, now, on the Sabbath day, the soldiers rounded up all the Jews, the rabbi did not cease his prayer of consecration, the soldiers knocked the Torah out of his hands, he kept singing, the men's black, broad-rimmed caps were torn off, they were yanked down to the ground by their hair and the singing did not cease, they were thrown onto a truck, men and women, children and the elderly, once again my father pulled my mother along with him, he showed his papers, he was a Slovak, formerly Hungarian, a war veteran, a distinguished recipient of the Iron Cross, wounded, here was the scar from the bullet lodged in his knee, and he was clapped on the shoulder, he was in the wrong place, he should head in the direction of his homeland, he got a pass, provisions, directions to the nearest authorities. They didn't go back, but rather towards Galacia, they came to Przemyśl, where my father had been taken to a field hospital in the late spring of nineteen hundred sixteen. They went around the city, in the loamy landscape surrounded by chains of hills, he recognized the old exercise grounds and the old freight yard, the locomotive shed made of yellow brick, from which he left for Bremen, bedded on straw in the livestock wagon. And the farther my parents, and with them a handful of Czech Jews, made it east, the more

quickly the trucks and tanks rattled towards them and past them, before them the villages were shot and ravaged, for the troops it was a matter of capturing several kilometers more, as was due them, soon they had run into the army that was moving towards them from the east. They moved through the haze and the smoke, came by the ruins of a courtyard, in the coal-blackened window frames of a stall, they saw a woman sitting, her feet stretched out on a board, her body leaning back onto the rubble, her legs spread wide apart, her hands pressed on her stomach, she pressed out the child, surrounded by the black flakes of grime. At the end of October, they found lodging in a village on one of the rivers branching off the Dniester, a Jewish baker took them in, you can live here, he said, the Russians are coming soon, they will protect us. How are they supposed to protect us, my mother had asked after the arrival of the Soviet soldiers, there was no motorized, oiled rolling, those who now came went on foot, in patched uniforms, with outdated rifles, a pair of rickety trucks were drawn by horses, how are they, my mother asked, supposed to stop the Germans. They dug out trenches, they dug themselves in, what was going on with this pact that had been spoken of for months, did the pact no longer exist, no, it did exist, and why were they getting into formation, because the pact could not last, because it would go on, because the Germans wanted to have Ukraine and Belorussia and the Caucuses. Hundreds of thousands streamed towards Lvov with them, in November my parents entered the once rich, elegant city. My father had hoped to find a position at one of the many weavers, printers, dye works that were located, as he knew, in Lemberg, but the concerns were all shut down, every space to be found was crammed full of people, the refugees camped in the streets, the Soviet army could not manage to provide for all the hungry. Still, something else unsettled us, said my father, among those driven out there were many Polish and Czech Communists, who had immediately come forward with their Party cards. They were rounded up, not, however, to be consulted for service, but rather to be deported to the German territories. The Communists who had fled Germany to the Soviet Union years ago fared no better. We met several, he said, who were to have been sent back to the German Reich. They had escaped from the train, in the meantime many others had fallen into the hands of the Germans. The fear that spread was not only of the winter, which was approaching, but also the question of where one was even supposed to go, where a way out might still be found. As they made their way north, they had ended up in the German zone of occupation. There, they had heard of the sanctuaries that were now established for the Jews, and they saw many who let themselves be taken in by the temptation to find a home finally and moved in the direction of Lublin. Once, my mother disappeared for an entire day, said my father, he found her in the driving snow, among Jews who had just lost their loved ones. Since then, he said, her sunkenness had grown worse, though he had often taken her silence during their wandering through

Belorussia, which had lasted nearly a quarter of a year, for exhaustion. In March, they arrived in Latvia and in Riga, at the Swedish consulate, received visas and plane tickets to Sweden. Once again my father mentioned this event, which must have been accompanied by endless difficulties, only in passing, as though he wanted to draw my mother's attention to the fact that everything that had caused her pain belonged to the past, and that now there was nothing but safety. Late in the evening, when he had brought my mother to bed, and we sat for a long time at the table under the lamp, he told me that the union had offered him a place for my mother in a rest home, however, he didn't believe that a stay there would do her any good, instead he felt that, left alone among strangers, even with the best care, she would fall into a state of total darkness from which there would be no way out. The only possibility for her recovery would be, as he saw it, if my mother were to become aware of the change in their situation and then turn to something other than that unspeakable thing that held her in its grip. Every hour that he did not have to spend in the factory he was with her, concerned constantly with providing her a feeling of safety. He spoke to her mildly, as though there weren't the slightest reason for concern anymore. He knew, he said, that she was moving towards him in her way and that a slow shift was taking place in the balance between the twilight and the waking state. Just the fact that, now and again, she stood at the window, looking out onto the street, waiting for him to come home, showed him that, at the very least, the possibility of improvement existed, and in that, he agreed with the doctor, a psychiatrist, a friend of Hodann's as it happened, who had been to their apartment several times and had promised to visit several more times. What was holding my mother to life was this understanding, this silent acceptance of her absence, of her sojourn in the abyss. At night, in the little parlor near the kitchen, I heard my mother whimpering in the voice of a complete stranger. The following morning, however, I saw her differently than I had at the beginning, when she seemed to be completely broken down. I spoke to her as what she had once been to me, as my mother, which she would always be. In the afternoons, after my father retrieved their meal from Beth's Pension and assisted my mother as she ate, I told them what had been on my mind since my father had mentioned the city of Riga. The name Riga had stirred something that at first remained as hazy as my father's allusion to their departure from that city, though now, as I turned to my mother, without knowing what my thoughts might mean, I felt as though I were touching layers that might be accessible to my mother. I began with this city that I did not know, upon hearing its name, however, I thought of someone named Hjärne, a Swedish poet and scholar, who, in the middle of the seventeenth century, lived there as the private physician to the Governor of Livonia. I had put aside his play, Rosimunda, which was one of the plays that Brecht had wanted to rework, into a crate, along with my other books. I was thinking of how we, in

addition to our reading of strange songs, religious and folk songs, of choruses, of verse dramas about the power-mad, nymphomaniacal Langobard Queen interspersed with scenes of pranksters and harlequins, read the diary of Hjärne, in which he describes his journey from Riga in the year sixteen hundred sixty-seven, through Mölln, where he sketched Eulenspiegel's grave, to Bremen. And now I suddenly understood why I was recounting all this, it belonged to the secret connections that existed between all of us, and which over the years had contributed to our ability to understand one another. In Delmenhorst, a village near Bremen, Hjärne had stopped to rest along his journey, and since this village had taken on such a special significance for us, his notes on that hour had affected me so greatly that I could cite them almost word for word. When he glanced at the landscape that I knew from my childhood, he was overcome by a spiritedness, as he called it, a trembling, an ecstatic exhilaration, a powerful joy was awakened in me, the joy of the poet. I saw the Delmenhorst highway before me as I read these lines, with its rows of poplars, behind them grazing pastures and mills. Here, in the convalescent home, my mother had met my father, here, in February nineteen hundred seventeen, she had conceived me. For several hours the web of recollection that surrounded us became perceptible, but just then it was lost once more, nothing in my mother's face gave any indication that she had understood a single word that I had said. Looking out the window on the train during my return trip to Stockholm, I saw this face, large, gray, worn by the images that had torn themselves into it, a stone mask, the eyes blind in its broken surface. It was the face of Gaia, the demoness of earth, her left hand soaring up with its shattered fingers, the evening landscapes flew by, Alcyoneus fell, bitten in the breast by the serpent, tilting away from her.