

ENDURE

Correspondence from the island of Tyflonia,
Place of Internment
For those Afflicted by The Loss

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The word “endure” means to survive, to withstand, to hang on.

“*Tyflōs*” (Grk): blind. Origin of terms like “tyflogia” (the science of sightlessness) and “tyflopædogy” (the raising and education of sightless children).

And so also, the source of the name for our island, our center of internment — TYFLONIA.

“As long as we are here — no! As long as we are *there*. Tyflonia did not become our place. It exists out there as a place assigned to us, not by us.

‘There’ came into existence at one point and has dragged on so long that it continues until now. As if until now, but not entirely.”

(from the “Chronicle of The Loss” being written by Habor for Viso, but unfinished)

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ENDURE

The Characters (more or less in their order of appearance):

HABOR [H.] – who writes about everything to Viso

KADAB [K.] – husband of Habor

VISO – a reporter to whom all is written

KAS-KAS [Miss Kassajan] – a lady, an artist, a photographer

JEANI [Jeannine de ...] – who knows what to do and raises her eyebrows

CONTROLLERS – who sometimes examine your eyes or order you to count fingers

HELEN – who owned the house and disappeared

KRAS – a Jersey cow

TADOL [also TADDOL] – who wants to do everything

KUBAT – partner of Tadol

HIZA – “the African queen”; sings psalms

LENBE – who does more than clean

NURSES – only one is named, “Annie” [ANMER]

THE MONASTERY – today a renovated outpost for a Christian Community of monks

PETITIONERS – a movement for religious awakening inspired by Brother Jocelyn

ANTI-PETITIONERS – opponents of the religious practices of The Petitioners

THE ELDER BROTHER – superior who wisely observes everything

SIR IAN—BROTHER BENNO – who frequents the “Reform” Club

BROTHER JOCELYN [FRATER JOC] – saxophonist, always in danger

BROTHER LEWIS – matures rapidly

BROTHER AXEL – knows all the psalms by heart

TERDU [TER-TER] – looks about eighteen years old

AUNTIE OF TERDU – the question, who takes care of whom?

PERLAT – who has the right to ask

THE CANTOR [Efremek] – who needs to be found

DR. Hedwig BEAUFORÉT [Ma-Doc, Ma-Bof] – a doctor

ELWA – one of the girl assistants to

SEBI – engaged to Elwa

REITLY [Renata] – who apologizes

OLWER [Olga] – Reitly’s daughter and a Petitioner

COMMISSIONER [unimportant that he calls himself Peter Björn Alting van Meienfeldt] – for whom they pray in the Monastery

AUDITORS – male and female

DANIELLE [Dani] – an Auditor and psychologist

SEMAR – from the lesbians’ barrack

DICKO – who is ashamed

MYRDAL – a ginger cat

LITTLE HEATHER – a terrier

ISLAND WILDLIFE – seagulls, gannets, seals, sheep, wild dogs.

Part 1.

1. About Tyflonia

TYFLONIA [*an introduction compiled from Habor's letters and later notes. — TL*]

When almost everyone who'd experienced the Event began to lose their central vision (this happened slowly, even now for some it is just beginning, so they still have the use of a group of remaining receptors and may suddenly recognize some letter or facial detail) ... now that basically we see only a shape without any individual details, a blurred face or hand with an unknown number of fingers — that happened, something curious happened with our identities too.

Back before The Loss happened, people would call out to one another usually by first name when they recognized them from a distance or as they got closer. Or if not, you could just shout, “hey, kid” or “hello, there, friend”! Now, when someone or a small group gets very close, we call out, “hey, you there!” To some individual person we wave a hand, “You, there” or “mister or lady!” After, you had to anticipate the figure, make certain that it was a real human being, and not something human-like---a mannequin, a sculpture, or maybe an animal, since they are moving figures too and it's easy to confuse them with children.

We don't appreciate human-like figures who fool us and make fun of us in front of those for whom The Loss is less advanced.

I'd like to still be able to distinguish someone just by calling out his or her name, on my own, by choice, when they come into my field of vision. As it is, I have to wait until I hear a whisper. Since The Loss, we use whispering to preserve our identity. We whisper our names — repeating them just in case, because often we're not sure if someone's approaching us or it's just some other sound and not a person making tentative steps. So, after the whisper alerts us, we get an extra signal: “it's me, Habor.” We've developed our own unique names adapted to The Loss. We can't use common names that repeat like Martin, Agnes, or Martha like before. The whisper of a name is part of all our encounters, even passing on the street (pretty empty anyway). Quiet is rare in our world. The abundance of acoustic signals makes understanding difficult, although without them we'd be completely disoriented. Our ears learn to pick up what we need.

Probably it was easier visually; you could close your eyes, and rest. We often do that in order to take a break from the strain of recognizing people in the sea of colorful blotches, bright spots and streaks of light. It's easier to see something that moves, especially when The Loss is not total. For some of us figures exist only when in motion and disappear when they stop moving. Using this aspect of our sight (we do have sight — we've just lost certain features of it) we create around ourselves a colorful, lively world of signs different from those used before The Loss.

Some try to substitute a distinctive combination of colors for a whispered name. There are combinations that could even be registered with some “Department of ID Facilitation.” A department like that would be worth creating, but for the time being people do this simply and

cheaply. They agree on the colors they will use to recognize one another. Mistakes can be awkward, but the whispered name confirms identity. Those who want to be recognized without announcing their name in a crowd can choose certain whispered words instead of using the familiar sound of their voice that is hard to distinguish against the background of dense noise and conflicting signals. Besides, our hearing goes dull; people use earmuffs and plugs to preserve it, but those are risky when you want to move around. We move in great part by sound, although many use canes to feel their way. We who are afflicted by The Loss prefer not to resemble the blind. Traditionally, the blind have used the white cane; ours should have some color.

Reading this letter you probably wonder, dear Viso, how it is that I can write. When The Loss began, I was one of those first affected by The Event — which I don't want to talk about, at least not now, not yet.

Suffice it to say, that I had good handwriting, so good that even now I can still trace letters that I can't see. For a long time I could still see letters when written on well-lit paper. My letters were fairly regular and not difficult to read. But later (and now even more so) I couldn't decipher them after I'd finished forming the last letter. This is why my writing is so fragmentary — sometimes I can't finish a sentence because I can't return to where I left off. However many times this may irritate you, imagine that at my back someone has just whispered, "It's me-Kadab; is that you, Habor?" And of course, I will stop writing! Kadab reads what I've written. He can do much more than I can. But you, Viso, can you read what I write, you read it, yes? You read everything that I've gotten down before I forget, but how do you do it?

Oh, Viso, sometimes I fear that my writing is no longer writing, that I just scratch marks that mean nothing to anyone. I swear that I dream that with some incredibly powerful "imagnoscope" one could tell if I'm writing words or it just seems like I am.

Remember that the imaginoscope might help you decipher my letter. It's important that you know the world after The Loss. Maybe you can avoid it. Wisely, you avoid contact with those Afflicted, inspect people at the border, and so on. Maybe someday I'll find out from you whether anything is visible on us, I mean, do we look any different from those who are not affected? Really, you see or at least could see our faces and we could hear from you whether a sharp eye can tell that we are different.

Kadab worries that I spend too much time on my writing being legible. He knows, because I told him that I write a letter to someone among the Not Afflicted, a letter that will go beyond Tyflonia. "The letter should be short," he says, "but you just scratch, and scratch."

I wrote that we don't want to be confused with the blind. I realize that this comment is probably hard for you to understand. But you, Viso, would you like to be treated the same as someone who is different from you? It's important to us that others like you see us as victims of a particular Event. The blind are not victims of this Event. They do not see, whereas we can make out many things, so we live with the remnants of our vision! They live in a darkness like night, a night that penetrates the brain; they do not know that it's daytime except maybe if birds are singing. Please understand that I empathize with them, even envy them at the same time because they know better how to live than we do. They manage better with their condition than we do.

What was I writing about before I broke off because it was time for dinner? I sometimes cook for myself and Kadab. The dishes can't be very complicated, and we can't enjoy how they look anyway. What's important for us is how they smell and taste. Peeling vegetables like potatoes is the hardest. I hate it when sometimes they have bad spots that I can't see or feel under my fingers and then they stink when they are boiled and we have to eat them. How do the blind manage with this?

Will The Afflicted ever be able to have children, and if so, will they have vision like ours? There will be debates over whether these children should learn the alphabet for the blind, or not read and write (because we, their parents, do not read, and we write only for others not Afflicted, outsiders like you, Viso, who don't understand and cannot really comprehend our situation).

Ask me about something, Viso, ask when you do your program for Tyflonia. No doubt it won't be ready soon. Ask us, The Afflicted. Don't pointlessly quiz those who have been blind from birth and understand less even than you. Those who never could see have not lost anything. They cannot know what it's like, how it's been for us and what we are experiencing now.

Even if you cover your eyes, Viso, you won't be like us. You will be like them, that is, like some of those I once saw. Still others are free of that memory, impoverished without that memory, unable to imagine what they do not have.

I think that you must be young, Viso. If so, and even if you have a great deal of experience, your programs (I think) will be full of naïveté (pardon my frankness, but to us, The Afflicted, everything seems naïve). So I'd like you to get to know Kas-Kas. She could write to you and send you her new photos. She was an illustrator before The Loss. Now she does photography. It's harder than writing; you can play with colors, but you can't capture or present precise shapes (sometimes describes her "photo-drawings" when she participates in The Remembering—I'll explain this later on).

Kas-Kas turned to photography. She fixed all the settings on her camera so that the photos would work for those who see the way we do. These photos are intended for those outside The Loss. She chooses something with her fingers (if it is small) and applies the ring as was done before, and then — using a big enlargement — something small becomes visible for us. We experience its beauty in our own way. is an exceptional artist and she'd be famous if she were not here. Here on Tyflonia we admire her. She doesn't have to whisper "I-." We recognize her by the tinkle of her bells and the rustle of her skirts.

I can sense your question, Viso. I feel it in everything you share on the radio in your travel features. I do think about you, Viso For example, something from before The Loss occurred to me: reading the newspaper scandal sheets. I always looked for travel articles in the papers. I won't tell you when that was because I don't want to reveal (or remember!) how old I am. Let me just say that I looked for travel pieces even in cheap scandal sheets (who was I back then when those were around? Maybe a precocious little girl?) In any case, what this means is that I understand what intrigues a reporter like yourself. You want to know and write about how things happened, how The Event came about, how it could happen is what interests you. This lets you show, or rather imply, that you are revealing something more momentous than some historian. Oh,

yes, Viso. I get it — you want to give your listeners a glimpse into the whys and wherefores of the world. Listeners should believe that thanks to you they know a bit about how everything works.

So I anticipate your question, questions like how did Tyflonia come about? And, of course, you're even more curious about The Loss itself. You know the various theories — surely you must if you are at all interested in my letters, considering them your “material.” I know journalists, you see, and some fairly famous ones at that. (Not those who feed the scandal sheets).

I'm not able, at least for now, to report to you anything about The Loss itself. That's not the subject, Viso. The Loss happened once, already long ago, and I live with its consequences now, every minute is a minute with The Loss. You don't understand, right? Now the pathos gets to you. Me too. So let's set that aside, though I can't promise that I won't come back to it. Maybe the desire for further contact with you will make me return? Or maybe something will change in me here on Tyflonia that compels me. Hold on! Instead, I'll try now to share my recollection of my road to Tyflonia.

2. Transport

Those Afflicted by The Loss finally began to find their way to the hospital—for observation. Few of the doctors imagined that they could help us. We were given sets of vitamins to improve blood circulation in order to nourish the macula, the central area of the retina that allows clear, detailed vision. Initially there was concern about our psychological state: pleasant interiors, select roommates, visits by psychologists and clergy (I'll describe this later on).

But it soon grew crowded, bed crammed next to bed, extra beds; the recreation room ran out of chairs. The television disappeared (its glare was considered harmful). An experimental group had to spend the entire time in semi-darkness and some of them were prescribed dark goggles in various colors and tints made from different kinds of material. As if that weren't enough, to us the goggles appeared just strangely hostile. At the same time a kind of fog evolved in the world around us as The Loss continued to worsen and on top of it all, people's faces were transformed into some kind of mask.

No one seemed concerned that some of The Afflicted didn't want to get out of bed and spent the entire day crying—at least they wept silently. After some weeks of hesitation, psychiatrists unlocked their arsenal: powders, injections (too bad if they harmed the macula; people could not be allowed to shriek, clench their teeth, or make a move to attempt suicide). Now it was clear: we had ceased to be in the hospital of our own free will. No one succeeded in getting out. Windows were quickly equipped with grates. The justification: cases of people jumping from the upper floors.

In my opinion, it was more likely to prevent escape.

How could this happen in a democratic country, you ask (more accurately, in several countries since The Loss must have affected more than one)? How naïve can you be? In the beginning they cared about us; later they only feared us. Some, for example, the Chief Physician still tried to do something for us, to get medicine which soon began to run out and then was given only to new patients. For those taken in earlier, what remained was only vitamin C, calcium, and some cod liver oil — just like a hundred years ago, terrible tasting and as useless as a placebo.

They feared us because someone somewhere (and soon everyone followed) surmised that The Loss could be contagious, that maybe it's a virus, or some prion disease (you can find that in any historical encyclopedia under BSE or “mad cow” disease). This didn't start among us, the patients, but above us—among the workers and in the laboratories, primarily the military ones. You may know about the question of theories about The Loss; if not, take a look at the materials you can access, probably newer, contemporary ones that we, inhabitants of Tyflonia, do not have the right to see.

Anyhow, one day, a Sunday — it must have been in December of the third year of our “cure”— the first transport of The Afflicted began. It was immediately called the “transport.” Curious, how words return from the depths of history. Oh, no, there were no ominous props. More

or less matching warm outdoor clothes were organized: sweat suits, windbreakers with hoods, socks and tennis shoes for feet that were often swollen from medication and lack of movement. A kind of Selection had to precede the Transport. Those on medication were clearly passed over.

We were required to put on dark glasses (new ones, thicker and darker, were given to us) and then we made our way through the empty hallway of the hospital to the buses. Once again we were assured that we were going to a sanatorium. We took this news calmly, although some of us (myself included) were not convinced. The windows of the bus were painted over before we had a chance to look around. At the airport a plane was waiting, ready for takeoff. Four nurses from the hospital boarded with us. We slept quite a while and then toward the end there was a shaky takeoff. How, you ask, did we remain passive throughout all this? Pick your theory: perhaps we had surreptitiously been given a psychotropic drug? Perhaps it was the effects of The Loss, of inflammation, a gradual dying. I don't know; I can't say whether or not it affected me too. As I write to you about this, a strange feeling returns. I struggle with it while wanting to focus your attention. I need your attention.

That's just it. I mentioned that before the Transport the television had disappeared. It had been a huge modern screen — I've seen several like them — at least we could just listen to the news. News? I was still interested in the news, although most of it was already in the past. In our situation a lot of it didn't make sense. It was already a foreign world, a world turned away from The Loss, silent about it, as if it didn't count for them.

Toward the end of the flight I remembered that I had gotten some pills from the Chief Physician who had given me a bottle just before our Transport saying that maybe they would help me regain my alertness when I needed to be fully conscious. I took one of the tiny red pills, a classic placebo, and I really did come fully awake.

I could tell that we were landing somewhere among mountains; nobody was around the small, nearly deserted airport. The nurses guided us once again to a bus and its windows were clear. I could see snowy roadsides, trees. I took a chance and raised my goggles slightly. I can see, I can see wonderful colors: gray cliffs, pale pink, and on them splotches of bright yellow—lichen. Could anyone else see all this without these cursed goggles? I pulled mine off and a young girl sitting next to me did the same. I looked at her face. I could barely distinguish features, but still I could make out her dark brows, a clear gap, large mouth and a smile —that I remember, but she disappeared from my vision in the commotion of disembarking and then a hurried loading onto a barge in the empty port. The sea boomed and slapped against the waves. It whispered, as it seeped through the gravel. Gray greenish waves with crests of foam. I felt joy that I could see, even if without sharp edges, without contours as it were.

On the barge we were isolated, no contact with the crew. The nurses handed out sandwiches taken from the hospital, bottles of water and the Transport took on the atmosphere of an excursion.

That much I can remember safely.

I've had to break off my writing and without finishing the story of the "transport." You must realize, Viso, that while writing to you has become important, I still have other obligations and experiences. Burying myself in memories is not my favored occupation. I live in the present, in what is around me. It's difficult for me to return to what was in the past. It wears me out.

The road back to the past itself, combined with re-living what I no longer experience, is exhausting, Viso. I wrote about the mountains along the way to the port; did I write that on the spots of lichen on the cliffs I recognized snow, white and in clearly outlined splotches, on ledges, meadows? I see it almost as if before The Loss.

Yes, I can return to those images, but then afterward it's harder for me to do what the therapists recommend we do: accept the world as it is, as it presents itself to us now. A world that is not sharp, that is dull, that is unsure. Yes, our world is unsure of its shape, of its form. I want to believe that I've already reached my deepest level of The Loss. But I don't know this for sure; maybe everything will dissolve still more into the thickening fog. Although that's not a good comparison at all. What is fog? I still see it sometimes when it really is foggy outside and Tyflonia is often foggy.

The Loss is something else, more like a chopping up of something that is solid. (You can test this with your touch, but your hand can only test ordinary hardness; it can't tell whether something's crooked or broken up, for example, the edge of a table or the edge of a piece of paper on which I write). Ours is a world interrupted, a world where parts are disappearing—and all was set in motion by The Loss that has infected us.

Have I taken to complaining? No, I simply think that knowing the "historical" beginnings of Tyflonia is less important than understanding the nature of The Loss. Understanding is very difficult and, who knows, maybe impossible. Here we run into a barrier: basic experiences are not communicable. Any two people can't really compare, for example, how they see the color blue. How then to explain what the difference is between not seeing and seeing after The Loss? Someone once told me — a person knowledgeable about art, or once knowledgeable — when I asked whether she will remain an art expert after The Loss, she replied that we see the world in the way it appears in impressionist paintings, like the colorists. There's some truth to this. I've seen their reproductions (before The Loss, of course). I liked them much better than what I can see now in reality. Impressionistic paintings? Perhaps, but significantly damaged, with flickers of malicious empty spots. The brain combines the punctured data into a kind of whole, but in those punctured places where the hole is filled by whatever is closest to it, there might be something important, something we need to recognize a face or a person. I can't exist without "I-Habor."

I've written that sentence and I can still see my name, "Habor," but the phrases just before it have already disappeared. And I am among the lucky ones who can do this well. For now.

To keep things straight, I'll finish the story of the Transport. The barge docked at a short pier in the small port. Again, nobody was around and the windows were dark although it was now deep twilight. The former inhabitants had been evacuated or fled at the news that The Afflicted were arriving and might bring their misfortune with them, basically, the plague that affected them. They were compensated elsewhere, while we took over what they'd left behind, houses and

clusters of barracks. The barracks spread out over former pastures, some quite near the beach. A graveyard was still there and watery meadows (at least for now, since probably they will dry out and be built upon). Grass and thorny heather grew only in the crevasses of rock near the port. A monastery also remained, but more about that important element later.

For better or worse, the former island of I. is no more; the place is Tyflonia now. That's our official address. What about me, you wonder? Well, at first, I lived along with several dozen women in a barrack opposite the Monastery. A few of them formed a group, while the rest —like me — were assigned. Alongside my group's room in the barrack was another little room for a therapist. But she wasn't there. We organized life for ourselves, temporary of course, because soon the sanatorium schedule emerged and the promised cure began. Or was supposed to begin, since it did not completely happen. Someone maybe thought or had concluded that this wasn't really about a cure but just isolating us, an internment so that the spread of The Loss could be halted.

Why do you really want to know what we experienced? Will any good come from what I, Habor, tell you, Viso, and then you will tell others? Good for whom? I sense that it's futile. Even so, when I have a free hour or more, I turn to this writing. It's a kind of reading, like reading a book that could be painful, the kind I wouldn't buy or choose to read. But when it is the only book or nearly the only one — no! the sole book that I don't have to listen to, one that without a single sound I can see like a movie? Then I have to turn to the book that is inside me. But you, Viso, you are important. This shouldn't be a book for one reader —for me alone.

The Transport, the trip, the crucial meeting with Jeannine in the bus, that I'd seen her face so extraordinarily clearly when she said, "I am Jeannine de" I wasn't yet the silly "I-Habor." That started on Tyflonia in the barracks, and then in the Colony. We introduced ourselves to one another not like people afflicted, but just like ordinary people. Mountains glowed outside the bus windows. They shined in the distance, but I see them only through this grid of pixels, filtered through a perforated retina.

We were a pretty large group, several hundred of us were on the barge, but at the coast there were still more Afflicted, imprisoned, having been transported to the Island earlier. Freezing in the sharp wind that always blew there. In the gray and the fog, not only in our own eyes, but the real gray fog, damp and salty to the taste. Why was a place like this chosen for our "cure"?

Somehow we'd all been counted. Those who knew one another stayed together, but many had no friends. Somehow I ended up in a barrack. It was fairly close to the coast, along a road beside a stone wall.

3. “Medical exams.” Chances to make contact

At the very end of January — I don’t want to check which day... I’ve suddenly felt again the desire to make contact with someone beyond Tyflonia. We have so few chances. (You probably would like to know what they are, and maybe I’ll write about them, but I need to think about this and whether it might harm our situation. How do I know who will read what I’ve written to you, who else will read this besides you? Where will this all go? Maybe find its way to those concerned with Control on Tyflonia? They do exist, but if they find out that somebody like me takes them into account, no matter. I know about You! I know! But I won’t say yet what else I know.)

Dear Viso, that was a side comment in case my suppositions prove true. I do need and want contact with you, apart from other possibilities I may or may not have.

Don’t be surprised at my off-hand remarks or that I don’t always keep my promises to explain what happened later. To tell someone something, it’s important to say something about oneself first. Do you always have the courage to do that?

And how long will I be able to manage this? What about your absent “presence”? The unbearable fact that I’m answering letters that don’t exist? Because it’s as if they never existed, well, they don’t exist because they are forbidden to exist.

What am I doing answering letters that are burned when they reach their destination, that I read in my memory that which is not allowed to be a real memory? I have to get you to realize, no — to feel — that it’s impossible to understand anything connected with The Loss or dependent on The Loss. And that’s the way it will continue to be.

So then I’ll tell you one thing more: I haven’t written to you because I went through a period of Control examinations (we have to submit to these examinations at various times based on the speed at which our retina changes). This ranges from stagnation to a sharp rise in The Loss (“The Loss,” something that’s a negative — can a negative increase? But that’s what they call it. The “unlosable” diminishes, and what increases is what was, but has ceased to exist).

It’s strange: normally The Loss is, in fact, imperceptible. Today I certainly see less than before, but I can’t confirm this, I don’t feel it — something has to happen so that a person notices that he’s not seeing what he once saw before — how long ago? He doesn’t know what to say. Each person gets accustomed to the fact that visible details are fewer. People get used to it faster than the details disappear. It sounds silly, but that’s how it is. The examination is an opportunity to pinpoint that information. Sometimes after an examination our categories of The Loss change (always an increase on an open scale from $\frac{1}{2}$ to ...). And maybe the scale for us has some limit, about which they are silent, or maybe it hasn’t yet been determined.

The examination is always standard. They no longer photograph our retinas, or assess our field of vision, or measure contrast, or even dilate the pupils. They just look briefly at the fundus or back of the eye, or sometimes not at all. Like “The Great Test” in king whats-his-name day — “how many fingers do you see?” And the Controllers believe what you say, how many fingers that

you guess, or say you see? Then they check the boxes. It's just information for a report about the tempo of The Loss among, let's say, the "inhabitants of Tyflonia."

My examination? Its result? Just like before. My category didn't change. "You've probably reached your bottom line," the Controller says. I prefer to call him "Controller" and not address him as doctor. At one time, doctors were here. Now it's just The Loss Controllers. Of course, they are Controllers in the sense of inspectors and not in controlling the phenomenon.

"My bottom line." That's rich. It would be beautiful were it true. What do I know? Maybe my case is not really that stable. It changes, but the Controller isn't interested in those changes. They don't affect the report of how many fingers appear in front of me. One hand suffices. What would he do if I said that I see six? Would that mean I've reached the end of an open scale?

Oh Viso! If you are planning to turn up here, please don't. It wouldn't make sense and besides, thank goodness, it would be hard to arrange. Impossible, really. In any case, I prefer to write: I don't accept this, I don't want this! For many reasons I simply don't want to agree to this. Maybe someday I will explain why this is so, or maybe I won't explain anything because I don't want to, I absolutely don't want to give in. What does it matter that you want to see me or take a look at our world — I don't want you to. That would be like meeting in person people whom you know only from the internet. That's about how it is for us. It doesn't change the fact that I think about this differently and maybe you do too. People can encounter one another in the flesh without knowing that they are actually communicating with each other online. But that can't happen with us. I'm on another planet. Get it through your head, please: really another planet. No contact via spaceship. Our planet is no place to visit.

You want to see me but I can't see you — you will be just a shape like all others until you say: "I-Viso." So what — You, Viso! Really you? How would I know? Of course, you'd see me but I'd see only a shape. Nothing more. So I want to be only a shape to you. So I'm speaking to you now, "I-Habor." Why should that be too little? Give me a break, leave things as they are.

And so there it is. I don't want you to show up here, even if by some miracle you could manage it. To help you accept this, despite my own reluctance and against various rules, I can explain one thing.

First of all: this is for your own good. It's true: there's no telling if The Loss has actually ended, that everyone has experienced it or is experiencing it — that there won't be new victims. We aren't certain there isn't a contagion factor we don't know about, how it is transmitted and who among us, "The Afflicted," carries it and infects new victims. Sometimes I believe in this danger (almost everyone does at the outset). Then I rule out that hypothesis, erase it. Unproved, no supporting evidence; we are just interned (let's use the term) to protect you, Viso. So get that notion of reporting out of your head. It wouldn't be any sort of useful experiment. It's not well thought out. Has no one had the courage to think it through? Not wanted to? An experiment that would prove yes or no: is The Loss contagious or not?

You can investigate in your own world, not here. There must be some traces of experiments, reports, conclusions. You knew, or rather did know, while it was news. We weren't told what was really found out. Or, maybe, nothing was discovered that would justify leaving us to this fate. It's hard to imagine how it might have been to maintain that The Loss was some misunderstanding that could be shoved under the rug. A really thick, kilometers-long, rug. I-Habor lie under some rug like a piece of trash.

I prefer to think that I am dangerous and therefore isolated and not that I'm doing penance for some misunderstanding, for a mindless panic that no one has the courage to admit. Someone doing life in prison has to be guilty; otherwise, how can there be restitution?

Anyway, Viso, I apologize for this abrupt refusal to let you come to our Center, even the very attempt to come. I'm not backing down from my arguments, but why so categorically? Because I don't know for sure if you are thinking about something like this. I only imagine that's the case. Here we know so little for certain that we are constantly tempted to imagine different situations that aren't possible even on the most distant horizon. We don't see any horizon at all. "Horizon" is an empty concept, a void encompassed by The Loss. All we see is a kind of fog. All the time — even when there's no fog at all. We know that when we move forward some distance it's always the same fog before us instead of a horizon. No dampness on our face, nothing real, nothing palpable. It can turn out that there's a barrier, a wall, a fence, a wire or a prickly hedge.

I'm not some ordinary lunatic. The term "Control examination" knocked me off balance, although these current Controllers aren't at fault. Even if they were more deeply interested in us, there's nothing they can do. They are unfairly caught up in this just like we are. For sure. I don't even know what schedule they have to submit reports. And I don't know if they are afraid of The Loss themselves, or whether they think it's dangerous to work with us, or maybe they feel safe?

Once again I've let myself wander off into conjecture. You know, sometimes I feel that The Loss is different from how it was once sketchily explained to us. Once, meaning during the "treatment" phase in the hospital. The same principle underlies the work of the Controllers. The eye, the eyes . . . that's where to look for The Loss, its early and late traces. You know yourself, everyone knows: the macula is a part of the brain. Like a kind of door flap. The Loss can be confirmed in the macula. After all, there is a connection: the nerves. Viso, I seriously fear that The Loss is more in the brain than in the eye. Something's missing there, something was destroyed, something that was once there, or still is but has been wiped away or lost. Maybe whatever triggers The Loss behaves like a computer virus. I'm afraid of that, although "there" means in the mind, and even with its cunning and memory I cannot observe what's missing the way my vision would. But why doesn't anyone really explore this? We see nobody besides ourselves. No surprise, after all, we don't see anything precisely. Maybe as with our injured sight, we get accustomed to our own craziness, to mental deprivation, to a kind of passivity.

Passivity is a hard thing. In the beginning it really was the illness, but that passed or subsided because they stopped giving us medicines to calm us down. It's no longer like it was, when no one wanted anything. Still . . . do we want in the way that those totally untouched by The Loss want? How could I know that now?

When the psychologists still tried to work with our problems, they advised some positive activity: recall the past, rest in the world of good memories. That is, if you had good memories and were able to comfort yourself with them, derive some faith from them. Memories also fed our sense of The Loss. So maybe The Loss, this plague, would swell up, spread elsewhere. “The Loss of Central Vision” — that was hard like a pebble, a concrete cause of our different degrees of The Loss, large and small. Because of it I am not the person I was and will not be the person I might have become. The borderline between memories and dreams barely exists. It is as foggy as our “horizon,” as near, ever nearer as if the size of the Earth decreased daily by some small fraction. Rarely, but from time to time, Kadab and I recall something. For you too, Viso, I can fish out something. Not from before The Loss, of course. That is forbidden territory.

4. Helen

Good memories from the time after The Loss? There are some. For example, during the supposedly temporary internment period in the barracks. Having to manage being confined with people we didn't choose was hard. A chaplain once described a similar center as a "convent without a vocation." An apt phrase and maybe not by accident, since the Island was once dotted with convents (their traces seen off the eastern edge of the Monastery walls — an area then labeled "off limits" to us, but faintly visible).

The crowding was hard to bear, especially as at first it increased with new transports that only later turned out to be unnecessary. I quickly discovered that in fact it was easy to slip out beyond the perimeter by going underneath the barbed wire and then simply opening the wooden gate locked only with a latch. Toward midnight I could easily walk along the old stone path, especially since I used a long, massive stick, forked at one end which I'd found under a Celtic cross. Practically every day I went out this way, past deserted farms to the sandy bay, the "Monks Beach," as I later learned it was called. It was cold, late winter, but the pasture in this climate remained green. One day in a green field, near a low stone wall I saw a strange, live figure that was moving — a large animal. A huge, reddish brown cow. Not seeing clearly, I could not tell if maybe it had been abandoned (like the dogs left behind by those who left the Island and that sometimes prowled around the barracks). I looked at its powerful shape with fascination.

Another day, the cow stood there again. And beside it was a woman, as motionless as the animal. We looked at each other; she must have felt my eyes on her, as if we were straining to recognize each other. Finally, she waved to me. I saw that hand more clearly than the fingers of the Controller during an examination. The next time I saw her beside the cow, she had a tin cup or a mug in her hand. She set it down on the wall, indicating that it was for me. Gestures are not the best way for The Afflicted to communicate, but I could see enough to understand. I took the mug and quickly drank the strange, thick, creamy milk. I bowed to the woman and she repeated my bow, all without a word. This was how our ritual began, not every day, but frequently.

This would continue, but that's another story.

Viso, Viso. Hey there! You are far away. You've been farther away for a longer time than you were before. It's a strange thing between us. Closer, farther. Formerly, now. Or maybe tomorrow? Maybe sometime? Did I already write to you about the word "sometime"? Sometimes when I write you see still another Habor. Today it's "I-Habor" who speaks to you, so that you know for sure whom you are really meeting.

I have thought that our distance, the "virtuality" of our meetings which means that you too are affected by The Loss because you can't see me fully. You aren't a witness to my

transformation; I am its witness and convince you about it, about what's happening to me or has happened at some point.

I've drawn you into an event, the day of my meeting Helen, of communication with her even in all her silent anonymity. For you, the whole time when I wasn't writing the woman offering milk remained. I thought, assumed, that you are wondering how I will learn her name. How could you guess that as soon as I started to speak with this mute, that together we dared this — we would exchange names.

At first I didn't realize how profound her silence was, that she had always lived in a soundless world. Somehow, perhaps via other nerves in another part of her brain, The Loss began for her in a different way than mine, than ours, the one that brought us to this Island. We were assigned here out of some trace of compassion, but fear too.

So Helen had remained, waiting for us, just like her cow and the sheep that huddled in the heather, on the meadows amid the grayish-white boulders. When taking long walks I'd come upon the sheep probably dozing, soft and warm. They were shy, but my — our — slow steps as we tapped our way along the path with a stick didn't frighten them. Maybe they missed human contact? Some dogs had stayed with them — did I write about the dogs? I often see them, like black and white smudges. Sometimes I see a white paw quite clearly, or black ears raised and alert. The way they hang around Helen, it seems they like people, but if I walk with her they are wary of me.

That was long ago, Viso, a fragment of an unwritten journal. It's much easier just to share it with you than to write about the present and what life is like now.

Helen belongs completely to the past, a name written in sand. She gave me milk, believing that it would halt The Loss, even though it had not brought her out of silence. "Deaf — dumb — it's all the same!"

Perhaps I'll tell you still more about Helen, but later, when it's necessary. I will summon her help when I struggle to make something that's difficult more comprehensible to you. For now, and so you don't dwell too much on Helen, there is something you should know.

One September day when the hours of light are short, Helen went away, that is, went across the heath, along the beach, along her favorite route circling the Island, silently and rapidly, barely stopping to rest in some little valley, or beneath the boulders, slipping through the little town after dusk until we could no longer see her shadow. She did not return.

I-Habor had to take over tending the cow. Helen was never found.

Because of The Loss, we aren't able to look for anybody or anything. The Controllers didn't have Helen on their lists. In effect, she had never been here because she was supposed to leave the Island before our arrival.

The Island is small. It's impossible that someone could disappear without a trace, although she could have swum away or concealed herself in her cave covered over by rocks and moss. I can happily imagine such a hiding place, sealed so tight that even a dog wouldn't pick up the scent in the turf.

The cow is old and doesn't like to walk far. But from time to time I try to drag her out onto the heath. Hairs of her bronze coat catch in the heather; there's nothing for her to graze on. The bales of hay brought on the ferry — for the locals — are better for her. As long as the cow is alive, we must tend to her. That is how it has always been.

5. Kadab

I mentioned him to you, but then went on with my story as if he weren't there, just a blank. So I'm returning to that episode (a lost episode) in my life when we were separated and I went on without him. My time alone didn't last that long and my solitariness was a moment of deprivation, rather than self-sufficiency. I haven't written to you and instead been silent about how empty it was without K, without "Kadab," as he too says, though to me he doesn't need to say, "I-Kadab."

There are no exceptions: K. was a figure also, an outline, a shape filled in by shadow, but I recognize him even at quite a distance. The rhythm of his speech tells me that he already sees me, that he is hastening to that moment of our being-together. Writing this, I am really saying too much about K. The two of us together, we — Habor and K. — are too little affected by The Loss to be here. What should we do? If I avoid explaining this, I'll add to the fiction I create in corresponding with "the reporter Viso" — the fiction of a lonely-normal Habor. Without K., Habor wouldn't exist either, Viso, at least the Habor who is writing these more or less organized letters-texts.

Fortunately, Viso, you found me when K. was already with me. Everyone here is alone unless The Loss affected whoever was with them, or they chose someone here, with The Loss assumed to be part of the picture, or more accurately, at the heart of their union. The Controllers recognize their right to be together on the condition of absolute adherence to contraception, because no one wants "children of The Loss." What would such children be like? Grim rumors circulate about some offspring. I'll spare you the details, highly improbable in any case. Contraception is suspiciously effective. It didn't used to be, but back then damage to the macula wasn't widespread either, so it's still all a puzzle.

The Loss in itself is a phenomenon of damage so deep that not everyone sees it, so the Controllers contend. I know, dear Viso, that you are waiting for some description like, "how did it happen?" or "what were the beginnings of The Loss like?" (Or, maybe "did you hear anything?" "Was there some smell?" "A cloud, some overcast?" "A dust storm?")

No, not yet — or at least not now. You'll have to be satisfied with the fact that by pure chance K. happened to be with me. There was, as you surely know, a kind of breakdown, or rather barrier to communication. Something began to happen with me (wait, I once wrote about it — take a look under "The Loss, first signs of"). Attempts to find help, a hospital, confinement somewhere . . . dead phone lines, busy signals, illegible mail, blank screens. I know that K. struggled to make contact and I realized then that it had to be that way. He overcame his timidity and some kind of fatalism; a quiet, tough, persistent determination guided him. No hint of that determination reached me, but I realized what must be going on — this wasn't the first phase in our life together, even if it was the most challenging. As I've already said, I attribute my survival to "treating the syndrome

of The Loss” that we’d succumbed to, mainly the passivity overwhelming us when faced with every kind of lack. Since K. was not there, I had to rely on medicine and wait.

The fog lifted, parted like a curtain and I saw K. in his usual spot near me, just a step away. I’m ashamed to write about this; what do you say, as a reporter?

I’ve had to convince myself, because without this admission, there’s no truth at all in my writing.

When K., that is Kadab, returns in my writing, you, Viso, must broaden your perspective. I don’t want you to imagine that having him at my side compromises or destroys your idea to examine the “phenomenon of The Loss” through me. Maybe that’s so, but if that’s the case — then the fault is mine. I-Habor presented myself as such: Habor — alone, Habor as your correspondent from “afar.”

But come on, let’s not delude ourselves. Habor might weave her own thoughts, even note them down illegibly, or legible for one person only. But every word that reaches you, every word-for-Viso, had to be patiently transcribed by Kadab-not-Kadab, or preferably still just “K.” For him, I am “H.” like before. Because of all the writing, he speaks to you, Viso, as “I-Kadab.” See him, look carefully at him when maybe we become real for you. You must work to achieve this, work as K. did; he achieved it. When I was already on the Island and had been here a while and had met Helen and she disappeared, he arrived on a Transport. He carefully asked around about who lives in our area. He waited. He saw me alone with the stick in my hand. I let it go when I heard my name.

I apologize.

Let people think whatever they want. I don’t want to offend you, Viso, when I say you don’t exist. You probably understand where this comes from and why. We exist in a situation that takes away our chance for normality. We understand one another despite The Loss, but The Loss is real. What is impossible remains so. If something happens, if something impossible occurs, then one has to cover it up, hide it. I can tell you this much: K. presented himself as a victim of “The Loss” and got through. He didn’t have to do it, no one directed him. He came to the conclusion himself that he had to look for me over here.

Things were still in a chaotic state, or rather in a state of chaos once again, “chaos 2,” meaning the pressure of the rising number of victims of the catastrophe bearing down on the system trying to contain it, confine it within certain limits. The Afflicted began to resist being separated. They stopped admitting that they had been affected by The Loss and they rejected help that was clearly discriminatory. I-Habor didn’t see it myself, but I know it from K. You probably know all this from your side, but in a different way. These reports probably can be reconciled.

K. had returned to the home we shared after I was gone. He found a letter, but the hospital would not let him in, and there was no information about who was being treated, or who had been transported and where. Somehow or another, hospital staff escaped — against the prohibitions —

and revealed some details. Along the highways to the airport buses could be seen, filled with sleepy, passive, shadowy figures.

While he was a patient, K. made friends with a gay man (it was said that gays were particularly targeted for deportation). K. made his way to the transport together with this fellow who was searching for a friend who'd been profoundly affected by The Loss. Although unsure whether they were choosing the right direction for deportation, they didn't want to wait longer. At the port they evaded the Controllers and the staff. K. said that this was not all that difficult, at least for someone who could actually see what was going on. K. found my barrack just as if someone had directed him to it. Later on, we easily found one another in the crowd or in unfamiliar spots, instinctively drawn to the same kinds of places — park benches, tables in the conference hall, the same areas on the beach or in the woods. So we were together on the first night.

I could help K.'s gay friend find his partner in the "Lazaret," the infirmary near the harbor, since I knew that was where the worst cases were housed. We had to get him out of there, however, because treatment was almost *exclusively* "sedation," and that situation could lead to suicide. The Lazaret inmates eventually filled a small graveyard on a hill. Long ago, when cholera victims were buried in cemeteries, lanterns were set out for the dead. Here, however, the graveyard had no markers at first, except the barbed wire fencing that surrounded it. Later, little marble crosses were placed or mounted, little tablets, and symbols made from the grayish-white marble that litters the beaches here. Now, in place of the wire, there's a low stone wall where prickly heather that blooms in early autumn has been planted. Someone painted in big black letters, "Dead on T" — but ran out of pitch to write more.

6. The Colony, Kubat, and a radio?

We decided to set up a “Colony.” Move out of the barrack and occupy — like squatters — a spacious house vacated or rather left to me by Helen. Helen’s house was dilapidated, looking almost as if destroyed, although the roof was still good, as were its little shuttered windows. Adjoining it was a small field where the cow sometimes would deign to let us milk her. The Colonists were, for the time being, K. and myself. From the outset, we planned to choose a few more people, but gradually so that they would fit in.

When was this? Do you realize, Viso, how far back in time I’m going? I think that when all this happened you weren’t a journalist yet, but just learning to write — no reporting, just phrases that taught you the alphabet. Maybe I’m exaggerating. To me it sometimes feels like all this took place only yesterday. No, maybe not. But in that range. After all, this is something far away from real life. Beyond our perspective, as it were. No matter. Now, when I think of the “Colony” that we established on Helen’s farm (let’s say, a month ago), I-Habor am quite young, living with K. as if we were off on a new honeymoon, taking walks on the beach and across the heath.

The Colony. An obvious idea, but also like previous attempts in various other emigrations. Sometimes emigrants formed a little hell for themselves from which it was hard to get away. I knew about such cases and that was a warning. But not form a Colony? Life in the barracks was a bit like a “lager,” a labor camp — just without the top down horror. You have to get away from anything like that, get completely away (which would be best), but how? Courage began to appear only much later.

So we decided in favor of the Colony. Daily, carefully, but like complete amateurs, we examined the Cow, K. and I, hesitantly but always with Tadol, K.’s friend from the “pilgrimage” who divided his time between Kubat (his friend in the Lazaret), us, and the Cow. Tadol worked at pulling Kubat out of his depression. One day Tadol gave in to my urging and took a teacup of milk that I’d been able to get after an hour’s coaxing and playing the sounds of Celtic music (K. had brought a few CDs and a little player). An unexpected miracle occurred. Kubat took an interest in the cow and wanted to see her, but then he fell silent, turned his head away to the wall, assuming that he never would. Still, this was some progress. “And maybe you know how to milk?” Tadol asked jokingly. “I did once know how,” Kubat burst out.

On the next visit we assured Kubat that if he really did know how, then maybe he would be able to do it. You don’t forget how to milk a cow, just like you don’t forget how to swim or ride a bicycle. We told Kubat about the Colony as if it were a secret garden. We convinced him that he could leave his dark glasses at the Lazaret; no one would put them on, and nobody would start looking for him. I was important here because in my case the extent of The Loss was already so far advanced that I understood what Kubat was feeling. Tadol tried to understand, but it’s impossible when someone can still read, even if with difficulty. K. has always been far-sighted and without his glasses strains to read (that had been his advantage with the Controllers). In

Kubat's case, The Loss came with a fever, an infection that further complicated the process. The infection was controlled, his condition eased, and the pain (probably not related directly to The Loss) subsided, but Kubat now moved around in a world of outlines, shapes, and fog. We had to start the Colony now because he wanted to come — to confirm it was real and not some therapeutic tale by Tadol, toward whom in any case he'd behaved badly, reacting against the humiliating life in the Lazaret. He apologized.

While not everything was ready, the late spring finally came. The dry stalks in the fields turned green and here and there, grasses sprouted, ordinary twitch grass that the Cow could feed on.

We decided on very early morning when everyone in the barracks and little houses was still sleeping. We wrapped Kubat in a blanket and set him up on a bicycle with Kadab and Tadol supporting him on each side. I walked ahead to wait with the cow in Helen's garden where crocuses sprouted (the cow had beaten them down but didn't eat them). Kubat was tense, but went through the gate with Tadol. The cow stood motionless on the path as usual. Kubat picked up her scent.

He approached her with complete trust — all of us were still a bit fearful of her — put out his hand and gave her a resounding slap on her neck. "You, cow, give way!" he said, and the hairy beast compliantly turned around so her udders were exposed. Kubat ran his hands along her neck and then squatted at the udders "Where's a bucket?" he asked. "Maybe you've got an apron and a small table?"

Colony life began with drinking — two sips each — of still warm milk. Happily, no one considered it disgusting.

When I think back on the beginnings of our Colony, I suddenly realize how strange it all was, how illogical. How we considered obvious things that were not obvious at all. Why do I only see this now? Probably because I try to see things as you must see them. I imagine your reaction, and maybe what you might have done in our place. Something entirely different, no doubt. Why didn't we organize an escape? Why didn't we think how foolish our isolation was? Break away, return home?

You probably would not have accepted all this.

But you know nothing about The Loss. I am writing, and have written a good deal already, but not about The Loss. Based on what I recount, through your imagining us, The Afflicted, from what we do for ourselves and what didn't occur to us, you have to build a concept: what is The Loss?

We don't know. We ceased to know any kind of world not affected by The Loss. In other words, we no longer counted on that world or took it into consideration. In the barracks various groups reappeared that were based on connections from before The Loss. Or so it seemed. But now other ties influenced them, ties connected with who had landed here, on what Transport they had come. How badly they had been affected by The Loss and to what extent they realized it. How much did they think about it and what they couldn't believe or did not want to believe. To what extent did they give in to its bondage or suffer waves of anger or depression. Who focused on his

own “health,” who counted on something and who didn’t. These differences were also rooted in how The Loss manifested itself in each person, the course its clinical development took.

“The Loss” — like the scythe of the Grim Reaper. Different, vague. Or like a laser beam — blue, winking flashes. Draining. Spitting. Spits in your eye. Blurs your open eyes. Blurs your face in the mirror with its fingers. I-Habor, you-The Loss?

So what do you think now? Better that I don’t know, since basically it doesn’t matter much to me. Kadab. My Kadab. I don’t want to alarm him. I shouldn’t, especially since I don’t encounter The Loss that way. I sense it. What I wrote came about through sensing what some were living through, or seemed to be at least, while others including myself somehow did not. Not me. Not Habor.

For me it was different.

To be honest, I have to say that I have gotten used to The Loss. Even though at the same time it’s unreal. I say to it: you aren’t here. The world is as it was. You envelop me, you surround me, but everything is still out there, everything that I do not see. People have faces; I still have my face too and, Kadab, you see it.

So, what could it be about? That’s something you, Viso, will never grasp. But maybe that’s precisely the issue?

When I think of our Colony, I first see a table, our table in Helen’s kitchen: an old-fashioned wooden table covered with a tin metal sheet for scrubbing that’s been scrubbed so much it is full of grooves. Dirt had accumulated on it, but Kubat got the idea to scrub it down with sand from the beach. It worked. Transformed, the surface of the table began to gleam. I remember the table, as if it were untouched by The Loss, as if I were looking at it in the morning light, with all its sharp detail engulfing a familiar sight — a bright, unevenly ridged countertop with slightly darker shadows, the outlines of objects: a stone saucer for salt, a knife, freshly baked bread cooling on a pillow covered with a white towel. The sight of the table comes not only through my eyes, but also through my fingers as they trace the grooves, as they touch the knife. I seem to hear the imperceptible murmur of the sea, and the strange laugh of the small sea birds landing and roosting on the roof. Oh, Viso, is it worth living so fast, cramming in so much each day that in the end we don’t really remember anything? We need a kind of memory that even The Loss cannot obliterate.

Hey, Viso — want to know how it happened that we have a radio, how that came about? I understand that you’d want to imagine that.

Things were different at different times. At first it was radio silence here. We’d been brought straight from the hospital. If someone had his own receiver, the question was whether the person was alert enough to bring it without asking permission. If they did have one, then they didn’t reveal it. Quite a bit of time passed, at least a month, before we learned that, despite the reluctance of the Controllers as our intermediaries, we could apply to get some needed item. You had to have money, and here again, few had any cash. We were denied free importation unless it

was “first aid.” Someone finally thought that we ought to have a radio, that it may not be first aid, but it’s reasonable, worth considering.

Transistor radios (unfortunately with weak range) began appearing in Cargo. Not much use here. One could hear reports for local fishermen, mainly about weather and tides — still kind of interesting — as well as mackerel schools, or the seals appearing farther north on the small, uninhabited isles and rocks. Only with difficulty could we tune in local news from the archipelago that our island belongs to, but the technical language and gossipy nature of the news made it almost incomprehensible. Local weddings or funerals or celebrations of local dignitaries, mayors, or whatever they were called didn’t interest us. All we learned was that nothing special was happening, that the continental community hadn’t collapsed; no epidemic had broken out in the area, nor had The Loss or anything like it had spread farther. One could assume that back in the place we’d left life was going on just as before.

In Helen’s house we found a huge, old-fashioned Telefunken radio with its green “magic eye” tube. It sat on a chest, unused, and for Helen, completely useless. After weeks of effort, Kadab managed to get it to work. We heard a murmuring, crackling, wheezing, then long buzzing in places where there had once been a signal, stations broadcasting on long and short waves. I remember that one spot was called “Hilversum,” somewhere in Holland. Had all stations gone silent, or were they too far away for us to pick up? We would have to work harder to get the antique radio tuned to pick up anything real. Kadab had a few small tools that he wouldn’t part with, and so he’d brought them here — just as Tadol had his silver flute.

Of course, it didn’t succeed immediately. At first we got bits of music mixed in with murmuring, as if the radio waves ran into ocean waves in stormy weather, as if the wind mixed them up. The wind beat against the antenna suspended along the back wall of the building. Traces of an old antenna were still there, some remaining pegs and hooks helped reinforce a new one. Had it been placed on the roof, the wind would have beat against it even harder, and worse, it would have been more visible. We wanted to avoid that, since we suspected that the choice of weak transistor radios in Cargo had not been accidental.

What did we hear one evening when the antenna finally worked? Guess!

7. Hiza, Taddol, Kubat. First contact with the Monastery

A long, bright northern night. Quite warm. The distinct hum of the ocean coming in close to us and a violet gray moisture in the air around us. Kubat is milking the cow, slowly, the way she likes it. In the panes of a little window, Tadol is playing his flute, a silvery voice from the silver instrument; its sound travels, turning into music. “A kind of ambient, a ‘hymn of milk,’” Tadol called it.

Someone halts at the gate. Listens. I say, “Come in.” The figure moves closer. A woman. Very tall. When close to me, she says, “I-Hiza.” And then, in English: “May I listen?” I see that her face is very dark. So is the hand she extends to me, and heavy with glittering stones. Kubat taps on the table’s tin top. Tadol switches to another rhythm. Kadab brings in some milk in a mug. One after another, we drink. When the flute stops, Hiza sings in a low, soft voice. No, she can’t be young, I think. She sings, “Oh, how fragile.” We remember this, Kadab and I. And you, Viso? No, it is something from a world long before ours, yours as well.

You may get impatient when I lose myself in memories. But I have to go back into them in order to explain something to you, that is, to finally explain it.

Hiza became part of our household. Only a few days later, she brought in her belongings. At that time, few of us had very much in the way of “belongings.” A couple of sweaters, some underwear, rubber boots — wellingtons — that had been given out to us, some plates and eating utensils. And more rarely, books, now souvenirs that we couldn’t read.

Hiza toted in everything herself: dishes, pots, a large knife that she left in the kitchen, while the rest she put into a tiny room she occupied on the first floor. (Tadol had already white-washed the walls).

Hiza didn’t spend much time with us at home. Early in the morning she went out with Kubat who led the cow out onto a meadow near the lake, usually in the direction of the Monastery. Hiza still could see better and managed skillfully with the gates that had to be locked. This direction, our direction, wasn’t popular with the neighboring barracks. People feared contact with the Monastery without permission, including the field that belonged to it. The cow grazed. Kubat lay with his eyes closed, listening to the wind, and the murmuring sounds from the nearby beach. At first, Hiza sang very softly. They were out on the meadow at different times of the day and even late after dusk.

One day, Hiza spotted a blinking light in one of the windows of the Monastery.

Kubat liked to lay out in his own way, curled up or spread out between two thick planks from Helen’s house, so that he could feel the hard earth, but still warm, protected from the penetrating dampness. Having his eyes closed was restful, even if not the kind of rest anyone would want. The brain, relieved of the influx of data, reproduces beneath the eyelids, as it were, various messages lodged there, the strongest ones. It imposes patterns on them, like a bunch of grass, or brown hairs from Kras (as Kubat had christened the cow). Or it could be the fencing around the

barracks or the stone wall of the Monastery. A wall like that rises suddenly across the road, lines it, although it's actually not there at all. These are tricks that The Loss plays on us. Kubat told me about them, and we agreed because already by then I'd experienced the same thing. Now there are medications for it, but they don't help. Maybe they can slow them down, halt the kaleidoscope of patterns. Kubat was tormented by them. Laying on the meadow and Hiza's singing brought him some relief. The best was when he could feel that two large bodies, Hiza and Kras, were close by, touchable. Kras stood alongside, motionless as a statue; he could hear her munching with her calm, bovine patience. Hiza would sing ever more quietly, almost wordlessly, though sometimes mingling words unknown to her from our language.

Sleep gave Kubat some respite and he needed sleep more and more. In his case, The Loss manifested itself as exhaustion, something that we too could expect, at least some of us, maybe even all of us. Perhaps it wasn't The Loss itself that exhausted us, but rather the world it had given rise to? I didn't know at the time. Only now I've begun to wonder about it. I think the answer is "yes," or "probably yes".

I won't rule out that The Loss saps our strength, that it occurs within our physiology itself, while sadness floats in on the psychic level — like Kubat's sadness and Hiza's partial sadness that hadn't yet destroyed her. And the rebelliousness of Tadol, or "Taddol" as he now wanted to be called. There was something to this name change; he felt like someone different, at least a little different. He began to suffer because his action, his entire strength once put into finding Kubat, and now being stubbornly devoted to him, to helping him, to cheering him up — didn't make Kubat happy, but perhaps only slowed his decline.

Poor Taddol. He longed desperately to produce some success. Personalities like Taddol should steer clear of The Loss. Absolutely. Maybe that's instructive for you, Viso. Decide whether you want to read further what I write!

And Kadab? It's hard for me to write about him, as you've probably noticed. We, that is, he and I, had and continue to have together something that we don't talk about because it isn't necessary. Searching for me, struggling to get here, staying in the midst of The Loss, Kadab acted in his own unique way — not out of custom, but because of his nature, something that's given, and supports his nature and relies on it.

You may envy me, Viso. I don't even need to be happy. I'm free to not be happy, so I am. Through you, Viso, I had to tell Kadab what I think and hope. It hasn't always been that way.

Sorry, Kadab. Of course, you will forgive me. Don't worry, it's only for this once. I try not to involve you (more than you already are).

What happened? It seemed to us five — Kadab, Habor, Kubat, Taddol, and Hiza — that we had settled, that we would continue in our little splinter group, our Colony, as a branch of the medical internment to which The Afflicted had been exiled. Here we somehow live, see however much we can from afar, and wait for what will happen to us (or maybe to everyone?). The Loss

develops in us, or maybe we develop with it? Month after month, until at last it had been a year, and then another year and a new sequence of the seasons that we know.

We grew bolder. We didn't confine ourselves to the heath, but walked along the beach too. We could sit there in the paltry sun (which was good for us). Whoever knew how or had enough courage might swim. Most, the majority, feared getting lost in the fog in which we exist. The beach was not crowded, just figures here and there. We avoided making friends, only later we developed ways to meet people. It's always an effort, and brings little benefit since what's the point of an "acquaintance" who remains an anonymous, unidentifiable shape?

Near the town was a cluster of little houses adjacent to the harbor and a colony of barracks enclosed by a flat bay and a bit of less rocky, almost sandy coastline. More people came and went here because it was safe to swim; a line of colorful buoys enclosed the bay. It was hard to find your things left on the shore; someone had to watch them, or rather watch for the owner to direct them to their things. That's why there was a constant calling out and shouting at the shore. I preferred to avoid that and, besides, it was rarely warm enough to swim. Walks were more relaxing, or being on the meadow near the ocean behind our house in the direction of the Monastery.

One recollection at the start, an important one. I write this now because it just came to mind and maybe I'll lose it. It was Hiza, who one evening noticed a flashing light from one of the Monastery windows. We thought no one lived there. Along the road to the harbor, the town, and the barracks — as well as the graveyard — we passed the empty Monastery, just as if it were a big rock, although it was not a ruin and before our arrival it was certainly inhabited.

Surely you've noticed, Viso, what these memories suggest — that we, The Afflicted, had our curiosity, initiative and enterprise blocked. The Colony in Helen's house would not have developed without Helen, even though she left us so quickly. Taddol and Kadab had more strength, but by being with us it seemed to dissipate. We drain them. Maybe that's what Tadol was rebelling against when he added the second "d" to his name? Please show us some empathy, realize how amazing it was that we undertook anything, any project or plan however small. Passivity was normal. The reality was that we slept so much, even Kubat woke up only to milk Kras and he was half-asleep, though he always managed to do it correctly.

All our work was drastically reduced to self-service. Meals were brought to us — pick it up, chew, and that's it. No one had thought that we'd be able to manage. We taught them that we could. In general, we by-passed one another, not only the silent, empty Monastery and deserted farms, or the few sheep and dogs on the heath. At the time we surely thought that we were living as best we could. Now I see that era as one long, gray stretch. It seems to me, as well, that it didn't last long. But that's not true. There were years, years with practically no events, because we avoided what was possible to avoid.

This is why I remember the striking of the bell, sometime after the break of dawn. We all heard it. Hiza did not let us ignore this signal. When the bell sounded the second day, she prodded us to go and find out what it meant. Of course, it was an invitation: the gate was open. Through the courtyard with its empty fountain, we walked to the church from which we could hear the sounds of a piano. Someone was playing "Amazing Grace." Slowly, carefully. Rows of chairs,

probably empty. At the front, around the piano, a group of figures. One of them said to us, “Welcome. We’ve finally been able to return and be here . . . with you. For now, each evening there will be prayer. Come sing with us.” No song books; they knew the music.

That first night, only Hiza sang. Her voice grew stronger, until it finally filled the church. After the service people from the Monastery thanked us, and Hiza in particular. They asked us to encourage others of “our people.” “Yes, yes.” But we didn’t promise anything.

8. Boredom. The Petitioners

HABOR TO VISO:

Contact between us dropped off, naturally. You don't understand why. You remind me about what happened next, as if you had some right to know. But what if I, Habor, lost the need to tell anyone about anything? Not you in particular, Viso, but in general. You had the impression that recalling these events is pleasurable for me. No doubt you believed that it was because you are such an exceptional listener? Reader? (You, of course, can read, whereas I can't decipher what one normally reads in one's notes). More people carry on some type of correspondence from our situation here, so we always feel that you out there think that each of us has endless time on our hands. We here are under such care that only writing to you was left to us, writing out of boredom, because boredom torments us.

What could you know about boredom, Viso? You don't have time for it. Boredom here is different from in your world. We, The Afflicted, are bored like flies in some gray, sprawling web. Just like in the guidebook written for you about dealing with us, The Afflicted see "in general." That's supposed to be some consolation. "In general" is boring, just that, boring. Always similar or the same. I could spit on it, tear at it, scream at it until it would burst, fall apart, drop like a curtain, or open like a giant eyelid so something would be visible, anything whatever, but in all its detail, so that "a" is "a" and not some semblance of a letter. We are bored, or rather something bores us, generality bores us — that generality instead of the particular is disgusting: smoothness, instead of a cheek with wrinkles and a beard.

We continually lack a huge amount of time, although

I'm sending you my reflections about boredom unfinished because I had to do some task or other. Don't think that I have a lot of time for myself, for writing my memoirs, for example, or informing some reporter named Viso about oddities of life-after-The Loss. With The Loss? Yes with The Loss, because it's not something that divides life into two halves, but rather into "this way before" and "this way after." Like "before the war" and "after the war." After should mean "again — without The Loss." But it's still there; it began and it continues. You continue to lose more of what supposedly was already lost. "The Loss" advances, deepens so that you have even less of what's already lost, and you remember it even less. Maybe one should exercise one's memory, remind oneself of what was once visible that now you can't see?

And you, too, Viso, how much do you remember of something that you are no longer seeing because it's not there anymore? A tree that's been cut down, for example, or a building that was torn down, a cat that died? Do you remember exactly how tall the tree was, what its leaves were like---each individual leaf and how they looked altogether? What about when the cat raises its fur, how each little hair had its shine? More likely you remember its black shape and agile movement, what I'd be able to see now if my cat were alive. My cat has become a generalization, so that my

memory doesn't save it from the boredom of generalization. Maybe if something brought it back just like it was, some particular moment or image in my thoughts. But that is hard for us.

I know you are not interested in memories from before The Loss, so they won't appear here. I'll return, as best I can, to our Colony in Helen's house. I don't remember exactly where that film broke off, at what point I set it aside. Probably Kubat was still alive, dozing beneath blankets on the meadow. And Hiza? She sang at the Monastery, and when not always remembering the words, she would sing melismatically, adding more sweetness to the ancient songs. More and more people, that is The Afflicted who lived in distant barracks and the little town at the port, came to the Monastery. We in the Colony did too, even Kubat sometimes at the outset. But we kept apart. Did some different kind of identity emerge in us? I remember that we didn't call out to the others and didn't participate in conversations with the Monastery people, drinking tea with them. After the last song, Hiza quickly caught up with us on the path where it ended at the Monastery wall and a stone cross still stood. We walked slowly, even when Kubat wasn't with us. All the others were only shapes for us, just as we were for them. Only Hiza was something more — a voice. Thanks to her, her voice and being identified with it, Hiza was something different. Those who listened tried to figure out from whom, from which shadow, they would hear that voice.

I don't know why Tadol-Taddol did not want to play at the Monastery. He saved that for us, for Kubat. Later, he would stay back with Kubat, when we didn't want to leave him alone. So despite his rebellious attitude, it was Taddol and not Hiza who stayed, because Hiza accepted being indispensable at the Monastery. Anyhow, maybe that was her place to be.

Somehow, my return to writing hasn't worked out — piecing together the tape where it broke. That memory can't return now; in the meantime (literally, that “time between” my describing to you or for myself, and before writing now), by not writing then I renewed too much of what came later, closer in time to the present, and in all its vividness.

First, the barracks were swept up in a wave, perhaps even epidemic, of hope in religion, a very concrete hope. Maybe less a hope than a bet? Since The Loss is something mysterious (after all, science couldn't deal with it very well), then it might turn out to be something transitory, some kind of test that would be called off — unless The Afflicted themselves beg for it and have enough faith in their own power. “It all depends on us” was the notion that occurred to several of the enthusiasts who at first sat for hours in the Monastery, and then moved to one of the little valleys near the beach where they put up a new stone cross surrounded by a circle of prayer stones. Near the cross they arranged small marble stones incised with crosses — a typical local craft that now took on a new meaning, like votives for The Loss.

The enthusiasts demanded belief in release from The Loss through faith. Many wanted to try, so the “Petitioners” — those who appealed to others for faith — had some initial success. The Colony proved resistant, probably because of me, Habor, and my influence, but that wasn't decisive. Taddol took two stones and placed them, in Kubat's name, at the cross in the valley, the cross of The Petitioners. Kadab and I never once went there during this period. The Petitioners were not for me, which meant not for us either. Was I really never there in that valley even once? I know it from stories that have been told and because I remember the spot from before they took

it over for their meetings. It was beautiful, somehow particularly open to the sky, covered with thick grass not eaten down by the sheep. The sheep themselves came there in the afternoon and evening when the boulders radiated the warmth of the day. That's how it was at the beginning. The other thing started with those who, it's true, were outside our group of five in Helen's house. With those exceptions about which it seems I've written.

Later on — it's a complicated story.

So you can understand a bit (and there's no getting around this!) you need information about the people from the Monastery. You may be imagining some monks. In fact, as figures, for us who cannot see in detail, that's how they appeared, grouped in a chapel around a piano or silently walking along the porticos. But later, cautiously however, we let ourselves get acquainted more personally. We, myself included, were wary, as they were too. At least, they didn't insist that we talk about ourselves, or share anything confidential like who we were before The Loss — that made talking easier. They didn't recount their lives "before their vocation," either. Their vocation was treated as a deeply serious religion; about the community on which it was based and how or why they had come, they said nothing.

The community was connected with the place where we now found ourselves. They had somehow gotten permission to return and be with us, on their own and without any obligations. They didn't undertake caring for us, or converting us, or anything like that. On the contrary, they promised not to get involved in our affairs or our fate. They would just exist there, like the first builders of the Monastery, until their deaths. Identifying with the place meant being obliged to hospitality, as was practiced from the very beginning, both toward princes and kings (some traces of this remained), and toward pilgrims as well, whether pious or condemned outcasts. A fair number of The Afflicted willingly took on this role. On days of group singing the church was practically full. Some would get into conversation, usually about the weather. The Brothers of the Monastery, as they called themselves, knew far more about local conditions. All other topics could lead into potential minefields, like memories of forced evacuation or banishment before our arrival.

In addition to the weather, music was another safe subject. We could sing, listen to records from the Monastery's collection, something different from what otherwise was available to us. Music could lead delicately to broaching more engaging conversation about religion, conversation which always had more listeners than talkers. Hiza was among the listeners, at times unwilling. Sometimes she would break off the conversation about religion by putting on the next record. Or at some other moment she would interrupt with a kind of anger: why don't we pray for The Loss to end? Not waiting for an answer, she left. We found her at home with Kubat who that day, or from that day, no longer wanted even to milk the cow. Kadab took over and from that time the cow gave less milk, as if she felt offended or missed Kubat, even though Kadab tried to talk to her too.

9. Kubat's death. The burial. Jeani. Taddol leaves

The wind decides everything here. We feel its great power through our whole body. The Loss probably increased our sensitivity, at least mine, to its dominion. In general, I struggle with the naïve conviction that while The Loss takes something away, it gives us something as well, like for example, an aptitude for music or a more sensitive touch. You have to work on the sense of touch, but either you had the ability and it survives, or it was never there. The incentive side of The Loss — which doesn't appear in everyone anyway — presses one to take advantage of what little one still has.

But the wind is something special; maybe that sensitivity is something that penetrates this Island. Those of us with The Loss were “left” here. Nobody planned to cause us either additional torment or delight. The wind here gives us both and it all depends on the person who is facing its distinctive local gusts. We hear it outside the windows and we try not to let it in, or, conversely, we submit to its call. I usually submit and go out to some place where I can commune with the wind. At the Monastery the wind tumbles down from the hills, rests there quietly while it plays around the towers and the roofs, reverberating like one long, rustling sound. Its echo even reaches Helen's house, where it fans out more like a trail of noise. To fully experience the wind, you have to climb higher, above the boulders, onto the peak that faces the coast to the west.

Clambering along with one or two sticks I stand, not trying to see anything in the swirling mist of wind. Having your back against a rock is best. With the palms of my hands I can feel that the wind affects them too. The ridge high above me is its instrument, like a rooster's comb surrounded with a crown of noise.

It's a musical place, Viso, even for someone like me, one of The Afflicted who is not musical.

There was no wind the day that Kubat died. Kubat always feared it because when it was windy outside what little warmth he had in Helen's old house, even when we kept the heat high, which was hard to maintain. But that day the wind bypassed us, the sun was still fairly warm, and as always here, its rays reflected intensely in our direction against bright clouds in the western sky. Kubat liked to lay outside. We lifted him outside with all his bedding, just in front of the house. “Kras,” whispered Kubat. Kadab was milking, but had brought the cow closer so that by slipping his hand out from underneath the blankets, Kubat could touch her. Doing that, he then fell asleep. Milk splashed into the bucket. Birds sailed above us in the clear air.

“Sing, Hiza!” I whispered. It was a lullaby without words, softer and softer, until her voice broke. Taddol clutched his horn, not even trying to put it to his lips.

How long did it last? Probably I was the only one to notice the barely perceptible movement that rippled across Kubat's white face. The shadow deepened on his face, a shadow from within him.

The death had to be announced, although we would have preferred to let Kubat disappear, like Helen. Hiza brought in a young, energetic female Controller who immediately got furious. Why had he not been in the Lazaret? How could you let him be untended, what disobedience! The Lazaret has medicines, oxygen

We stood silent. It just had to be endured. We had done everything for Kubat. This was what he wanted. Suddenly, Taddol broke into the Controller's stream of invective. "This was a Refusal, a Refusal! You don't understand anything, you"

The Controller fell silent. Taddol had spoken the word which had just come into use, "Refusal," a term for instances of suicide or a chosen death, a willed death.

Kubat's burial. People here usually don't go to burials. It's easier to go to the cemetery after everything is over. You take the first good stone you come upon — they are everywhere — and place it on the pleasingly smoothed grave covered with a carefully cut blanket. You could search for beautiful marble pebbles on the beach, where they were plentiful and even one of us could find a smooth, cylindrical stone you could feel in your palm. There really aren't any flowers here, so the Jewish custom of leaving a stone easily took hold. We — the Colony, Taddol, and Kadab — spread earth on Kubat's fragile coffin. The ceremony was not a burden for us; Hiza even managed to sing, not a lullaby, but as had been at the start in the Monastery, "Amazing Grace." No one joined in, although people from the Monastery were there standing behind us, sheltering us and the coffin from the gusts of wind. Then, when the rain began, we laid out a tarp and finished our duty quickly and quietly. As we were leaving, somewhat furtively, Hiza covered the tarp with one of Kubat's blankets and weighted it down with a stone.

This event does not close the story of Kubat, no, we will speak of him, remembering him warmly and anxiously when we struggle against what has turned out to be the most terrible thing. What awaits us here on Tyflonia during these years — and maybe even now? — between death and the grave?

I don't feel like going on today, it's too late. But writing conjures up Kubat alive, his quiet death which ought to lead to his grave covered with his blanket. You might think that was it. I'm always accusing you of naïveté, but you are an experienced reporter. Surely, Viso, you have figured out that the Controller did not forget that Kubat had died outside the Lazaret. She was right — there was rebellion in it, Kubat's own revolt against Refusal, a Refusal that even Kras with her stoic calm, and warm, rich milk could not subdue.

Taddol and Hiza, as well as both of us, agreed without discussion, as if unconsciously, that Kubat had the right to depart here in front of the barn doors, on a quiet afternoon, perhaps hearing the singing, perhaps our breathing, and feeling Taddol's hands at his feet. Yes. But later the Controllers must have argued. And that's what happened, Viso, and there was nothing we could do about it. I stammered that it wasn't necessary, that we'd done it ourselves . . . Hiza rested her head on the gates to the barn and began to weep loudly; suddenly she became an old black woman, hurt and abandoned once again.

Kadab and I bathed Kubat's body once more in water and milk from Kras. Kubat had always been clean, and only now after a couple of hours did a sign of The Refusal appear: bloody

bedsores. We wrapped his poor body in one of Helen's sheets and then we were ready. Taddol pulled Hiza inside and closed the doors. I brought the medics to Kubat's room. They lifted his body onto a stretcher and quickly carried him out to a small van. In less than five minutes we were on the road to the Lazaret. Better this way than wait there, said Kadab. We each took our different places, not looking at one another's faces. In any case, we can't see into each other's eyes, rarely can we see anything in someone else's eyes, we see figures without faces. But we know that the eyes are there, and we like to run our hands along the brow and eyelids of those dearest to us. It's a special caress that counteracts The Refusal or pushes it aside.

But now they take examination samples from Kubat's body — his eyeballs. They will put silicone or plastic in their place, or who knows, maybe just little funeral stones.

You see what an effort it is to write about this, how much I struggle. I don't want to spare the world, that world which wants to "manage The Loss clinically." What is there to fear? Are there more cases of The Loss? I think there must be, though we don't have real access to information. Surely, there are more cases. Ordinary illnesses, relatively rare, whose effect was similar to The Loss have always existed. Maybe indistinguishable? But we know that every individual person has always had his own illness, maybe similar to other cases, but not completely identical.

What's there to fear? It is different now, presumably. The material is collected selectively, delicately, maybe only the retina or the defective yellow splotch on it. They examine this tissue under an electronic microscope to find the code for The Loss, so impenetrable that thousands of samples are needed to decipher anything. I carry a future sample in my body too, but while I am alive no one has the nerve to take it, not yet.

Still worse is that the scientific right to samples has nothing to do with organ donation for transplant. Our "material" can't be donated to another person because it is contaminated by The Loss. We've even lost the right to organ donation! Donating for transplant, whether during one's lifetime or after, is no longer a privilege for us. No transplant is offered to us either, since we are The Afflicted.

(Maybe I'll cross out these words, or maybe leave them: Viso, if ever you make it here as a reporter, do not be afraid of the little graveyard. Fewer of The Afflicted are there than in other places on the Island. They are at rest, freed of The Loss.)

I can help you out. Let's go back to the melodic accent, the warm, low voice. A glance to my side — suddenly I see the space between dark eyebrows. Sun, splotches of snow on the rocks. Jeannine!

We didn't talk. A graveyard was no place to reminisce about our common road to this point, that dramatic episode after which we didn't search for one another. Kadab had found me; what about her? She is here, doing what I am doing now.

A cardboard coffin. A sheet, from Helen's possessions, covers the body inside. We push the cart together. At the entry, Taddol waits, alone. But a little farther on is Kadab — "I'm here," he says. Still others like Hiza are at the graveyard. Jeannine joins our group. When we depart, I grab the edge of the jacket she has thrown over her apron. "Don't disappear!" I plead. Jeani agrees to come to Helen's house for a visit. She rolls up her apron and walks along with us. She agrees to stay — we have space, the little room that Kubat and Taddol had used. Taddol prefers to stay downstairs. "I'll be leaving because I can return now," he says. I don't ask where or how he plans to go. For a long while, perhaps a month, he came and went. One evening he played the flute for us for an unusually long time. Hiza sang again (though not from her religious repertoire). Jeani, tired from her work at the Lazaret, didn't go to bed as usual. I heard her whisper to Taddol: "Are you taking off?"

Taddol left as he'd done before, without explanation or farewell, leaving all his things behind except his flute. Several days later, Jeani clutched me by the arm and whispered, "Don't wait for him to return. Everything's good." It turned out that she knew more than I'd thought, not only about Taddol's plans but she had other information as well.

10. More about the Lazaret, the work of Habor and Kadab. Anmer appears

To you, Viso, it's probably incomprehensible, but I didn't want to know more about Taddol. You might search him out in some club or other, should you hear the sound of a silver flute. True, it's been a long time now. To me it always seems that what I recall from memory is something existing in the present for you. Nonsense, of course, I'm not on another planet here, although there are those who cling to that delusion. Taddol left; it matters little how long ago, since it was forever. And Jeani's secrets? Nothing can harm her now. The "secret knowledge" was probably the least of her secrets, just the most visible one. If The Refusal overcame me as it had Kubat, would Kadab return too? "Don't philosophize," would be his reply had the question come up. It didn't, because all my philosophizing is provoked only by you, Viso, maybe not so much by where you actually are, as by the place our correspondence occupies in my inner life.

Jeani struggles with fatigue. Those who are affected by The Refusal are tired even though they do nothing. They exhaust themselves holding on to their inner "no." It saps their strength. But when I anxiously touched Jeani's arm, she said: "Don't think that it's The Refusal. I'm simply throwing myself into work."

This is no surprise. But in our context here it was significant. Remember, Viso: nobody works here. Some do something, like we do in Helen's house. We move around, take care of Kras, and of one another; we clean up around the house. From time to time we even make some changes, improvements: cushions on the benches, hooks for jackets. Jeani reminded us of something, something we'd resisted as if it didn't matter for us. Each morning she got up at the sound of the bell at the Monastery. She drank a small mug of milk left for her from last night's milking. (I placed it on a large tray in the middle of the table so she would not forget). Then, wrapped in a shawl or in a windbreaker she went out, most often in the mist — the real, cold, wet mist here — past the Monastery, along the path above the port, and to the Lazaret. Sometimes she'd take the bicycle. At the Lazaret, the day had already begun. Feeding patients, some through tubes, placing dressings over oozing medications, changing smelly diapers. Mostly in silence, broken from time to time by a complaint, some shriek of impatience. I know what the rows of beds in the Lazaret look like, because after a period of time I tried going with her. It wasn't an easy step, going against everything that The Loss established as its reality, but Jeani had never accepted it. So perhaps that is why, or maybe some other reason, The Loss did not advance in her case, allowing her to exceed her trained abilities. Jeani could see. Once she was allowed to help out temporarily at the Lazaret, she never let herself be pushed away.

Registered nurses from the mainland staffed the Lazaret. They were brought over by helicopter or ferry for short, several-week shifts. In their long antiseptic aprons over their baggy

tracksuits, the nurses moved about with a rustling sound that seemed like robots. Their plastic clogs made a sucking sound on the floor that was always wet. It was unpleasant, as if the entire Lazaret was an anteroom to the morgue (which was, in fact, the most important room). Maintaining the Lazaret must have been costly. (Viso, you might be able to check what the budget is and has been for our life here.) The nurses always wore masks and fitted gloves. You know what bothered us the most? We couldn't really see their faces or hands which would let us distinguish human features from masks. That was important. Jeani didn't wear a mask and neither did I, so people talked to us. We worked to make those who hadn't yet totally given in to The Refusal.

One might think that the Lazaret would be fertile ground for The Refusal, despite so many being kept alive there. They still had a chance, but the question was, what kind of chance? Did we really increase that chance? After all, Kubat had had everything, but even Kras, Taddol, and Hiza all together could not stave off the desolation of The Refusal. They could only calm and ease it, the way we saw it happen with narcotic drugs. I was afraid of the Lazaret, of what it signified for Jeani (initially I had thought about getting her away from there), then for myself and for us both. Because of Jeani I regained my former awareness, that I cannot and do not want to forget about the existence of the place where people are dying. The Loss served as an alibi: I am a victim, I endure and that's enough. I ran my finger along the grooves in the tin surface of our wooden table, up and down. In my mind's eye, I saw myself doing this. "The first stage of The Refusal!" something shouted out inside me. "Tomorrow, I'm going with Jeani." What happens next we'll just have to see.

Kadab understood (as he always did). He was afraid himself, but not of what I feared — rather, about whether there was something he could do? He doubted that there would be a role for him, but he didn't want to stay at the Colony without us, just out of timidity. And so we took turns going to the Lazaret with Jeani, or sometimes going together, rarely able to persuade her to stay home a day to relieve her continual fatigue. At home she had the solitude she needed because Hiza spent more and more time at the Monastery. For Hiza, it really seemed that the more she rebelled against religion, the more she sought out something that she could find precisely at the Monastery.

There's one more thing about the Lazaret, that was connected with it — something I want to write down, but maybe I still can hold off.

When memories come closer to the present, even a little, and start to impinge on the present no matter how slightly, my resistance rises up. Of course, I can write about the Lazaret. I've got many images in my mind, imprinted in memory with photographic detail (like a blurry photo that shows everything that had been in the field of vision but imprecisely). At the time, I tried consciously to remember where everyone was and where different necessary objects were placed or kept---clean coverlets, basins, bowls, happy bits of color in the sea of white that's hard for the sick to bear; amid all the white we feel more lost (a good thing that we don't have snow here).

Three large rooms in the main barrack made up the Lazaret, each room holding fifteen patients. In between the closely arranged beds, floor-to-ceiling curtains could be extended. One room housed the lighter cases, those who could still get out of bed and go to the toilet. These ones also preferred to eat at a table in the center of the room. In the remaining two rooms, people were

bedridden. In the morning nurses pulled down almost all the curtains. Some of them did not open again.

But I've still not told you what was most important, namely, that everyone in the Lazaret was sick (that is, near death) as a result of The Loss. Or, to be more precise or more "colloquial," The Refusal. The Refusal did not exist as a diagnosis. Diagnoses could be extreme exhaustion, stupor, sometimes (initially, before the condition developed), depression. Those with The Loss who were normally sick with something else as well, like pneumonia, inflammation of the joints, irritation of the duodenum or liver, were treated separately in what was called the Villa, a little hospital taken over after the Island inhabitants had been expelled. The Villa had its own little garden, a glassed-in terrace, and a hall where patients played cards. We really didn't have contact with the Villa, other than through cases that were eventually transferred to the Lazaret. That did happen. Sometimes patients from the Villa were taken by helicopters to the mainland, to a hospital there with a special surgical unit (where, for example, bones were set when someone had broken a leg during a too adventurous hike on the heath and rocks).

Now you have an idea about how it all looked; it would be best to sketch out a little map.

Why am I telling you so much about the Villa and the Lazaret? Maybe something from these recollections will emerge; we will see. There, between the Colony, the medical complex, and then the Monastery, a long and crucial chapter of our life unfolded.

Remnants of crooked hedging and a new, wooden windbreak lined two low, curved ramps that led from the Villa to the road and the parking area near the Lazaret. The hedging and windbreak were tall enough to conceal stretchers and medics bent over patients in wheelchairs.

I think that it happened this way: one evening, between the hedges a nurse in a mask and coveralls entered the Villa. A moment or two later, she came out leading a young woman in an Island windbreaker and rubber boots. They said good-bye at the parking area in front of the Lazaret. Jeani was leaving just then and the woman followed her. No one paid any attention. Bypassing the Monastery where the evening song could be heard, they walked on to Helen's house.

"I-Anmer," she said loudly and since she was clearly unknown, she extended her hand to me. "Not that way!" Jeani criticized. "You speak in a whisper! I explained this to you — we don't put out our hands; that's not how we start." Then, to us, Jeani continued, "This is Annie Mercer, a nurse. She will stay with us for a few days." To Annie, Jeani went on, "it's better that you don't go outside. If we need to, we will say that our housemate suffers from The Refusal. We are treating her, she has a certificate and isn't subject to the Controllers. Here are some goggles from the Lazaret, luckily, they are very dark."

After several days, Jeani told us to take Annie to the service at the Monastery. There Annie slipped away without being seen. Maybe she's still there today and we see her as one of the praying figures? Did she go to the Monastery concealing her face with the goggles that had belonged to Kubat? Does that have some significance, or was it really necessary to cover our faces even though we can't see or recognize others' faces?

[In her notebook Habor crossed out this fragment about the event on the ramp and its aftermath and inserted a comment, “not time yet.” It was found because Kadab saved it somewhere among his calculations of the times and tidal ranges on the Island. —TL]

11. Kras II. My writing

Sometime back I promised some good recollections. I'll keep that promise, at least in principle. There are things one remembers well, even though they don't return fixed in some special memory. So I won't return to that stormy day of sudden bad weather when it happened that Kras left us. Although cows are long lived, her day had to come. So, with Kras no longer with us, we threw out the remaining straw and hay, and the barn started to fill up with things no longer used in the house, and stacks of firewood. We didn't like to go there. How much time passed? Probably several months, until one day Jeani, maybe with her charming facial expression, told us to form a welcoming committee. This is still something to remember: one of the most joyful days in the Colony, the day when our household god returned in a nearly identical form. The ferry moved majestically toward the shore, and then we saw Kras II, walking down the gangway surrounded by helpers. "Miss Jeannine, it's a cow!" one of them called out. Jeani signed some papers and we, with Kadab at the forefront, led Kras II to her place. She wasn't young. "She's like an early retiree," someone said, but still strong. She was smaller than her predecessor, but still very large and with the same sweetness of a creature from another epoch, her own, and not without its mystery.

So again we washed and cleaned her udders, milked, led her out onto the heath, brought her grass from the quiet valleys in the area of the boulders.

Kras II supported the Colony mightily. It was all Jeani's doing, known only to herself. It had something to do with the Monastery because the Elder Brother immediately asked about the barn's new resident and went down to give her a blessing. She accepted it quietly. Solemnly, as befits a cow. The Elder Brother standing at the doors of the barn, Kras II with red ribbons tied on her huge horns — our little joke during the ceremony of drinking milk — warm memories of Helen, the melody of the "Hymn to Milk," sung wordlessly by Hiza

Even The Afflicted are capable of joy.

Hey, Viso — Read this soon, now. Please — don't put it off in order to first find out what happened earlier.

I don't know how you read, Viso. I write with breaks, but it's been a long time, so there must be a fair amount. Maybe it happens this way, you see "something from Habor again" (from that Habor?) and you set it aside for later, saying to yourself, "I'll get back to this again sometime." Nothing wrong with that, it's OK. Only I beg you to remember how much time has passed already. You read those pages set aside differently from the way I wrote them. For you, there has to be some kind of whole, but I live through it and immediately write it down, or when I remember and so I write it in different segments. Maybe it sometimes doesn't all fit together, this puzzle with missing pieces, and worse, with different, unclear images. Only one common thread: The Loss.

And everything else? I'm always writing about different people. Their portraits are not clear, and their names are strange. Maybe you get it all confused. Don't be irritated; here and there it comes together, or maybe not. It's like life itself, and not some organized text. Make some order out of it for yourself; in any case I won't ever know what you consider boring or confusing. That's your business. Just show a little understanding. I'm trying, after all, to tell it as interestingly as I can. I think that sometimes I manage to produce something like a news report. My memory about what happens here still remains good.

Of course, The Loss hampers me. Could I write differently than I see? Look at it from my point of view. And hang on, Viso. Your world isn't the worst of all possible worlds and even mine is not the last remnant of human life.

Part 2.

12. Jocelyn, Hiza, the Elder Brother, Lenbe, Anmer?

Time to deal with the Petitioners. This story, surely still interesting to you even now, took place at about the same time that we got involved with the Lazaret. Some of it may have started earlier, but Jeani became our guide just in time. Thanks to her, real activity took up our time, meaningful activity — meaning absolutely reasonable. After we'd done our usual work with the sick, the world was better by at least a few emptied basins and several freshly made beds. This was Jeani's doctrine, the view of an anti-fanatic who recognizes that it's nevertheless good that the Monastery is there, that people are there, and that Hiza sings.

I think that the Petitioners' movement, and what ensued from it (a wave of Refusals) stemmed from a break, a cleavage in the Monastery community. I don't know how to describe it. Two expressions were used: the traditional "The Community of the Island I." and a new one (not accepted by everyone), the "Mission," that is, the mission to T., the outpost set up for those afflicted by The Loss. In the Monastery community there was a group for whom we, the newly settled Afflicted, actually differed little from the fishermen and shepherds who lived here before us. The "Mission" did not comply with the government contract. Living in the Monastery was tolerated on condition that a safe distance was maintained to protect both the Monastery residents and The Afflicted from influences outside the Controllers. But some kind of fraternization quickly developed, in two different ways, among all the residents of the Monastery.

One group, with their superior "the Elder Brother," was prepared for small, traditional steps and forms of contact: a common service according to the established order, a soothing accompaniment to the cycle of life — a quiet model of "godly life" amid the cares and temptations of the world.

But there was also a current of zeal that was less quiet, tinged with fear of the world and a conviction that it was necessary to embark on a mission. The peacefully sailing nave had found itself at sea amid the shipwrecked. A Brother Jocelyn emerged to develop musical programs that brought relief to The Afflicted. Surely something must have been written in his application to stay at the Monastery — one of the very few applications not turned down (as all requests from those in the community with medical or nursing training had been).

Jocelyn's appearance was distinctive: he had long, flowing blond hair that reached below his dark beard. The hair, and the sound of the tenor saxophone he played, expressed all kinds of moods — anxiety, commentary, questioning. When its sound rose above the choir, Hiza went silent. She listened without responding in song.

One day, as I now recall, Hiza asked why we don't pray "against The Loss"? That's how she expressed it, or at least that was how it sounded to me. I too, I-Habor, would like to know, whether when we stand before God, are we, in fact, protesting The Loss? When you've experienced what we have, do we see it as what God wants? Such a conversation that expressed the most varied levels of pain and anger didn't come easily to us, especially after Kubat's death, in a world, for me at least, starting to be released from the initial impact of passivity — in a world after renewed contact with Jeani.

I spoke with the Elder Brother and doubtless we didn't meet face to face by chance. As a rule, our meetings at the time were accidental, but the Elder Brother was not one of The Afflicted. He sought me out on the cloister portico after the service and led me into the Monastery's enclosed garden. He talked about this and that until at last, perhaps gathering his nerve, he reached what had been on his mind — maybe for some time. I remember that conversation, long impressed on my mind like patterns burned into my brain and eyes. Yes, I remember, but I was mistaken about when it took place. It must have been earlier than I thought: Kubat was still alive, and Jeanie had not yet appeared. I was alone with my thoughts and with Kadab, which isn't loneliness, but did not free me to make my own personal decision. That was resolved when the newly-arrived Jocelyn began his services in the Little Valley near the new Cross.

The Monastery observed the Colony; we were the first to come at the sound of the bell. Hiza was from our group. That was enough to make us important for the Monastery. But the Elder Brother wanted to know, now most crucially, what I and Kadab took Hiza's question to mean and what we thought about it: "Why do we not pray for a miracle, for something that would defeat The Loss?"

How to reply? I remember my long silence. The truth was we hadn't thought about this. Hiza was the prayerful one among us. We attached ourselves to her. That was possible. The important thing was Kubat and preventing his departure if possible, a departure caused by The Loss, of course. But not that we were seeking — what? A miracle? That wasn't something in our world, within our scope of action or goals. No, we didn't demand that. Maybe Hiza? Probably not her either. Maybe Tadol-Taddol? He surely did not, not the way Jocelyn did. For Tadol it was simply to do everything, meaning absolutely everything. So, bless some stones, cry out to heaven, even if without conviction, but just in case, try it all.

But Hiza had asked and now the Elder Brother asks. Why me? I told him that I don't believe in or want to believe in a God we have to cry out to. I don't accept having to beg for something that might help. The Elder Brother was silent. Finally, he decided. "I want you to know. Tell Hiza: Jocelyn did not listen to me. He will surely be deported. I was not able to prevent that, but I don't know when."

I didn't try to respond. Up on the roof the northern gannets landed noisily after their ocean hunt, strutting and cawing as they do. "They have beautiful red beaks," said the Elder Brother, "they've always landed here, from the very beginning when the Monastery was a ruin. Only a few fishing families lived in the town then. Our intent here was to be hermits, although we wanted to serve pilgrims too."

I related my conversation to Hiza. She took it calmly. “Well, yes, there’s something in this. I understand, though I’m not just a fanatic appealing to God. But you know, Jocel really cares about The Afflicted from the worst barracks and even from the Lazaret. He really pulls them out of The Refusal. They encourage one another, they get up, get dressed and go down to the Valley where the Cross is.

Kadab and I kept going to the Monastery where fewer people went now. If Jocelyn didn’t get a hold of her, Hiza tried to be there too, once or twice. Sometimes she sat silently, deep in the shadows, wrapped in Jeani’s poncho.

At some point, influenced by a conversation with Lenbe, I sensed that nevertheless I could no longer avoid this situation.

Lenbe had come to the Colony through Jeani who had perceived that Lenbe was unusual. As I’ve explained before, as a result of The Loss, the majority of us no longer felt the desire to work. Jeani was an exception and had immediately found work that made the greatest sense. And Lenbe? Lenbe didn’t even consider the idea that she shouldn’t do anything just because she was a victim of The Loss. When she had arrived on T., she tried to resume her past occupation: cleaning for others, for those too weak to do this for themselves (a good deed that Lenbe could be counted on to do), and because she could earn some money by cleaning and tidying up for others, as she had before. People could pay her and soon a cautious, limited circulation of money began on T. Lenbe wanted to have at least a bit of her own money on the island. She had lost all her small earnings in the chaos of The Loss, first trying to get help and then later trying to avoid evacuation.

How could Lenbe clean having lost the macula in her eyes? Lenbe herself developed this art, using all her lively intelligence. The Loss had advanced slowly in her case, as long as she avoided heavy work. Jeani recognized her as someone worthy of trust and the Colony as a place where she might be useful. Lenbe continued to pursue her profession, above all for her “poor ones,” saving them from the rapid advance of The Refusal. But she was important in Helen’s house too. Lenbe was the advocate for finding a permanent place for every object — a permanent place that would reduce the difficulty of daily life with The Loss — the ceaseless search for misplaced objects one could not see.

One day while carefully hanging up freshly washed towels, Lenbe asked me: “Habor, why don’t you go down to the Little Valley?” “Do you go?” I asked her. “Yes, I now go and lead a few others who would not be able to manage on their own. It’s not very far, but even so, it’s a pilgrimage. I figure that I really do help; now I see a little bit better each time I go. At the beginning we only sang songs and psalms and listened to the Bible because we couldn’t read on our own. Brother Jocel or another brother reads a little; we take the words to heart, and call out “Amen, Amen.” Now there’s something else that brings us back to health. When we leave the Little Valley, our stones with the crosses remain, as if they themselves pray that we regain what The Loss has

taken away from us. But most important is that Brother Jocel blesses us with water from the Bay of the Holy Rescuers and we can use that water to bathe our eyes and then take a little of it back so we can begin each day with bathing our eyes with the holy water and prayers that we've just learned and then it begins" Lenbe didn't say what began, but returned to arranging clean dishes on the shelves.

Lenbe didn't pursue the topic further. But she effectively sowed seeds of doubt in me about what this movement would lead to. "The Petition," as it was now being called, was based on an assembly or religious service at the cross, the Cross of the "New Mission" (the Monastery destined to become a relic of the "old" mission that had ossified or died out). Jeani refused to take part in conversations on the topic. She tolerated bathing the Lazaret patients with "holy water" if they wished. "If it stimulates something in them, then that's good. Maybe the water stimulates them better than when I wash them with a bath sponge?" She took care that trips to the Little Valley were done with the knowledge of the nurses and only in good weather (it was summer then). In the end, tentatively and hesitantly, Lenbe gave me a bottle of "holy water." She did this with her characteristic gesture of entreaty, both her palms open; there was so much sincerity in her touch that I had to take the gift. Out of respect for Lenbe I later sprinkled the water on the meadow beyond the house where the ground was full of sea salt anyway.

In the end I asked Kadab, as the best observer, to go see what The Petitioners' ceremony was in the Little Valley. Somehow, I didn't want to ask Hiza. She asked enough questions herself. From Kadab's report it appeared that the ceremony had become more elaborate. Music: Jocelyn's saxophone, some guitars (a credit to him because it broke the passivity). Singing together, in dialogue with Hiza and some unknown cantor who, according to Kadab, sounded quite pretentious or rapturous. The reading, in his view, was moving. After the reading beneath the cross, various people expressed their petitions; voices rising from the crowd gathered on the hillside extended to the beach. Sometimes they were audible whispers, as when finding one another at a distance, or sometimes calling out some chant, and then the response — "AMEN," "Yes, we beg"

So, what did they beg for? Kadab confessed: "I don't know. They repeated the words, 'New Mission,' 'We call out to You,' in different languages. People weep. And that's not all. Some seem unconscious, in some kind of trance. Jocelyn joins in their appeals, until only one word can be heard, I don't know what it is, and he blesses the water. People bathe themselves amid the loud appeals and sighs."

"Did you see Lenbe?"

"No, but she could have been there. People from the Lazaret in blankets were around the cross. I saw someone, probably Anmer in her goggles, assisting Jocelyn. I also ran into Kas-Kas in a great, thick poncho. It was surely her because she was taking pictures from the upper edge of the Little Valley in the direction of the beach. The best way to see the Cross."

"And what do you think?"

"It seems all right. Sort of. But don't go there."

13. Habor's past — the sociology of religion, “Gardening on T.,” Anmer again

I'm writing to you about this, about the entire story, Viso, because I consider it important for us here (important for me too, and as I write I grow even more convinced). And for you? Viso, maybe for you this is something from a textbook about the sociology of religion? Even if such authors know nothing about our Petitioners here, they have evidence of more than one such event. I-Habor have read a bit about this (I once read, read books — imagine, but better don't try). A long time ago someone named Hollenweger (Walther, I think) wrote “The Pentecostals.” I don't think I'm getting it wrong by bringing up some past research. I knew about such phenomena, just as the Elder Brother did and sensed that I knew. So my question about Jocelyn, the question I could not share with Lenbe, or even with Hiza, was did the venerable brother let himself go along with a movement whose power will carry him where it has taken others before him (or one of those places)? Or was Jocelyn running some game, his own or someone else's? What kind of game? Maybe both possibilities together. Crooked lines upon which he writes directly?

The gannets again were laughing on the roof of the Monastery. The Elder Brother came out of the kitchen where he and the others were washing dishes after lunch. “Just like You-Habor — I don't know either. I was asked about Jocelyn, but luckily nothing came of it. Maybe I convinced those two elder brothers that we should wait? Doesn't it seem to you, Habor, that all this has something to do with what The Loss is?”

I didn't reply. If the Elder Brother really thought that, I compliment him. We, The Afflicted, drag The Loss into everything, a habit that can become an infection as well.

I'm thinking about the fact, Viso, that you really don't know me. After all, I'm still the person I was before The Loss. I entered into this correspondence presuming, as it were, that it's possible to separate “Habor” from “H.” and that The Loss caused this separation. The Afflicted are The Afflicted and that is so important that it conceals everything else. Now I see (maybe not clearly, but I do see) that it's not “all the same.” No! How I entered into this correspondence is not insignificant. That's obvious, but still it was obscured. It's as if I somehow hid from you, Viso, the bottom or the level just above it that was affected by The Loss, but it's still there! And this came to me through that Hollenweger. How ironic.

You should bear in mind, Viso, that my vignettes from T. can appear like flares, some salvaged fragments glittering on the surface. None of us is only who we are here. Just don't pepper me with questions about “before.” That remains our secret. The practice at the Monastery, the practice of silence about their past life before entering the community, is surely a good one. T. is a community that came about by accident; no one has a “vocation to be Afflicted,” only a fate. Not

identical fates, of course; each person has his own, but they are braided together. Appreciate the richness of this braid; be prepared for surprises.

I'm returning to the explanation of what stuck with me in connection with The Petitioners.

No, not just yet. A mutual exchange of information is needed, Viso: what is going on with religion in your world? A lot must have changed — after all, The Loss occurred in a world which we still shared. You must have noticed that we have disappeared! After all, your fear, the fear that pushed us to the margins was something that affected you too. Could humanity be that conflicted, like some strange monster, that it's able to cut part of itself off without feeling its own Loss?

Did the Island begin to change after our arrival? This subject is, of course, a digression. I am talking about how it was at the time the Petitioners had their summer (as it's sometimes called, although in general, the episode isn't remembered that way).

Getting adjusted on the Island took place slowly. Puny little gardens sprouted in front of some barracks. The Controllers didn't support digging in the ground because bending over was an unhealthy position for us. Still, they agreed to bring in seeds from which little grew. Misshapen plants struggled along the low walls; the least bit of wind blew others into the mud that the flower beds had become. Lenbe also tried to garden around Helen's house. Pelargonias grew in pots outside the window. I think that they made Helen's spirit happy. Outside the flower beds, clumps of gray leaves grew, and not a single carnation; only little red daisies and tiny yellow marguerites bloomed.

The Afflicted, needless to say, were poor gardeners. Our gardens, our flower beds, bloom in our memories. We can't see whether the plants are healthy or sickly until it's too late. Pests can feed on them, but we don't know how much of what delights us dies each day. Sometimes a smell alerts us from the broken or wilted leaves we feel in our hands. Plants typically change from day to day in ways we cannot see. It's that cursed "generality." But plants consist of particulars, specifics, details, leaves, grains, and thorns that may prick us when we grope them — we no longer see the young thorns gleaming in the sunlight beneath the rose blooms.

At the little wall of our courtyard — the place where Helen had left me the milk — nettles grow now. Maybe we mixed seeds in with the hay for Kras? In the morning the sun shines at the base of the wall. Nettles smell like nettles the way they do in the gardens of the whole continent. Lenbe gathered the first delicate swathes and cooked them into a spring soup (although it's already summer here). Maybe she added some healthy sea water? But the soup was good, its flavor spicy. Lenbe praised its early spring health benefits. "You could heal the entire Island, except that we'd run out of nettles," said Jeani.

One more thing I can add: in the garden we are hampered by "patterns," that is, something from past memory of what we've seen (whether recently or earlier) that imprints itself on what I am actually seeing. I can distinguish past patterns from what I am looking at now. These patterns hamper us most of all because they wander, show up in different contexts around us. At worst, something seen through patterns is ruined, clouded by remnants of past sights. Strangely enough, flowers seldom become patterns. More often it's grass, dry stalks, broken branches, debris. Somehow or other we can't trust our own sight enough that we could weed and plant like real

gardeners. Maybe some of us still can, but one day they too will see something in a puddle that's not there.

I'm rambling on about something that probably doesn't interest you. I do it out of concern for your imagination, Viso, and so that the line of communication between us doesn't break off until I get to a difficult episode, one still confusing for me and not completely understood despite Hollenweger and sociological evidence.

How did it come to this? The Controllers don't dwell on it but consider themselves at fault. The Afflicted are unsure of their human equilibrium and need Control. But the Control let them down by being too tolerant of eccentricity. Without Jocelyn this would not have happened; he could have been deported in time. Better yet would have been to confine religion to the Monastery and its traditional occupants. No one really monitored their contract which had no provision for any "New Mission." That's how danger arose for The Afflicted who had been so carefully guarded, whose life on this idyllic Island cost so much in taxes. So much time has passed (you, Viso, can surely figure out how long), that you needn't defend such a point of view now. You can examine this with your own sharp eye, you as one among The Healthy. Forgive me, but it's just a fact and not an insult. You are able to look at things the way a person has a right to be able to do, and if you are a reporter, there's the obligation of being insightful. Only please, before you continue with my story, read Hollenweger or some other newer study in this field. The main thing is that dear Walther was a fanatic himself. I'm not sure whether he or some predecessor writing in the same language inoculated me against The Petitioners. There were several. I suspect that the Elder Brother had read them, but did not share them with Jocelyn, or maybe Jocelyn preferred the saxophone over theological studies?

Anmer in her goggles turned up at the Monastery because of what I've already mentioned — excessive tolerance. No matter who caused it, it happened and I don't want to go into that now. Somehow or other, there was certainty or near certainty that in Anmer's case The Loss crossed into forbidden territory. At least, physically. Anmer substituted the goggles for The Loss that she wanted to experience "in solidarity." Has such a phenomenon like a fascination with The Loss, some helpless emotional absorption, happened more broadly in our world? Was Anmer an absolute exception, all the more peculiar, since she was trained as a nurse and knew the reality from her own experience? She was looking for spiritual support and Jocelyn supplied it. I suppose they supported one another and that supplied the energy needed for the New Mission.

I think that when the crisis emerged, the Elder Brother doubtless tried to have Anmer disappear so that the attention of the Controllers would not focus on her. Without Anmer, Jocelyn fit more easily into a less dangerous set up.

Anmer: a tall, somewhat stiff figure, large, with strong hands and a sure grip without a trace of softness. I know her from our work at the Lazaret. In the beginning Jeani spoke with a kind of reluctance about someone called "Anmer." "She's different," Jeani said.

"Different? In what way, Jeani?"

"Different. That's all I know at this point."

14. Something terrible happened

I didn't witness everything from the beginning. I slept. Jeani and Kadab were on duty at the Lazaret where several patients were dying at that time, ones too weak to go to the Valley for prayer. But for sure a couple of friends who were helping did wander there, as did Lenbe. Hiza was absent, evidently having decided to sing there. I had planned to go to the meeting, but in the meantime I'd drunk a little milk from our shared cup, lay down in our room and fallen asleep. A loud whisper, "Habor, Habor, it's me, Hiza" woke me. It was nearly dark, and so quite late, because summer days here are very long. "Habor, something terrible is happening. Let's go now to the Lazaret, it's good that Jeani is there." The Monastery bell began to ring and lights flashed on. Maybe ... ? No, there's not enough time. Closer to the barracks and the port some figures could be seen running. You could hear shrieks, peoples' names. And from somewhere a strange, protracted laugh. A long series of some technical signals, like alarms, completely unknown here, repeated with increasing intensity. From somewhere, as if from below, from the earth, fear struck me. Both confusing and familiar. Since the day of The Loss I've known that everything is possible, my whole body and mind know this. Kadab! Again, we are apart. Will we be able to get into the Lazaret? When fear strikes, distances suddenly seem enormous. Just a kilometer away, beyond a barrier, beyond a wall maybe another world has emerged?

"Hiza, tell me what happened — something in the Valley?"

"Yes, I was there, but I don't really know."

Confusion reigned around the Lazaret. A Controller in a nursing uniform tried to enforce some order. Wounded, crippled people, some in wheelchairs or on crutches, or being led by the hand were moving uphill toward the Villa. Several nurses gathered together patients from the Lazaret and others who were disoriented, weeping or barely conscious. As we started to help them I bumped into Kadab pushing a wheelchair with a wounded patient. "I'll come back here to you," he said. By now it was completely dark. People shivered with cold and exhaustion, but still more appeared, seemingly from all directions. An additional sick bay had to be improvised in a residential barrack near the Lazaret in order to direct those in better condition to beds there. Some didn't want to leave the Lazaret where they'd gotten help in order to go to some other place where they might be alone. The Controllers, generally not liked, now suddenly became a source of support for some, but surely not for all. Someone asked me to lead him to the Lazaret so that the Controller wouldn't see him. It was hard because one of them stood all the while at the doors examining faces. Finally, Jeani managed to divert the Controller to some dubious case.

I haven't yet mentioned that many people, wounded or unharmed, had completely wet clothing. The fellow who had wanted to avoid The Controller's inspection was wet with only a blanket thrown over him. I asked Hiza to find him some dry clothes and a place for him. "He hasn't changed his clothes yet, just fell asleep where I took him," she said. "But did you know that he's the same Cantor who helped Jocelyn in the litanies?"

Of course, that was the question: where is Jocelyn? And where is Lenbe who had been at the very foot of the Cross?

For now, help was more important than finding out what had really happened. A few more people joined us, or rather Jeani, who were ready to help whoever needed anything. Many more were helping their own, those whom they had been with. Later, when it was almost morning, people turned up looking for those who had not returned yet.

Kadab has re-read my notes from that evening, Viso. I wrote them down as quickly as I could because from the start I felt like I was a witness — a witness to that fragment which unfolded before me. I consider it important that I didn't understand what had caused everything unfolding before my eyes, what the sequence of events was. How did we manage in this world that had suddenly speeded up? It must amaze you, Viso, but that's how it is. When reality suddenly begins to demand more, some people shrink away, try to stay on the sidelines, and if they can't, then they freeze in a pathological passivity — a bodily response overrules the brain and chooses passivity as the best course.

Then there are others like Jeani who can do more than one would think possible. In both me and Hiza that night the "Jeani" syndrome took over. Even with faulty and incomplete information, the brain can sometimes direct us effectively, making up for what we lack. But this kind of effort ends in utter exhaustion. It's hard to control when it will appear. You could see it in the people we were trying to help. You have to distinguish their exhaustion from the passive rigidity typical of The Refusal. It takes experience, but that night there was no time for distinctions. It had to do with the effect of shock which meant people didn't recognize new injuries, the breakdown of resistance.

When over a long period of time a person slowly pushes on through a dull, gray, and tasteless generality, any more vivid experience is easily found in memory — it stands out like a colorful page in a faded notebook covered with illegible scribbling. That night and what happened afterward had color.

Toward morning two teams of nurses from the mainland appeared, reserve nursing units mobilized because of what was happening on the Island. A sizable group of Controllers came with them. They took charge of everything. Some acted like doctors. We were taken home in a small van, which was a help, though exhaustion overcame us when we arrived. Lenbe was not around, and none of us had encountered her. She could have stayed with one of her charges outside the Lazaret. We decided not to talk for now — we couldn't manage it anyway.

15. A meeting at the Monastery after the catastrophe. Brother Benno

Around noon a brother from the Monastery awakened us. He had come to tell us that Lenbe and a sizable group were with them and sleeping. A meeting was planned for early evening. The Elder Brother invited us, asking that the Colony take part. Again, we did not ask about Jocelyn.

For a long time, it was very quiet; people barely spoke even to whoever sat beside them on the bench at the table. The Refectory, the largest room, was nearly full.

A tall Controller sat bent over a mug and basin at the table. An aroma of oatmeal and bread in the air. The brothers offered all of us bread and tea. One of the brothers whispered to me, “That Controller is one of us brothers, probably a doctor. He flew in with the group.”

“We all want to understand how this happened. People have perished, dozens have died. Five bodies have washed up on the coast. Some died of shock right away at the Valley, others later at the Lazaret. We fear for the survival of the rest. Some who perished no doubt drowned.

This will take time to determine. Brother Jocelyn is among the dead.”

The Elder Brother boldly answered the question all had on their minds.

Dear reporter, once again I’m communicating with you after a somewhat longer period of hesitation. I interrupted the story of the crisis of the Petitioners supposedly because of being occupied with other things, small daily crises absorbing time and energy. But it was really because when I relate all this, it starts to be painful and incomprehensible, just as before. Once again, I escaped from these recollections. I hope that you can revive your interest by leafing through my notes and that you appreciate my continued effort.

I still must skip over one particular difficulty. I persist in thinking about what happened at The Bay of the “Holy Rescuers” that I described almost immediately after the event — or could it have been a good while later? I don’t have that page, Kadab searched and searched and found other things, but not that one. Do you know that phenomenon? I don’t know why, but it’s hard to write it all over again. The reality exists further away, as if behind a pane of glass which is my remembered text itself.

I tell myself that the text didn’t exist. I simply remember recounting to myself what I wanted to write. I’m not in a good place when I am writing. That was my experience, but it’s only partially what I really saw myself — I saw I-Habor — a lot of things I see only as You-Habor, listening to someone. I recall myself listening to what other participants said, those witnesses to the event gathered in the refectory of the Monastery the day after everything took place.

I-Habor listened, but people were not speaking to me (although Lenbe may have). They were speaking to the Elder Brother who for them was, above all, a brother to Jocelyn. But behind the Elder Brother they perceived the presence of a newcomer, surely a more Elder Brother, who at

the same time was also someone from the world of the Controllers. Now I realize that during that conversation it gradually came down to this, that the main questioner was this Brother Superior — Benno? Jan? “I am Benno,” he told us. But more than once the Elder Brother used this other name.

Jan-Benno accepted the complete quiet marked only by our uneven breathing and rustling. He finished eating and sat motionless. Remember that we could not see their faces, while they perceived our unease, sadness, strange suspense, anticipation of something undefined. Here at the Monastery were people who had survived yesterday’s event more or less whole. Certainly, the stronger ones, not those on the verge of The Refusal like a substantial number of the typical Petitioners, as Benno surely realized. He knew as well that others like myself and Jeani, above all, knew something essential about the event. We were looking to see how this would turn out, while still not knowing everything. We hadn’t seen bodies on the beach or others who had perished.

“We need time,” said Benno. Maybe he expected that our silence would turn into the sound of hushed talk, but that didn’t happen. It was clear to me that without some help from the outside each of us would be alone with this event. For many, The Loss meant a certain paralysis of contact. We never know how to signal to one another that we want to talk, that we are ready to listen, or speak up ourselves. People very close to each other, like us in the Colony, somehow are more skilled at managing our inner lives. And there are also privileged ones among us: Taddol who could see more than just shapes but rarely was interested in small, curious signals, or Kadab whose sensitive perception was enough for a conversation. Lenbe might be an example — she would ask or agree with a light touch. Jeani too, but she had something more, which over time we began to call “second sight” (I say more about this later, dear Viso — once again I’ve strayed from the story at hand).

“We need time, but we don’t have it,” said Benno, continuing his sentence. “We must understand how this came about, tell one another what this was This will help us oppose the desire for The Refusal, acceptance of The Refusal. I know that you are doing it, but it may be harder now. The sole chance we have now is to talk to one another and tell ourselves what happened.”

Benno picked up a platter laying on the table. It was metal, perhaps silver, and rang slightly: “Whoever receives the platter has the right and obligation to tell what he or she knows. For now we will try to return to the beginning of what you call The Mission, The Mission of Jocelyn”

Lenbe carefully took the offered platter into her hands (she always handled dishes carefully).

“I-Lenbe say that it happened this way . . . Habor accepted me into the Colony and things got better for me. I worked, I cleaned for those who live there, just as if The Loss didn’t exist, but I also took on a little work to care for those in the barracks who don’t want to go to the Lazaret and don’t have to yet, but need someone so that they don’t sleep all day in a mess, because The Refusal takes them over, little by little, but it tightens its grip.

When The Mission began, Brother Jocelyn started to come to these people, play for them, sometimes awaken them; later someone was sent by him with a prayer stone, the holy water . .

.What happened to him?” Lenbe’s voice changed, the platter clanged when she put it down on the table. “Did he perish? Why aren’t we all looking for him?”

Benno took the platter back and raised it up. “Brother Jocelyn is being searched for, not only him, but others too. But ‘perished’ can also mean that he’s lost to the water.” A murmur rippled through the refectory. People wept.

“More about The Mission,” Benno asked. Several hands reached out for the plate. It was passed from hand to hand as each blurted out some statement.

Yes. The Mission was an awakening. Brought by the Holy Brother: Brother Jocelyn. Yes, but our Lenbe exaggerates when she says that the music cured people. It may have marked a beginning, but what was really important was the reminder that we need to call out to God against The Refusal, banish The Refusal, so The Loss becomes a holy gift of being able to see what others can’t see. The Mission — it’s to encourage people to appeal to God: “Now, come.”

Someone also recalled that Brother Jocelyn had said that “this Island is The Island Mission. From here a new beginning will spread to the whole world.”

Amid the voices was one, I don’t know whose it was, there were a lot of people here whom I’d never met. A sharp voice which I recognize though I can’t connect it with a person. I hear something that struck me like a shot: “The Mission on the Island is filled with sin.”

Someone else echoed this thought: “From the depths of sin we cry out.” “We cry out, but everywhere sin abounds.” “Houses full of sin.” “Sin in the Monastery.” “An Island of sin, our penance is not sufficient” “Depart from here.”

Then Lenbe’s voice: “No, Jo-ce-lyn didn’t say that, it’s you”

“He didn’t have time.”

“He said it, but not to you, not to everyone.”

It occurred to me that as Benno listens, his hypothesis that began this conversation is confirmed.

An insoluble debate: what the now lost Jocelyn said. But what others heard, what others added from their own recollections — emotions, bits of lectures or sermons heard earlier.

“But the Cross at the Bay of Rescuers?” prompted the Elder. Although the cross was new, it was modeled on the one standing in front of the Monastery, an ancient one from the first Christian mission on this bit of land, a mission of Celtic monks, exiles from the monasteries in which they’d been educated.

The Second Mission had to have its own Cross. Kadab had looked at it quite closely and said that it was not completely identical to the model. The Cross at the Monastery was made from gray stone, whereas the new one was from blocks of marble and it was white. The marble is clearly visible, but its base is rather roughly finished. Already tiny yellow and gray lichen, even the first patches of moss had formed on it. When the services began, the whiteness of the Cross of the Second Mission appeared practically pure, rising against the background of the sea with its dark grayness and crested waves. The votive stones were also white marble, prayer stones arranged around the Cross. Taddol also had placed a large, beautiful stone for Kubat. The possibility, the

chance to do something, to offer something had reached him too. That was good news. But not the news that the death of Kubat was a punishment.

Those are my thoughts; no one expressed them. When it had quieted down a little (because more was said about punishment for sins and who deserved punishment, even though another important topic had been raised — namely, the Cross and the prayer meetings in the Valley of the Rescuers), Lenbe reached for the platter and quickly raised it above her head.

“You have the right to speak!” said Benno, who nevertheless had not lost firm control over the gathering. Lenbe waited for quiet and then spoke clearly and confidently. She stated that Brother Jocelyn had introduced the gathering around the Cross. The gatherings had been “sweet,” everyone was happy with them, that in the bright sun, against the background of the sea, they could see the beautiful Cross clearly. The singing was beautiful, Hiza sang songs that many knew from the Monastery, but here they were even more real. In general, the music was, as Lenbe characterized it, “magical.”

“Not magical, but holy,” called out voices, “Holy!”

These voices were sharp, adamant. Lenbe grew quiet, but after a moment she added: “At the start it was pleasant, but then I began to fear the gatherings, even though I too carried holy water to those even more sick with The Refusal. The water held a prayer, a petition like something living, invisible.” Lenbe went silent, alarmed by her own words.

“Why were you afraid of these services?”

“I-Hiza will tell you. I sang, but less and less. The Cantor took my place ... he was Jocelyn’s friend, but maybe something more But where is he? Is he here with you?”

Silence. Hiza had noticed the Cantor among those looking for help at the Lazaret. He had been there, asleep, sleeping like those who are bone tired or escaping through The Refusal. But where was he now?

“I-Hiza was afraid of the power of the demand that The Loss ceased to be a fact, that we would no longer be in this condition that we are. I’m afraid of The Refusal, but this wild hope? It was like The Refusal, the reverse of The Refusal was just the same as The Refusal . . . I was afraid that something might happen, that something terrible must happen . . . I tried to continue, to sing against that, but I sensed my own weakness and so I left.”

Lenbe had been interrupted, but Hiza was listened to until the end.

Something sounded in the silence. Silver bracelets tinkled lightly on the platter when she put her hand on it. At that time she did not yet wear her dress with the little bells. But already she had begun to be our exceptional person, an artist — despite The Loss. “At certain times the sun lit up the Cross.”

“We know that the Cross glowed.”

These were individual voices, but more like someone’s single voice, confirmed with a murmur of soft cries, “Yes, that’s how it was,” “Amen.”

Was Benno convinced? Or did he just think that he could get back to the subject? I know that the Elder Brother certainly agreed with Hiza. I recall that Hiza had gone on to add, “I don’t

know how long I've thought this way, whether for a long time or just from some particular moment — but which one? Since yesterday, or now when I'm asked?"

But I, myself, I-Habor, what did I think? Did I flee to the Lazaret to avoid thinking? Was it to follow Jeani — that she was SOMEONE-BEFORE-ME? The Afflicted absolutely need a path marked out for them, one that is tested. Not exactly like the blind, but similar. Or is it just another way of beginning The Refusal, to hold back in order to not be first?

Benno ought to pose the question: what makes the Monastery different from the Beach of Rescuers? Up until yesterday one didn't need to know that or question it. What happened yesterday? At the Lazaret we saw the victims of this event, just like in a hospital, the worst cases. Here in the refectory we Afflicted-Survivors gathered or were gathered, those who could stand, consciously participate and have something to bring up.

It gradually became clear what sort of condition those who'd been at yesterday's event were in. Other than Lenbe, none of those who spoke had been at the Valley the crucial evening: neither Hiza who had neared the place when people were already fleeing, and had run to me by a known path, nor , who was in her workshop. Had Benno moved too quickly to answer the question "why" before asking instead "what actually happened?" No doubt he thought that he knew; after all, he took part in dismissing the Controllers.

But at the same time, Benno didn't seem to be listening to us for the Controllers or following their plan. The Controllers weren't interested in experiences, only in facts: "how many fingers do you see?" Could those unsure of how many fingers the Controller holds up be witnesses to facts, actual events? Witnesses to The Loss are not, were not, recognized as capable of assessing The Loss. The Loss didn't take place before our eyes, but inside them, in some spot where they connect with the brain. But we do know something that we can't convince anyone about: that anything is possible, anything can happen, the way it has now happened to us. Why do I hope that you can grasp this? If everything is possible, maybe that's possible also. But won't that be the way that The Loss reaches you too?

Maybe without any change in the retina, I pass on the danger of The Refusal directly to the organ of thought? Maybe end with this? But no, not yet! Just by writing "I-Habor" I shake myself out of The Refusal.

For a moment I still can see that written phrase.

16. More reports from witnesses. Mourning. The discovery of Jocelyn

What Benno did find out from more stories (and I with him and practically everyone because this was the only way each of us learned what then became our collective experience).

At the beginning, the prayer service at the Beach of Rescuers went on as it had on other days. Maybe there were more people, new ones in particular, but also more of the sick and elderly than usual. There were different estimates of the number; as a rule, Brother Jocelyn called out, “We are the Thousand.”

(The Controllers counted 2573 Afflicted on the Island at that time; in addition to them there was an unknown number of staff, duty nurses, several Controllers, and workers at the port).

The Little Valley that opened onto a small, curved beach is not large. People filled it tightly, packed close to one another. They sang the usual litany. Brother Jocelyn called out, begging them to appeal ardently to God, Jesus, the Lord He has already chosen the time for his coming.

The first to fall on their faces were those closest to the Cross and then those behind them, as if a current were passing through them. Someone called out, “look at the Cross.”

People broke away, began to push against one another — in the direction of the Cross and the beach. There was some crying out, some strange, foreign shriek: “The Cross is before us . . . the Cross is getting brighter.” Beyond the Cross that some saw or believed that others were seeing, the first row of people entered the water; they turned around, rose up, clinging “blindly” to those around them. Later, they saw nothing, only splashing. Someone cried out, “to the shore, to the shore!” They drew back, but the crowd kept surging forward, stumbling on the slick, treacherous stones; the water got deeper and deeper, pushed toward the shore, frightening them. There were some who tried to go against the water where its movement dragged back and rolled over the churning grit and stones.

Lenbe still held fast to her charges on the grass, among the boulders before the beach. She said to them, “wait, we will make it.” They stayed. Then, as they clutched one another’s hands, she dragged them further into the floor of the valley until they reached its edge. Turning over every few minutes, water flowed strangely far onto the shore. It helped those laying on the rocks stand and go back. Now it was nearly dark. Surely not all of them were able to get out of the water.

“Not everyone,” said Benno. Those who got out and were practically safe were suddenly overcome by a senseless fear — as if the water might reach them, fill the valley, pour over the heath they were crossing.

“Don’t be surprised,” said the Elder to Brother Benno. “After all, they are Afflicted. Something inconceivable has happened to them once already.”

“I could see everything better then. And now I see you better. Only a little better, but better”

“An Angel raised me up by the hand from the water and led me across the water to a dry place.”

“Why you, You-Kar-se, and not those others?”

“They drowned in the Holy water,” a deaf and dull voice, laced with irony.

Silence. Weeping. Probably Lenbe. Then more weeping.

Benno stood up. His body towered over us, even when he sat with his empty bowl. “Go ahead and weep,” he said. “Weep together.”

I think there was a great deal of weeping during those days. Only those completely given over to The Refusal did not cry.

“Go stand watch with them,” Jeani implored. “If you must weep, then weep with them.” The Colony took up her suggestion.

Viso, I-Habor cried too, as I walked the path with Kadab alongside the Monastery, near Kubat’s grave where Tadol’s white stone lay, and by the Lazaret. I cried with the sick, who would eat, as long as I held their other hand, as long as I supported their backs with my body.

Jeani told us that the “untouchables” died faster. She’d read that once somewhere and remembered it and it proved true during the time of The Loss.

The most wonderful joy came over me when someone awakened from The Refusal and wept with me.

I didn’t behave as Jeani did; instead, I avoided the bed of the “Cantor.” I knew which one he was. The duty nurse placed his food beside him and only when she left did he eat. I noticed it while sitting watch at the bed next to him. In general, he slept or pretended to. We could tell when someone was sleeping by the breath, the relaxation of the body, and then by touching. I did not touch the “Cantor.” When I asked Jeani, she said that the Cantor suffers. In his own way.

The number of burials increased. At the Lazaret, people died as before, and the situation of those in the state of Refusal worsened. New patients arrived — those who hadn’t been able to overcome the shock experienced in the Valley. Again and again, bodies were found washed up by the waves in different places. The number of the missing continued to grow. How many? There might be people whom no one had noticed missing, or the reverse, neighbors said that they’d not returned, but then they turned up at the Lazaret or some other barrack where they were taken in.

The Controllers handled the searching, checking, and identifying of people and somewhat nervously because it turned out that they didn’t know very precisely how many of us there were. Taddol had escaped the loss statistics and Anmer was not searched for either. Now they could finally accept that the sea had closed over them for good. As it had Jocelyn, presumably.

The Controllers refused to hold one big funeral for all the bodies found. Hardly anyone knew anything about these people. I think that the bodies underwent the usual autopsy procedures. Jeani and Lenbe prepared them for burial. Neighbors from their barrack and a small group from the Monastery accompanied the carts carrying coffins. Usually someone placed a white stone on the grave, saying that it looked nice. A pair of Controllers observed the burials at a distance, sometimes together with nurses in their full uniforms. Why? They didn’t explain.

Burials took place in the morning when it was still dark. The first on the given day would begin at dawn. I decided to go because it was a patient from the Lazaret who I’d been able, from time to time, bring back from the unconsciousness of The Refusal. I have in mind psychic

unconsciousness, absorption in something internal that little by little leads to death. He liked the little stories about Kras that I whispered to him alone, and about the gannets, and the life on the heath around us. I thought back to “The Secret Garden,” past tales about nature that I myself had always loved, or the tales about otters in “Ring of Bright Water.” We don’t have otters here but sometimes seals are in the waves, not visible to us but still a part of the fog and grayness. Can you figure out how I know this?

My listener was to be buried today — does it matter how he died? In his own bed in the Lazaret, or looking for help in a glowing Cross and the litanies of Jocelyn? In any case, I went early, slipped out while Kadab was still sleeping, and passed by the Monastery. Why did it occur to me to peek in at the Church? It was still too early for the brothers’ morning prayer. The doors might be closed. But something lay there in front of them. Strange. It was a pile of rags, like a bag. I leaned down. The awful stench of decay and excrement hit me. I cried out. Out of the stinking heap came a human groan. The brothers came, pushing forward to help. “It’s him, it’s Jocelyn.” They quickly carried him inside somewhere. I remained, staring at the rags left behind. I finally turned away in order to go on to the burial of the poor beggar who couldn’t save himself. The Elder Brother caught up with me on the path. “Don’t tell anyone yet, dear Habor. It will be better that way.”

I admit he was right. More events came on the heels of this one.

17. The service with Lenbe. Events — a seaweed attack. Anmer dead?

Thursday, after a series of burials, and the second burial after that of my friend. I probably did not write that the services at the Cross had always been on Thursdays. Thursday had been the “Day of Petition,” the day of the New Mission.

I knew that Jocelyn was alive and would live, but it wasn’t clear how much he would recover, that is, begin to speak and react beyond minimal contact. Brother Benno, who still remained here, found me to let me know. He asked that I continue to observe secrecy.

Thursday morning Lenbe asked me and Hiza for some advice. She wanted to go to the Cross that day at dusk to pray together for Jocelyn. Many believed that he and the others still missing, probably some four or six of them, were still alive somewhere, had survived, unaffected by either The Loss or The Refusal.

“Is that what you think, Lenbe?” I asked. Hiza was silent. Lenbe looked flustered for a moment, but said: “I-Lenbe don’t know! But I hope they are living, either here or in another world. We can hope for this, right? Habor — Hiza, can we? Surely, we can. If only the Controllers don’t interfere. They might be afraid of a new accident”

“We’ll see,” said Hiza. “I’ll come and sing a psalm. I’ll do it because you can’t count on the Cantor. He’s afraid and is still hiding at the Lazaret.”

I decided to demand something from the Monastery in return for my silence that increasingly weighed on me. Let them go to the Cross, but best would be to approach Benno, the venerable Brother-Controller

Jeani did not want anyone to be released from the Lazaret. Lenbe promised that the invitation would not be extended to the Lazaret.

Lenbe’s worship service — that’s how I described it — was different. Of course, it recalled those earliest ones, when there were still very few Petitioners. In the silence or the hushed whispers, as at a funeral, a small group of several people, joined by about ten others, huddled around the Cross on the promontory above the Valley. All of them moved about quite confidently in the deepening dusk.

Kadab and I stood at a distance. We did not hear what Lenbe said, only the melody of her voice. The silence, broken by a soft response of “Amen.” Hiza began to sing “Amazing Grace,” her song of escape, and the strong voices of the brothers of the monastery joined in. At this moment the first stones hit the group. Hiza in particular, standing to the side and a bit higher, was hit by a stone thrown inaccurately in the dark. Kadab and one of the brothers (later I heard it was Benno) immediately dashed toward her. Hiza slumped to her knees with her arms on the ground. Benno lifted her up with the skilled grip of an army medic. Amid the cries and scuffle, the Controllers immediately appeared with flashlights and whistles. They must have been waiting on a hillside nearby.

Hiza did not want to spend the night in the Villa where her forehead had been bandaged. The wound was superficial, more of a bruise, a painful lump at the base of her woolly hair.

“I’ve become an ‘African Queen’ and they’ve moved me here where I want to be. Jeani has to take care of me” — are you listening, Jeani?

Hiza’s expression, combining pride and irony, was uniquely that of an “African Queen.” She wasn’t perturbed about what could happen to her, or to others, say, like Lenbe. But Lenbe hadn’t been hit by a stone — only Hiza was.

The attack was primarily symbolic, and it was hard to imagine that The Afflicted could throw stones accurately, even had they wanted to. The question was why this protest had happened and what might happen in the future. What else might these distraught people, as Hiza called them, do and how would the Controllers respond? Jeani and I thought about this, each of us relying on what we individually knew.

Did Jeani know what had happened to Jocelyn? Maybe she knew more than I, but was silent? Silent as long as I remain so, but does she know why?

One of the images created by Kas-Kas shows the beach with a cloud in the shape of a fish floating overhead. A crowd of little people wave at the fish, little people with their arms raised. The cloud is heavy, oval like a whale and indifferent. Is it an expression of her attitude about the sense of appealing to God?

Is there no Other Power against The Loss? For now it seems that events — two already — are enough to set one thinking. Nevertheless, a certain little understood episode occurred.

Someone broke a window in the studio Kas-Kas used. It was done with a marble stone that landed inside and was wrapped in strips of seaweed, a dark algae called bladderwrack. In the morning some of the same bladderwrack, left behind on some of the beaches, full of sand and rotting, appeared outside the doors to Helen’s house. Another disgusting clump of ocean refuse and rotting fish turned up outside the barrack doors of the most well-known Petitioners.

Bodies were still missing. Searching to find the instigator or instigators of the “Seaweed Attack” the Controllers discovered a rarely visited bay on the wilder, northern edge of the Island. The bladderwrack had come from there. Clumps were found on the remote pathways far beyond the reach of the strongest tides. Heaps of ocean greenery and washed-up trash lay on the beach. Beneath all of it lay the body of a woman, most likely one of missing Petitioners.

Identification was difficult; no one could recognize who she was. Guessing by height, it was assumed to be Anmer. But Semar, her partner from the lesbians’ barrack immediately disagreed, until Anmer’s goggles were found in the seaweed — Anmer was never without them when she walked by the sea.

Modern techniques of identification? Who would resort to them when it’s just about one less of The Afflicted? The body went to the autopsy room. Maybe the usual procedures were carried out, or maybe not, since the body was in poor condition.

Jeani went with Semar to prepare the body for burial. Late in the evening when we were drinking our milk, Jeani whispered: “Today we buried Anmer. Those were her goggles — tell the Elder when you see him.”

Lenbe continued to go to “her poor ones,” elderly people whom she tried to keep from The Refusal, for them a condition not always discernible. Advanced age, dementia and moderate Refusal are almost impossible to distinguish.

A short cut to the nearest barrack led across the meadows below the Monastery. Lenbe usually went that way. Her heavy wellingtons beat down a narrow path between the rough grasses and dry reeds. She threw a bag onto her back with some of the most useful supplies — extra diapers from the Lazaret, some medicines, and a bottle of Kras’s healthful milk. She left her muddy boots outside the door. She remained quite a long time with her patients; not only did she clean and wash whatever needed washing, above all, she made conversation — conversation about anything. Now talk was about the burial for one of the pensioners who had perished in the bay. Lenbe listened to their grieving, since the fellow had been known and rather liked, and had roused himself out of The Refusal. He had begun to enjoy life a little. He had gone to the service at the Cross alone; Lenbe had not led him there, or even encouraged him. “He went out of his own longing,” was how she summed it up. Someone had said, “Maybe better to go and not return than not go and live with the thought that it’s all a sick illusion?”

Just at the threshold, closing the door because of the wind, Lenbe reached down for her wellingtons, covered with clumps of rotting seaweed. Little stones rattled inside each shoe. Lenbe pulled off the putrid seaweed and then dropped the stones into her bag. After returning to the Colony, she turned out the stones into a bowl — sharp fragments of white marble, but tinged with a rusty color, like blood.

“I’ll take them to the Monastery,” I decided. “Brother Benno should see this. It means something, it has to mean something. And you, Lenbe, you should never go alone again. Let someone you know go for you or Kadab and I will go with you.”

Lenbe examined the fragments carefully. “These are broken prayer stones. It’s terrible ...,” Lenbe clenched her lips. She was silent, but we perceived the signal of her alarm which only now came over her. Why? Jeani came in on this scene and asked, “Lenbe, make me some tea.”

The bustle helped, but Jeani was also affected.

“I was just going to tell you that the stones had disappeared from the cemetery, the ones that had been placed on the graves. I noticed it today during one of the burials. The one on Kubat’s grave is gone too. Now we know what they are doing with them.”

“Who?”

“There are some ...,” Lenbe said. And then she was silent again.

I thought that I should question her, so that she didn’t have to bear the weight of this knowledge or suspicion alone. But not now. More important than investigation is that the

graveyard should be as it had been before. The stones should return. Kadab was able to find similar ones on one of the southwest beaches or near the former quarry. Marble pebbles are no rarity here.

You, Viso, probably have guessed the answer to the question that we had barely asked ourselves. But you surely won't blame me for trying to tell the story in a way that maintains a line between what we knew at various stages, that is, at the moment I'm describing. We will never know everything in any case. The entire "seaweed episode," the events and what people said about them are intertwined with the fundamental issue of The Loss and The Refusal that binds them, infecting everything we do. But maybe you don't believe that? Maybe you are not able to believe that.

Did I already write to you about this? Benno decided that the next four services would be at the Monastery. He spoke with Lenbe and that convinced him. The distance between the Monastery and the concerns of The Afflicted had totally disappeared. The Controllers took the bait. Clearly, contact with the brothers ceased to interfere with our "therapy."

And in fact, nonexistent activity was hard to interfere with. Maybe someone on the mainland somewhere realized that our problem — less and less important — fit perfectly with missionary activity, just as leprosy had at one time? And really, it wasn't the first time I thought that our Island was like Molokai. But these two situations weren't entirely the same. The contagion of leprosy had always been known, since its earliest appearance in humans. Those with leprosy gradually lost their human features, death was written all over their bodies.

But we know practically nothing about ourselves. What kills us is not The Loss, but The Refusal. We observe The Refusal not knowing whether it comes from us, our response to The Loss. Or, is it our response to an attack from somewhere, an external aggression, or maybe another phase of the attack? We feel fear and revulsion at medical exams that treat us like carriers of some agent of The Loss. We behave as if we didn't want to know. I do too. Have you noticed, Viso, that I never ask you about what must be of interest to me: what do you know, Viso, what must you have learned about the biology of The Loss? What really happened to us, to me?

No, I beg you, don't investigate it. Or if you have, then set any findings aside. Don't think about me, about Habor, about us here in terms of such information. It won't clarify anything for you. We don't get involved in it.

There was something, a new kind of study which had begun to develop just before The Loss, maybe I can recall its peculiar, long name — something like psycho-neuro-communicator? It's not a study about human beings. I loathe it because it looks for causes within our bodies. I sometimes have dreams about it and so does Jeani. Dreams about extracting something which constitutes my identity. This nightmare follows a specific course, based I'm sure on what we know from the autopsy room at the Lazaret.

I don't want to think about this. Better to imagine the naked corpse of Anmer the nurse, entangled in ribbons of seaweed, coated with grainy sand. Compared with science, the sea is delicate and humane.

18. The Non-Petitioners? About a different Refusal. The sound of the saxophone. Second sight

Wednesday evening in a spotless kitchen. I've returned early from the Lazaret; Jeani has stayed with a new patient. Moving to a different place always intensifies The Refusal. Nurses offer an injection, but we prefer to go without it and instead to nourish ourselves with a drink of sweet gelatin.

Lenbe is already at home and Kadab is out milking Kras. We hear the shuffling of her hooves, first one, then another, and the clang of Helen's old bucket.

"Were you at the barracks today, Lenbe?"

"Perlat came and walked me there, alone like I wanted."

Lenbe disappeared into the lower shelf of the cupboard where she began to organize the pots.

"Come and sit with me. Don't tell me that you don't know. After all, you understand what I mean, who could have done this and why?"

I took her by the hand, her small, rough paw. After a moment she responded with a squeeze, delicate, and then stronger. It was one of the signs we use here, a signal in the palm that says, "I trust you."

Lenbe thought for a long time before she began to speak.

"You-Habor think that first there's The Loss, and then from The Loss comes The Refusal. A Refusal like Kubat's ... and others in the Lazaret and in their barracks — well, they fall asleep, they grow cold from the inside, they die. But The Loss and then The Refusal or The Loss and its discovery can allow you to exist. But I, foolish Lenbe, I know something more. I learned that there are also people with another Refusal. They grow cold from the inside too, but they don't fall asleep. They burn from anger, anger sustains them until they can break something, hit and kill something, even if it's just a rat."

"Lenbe, do you know someone like that?"

"I don't know, maybe? I assume so. But Brother Jocelyn said that people like that exist. In the world and here too. They have huge power."

I didn't know how to calm Lenbe. Nor how to calm myself either. It's logical that The Refusal might take such a course, and have such consequences. Without any belief in possession, but simply like a viral disease, like rabies. Different from other cases just as The Loss differs from various ordinary illnesses that lead to blindness. Did the Controllers know about this aspect of The Refusal? If they know, by what right do they leave us in this situation without any help? Do they think about this at all? Do they try to investigate this possibility at all? Maybe until now this kind of Refusal has not emerged clearly enough?

Thursday evening the bell sounded just like on Sunday mornings. People came down somewhat hesitantly, stopping at the Cross, and talking to each other in strangely soft tones. In the end everyone was out and gathered around a group of figures from the Monastery.

The Elder Brother led in prayer, the psalms usually sung in the evening. Everything was just as usual at the Monastery, meaning, different from what had gone on in the Valley. The Monastery was and remained a place of peace. Prayers for the intention of “those buried in cemeteries, for those perished on land and sea,”... just as had always been prayed before. Then Hiza sang, again, just as before. I knew that she had a bandage over her forehead, but her voice sounded strong, maybe even a little calmer.

When Hiza finished, from beyond the open doors of the sacristy, somewhere deep inside the Monastery, came the soft, quavering note of the saxophone. Did others hear it too? And did a sigh of relief really pass through us? Some softly stifled cry? Did Lenbe hear it? She was standing near me. With some fear I walked out of the church into the night darkness. No one said anything. Only Kadab asked, “Did you hear it?” But he knew everything that I knew. I went with him to milk Kras. In the quiet we exchanged a few sentences. Yes, it was time to be done with this secret. Maybe this had been the way that the Elder wanted to give the signal? But for what? Could Jocelyn bear his own return?

What about The Mission?

I don't know why I didn't note it down, but during that Thursday service Brother Benno sang along with Hiza. Not the entire time, maybe only the last verse, but quietly and with a clear voice. It was important, moving. Hearing the two voices, I thought that perhaps their thoughts were now mingling.

Am I able to be the reporter on this story? Because I'm beginning to fear that I am turning it into some kind of mystery novel.

In fact, it really was. I lay down on a mat in Helen's house, as if I were sleeping or intended to sleep; everyone hung around the front door trying not to be a bother (not only I, but everyone is sensitive to noises, to incomprehensible sounds). I really tried to figure it out mentally, even though I was no longer accustomed to such sorting out or analyzing. The Loss was more important than the events, and I had capitulated to it right at the outset. You already know about us, The Afflicted. That internally we have something like fuzzy cotton padding: “it's all the same — that's the way the world is. We stand before our fate like at a wall or before the horizon along which there is Nothing.

But now I am rebelling. I-Habor want to find my way among people, among the living, and take part in events. That's what I wanted then and I want to do it now.

But tell me, can you see these people through my description, can you catch them in the act of living, be convinced about what they are headed for, what they are doing in this world around me?

Nothing is like it would be in a puppet theater: role, function — and that's it. Only the nurses resemble puppets, stuffed into their protective uniforms. I think that before taking on duty here they are given some brain starch to stiffen their resistance to contact with The Refusal. Still, one of their ranks cracked — Anmer, poor Anmer.

And the Controllers? Benno serves as a bridge: Benno is a human being, and so the Controllers must be human too.

Jeani has her connections among the nurses, maybe even reaching as far up as the Controllers. She doesn't say anything about it. I don't prod her to speak. From reading long ago I retained the useful concept of "need to know." In other times of hidden struggle for one's own rights the phrase meant that not everyone had the right to know what he or she was curious about. On the contrary, those entitled "to know" are only those who must know in order to act.

Enough of that. Maybe it's been too much already? But that's old news. Now something else is being played out. I can anticipate your question, but I'm not going to take it up. Better to try to explain one detail in what's already been described. For example, how was it possible that someone could hit Hiza with a stone? Two possibilities: among the "former Petitioners" (as we might term that hypothetical group) there was someone who had not really been affected by The Loss. Someone who ended up here of his or her volition ... maybe like Taddol and Kadab. Or, as Jeani suggested to me, someone who had "second sight," meaning the ability to get a precise orientation by sound. That orientation complements the visual, the remnants of sight we still have. It's possible to hit a figure identified by sound. Hiza sang for quite a while; her location could be gauged.

I didn't really want to believe this. But Jeani stated: "I myself have 'second sight.' Something like that exists — I know more about what goes on around me than I can actually see. For example, Kas-Kas has it and so do others. Only they probably don't call it that. You too, Habor, you have a second sight for Kadab, a special one."

Maybe I do have it. Maybe for Lenbe too, although she talks about a second sight that works like a signal that reaches her, whereas Hiza does it through singing. And Benno tries that too, which is why he sang at the service.

During the seaweed episode the Controllers deflected any second sight with their whistles just as they shocked our retinas with the glare of their flashlights.

19. What non-Petitioners? A little meeting in the Monastery — Jocelyn

Inadvertently I've written about the "non-Petitioners." To name someone or something means to grant it independent existence, to invoke a theory. According to this theory, it must have happened this way: the Petitioners working with Jocelyn, and to some extent with Anmer and the Cantor as facilitators, engaged a fair number of people, nearly half of those gathered on the Island of The Afflicted. At a certain moment a crisis came, an event painful for many, especially for those who'd lost someone close to them, and those whose condition had worsened — either their own or the condition of those dear to them.

The Controllers had to respond to the situation on the spot and at their headquarters. How? We don't know. Was the response the same for both? The Monastery also reacted to the Petitioners the whole time. Supposedly we were closer to the Monastery, but I'm not sure what the brothers could do and how they could use their capabilities.

Into this sea of ignorance came the non-Petitioners. Were they disappointed, disillusioned Petitioners? Or a breakaway group? Maybe opponents who rejected the "Second Mission" from the outset and fundamentally opposed? The Afflicted are people with the most varied basic convictions: atheists, agnostics, fundamentalists and people raised in different traditions. Evidently, however, it seems that The Loss had not affected their capacity to attack people. Different interpretations of the nature of the loss arose, and above all about The Refusal. But these interpretations relied neither on logic and nor responses to opposing arguments. The Refusal is probably rooted in the brain stem, so that The Loss ultimately involves the brain stem too.

I think that The Refusal occurs in people in a particular way. It's not that we choose a particular direction in life, some goal we aim for, or abandon. To different extents, we still use our intellect; we accept or reject arguments. Some question stands before us and we say "yes" or "no." We agree to something or refuse something — a job, army service, sex with someone. What kills the Afflicted isn't that kind of refusal. It isn't the intellect that refuses, although the intellect can't manage with The Loss either. What does it mean that something depends upon the capability of intellect?

Kadab usually objects to questions like this. He's right; science could provide a factual answer, but whatever the answer may be, it will risk discrimination against this or that kind of supposedly "inferior" people.

In terms of surviving The Loss, as well as life here, what matters above all is having a direction outward, toward someone else, and not being warped by focus on oneself. Help doesn't depend on giving advice! Jeani doesn't say anything, she waits until the patient swallows a spoon of the sweet gelatin before she offers the next one.

Of course, you have already noticed that I didn't even try to join The Second Mission. I took part in the sprinkling of water mainly because of Lenbe. Many who observed The Mission were not hostile but felt uncomfortable with it. At the Monastery too. I don't accuse such observers of shattering the prayer stones or attacking people like Hiza, or Lenbe. I keep in mind the voices at the meeting with Benno. One could feel a kind of hatred there, toward Lenbe, for example, but mainly against the so-called "sinful ones."

Meantime it turned out that on Sunday the sound of the saxophone toward the end of the service was heard by enough people that the news spread throughout all the barracks and even to quarters farther away. People asked one another about what no one could know: was Jocelyn — Brother Jocelyn — alive? Or had his instrument been found and someone tried it out, just at the moment when many would be able to hear it. It had been one, prolonged note, not a melody, an even more peculiar and mysterious signal.

Jeani wasn't at the service and heard the news only two days later when she was visiting patients in the Lazaret. People kept quiet among themselves, as if they feared that the news might get out to the wrong people through the nurses who worked with the Controllers. But what could they think about Brother Jocelyn? Some questioned Jeani who, no doubt, raised her eyebrows and suggested that "so it seemed to someone."

Lenbe clapped her hands against her apron.

"It didn't seem that way to us. I heard it and Habor right beside me must have heard it. But people sighed, shuffled and must have looked around. The doors to the Monastery church slammed shut."

"Jeani or you, Habor, go to the Brothers. We have to check whether or not we could help"

Jeani said slowly: "I don't know whether that's a good idea. Jocelyn is the Monastery's affair now. They will manage themselves."

Lenbe was not convinced.

"Jeani, you know best, but I feel that Brother Jocelyn might think that everyone is against him. Maybe that was his way of calling out to us because he had no other way."

In the end the three of us went: Jeani, Kadab, and myself. Lenbe stayed with Hiza and our new roommate, young Terdu, with whom we had to manage somehow. The wind, sliced by the Island's sudden cold rain, beat against us. Something else beat against us too at the Monastery gate, in the courtyard under the cross — cardboard boxes and black trash bags crammed with clumps of seaweed. Seaweed stinks in a distinctive way but these boxes gave off an odor of vomit and ether, like some kind of hospital refuse. Some new gift from the non-Petitioners?

Our entry alarmed the brothers so that they immediately cleaned up despite the darkness. But without a word, Benno first carefully looked over the bags with one of the Controllers' high-powered flashlights. When we entered inside, he said only, "Jocelyn shouldn't see this and it's better if he doesn't know about it at all."

In the refectory — bread on a silver platter, tea. Kadab went to wash because he had helped with cleaning up the bags. He returned covered with a cape; the brothers had taken away his jacket,

reeking from the smell, to launder. In this garb he became like a monastic figure; I had to take a second look to recognize him!

The Elder Brother asked: “Jeani, pour us some tea.” I’d almost forgotten about this custom, that a woman should pour. At home, Kadab always poured, less risky with spills. Jeani managed faultlessly. Suddenly, I recalled how she had introduced herself when I saw her for the first time: “Jeanine de” She was still that person and somehow it fit at the Monastery. She said also: “Since Thursday everyone knows that brother Jocelyn is here. They assume that we know something and that convinces them that they’re right. Our Lenbe, too, who would like to help him.”

I added, probably unnecessarily, “Jocelyn isn’t only your affair, that is, of the Monastery or the Controllers.”

They were silent, as if they wanted to say, “This isn’t your business, Habor.” But they didn’t say it.

The Elder Brother began to speak, and Benno withdrew into the shadow outside the circle of light from the lamp hanging above the table.

“Jocelyn returns from far away. We wanted to give him time and ourselves as well, to examine the options, what is possible to do and what would be best. For him, for everyone.”

“For the Petitioners and the non-Petitioners?” I interjected. Jeani touched my arm, “Don’t interrupt.” The Elder Brother calmly continued:

“Jocelyn was sick, with a high fever. We decided not to evacuate him. Various kinds of difficulties would ensue, complications beyond the competencies of the Controllers. Fortunately, Jocelyn’s condition began to improve, and he could remain. We didn’t want him to be questioned, upset before he’d come to himself, at least physically. We will explain this to Jocelyn’s friends.”

The last sentence of this summary explanation grated. We knew, after all, that it wasn’t about friends only. We had just cleaned up very unfriendly gifts.

Benno went a step further: “Jocelyn is conscious, his wounds are healing, superficial in any case, the dehydration has abated. But his state resembles what you know the best, The Refusal”

“Well, then he has to be revived. If it’s The Refusal, then that is Jocelyn’s only chance,” said the Elder Brother.

“You revive him, then maybe I-Jeani or Lenbe.”

“But how did the saxophone happen?” I asked.

“Jocelyn had two instruments. His favorite one got lost. The other one he had loaned to one of the brothers and he brought it back to him. I thought that it might revive Jocelyn if the brother played as best he could. The sound came out too loud and at the wrong time. It was inevitable, although the brother regrets that he “played” before people had left.

We decided that Jeani would come tomorrow. She would try to feed Jocelyn.

We went out in almost total darkness, with only moonlight filtered through the clouds (the moon can be blinding here). Kadab still in his monastic cape with its hood. Most likely that was why someone, a non-Petitioner with second sight, aimed at him. The stone bypassed Kadab and

hit the wall. The light from the moon intensified its whiteness. Kadab picked the stone up and kept it. Fairly large and heavy, “just about right for a prayer stone.”

“How did it go?” I asked Jeani as soon as we met in the Lazaret.

She stopped me with her usual noncommittal gesture — shrugging her shoulders. She happened to be standing at the bed of the Cantor, who lay motionless. For a moment together we listened to the breathing of a person who was not sleeping. We moved on to other patients. Only in the evening was Jeani able to return to what she’d learned in her morning visit at the Monastery. Jocelyn’s room, or whatever they call it there, had been turned into a little hospital. Two brothers took turns caring for him. One was qualified as a paramedic. Of course, there was Benno, and also a Controller, a doctor.

“I was there for about an hour, the greater part of the time alone, as I’d wanted. Without communication. I touched his thin hands and feet. His body was as if dead, not responsive. They serve him and that’s how it is. So it really is like The Refusal and firmly established now. But yet, it still feels the same when I’m with the Cantor. He does not sleep at all, he is not dying — he shivers beneath that cold skin. Both of them are half-wakened, as it were, when they drink and when they eat a little sometimes. Almost stealthily. I’ll go again and try, with Hiza if possible, but Lenbe will want to go, or maybe Hiza — I don’t know.”

20. Terdu and Auntie, Lewis. Working on Jocelyn. Lenbe's gift

Young Terdu turned up at the Colony at just the right moment. Now when Lenbe returned to the barrack from her rounds, she didn't need to do another cleaning job. Terdu took over. She followed Lenbe's pattern, maintaining the order set by an older person and completely appropriate here. Terdu had long felt like a guest. She'd turned up on the Island not long ago with a little group of mostly older and helpless Afflicted who immediately found themselves in the Lazaret. Such people were added to our group from time to time, but Terdu was an exception because she was just eighteen. She told us only that some time ago when she was little, both she and her parents had become Afflicted. Wandering from hospital to hospital, she lost contact with her parents who had been taken elsewhere because The Loss had progressed rapidly for them. Terdu made friends with an older woman whom she called Auntie. Finally, both of them were sent to the Island; Auntie was sent to the Lazaret, while Terdu was placed in the Lesbians' barrack because there was space there.

"The girls, the ladies," Terdu immediately corrected herself, "these ladies were good to me, they felt sorry for me, but I didn't want sympathy. I sat with Auntie in the Lazaret and I met you, Jeani, Habor and Kadab---you didn't throw me out like the nurses. Jeani showed me how to wake Auntie and feed her. I tried to stay in the Lazaret, but Jeani said, "It's better for you to come be with us, stay in the Colony." So here I am. When Auntie comes out of The Refusal a bit, we can bring her here. I'm going to promise her that so she'll make an effort."

Lenbe told me about what Terdu had confided to her: "I need to save Auntie, she loves me where my parents couldn't because it was me who brought The Loss to them, they got it through me. I won't say more, just that it was my fault. If it weren't for Auntie, The Refusal would have got to me and it would have been total."

After a few days of our visiting Jocelyn — still with no change — late one evening when Jeani and I-Habor were already at home, Brother Lewis unexpectedly turned up, the younger of two brothers who were tending to Jocelyn.

They, that is, those at the Monastery, generally do not visit others. Jocelyn, with his Second Mission, had been an exception. Brother Lewis was very tense, even frightened that he had come to us and wanted to ask us about The Loss. This problem had returned for him because in recent days The Refusal had seemed to become more important than The Loss itself. Lewis's questions, directed primarily to Jeani, were a shock to me. Brother Lewis wanted to know what the signs of The Loss were, how could you recognize it, how does it begin? What do you feel like, what is it? What are the examinations like that precede a diagnosis?

This was incredible, Viso. Suddenly, I saw that the entire closeness of the Monastery to us was only apparent, that we and those in the Monastery belonged to two worlds. Their Benno had not let the Brothers in on his Controllers' information that he must have. Despite being a brother, Lewis was not a partner for him. I heard our guest referring to Jeani and that probably set my second sight in motion. It dawned on me that he was asking because he was afraid. His next question confirmed it, "How can it be? Is The Refusal without The Loss the same Refusal from which you are dying? Or was it that Jocelyn became one of The Afflicted and that is his illness? Because maybe it's true that The Afflicted spread The Loss themselves and others, new people, get it from them?"

I noticed Terdu in the corner, a tiny figure, hunched over in a ball, and I could hear her uneasy breathing.

Lewis had yet another question:

"Is it true that you can acquire The Loss by looking into your eyes?"

At this moment Jeani ceased calmly explaining first contact like a teacher.

"Don't repeat such nonsense! I won't let you in to see Jocelyn anymore. You ought to be evacuated. I'll tell the Elder Brother and Benno should know too."

Lewis began to beg Jeani not to do that — he now knew there was no need to be afraid. But on the point about staying away from Jocelyn, Jeani was adamant.

"Tell us, Lewis," I asked, when the conversation seemed to have ended, "do the other brothers have such doubts too?"

"I don't know. Before, before Benno arrived, and everything happened, we didn't feel threatened. It was Jocelyn and his followers who drew The Afflicted to us and the brothers went out to them, but at the same time it was the followers who talked about our supposed devotion, about the Second Mission which is an offering"

I'm describing the conversation in detail, and particularly Lewis's response, because it explains a lot. But at the same time, I feel that Benno ceased to be an authority for me, the kind I had already begun to consider him. But were the Monastery and the Controllers somewhere there behind everything like manipulators in a puppet theater? Something was going on behind the scenes that was inaccessible to us.

I think, Viso, that you already sense this. The distance between the history I'm recounting for you and what is essential today, that distance is smaller now. I am beginning to narrate things as they happen. It's hard because I don't know whether there will be a next chapter. What will turn out to be important and what is not worth telling.

Brother Lewis departed clasping everyone's hand, including Terdu.

"Why didn't I offer you all tea?" asked Lenbe, upset.

Jeani spent the morning at Jocelyn's side, and then the rest of the day at the Lazaret. There I could relieve her. It was pleasant to have Terdu with me. Auntie woke for her right away. Jeani

and the nurses considered her state not too bad, considering her age and how much The Loss limited her independence. We anticipated that she would soon no longer need to be with the bedridden and those needing complete nursing care. Terdu had the advantage of second sight, she was able to concentrate her attention on the patients. She quickly learned how to carefully help the unconscious to drink. She told Auntie about her nursing achievements, while Auntie very slowly stroked her smooth, blonde head.

In the Monastery problems awaited. The Elder Brother listened to Jeani and me in silence. Benno was on the mainland, in a central headquarters somewhere there, but was due to return soon. We had to wait for him. The Elder Brother believed that his return would change a lot. The “Elder” had never been loquacious and now you could sense that he did not have the freedom to make decisions. He directed another one of the elder brothers to take Lewis’s place in caring for Jocelyn. To the question of whether he was afraid to have contact with The Loss, the brother replied that even if he were afraid, it wouldn’t change anything. He is a member of the Community and that is enough. But he was not afraid, “No Loss in my life has changed anything. I know the Psalms by heart.”

Although restricted by the ruling, Lewis continued to hang around Jocelyn’s cell. He asked for the saxophone and began to practice playing, somewhere close enough that its low sound reached the cell. He was far from Jocelyn’s skill, but it was pleasant to catch the sound.

Jeani decided — to my relief, because her evening fatigue had returned — that Lenbe could now go and be with Jocelyn. I think that Lenbe had been praying for this. “Lenbe didn’t give up being a Petitioner,” said Hiza one time when she found a small prayer stone on the kitchen cupboard. The stone disappeared; probably Lenbe carried it in her backpack.

Jeani and Lenbe went together for the first time. And Lenbe stayed. Elder Brother Axel, at Jocelyn’s bedside during the night, accepted the change without comment and returned to his room. Lewis, seeing Lenbe in place of the formidable Jeani, felt more sure of himself, and stood at the door. Lenbe carefully fed Jocelyn by spoonfuls. He took it as he usually did, without opening his eyes, which Lenbe checked in her own way by touching his eyelids with her fingers. Their vibration said something to her. Time for prayer. Lenbe warmed her stone in her palm and then placed it in Jocelyn’s hand that lay on top of the blanket. She smoothed his hand repeatedly until she heard an uneven breathing. Jocelyn raised his hand with the stone and wiped the tears now flowing down his face. The weeping disturbed his stillness and silence. Lewis ran into the cell to help Lenbe hold and tuck up the body now searching for shelter in the tossing bed clothes. They wept together, clinging to one another with all their strength. Jocelyn continued to clutch the stone. Then, gradually quieting, he fell asleep, but it was a completely different kind of sleep than before, a true and deep, but unsettled, with constant sighing.

“Lewis, let us continue to pray, maybe recite one of the psalms.”

“Yes, I can begin “

In the evening, Lewis came to Helen's house searching for Lenbe. He came too early and found only Terdu. We found them deep in lively conversation. Lewis wanted to say that Jocelyn had asked about Lenbe immediately after he awakened. "Come in the morning for sure, I'll let him know that you will come."

Lewis clearly had not accepted Jeani's order. He was not alarmed at her raised eyebrows, although of course he saw her threatening sign, for us mostly unobserved, more guessed from her tone of voice.

On his way out, Lewis promised Terdu a book about the wildlife on the Island. Before Jeani could scold him, he quickly added, "I'll read you what it has about birds ... , we can go listen to their sounds on the cliffs." When he'd gone, Hiza said, "See, Jeani, Lewis isn't afraid of looking into the eyes of The Afflicted."

21. Terdu. Lewis. One more “installation.” Who might know something?

Benno still didn't return. In a monotonous life, time goes who knows where, whole weeks disappear. I imagine that nothing like this happens in your life, Viso, where weeks have their labels, days are marked for this and that. During the time of the crisis around the Petitioners, this came back to us a little. In a modest form. But what paltry labels: Jocelyn resumed contact with us (with Lenbe and Lewis to be precise, not a word to anyone else).

It's already autumn; summer here is short. The days shorten quickly, but the heather still blooms on the hillsides. How do I know? I don't have time for the long walks that Kadab encouraged me to take, or Helen before that. Lewis brought a large bouquet of heather. He stood in the doorway, and said, “I-Lewis” as if he were one of us. “Terdu, this is for Auntie, you can take it to her tomorrow.” “But wouldn't you go with me?” replied Terdu, who often says what pops into her head. I didn't want to interrupt, but Jeani did instead: “Lewis has to ask the Elder Brother first.” “Thank you,” Lewis replied politely. “Ask if you can,” said Terdu. “Auntie would be very happy, because I've told her about you.”

I didn't think we'd see Lewis so soon at the Lazaret, but he was there the next day, with the heather and Terdu hiding behind him. She patted his arm, “How kind that the Brother allowed you to come.” “Actually, I didn't ask. He always says I ask too often.” An unusual sound began to resonate in the Lazaret, even those in beds furthest away could waken: Terdu's laugh, heartfelt and joyous. Lewis smiled too, and Auntie, maybe not knowing why — whether at the bouquet of heather, or the flowers, something never seen here. Can something like that be a label? I think so, no matter how sentimental.

I'll explain something, Viso, probably that I've not written about yet, but you must know; I'll write it myself since you can't ask questions. In life with The Loss it's unclear why not only things impossible for us (like reading books) have disappeared or considered harmful (TV, movies, things like that), but other things too, theoretically accessible. It's as if we ourselves wanted to add more deficits on top of the fundamental Loss, blank spots that for some mysterious reason are no longer for us. Of course, not everything that I don't write about doesn't exist here or is just identical to how it was before The Loss.

I'm extremely reluctant to broach the issue of sex — not out of prudery, something alien to me, but only because understanding it means understanding everything. I am moved by the lessons that Lewis gets from us and particularly from Jeani. He feels here the way you might or maybe as you do when you are reading Lewis's youth saves him, his touching boyishness, whereas you have been in so many worlds that make up our planet. “Multicultural Viso” is how I characterize you in my mind. And yet I'm not sure if that is enough to guard against the irony of eroticism among The Afflicted and “sex between the blind.” No one, no tribe of aborigines or immigrants wants to serve as an exhibit in some cultural studies gallery. So we don't either. I do not want to place us there, nor in your personal display case either.

Benno still doesn't return. It's been over three months now. From time to time I talk about him to the Elder Brother who always repeats that we have to wait and that he keeps Jan, that is Benno, informed about the situation here, about how Jocelyn is doing (better and better) and that everything is OK. I don't know if Benno himself would agree. True, there had been a couple of more incidents, but none were dangerous. Some graffiti, for example, on the walls of the Lesbians' barrack, but nobody reads them. Or almost nobody. The girls practiced their make-up skills. Rainbow-colored examples emerge that are worthy of .

Once a man turned up at the Lazaret who during a walk in the Little Valley of the Cross was pelted by stones, pieces of broken prayer stones. Some grazed him. He stressed that it had been an autumn walk, and not a pilgrimage. Going out to the edge of the water he only wanted to check whether it was cold, because he'd been told about a warm current that ran there. He didn't see his attacker or attackers, even a glimpse of them. He would tell the Controllers the same thing, if they asked.

The Little Valley should be cleaned up a bit because around the Cross someone dumped trash, mostly seaweed. Two weeks had passed since then; nothing more happened. Why did I really think that this crisis might trigger some resolution, that something would change, clarify? Had anyone promised that? Was this all? As he grew stronger, Jocelyn talked with Lenbe (what about?). According to her, he asked "what's new?" and was content with the reports about the health of Terdu's Auntie, about other patients (no one had died recently, but The Refusal continued to weaken people's health as before). Among the more important things (about particular people) — Jocelyn held on to the prayer stone from Lenbe, keeping it under his pillow. They prayed together each day, aided by Lewis and sometimes Terdu (although she said that she didn't understand why it was done, just that it was nice).

Happily, Lewis reads Terdu stories from the history of the Island (which had been a place of exile and longing in the past as well), rather than prayer books. Eventually, we all liked hearing what he read. Hiza decided to compose a ballad about monks longing for Ireland, how they went out along the western coastline and gazed in the direction beyond the horizon where Ireland was. Through their longing the clouds took on the shape of Ireland.

The crisis of The Petitioners didn't move toward a solution. No one took it in hand. Benno started something and then disappeared. The tension, questions, regret, anger, blaming others — everything got shoved under the carpet, troubled relations between people, and then subsided. But the net result was that nothing remained just as it had been before. Nothing, aside from The Loss and The Refusal. I don't know but what The Refusal may have gained some further justification. But does it need justification?

Maybe Jocelyn knows more about this? But he certainly won't tell Lenbe.

One day we came out of the Lazaret early, Kadab and I, taking advantage of the improved weather while there was still daylight, so that we could go over to the heather patch. Such little expeditions were our tradition, just the two of us, to look at our favorite places. Our path led through the cemetery where we checked that the white prayer stones remained undisturbed on the graves and then along the ridge of the hill down into the Valley where The Petitioners had gathered. Standing on the hillside one could see the wide horizon of the ocean and the bay slashed by foaming white caps, shining in the glimmer of good weather, the sun beneath the fleet of clouds. Such a view reaches me in our unique impressionistic way typical for The Afflicted. To the left, on the rim of the hill surrounding the bay, the Cross shines white in the sun. Looking down, into the green valley, I saw it as if it was also striped with bands of foam, broadening as if the ocean covered it over. I knew that it was an illusion, a pattern imprinted in the retina, overlaying itself on what was real to see there. Sometimes I curse this tiring phenomenon, but this time the view was beautiful, even if unsettling.

Kadab noticed that something lay at the foot of the Cross, something white. Had someone still come here to pray?

We walked down a slippery path. Kadab gave me a hand. Then suddenly he stopped, tugged at me and turned around. “Don’t look there. Wait here until I cover it.” He pulled out the rolled up paper apron from his backpack he’d intended to bring Lenbe. I stood motionless with my eyes closed. My imagination was at work: what had Kadab seen beneath the Cross, now so close to us — a body? What had he gone to cover from my sight? After a moment he returned: “It’s only a sheep, but slaughtered. I thought that you might continue to see it when your eyes were closed.” It could happen. “Thank you,” I said, “but don’t think about my sensitivity ... a slaughtered sheep didn’t turn up here by accident. It signifies something frightening. We need to alert the Controllers as soon as possible.” I recalled my conversation with Lenbe, about the dark Refusal, the dreamless Refusal. Lenbe said something about a rat, about the killing of a rat.

The sheep must have been one left behind on the Island in the haste of evacuation by its inhabitants. In the end someone, probably people from the Monastery, had begun to take care of the sheep, feeding them and setting up some shelters against the wind and harsh weather. The sheep hid from people and trusted only the dogs, also wild, who huddled with them for warmth and got fed by those who took care of the sheep. Capturing a sheep wouldn’t be hard for either the healthy or those “with second sight.” You just would need to not be afraid of the dogs.

The Controllers did their duty. The sinister exhibit quickly disappeared from the base of the Cross. Kadab had to explain the presence of the paper apron. All in all, we were praised for our action which had prevented rumors. It seemed that no one besides us, and of course whoever had done it, knew anything. The Controllers counted on this the most. We, and Jeani to whom we told everything, worried that the incident might have further consequences that no one could try to prevent. What could Kadab and I do, and Jeani, before Benno would get involved? The crucial thing is to find some clue linking the incidents, above all, something leading from the macabre installation in the Valley, whether toward the anti-Petitioners, or toward The Afflicted, or even toward people beyond the Island practicing an aggressive version of The Refusal.

Who might know something (maybe not even realizing that it's something important)?

Lenbe — who's just begun to talk? Lenbe, preoccupied, unsure.

Jocelyn — would he be capable of evaluating the people he lured into “The Second Mission” or provoked them to oppose it?

Lewis — to what extent did he participate in Jocelyn's initiative?

The Cantor — who is he, who was he? What does his unusual form of The Refusal mean?

The other brothers?

Or by way of contrast — Hiza, a victim of the same attacker who later attacked Kadab, Kadab in his monk-like cape on the path from the Monastery.

And one more person too, someone with whom it's the most difficult — Jeani. Her right to know is different from mine. Does Jeani want to add her knowledge to what I will learn? Will we be in this together? I will tell her everything, but does she tell me all she knows? Maybe like Kadab she recognizes that I don't have what's needed to examine this? Maybe they are right. My own Loss advances, although I don't sense The Refusal within me. I count on it not creeping inside me imperceptibly. That it won't explode in an unexpected burst of anger. That I won't suddenly decide to harm someone or something, or whip the sea, splashing its foam into my eyes.

22. Auntie. Kitten. A romantic plot

Now it was actually possible to bring Auntie to Helen's house. She longed for this and promised that she would be completely healthy outside the Lazaret. We had to prepare space for her. Lewis brought a roll of old-fashioned wallpaper with pink flowers. Stuff like this and paste had turned up in the Monastery's warehouse he'd been told to clean. The warehouse was a walled barrack on a hill behind a rocky ridge. It had a lot of space, and once housed young guests of Monastery.

Auntie fit in perfectly with the household at Helen's place. Other than premature aging, the period of The Refusal did not leave her devastated, as so often happened. Terdu continued to spend a great deal of time at the Lazaret with Jeani and me. Lewis still felt somewhat uncomfortable, but he came in handy with helping Kadab. He also went to the burials, but we kept him away from the morgue.

One day he was late to the usual evening reading. Entering he said, "Hello, everyone — it's I-Lewis and someone else." From under the cape (completely soaked because it was pouring rain) he pulled a ginger colored kitten, just small enough to fit in his palm. Terdu reached out for the tiny redhead like a treasure. "Habor, the kitty can stay, right? Please, please. When I was little, before The Loss, I never had anyone, that is, never any pet ... "

"I know about cats," said Lenbe. "We need to make a litter box for it ... little doors ... "

"Lewis, make the doors, you know how, right?"

In the midst of all this Lewis forgot to tell us that Benno had returned.

Thinking about the visit to the Monastery I returned home earlier. Approaching the gate, I looked in the direction of the brightly lit windows. I thought that thanks to Terdu's Auntie, the place is a real home. Entering I heard Terdu singing while scrubbing the metal tabletop. Some kind of rap, unique to her. I stood in the doorway listening to the refrain, "Ordinary happiness, two hearts side by side — sings the nightingale on the branch and the flute sweetly plays." I made a noise at the doorway, the singing stopped.

Sitting down by Auntie, rousing her from a doze, I felt something like being at home. A release from fatigue. Joy. "Ordinary happiness" — why shouldn't it be like that? Is it not to be among us? Does it exist at all?

I apologize, Viso, for this sentimental interlude, or, rather for its appearance in my reporter's description. But neither Terdu nor Lewis are from some romance. What is the most ordinary thing in the world — here is an improbable victory over circumstances.

From Habor to Viso.

On second thought.

I decided not to withhold anything from these notes, even if it were still possible to do so, for example, in connection with the difficulties in sending things out. What I have written, I've written. "Written" means that in this way reality has been captured, comprehended, packed up. Actually, I regret now the decision about the irrevocability of my communiqués. But what I've begun to describe for you: a romance that may seem charming, well, maybe like a lovely episode from a magazine. But I know how it really is with Terdu and Lewis. It's not as if The Loss hadn't happened for either of them. Terdu's blonde hair is thin and limp. Looking at her closely you sense the sharp, animal scent of sweat from an anorexic. Terdu overcame The Refusal, but it was a kind of miracle and we don't know what traces of it remain in her body, probably forever. Does Lewis realize this? Does he not sense that sweat, can he trust the body of someone afflicted by The Loss? Even my body is like that — unsure, because it's permeated by the Loss too. Terdu is a carrier of it; I remind myself of this when I look at her and Lewis, how they pet the cat Myrdal and their hands touch. She is a carrier, and I am as well. True, I didn't seem to react by developing The Refusal. But can I be sure of that? Between me and The Refusal there's Kadab. I wasn't alone with The Loss as Terdu was. Will Lewis be able to be like Kadab for Terdu, someone who ...

Supposedly this Island was selected for us because it is a mild place, terrain without sharp edges where we might try to smash ourselves. A fairly empty place too. The people here moved to the mainland before we arrived. Any tourism was due to the rebuilding of the Monastery, but the visitors were few, and they turned up only in the summer and stayed briefly. Those staying longer were guests of the Monastery and volunteer workers, but the town didn't benefit from them directly. The exodus that made room for The Afflicted unfolded smoothly and efficiently — except for a certain amount of difficulty with the elderly. They gave in to the necessity with regret perhaps, but they had no choice. Did they think their removal would be temporary? I don't know.

The question occurred to me during the course of my waking from something like a coma that I already mentioned. I began to think about what would come next — together with Jeani who certainly never stopped planning, even though she seemed totally absorbed with her successive patients, the events of the day and other activities that I knew nothing about When we began to ask about the future, we assumed that its boundaries were permanently set, that our isolation is final, whether justified or not, but nevertheless final. Final too is the reality of no future generation, neither little children nor later any adult offspring of The Afflicted. I haven't written to you about this. This humiliated us to the core. It was the beginning of the suspicion that this had long been planned: our being cut off from any future is medically assured and controlled. Irrevocably assured? Assured through some renewed activity that we cannot perceive?

I don't know whether to involve you, Viso, in figuring out this problem. Not being affected by The Loss, you won't give up so easily. You will want to know more, know what it's like in detail: what they do to us, who decides this and when? My supposition is this: for security purposes we were rendered infertile even before we landed here. Maybe not everyone, the majority, or only the men — but that is enough. As a camouflage, contraceptives were given out. When one descends into the state of The Refusal, all this becomes unnecessary. Compliance with the demand for infertility is essential. We have the fear of transmitting The Loss, the very thought of someone being born with The Loss and falling immediately into The Refusal is alarming. We're afraid of it, at least I was fearful as long as it was theoretically possible ... I feared it even more than those who fear passing on a genetic defect that they know they carry.

Somehow, it hasn't been possible to get used to The Loss. You already know about this. It's not like cystic fibrosis or the AIDs virus. When I say to Jeani that maybe it's something like that, she gets furious like nothing else.

One day I started to talk to the Elder Brother about this, maybe because I wanted to bring up the subject of Lewis-Terdu. The Elder Brother, of course, shifted the topic to Benno. Benno is the one who found out the information, knew about some documents (not gossip), and most importantly — he thought about the future. "Whose future?" I asked, because for a long time now I'd ceased to fear The Elder Brother.

"Our common future," he said, with his usual gesture of putting his palms together, as if in prayer.

Not only Jocelyn the enthusiast, but these two adults as well, and with them the entire imposing Monastery, sought some "common future" for which they prayed. Hiza was part of this Monastery effort too, but indirectly. She adopted the habit of wiping the spot on her forehead where the rock had hit her in the Valley. I touched it too; barely any trace from the wound remained other than a small rough patch of skin.

Part 3.

16. What did Perlat see? Fish soup. The Lazaret

And so Benno finally returned. What had he been up to while he was absent from our world? Did it have anything to do with us? Did he return with something we were waiting for? Would he ask about the incident with the slaughtered sheep at the Cross of the Second Mission? Surely someone had told him. He knows that it was Kadab and I who found this grim signal.

Our Island is not deserted; for centuries it has been the northern outpost of Christianity. What sense did it make to lay the sheep at the foot of the Cross, precisely there, like some totem in the style of “Lord of the Flies”? No flies are here, it’s too cold and the wind is too strong. The mist is full of sea salt. Even when I went up close to it, from beneath the paper apron I couldn’t detect the smell either of blood or of dirty, fatty wool. Nothing? There was only the scent of seaweed or the disinfectant from the surface of the apron.

Benno ought to question Kadab. I didn’t see anything. I don’t know how the slaughtered sheep looked. What does “slaughtered” mean? Torn apart as if by wild dogs? Run over? Beaten with a club? With rocks? Maybe Kadab observed something, but the Controllers would know more. Had the carcass been examined in the morgue?

Benno doubtless does not need my questions.

Viso, I’ve really labored over hypotheses in my mind. Yet it was clear that the most I could learn would be from Lenbe and that, in fact, I would be the one to tease out any real leads. But Lenbe avoided me. Perhaps she was afraid of such talk. Old Perlat came to the rescue; he’d accompanied Lenbe for some time when she went to the distant barracks where he himself lived. Perlat was one of the oldest inhabitants of the barracks; others, a bit younger, had already moved to the Lazaret. Perlat, as he said himself, did not want to go. He spent his time around the port, trying to catch fish — the Loss didn’t affect his ability to fish. Lenbe taught him how to cook a fish soup which was quite good, now that Jeani had brought some spices from the mainland. He found laurel springs in the wild weeds around the former monastic enclosure and the potatoes and parsley came back in the beds that he gardened alongside the barracks.

On his own, Perlat brought me something to look at that he’d found, or rather picked up at the threshold of the doorway. It was the heads of seagulls with their eyes stabbed out. Several dozen of them. “Lenbe was very frightened by them so I took them in order to clean the spot up beforehand.”

Someone had laid them there so that they’d be seen. On top of some paper, scraps from the aprons.

“Perlat, did you see who did it? A shape of someone?”

“No. But there’s something else. I did see a woman walking along the beach at low tide in places where the dead birds lay.”

Perlat didn’t have a second sight for women and couldn’t say anything further. It was just a female figure in a long skirt ... or maybe shorter, so as not to get wet.

He encountered the woman while going with his fishing rod, twice or three times a day. Later, the seagull heads turned up at the doorway.

I asked Kadab to put together some kind of fishing pole and go with Perlat. But they didn’t run into anyone.

The three heads laying on the table frightened Lenbe. They had been cleaned and so the eyes were gone. Perlat suggested making a soup out of them, since Lenbe liked soup. But she saw something sinister in them.

“Per-per, dear heart, was this really your idea for the heads, to bring them for soup?”

“Your very own, ma’am. You said that for the best soup you cook a lot of heads, and then simmer it with grated onion, some chunks of fish with spices. I threw out the eyes because they’re bitter and so the fish wouldn’t be staring out of the pot ... ”

“That all may be true,” agreed Lenbe, “I’m the one gone crazy with all this. Only the white pebble remains and prayer and the poor souls who wake up when I am with them, not to something worse, but to life, right Per-Per? You too ... “

“What does ‘something worse’ mean, Lenbe, what happens then?” I asked.

“How can you not know this from the Lazaret? Maybe you see less in the light there, the nurses have orders from the doctors, about drops, bandages. In the barracks with The Loss and The Refusal, a person, a suffering person, is all alone. Maybe with a friend, with someone beloved, but more likely alone. One prays as if to pinch himself, like putting out a candle with his fingers. A tendril of smoke rises, and then it’s gone, snuffed out. Meaning, meaning ... well, almost too good. Maybe irrevocably, because life is gone. Or it’s able to come back from a spark to a flame, barely, barely growing until again it glows brightly, and someone is alive. Perlat, for example, with his fishing rod or rummaging in the flower beds. Normal.

I once saw someone come out of The Refusal with a shriek that he didn’t want it. Awakening is a dangerous moment. Fear, sometimes a person will seem to turn over, face down with all the strength he has to say “no.”

“Lenbe, have you seen something like that?” asked Jeanie.

“Jeni, you know that this is true. You don’t want to talk about it yourself. Neither do I. But I’m afraid that it’s someone like this who has left the heads without eyes.”

No one said anything more. Finally, Terdu hugged Lenbe: “Come on, let’s put Auntie to bed. It’s time to put Myrdal out too. Then we’ll all drink milk. Maybe Lewis will still come. We are supposed to look at the stars tonight.”

Lewis found a wreath of dead birds on the path — their eyes dug out.

“Give me something,” he said. “a sheet, a basket ... I’ll take this to Benno right away. Maybe he will stop dragging his feet. I’ll come back to watch Kras for the night. I think she might be in danger.”

In the end, I-Habor cooked the fish soup. I know how to do things too. I dared to add a piece of ginger which is good for the heart. It was in a little packet that Jeanie had gotten but nobody had used yet. I felt the joy of cooking once again. Kadab and Lewis happily ate the soup as a meal at midnight. Benno approved Lewis's idea to watch guard over Kras. Myrdal the kitten came back in for the night. A discussion with Benno — when will that happen? Lewis assured us that it would be soon now, in a day or two.

In the morning Hiza went with Lenbe for her shift at Jocelyn's side. He no longer really needed nursing care, but rather the company. I thought that Lenbe had helped Jocelyn's injuries heal, but now it was time to challenge him. Could Hiza accomplish this?

The Lazaret seemed different to me somehow. No doubt this was because of stories Lenbe told. Those sleeping, submerged in The Refusal, seemed more mysterious to me. I'd always thought that despite being asleep, people were still present, as Jeani had taught me, capable of an inner summoning when touched. Now I began to imagine that beneath this semblance of sleep something decisive might be happening. I considered this idea as something good, useful when working with these people. I didn't like the fear that emerged as well, peculiar in the context of getting used to precisely these kinds of patients. I wanted to say something about all this to Jeani, but she disappeared, occupied with preparing the burial for one of the women patients who had died yesterday.

One more observation I recall, an important one, though difficult to share with Benno, for example. I went to the Cantor with a bowl of the nourishing gelatin in hopes of sharing it with him as well as others who were semi-conscious. I touched his hand. It was clenched in a fist, tight as if ready for a punch. His lips clenched closed when I touched them with the spoon, clumsily, but our patients are accustomed to this. I had the impression that the Cantor was trying to spit. He didn't want to be fed. I left his bowl on the nightstand. Maybe he will eat it himself.

Kadab later found the bowl in a corner of the room, shattered in a puddle of gelatin. Beneath the Cantor's bed lay the broken (maybe gnawed?) white plastic spoon.

17. A second consultation at the Monastery

I felt that a meeting with Benno was important, that this time it could constitute the long-awaited turning point toward some reasonable common future.

Benno did not want too many people to be there. From the Monastery it was to be only him, the Elder Brother and Jocelyn, but Jocelyn declined, saying: “Not me, Lewis would be better, none of you value him enough.” From the Colony, it was to be I-Habor, Hiza, and Jeani.

Lewis sat a little outside the group, behind Jeani.

This time Benno began with a lecture, but first he apologized that we had waited so long for this meeting. He wasn’t fully prepared for this conference, but it could no longer be postponed.

It went like this, Viso: Benno treated us the way a visiting expert treats employees of some company who are in a dispute with management. At least, that was how it seemed to me. Maybe he wasn’t prepared enough to tell us what he knew? Nevertheless, he had carefully prepared for this not-telling or not-calling things by their real names. At least he didn’t try to show us charts on his computer screen — that much he sensed would not be appropriate. Part of what he tried to tell us, you certainly know better, Viso. For us, it was long withheld news from the world beyond “T,” about which we long since grown indifferent — in great part, because news couldn’t be confirmed. Our view was that the news seeped through to us like through a sieve that completely excluded truthfulness (radio was affected too, except presumably for reports on the seals).

Those places from which we had all come, countries which had rejected us, had changed into a foreign other-world with strange rapidity. From that other-world arrived the indifferent (and at the same time helpless) Controllers, plus all the cargo sent to satisfy our elementary needs. This would seem more protective than dangerous, were it not for their postmortem routine with The Afflicted, which not everyone knew about, only those who had close contact with the Lazaret. Taddol had somehow investigated it; Jeani, of course, knew the procedure precisely. I don’t want to describe this again for you, just take a look at my earlier notes. Those who knew anything about the postmortem examination for the traces of The Loss in our bodies didn’t believe it made sense; we could not presume the good will of these examiners. It was easier to suspect the Controllers’ superiors of demonic curiosity or purported scientific interest, justified by the government’s chosen form of discrimination against The Afflicted.

Benno now had to tell us honestly what the world plans to do about us, the question of our future — let’s say, common future. But the Monastery is involved in all of it. They didn’t move the monastery to another Island, some village full of healthy and happy people or embittered fishermen. It remained here with its inhabitants, astonished at the change in the nature of their outpost. It was here that the young Jocelyn arrived, the hope of a neo-monastic community, only to meet disaster. Here the Elder Brother remained with quiet kindness toward everyone, here Benno was finally brought in, or he himself asked to come sensing — sensing what? A challenge? A duty?

The Elder Brother assessed the crisis of The Petitioners as a *locus theologicus*, a situation where what happens constitutes an intellectual or moral summons to think about God. I think that having arrived here, Benno situated the summons more in The Loss-Refusal itself. For that he had had to come here — the situation could not be seen from a distance.

For me, the fact that the awareness of what the situation is or is becoming, what Tyflonia might be, had not reached Benno earlier, is confirmed by the delay he took before he decided to reveal the general gist of the situation.

Listening to him I realized once again that Benno is someone. A strange thought popped up, one which would not have occurred to me before: you, Viso, really should get to know Benno. You could arrange to meet, perhaps in London, at the “Reform” club, where prominent people can always be found. This traditional men’s club probably has not changed. Seated in soft armchairs and surrounded by the hum of cultured conversation, you could talk about The Afflicted whom you know — about Habor, Jeani, Hiza ... no one would notice that you speak in hushed tones. I know that in this secluded and elegant place state secrets are confided to initiates.

Benno sits with the empty silver tray before him. Mugs of tea are cooling, and its distinctive home-like, but delicate aroma wafts throughout the entire common room.

Forgive me, Viso. I am trying to recall an impression, rather than summarize a lecture. Remembering the tea, I happened upon the insight that Benno addressed me as “Habor,” unlike our usual pattern, different from our customary usage among ourselves since the time of The Loss or since our arrival on T. and being settled here. Our custom means that compared to who we were before The Loss we are now horribly incomplete, as if we really experienced the disappearance of our non-afflicted memory. Taddol saved Kubat from this, during his life — at least in his still incomplete Refusal. Kadab and I, K. and H., we have a too seldom visited, but broad and rich area of common memory ... Benno spoke to Jeannine de ... , to Lewis the sociologist, and not to our “Hiza,” but to the stars whose voice a thousand listeners knew.

My ear did not deceive me: I recognized the soft sounds of little bells. Benno thanked the late arriving Kassajan for joining our meeting and then began again, “You must know ...”

What must we know? What we already know too well — that our fate interests no one. The world we once knew changes with no concern for what happened to us. It doesn’t relate to an incomprehensible but transitory event that disappeared from the media before it affected a larger segment of society. Maybe because the media were convinced — watch out, Viso! — that discretion was essential for the victims’ good. The number of victims was not known because soon people ceased admitting that they’d been harmed and no longer believed that they could be effectively cured. If The Loss were minor in their case and continued to remain so, they might not even associate their difficulties with some event that they didn’t know had really occurred and had affected them.

“What about The Refusal?” asked Hiza.

“The Refusal,” according to Benno, “was sufficiently rare — in its clear form,” he cautioned, “that generally it was considered an exceptional phenomenon.” Maybe the burgeoning of The Refusal pushed some of The Afflicted to reveal their condition in return for some “therapy” they didn’t believe in — and so they ended up here on T. Those not submitting remained connected to their families and that was better. It can’t be ruled out that a concealed Refusal was what caused the statistically recorded wave of disappearances and suicides. But that phenomenon spread during a period when it wasn’t possible for public health officials to imagine it clearly.

“What about fear of infection with The Loss,” was Lewis’s question, probably not by accident.

“At first it caused people to conceal their symptoms. Probably too, despite their own fears, relatives and friends hid The Afflicted. They were also concealed in convents and hospitals for other diseases. Somehow or other, they disappeared from sight and fear disappeared too, along with the memory that something like this had happened at all.”

Benno admitted something very human: that it is very hard for him to look us in the eye and tell us that the “world” (“meaning who,” say I-Habor — remember that, Viso) wanted only to forget.

“Forget about what? Forget that everything is possible?” Hiza commented and Benno agreed: “Yes. Exactly. That’s probably it ... “

A long moment of silence, and then The Elder Brother spoke up.

“Before we develop this thought further ... we need a basic clarification: does science know what this was, what The Loss really is, meaning, how does science explain its cause ... ?”

Benno resumed his lecturing tone (which he’d let drop when speaking about how “the world” treats us). Now it was easier for him. I won’t summarize his lecture, Viso. I know that you are surely aware of the theories in their most recent versions. You know about the infectious prions that replicate themselves, and others without that capacity, about the “slow avalanche of destruction” it can cause similar to a laser light, but also the particular, selective disorganization of the network of neurons ... What’s important from Benno’s lecture is that we learned this: no scientists any longer defend the assumption that The Loss can be transmitted through contact with those who have it. It is still not ruled out that it can be inherited ... but with limited probability. We don’t have a second generation with The Loss, no cases have been recorded, presumably because everyone feared it. Both society and we were protected from this to an excessive extent, by blocking the fertility of those affected with The Loss. Interesting was the fact that, in Benno’s opinion, the scientific world — no different from the world in general — had not become fascinated with “the problem of The Loss.” The politicians’ strategy to forget it had been crucial. Grants dried up, experiments were sharply curtailed. Material from “T.” — that is, from our autopsy lab — went into the freezer.

The common room in the Monastery was its most homelike place. A sofa, soft armchairs from different eras, sometimes with torn upholstery, an old but beautiful carpet, even a fireplace, although unused because of a lack of wood on the Island. Little tables with crocheted doilies, several pictures shine with their rich frames.

Imagine how we sit there expecting that Benno will say something that will change our life, and we will tell him about what still worries us. Lenbe ought to be here, she knows the most, after all. But Lewis? Isn't Benno too great an authority for Lewis to dare pose the question: what next? We pull ourselves together, Jeani whispers something to Kas-Kas. A natural pause and the Elder Brother offers everyone mint chocolates: "A tradition, Benno has brought them specially."

The chocolate was still in my hand when Benno began the second part of his explanation.

"This is how it looks. Don't think that everyone has forgotten about The Afflicted. This is a general picture. In this context, that of the strategy of forgetfulness, you need to know what I'll say now. Miss Kassajan, Jeannine — you know that your friends remember and try to remind people. They are trying to organize more effective help, and get around the barriers they can't remove. They seek financial sources. They seek academics and particular researchers who could include the subject of The Loss in their projects, even if indirectly. Some are already doing this. In fact, they have directed attention to what you term "The Refusal," the syndrome of The Afflicted ..., its neurological and psychiatric symptoms From them we can expect initiatives to change how patients are treated."

"Meaning those interned here?" interjected Lewis, reacting to the word "patient."

"For now they don't know much about what is happening here," I said. "Benno was to tell them, but I doubt you were able to do this, because here a lot of things change and we ourselves don't understand the most recent events."

"If I am here instead of Jocelyn," said Lewis, "and in a certain sense instead of Lenbe, then let me speak."

"No, Lewis, hold on," said Benno. "What you will say will mean something different when you hear me out. Forgive me, Jeannine, I know that you do not want me to talk about this, but it's necessary. Lewis, who is here in place of Jocelyn, has to know and it's best if he learns it from me. Maybe Habor too can aid in this understanding. (Benno spoke as if wanting to overcome some resistance on our side.) The right to indifference, to escape, to take advantage of opportunities for oneself first is not as universal a principle as it might seem. For example, a woman, let's call her Anmer, decides to stay here in place of someone else, someone who should be released"

"Let's say ... ," muttered Lewis, but Benno pressed on:

"Should that seem unlikely, then Jeannine voluntarily ... ,"

"No, Benno. I too had to wind up here. Otherwise, nothing would be true. I had to. What does it matter that hiding me seemed easy, but I didn't want that, I could not agree. This wasn't what you, Benno, are trying to sell them," said Jeani.

"To us, Jeani is Jeani, and you can't add anything to that," I said. "I can do this for you, since I no longer have to keep silent, at least in this group, about what I've figured out. It's probably right that many people need consciousness or rather faith in outside action in solidarity with us."

But you have to be careful with that because such actions are weak, and until now haven't changed much, really nothing at all. It would be premature to break up some protective adjustment to survival here. Encourage waiting for some change — but what kind? Some effective cure? Reintegrating us as we are now? It's doubtful that we could bear it."

"Jocelyn put his faith in a miracle," Lewis interjected. "That was a change, meaning not the miracle which didn't happen, but the conviction that it should happen, that things will not always remain the way they are now."

The little bells tinkled delicately. Kas-Kas must have raised her hand because Benno quickly said, "Yes, please, Kassajan."

"Elder Brother, please acknowledge that I too am here voluntarily, though I was transported here not asking about any decision, but straight from the hospital where I was looking for information about what was happening to us. Instead, I ended up interned. I could have tried to get out or give in to The Refusal, because some people challenge The Refusal, feel its call and accept it. I say yes to life. So far, The Loss leaves me the choice to be myself" — all her little bells chimed, as if in confirmation. Kas-Kas moved from her seat. "Brother Benno, if you want to help us, and I know that you do, you have to really understand, recognize — you especially, that we all are here because we want to be alive, still want to be, meaning "voluntarily." About "The Refusal," it's not difficult; it's obvious ... and it's contagious. We infect ourselves, each of us can, even without experiencing The Loss, that thing which after our deaths is extracted from our brains"

"You are frightening Lewis. And Brother Benno has long known this," said the Elder Brother.

"I'm not a child," Lewis suddenly protested. "Maybe I've only recently ceased to be one, but it's for good. Everyone has helped me grow: The Colony, Jocelyn, the Elder Brother. Lenbe ... and Terdu, she has too. I've studied sociology, and now I look at this laboratory in light of theory. Brother Benno appreciated it when he let me present the results of my juvenile analysis which coincides with a mature conclusion ... Kassajan's.

Jeannine, Jeani, works so that death here will continue to be humane, but that is work beyond what is possible, against the tide. Defeat is built in, so long as the procedure of desecration is in effect. Taddol knew that Kubat was dying with the awareness that his body would be treated as a carrier of The Loss. Maybe Kubat gradually grew indifferent to that, because as The Refusal advanced, that perspective mattered less. But Taddol did not want to stay here. You helped him, Jeani, why did he return from T.? Was it to forget, if he could, forget in order to do something? Do I have an ally in Taddol somewhere out there? Do I have an ally in whom, the Monastery? In Kassajan? In Jeannine — no, she has her own path. Others? I don't know. I've ceased to be a child, so I'm fearful. Just that awakening triggers resistance, a dormant anger. Jocelyn sees this too, he was first, but differently than I. Now he must struggle with the fact that the call to health, to defeating The Loss through faith, turned into temptation. Something broke loose, people perished, and he himself reached the very bottom. Jocelyn still trembles at the thought that people perished

because of him. He survived the frenzy, succumbing to his own ecstasy. I want to think critically all the time, step by step.”

“And you want to be good, to be warm hearted,” Hiza suddenly broke in.

“Yes, I do, I-little Lewis, childlike, but pretty well informed. Please don’t concern yourself too much with me. More important is that I can be of help, that we can be of help because when Jocelyn recovers a bit more, he must either get away from here or begin to work, to repair damage. The Elder Brother probably thinks that the latter is preferable, but Brother Benno?”

Tapping the silver platter Benno extended the silence that followed Lewis’s question. The answer that emerged was not a surprise to me.

“I don’t know whether Jocelyn ought to stay here. I don’t know that about anyone, neither about you, Lewis, nor about myself. That’s not the way I approach this. Like you, Lewis I look it as a puzzle. Going a step at a time, I want to encourage piecing together from this small whole, parts of a world capable of functioning, not isolated, not numb, not poisoned.”

“I understand why Benno thinks this way and has this approach,” said Jeani. “We, The Afflicted, expect something else. We learned how to exist under the Control, however sloppy, but without asking other questions, beyond replying to their ‘how many fingers do you see’ and so on. Nothing in particular was offered us; it was either this or that, in this barracks or on the other side. Everything happened to us willy-nilly, practically nothing was because it was what we wanted or chose. The Colony was something of an exception. We live together because we took some initiative. Honestly — Helen, whom I didn’t know. Helen and Habor. Surely here among us there are a lot of such micro attempts at initiative, less perceptible, but still ... Lenbe knows this the best.”

Benno listened to us, but I had the overwhelming impression that he waited for something else. Everything had gone on so long now that fatigue had gotten to us, the sudden fatigue that abruptly comes over The Afflicted when their effort to see what can’t be seen is exhausted, as happens in every debate.

“Enough for today,” said Jeani. “Let’s take a break, return to this, maybe tomorrow. Right, Benno?”

Habor to Viso

(after the unfinished conversation at the Monastery)

Maybe there will be a break in my writing, Viso. I don’t know what to do! Benno’s revelation has an effect on our ability and need for contact of the kind we’ve had until now. Now I see you, why only just now? Not alone, now, but in the context “of friends of Madame Jeannine and Kassajan.” Might you have contact with their network? And if you do, then reading my notes you must know a lot of what I strain to imagine. That paralyzes me. Why do I write? You already have memories of the beginnings on T. Now it’s time to go back to the recent past, to the last month, or yesterday.

Maybe I should stop? But I'm reluctant to give up this train of thought in the presence of such a long silent partner. After some reflection, I've decided to continue writing, to keep a small private log from the Colony on the island of T. If I hold off sending it for a longer period of time, then the information no longer current can't affect either you or "the friends" of Jeani in real time. That will be prudent.

Benno — who is "Somebody" — nevertheless achieved something that perhaps he wanted. After listening to his lecture, I gradually began to look differently at that world (your world!) beyond the expanse of water and the nearest island where, unlike here, tall trees grow peacefully, an entire forest. And further still, less peacefully, different kinds of people live. The Afflicted are hiding among them, like bits of gold in the sand, scattered here and there, friends of my friends worrying about us despite the politicians. And you, Viso, are you among them? Or are you alone?

[Chaos appears in Habor's notes. I'm organizing them as best I can. I apologize if I don't do a very good job. —TL]

18. An abandoned puppy. Terdu. Lewis's offer. The Contollers-visitors. What is happening with the Cantor?

We returned slowly in the deepening twilight. At the gate a figure appeared. Lewis called out: "You-Ter-du, I-Lewis," but there was no reply. Only something like crying or whimpering. Lewis ran up, and saw that Terdu's eyes were closed, but she was breathing, as if she'd been running. At her feet quivering slightly was a bloody, furry bundle. Lewis took hold of Terdu and practically carried her home where she wept, frightened. I took care of the bundle. It was the hide of a newly skinned sheep, and wrapped inside it, a half-strangled, bloodied, puppy. I took the puppy and the skin to the barn for now, where Kras shifted restlessly in her pen. The puppy, like the slaughtered sheep, must have come from the heath. Something had to be done with it, whatever the dark intentions of whoever had brought it here.

Terdu finally fell asleep, which worried us with its similarity to escape, to The Refusal. It was already late at night, not the time to talk at the Monastery about what had happened, with what — like it or not — we sensed was some kind of major thrust in Benno's lecture and our feelings.

Lewis stayed, in order to be close by when Terdu would waken. Hiza undertook watching over her with him. "I don't want to sleep, I have something to think about — about Terdu, but not only."

Jeani comforted us: "This doesn't have to be a huge setback, only a brief detour — you'll see tomorrow. He has to tell everything fairly calmly, or no one will remember anything, and that's good too."

And Jeani was right. The next day Terdu woke up late, like after an illness. Lewis, pale and unshaven, dozed in an armchair. The little cat, Myrdal, snorted like a puppy, scuffling with a box, where Lenbe had set up a little nest for him at the doorway into Terdu's and Auntie's room.

I took Terdu a mug of milk. She looked at me questioningly: "Did something happen? Was I sick?"

"Look, we have a new little puppy from the heath. A sweetheart, right?"

Terdu looked down at the black and white fluff ball with a pink nose and shook her head:

"Someone dropped it off here, probably this morning or yesterday, I can't recall. Yesterday I was waiting for you. How did it go at the Monastery?"

"A very long discussion that didn't finish. Benno said interesting things about studies of The Loss"

"I want to eat breakfast," Terdu announced, "and then I can hear about the studies. And what is the puppy's name? Have you all thought of something? Maybe 'Heather' because that's where he came from. Lewis, you should go shave, you look like a bandit."

That's what I wrote, Viso, in my first free moments. I've left it this way, but then it soon turned out that Terdu nevertheless had been harmed by the event which at first seemed to have escaped her memory. At first we noticed that she actually was afraid of the beautiful puppy that she herself named "Heather." Terdu wouldn't cuddle him as she did the cat Myrdal. She pushed the puppy's box into a farther corner. Had it not been for Lenbe, the little one would have been unhappy because it needed affection. Terdu was subdued, almost as before she had grown close to Lewis. Only Lewis could pull her out of it and around him she was herself again, but she did not want to go out anywhere and gave up helping at the Lazaret. She clung to Auntie and Lenbe, as if seeking consolation from them that she had not needed before. Lenbe asked, "What is bothering you? Tell me." "I dreamed about blood," she said at one point. Then she asked, "How is it that when a sheep gives birth to a lamb, there's so much blood?" Lenbe replied that this was not so. "That's good," said Terdu, relieved.

"We have to tell Terdu what happened," said Jeani. "As much as we know, and when she sees the rest clearly, we can help her struggle with it. You do it, Habor, you are closest to her."

Embracing Terdu, I told her — we were alone — about what had happened that evening, about Heather barely alive, wrapped in the sheepskin, about her shock, and sleeping . . . Breaking into tears, Terdu said that it all came back to her, that some people jumped out at her in the dark as she stood at the gate watching for us to return. They shrieked at her that she's disobedient and bloody, that the bloody give birth to the blind . . . she cried out, "Habor," and the people fled. "Habor, tell me why do they do something like that?"

What could I say? "Don't think about this?" Maybe better, "I don't know either. They must hate life. That's why they want to harm you and the poor little creature."

"Lenbe loves Heather and he will be hers, but a bit mine too," Terdu decided. "That will be good. They took away Heather's family, but he has us. That's what I thought right away. They don't have anything for Heather, they only stole him to kill him."

Terdu's words were wise, but afterward she continued to cry. I was not the one who could really comfort her, of course. "Don't tell Lewis anything," she said.

Lewis needed no help to interpret her tears and silence. Pain at Terdu's humiliation was a powerful stimulus. Lewis caught me in the barn while I was trying to clean Kras's coat, getting rid of some of her clumps of matted hair. Hardly romantic, but a warm setting. Lewis said, "Habor, this is my formal request for Terdu's hand. I had thought, we thought, that we have time. She is such a child, but that's really why. Benno or no Benno, he'll come to it eventually. We must have a celebration at the Monastery soon. The Community gives its members this option. Everyone knows this, though maybe a few have forgotten because it hasn't happened in a long time. I told Jocelyn a long time ago that this is my hope. Now I know that we must bring this out in the open.

"That will be a challenge, from many points of view."

"We'll manage," declared Lewis loudly, and Kras snorted her agreement.

"I've decided to get engaged," announced Lewis while we were drinking our evening milk. "To whom?" Lenbe happily inquired. "Ter-ter has said 'No,' for now, but I will continue to ask her, I and the Elder Brother or Benno, because my fiancée and wife will belong to the Community

too. I am asking you too, because Ter-ter has to be convinced not for me, but for herself. She has to believe that this can be done. “Be quiet, Lewis, stop,” Terdu exclaimed and fled to her room slamming the door. “Don’t let her cry too long,” Lewis asked. “I must finally get to the point where someone deals seriously with those who have been tormenting Lenbe and Terdu. Brother Benno seems to suffer from the slowness of The Afflicted. “

Nevertheless, it didn’t turn out quite that way. The newly arrived Controllers, men and women, had begun to visit the barracks and houses. It soon emerged that there were more of them, several different teams, and they behaved differently than their predecessors. They didn’t call first at the lab next to the Lazaret; they came on their own, politely notifying us when they planned to appear. They didn’t make us count the number of fingers on our hand. They were not interested in the extent of The Loss, either in actual fact or what was noted down in the charts of The Afflicted. “They try to detect how much of The Refusal is in the air,” as Lenbe characterized it, who while visiting the barracks encountered two teams of “guests,” as they asked to be treated. The residents immediately termed them “inspectors.” Rightly so, since like school inspectors, the “guests” with their notebooks were charged not so much to evaluate us, but rather the current Controllers. They were received in different ways, which no doubt they tried to register.

The politely self-invited inspectors never made it to Helen’s house at all. Instead, a special team appeared at the Lazaret, in part attaching themselves to the nurses, but without wearing their uniform. It was already fairly warm, so the inspectors (both male and female) were dressed in blue and colorful summer suits. Whether out of solidarity, or as a result of new regulations, the nurses gave up wearing masks. The inspectors examining the Lazaret were mainly from France. They addressed our Jeani as “Madame.” In any case, that was how they addressed other female patients; they used the person’s Tyflonia surname, but without the prefix “you.” (Of course, you will remember, Viso, that for you I am You-Habor).

The Lazaret was not crowded at the time and no new patients were arriving. That’s how it always was when the weather turned good. The little gardens around the barracks and houses were spruced up, the heath turned a more intense green, and along the beach one could look for pieces of wood and other treasures. People built little campfires there in the evening, and toasted crusts of bread and breakfast sausages. The battlefield of The Refusal retreated a few inches. Those who remained in the Lazaret were the weakest and the most lonely. Those who stayed there only during winter returned to their barracks. The Cantor checked out too, but he didn’t turn up where he had lived before. Lenbe investigated this carefully. For Jeani and myself an ethical and strategic problem emerged: should we alert the Inspectors about this person? It wasn’t the Cantor personally who had attacked Terdu when he had still been stuck in the Lazaret — unless maybe he’d escaped for a couple of hours? He still might have something to do with it. Why not ask Jocelyn what he thought about it? After all, the Cantor had worked closely with him.

We had been talking with Jocelyn in one of the Monastery’s garden courtyards. Yellow and white crocuses bloomed there, and you could smell cultivated earth where Jocelyn had planted spring onions. “Therapy through contact with nature,” as he described his work.

“You ask about the Cantor? He himself offered to help, since he wanted the services to be longer and more “impassioned.” He was cooperative, useful, eager ... , although I also had the impression that he liked to hear his own voice and envied what Hiza was able to do, and her place in people’s hearts. When Hiza sang, people felt God close to them, but with the Cantor they were crying out to God as if from far away. Still, I can’t imagine the Cantor organizing harassment of Lenbe or Terdu. Although, from another point of view, he is intelligent, he could think up something . . . I don’t know. He’d certainly need help. Maybe Brother Benno could advise you, say whether after the Inspectors’ visit we can expect help, or that they just make things worse. For now, Benno has not ordered me to meet with them, but it will surely come to that. Their goal is a report, conclusions: how to help The Afflicted gathered here or in other similar places, and those in hiding on the mainland, farther and farther away from where The Loss infected them. No one still believes that some location helps people live with The Loss, avoid The Refusal; that’s not at all true, but this Island is a fact. One can’t just decide to ‘take the lid off’ ... Go to Benno.”

But we did not go. The next “debate,” although delayed, was announced for the near future and maybe it would provide an opportunity to talk about this topic.

Meantime, the Inspectors in the Lazaret stumbled upon traces of the Cantor. Sometimes we forget that the nurses, although they work in an impersonal style, like automatons, still have their own thoughts, and the Controllers-doctors, now inspectors (maybe psychiatrists?) talk with them. From the nurses, they learned that until recently someone unusual had been at the Lazaret, seemingly simulating The Refusal, and afflicted with some other disorders, maybe some obsession One of the nurses said that she was present when a man called the “Cantor” recited (as though to himself) long, incomprehensible speeches. Those affected by The Refusal remain stubbornly silent, responding in double-talk only when the nurses patiently and repeatedly ask them, which the nurses don’t have time to do. The Cantor implied that he was persecuted, if they got it right, and that he wanted only the food that the staff ate.

The Inspectors wanted to meet with this patient, but before a meeting was set, someone decided that he could be checked out. It turned out that a Controller, who had already left the Island, arranged this. A scrawl in the record read that no reason was seen for this patient, like others with health improving in the spring, not to return to where he’d come from. At the request of the Inspectors, a search for the Cantor was begun in the barracks, but without success. The Inspectors began to be more interested in this unusual character among The Afflicted. Lenbe, and even old Perlat (who continued to accompany her for safety) found traces of him. But that was later, right after the meeting that I want to describe for you in very great detail and give an overview of the results.

Meantime, still before the crucial meeting, while the Inspectors continued to treat Jeani with attention and distance, Lewis came with the news that soon a new doctor was to appear at the Hospital connected with the Monastery, one specially trained in women’s health, as well as with The Loss. I thought this was a present from the Great Brother on the occasion of the little Brother’s engagement might prove salutary and not just for Terdu, something maybe more important than the psycho-socio-religious seminars. told me that getting someone to come here like Dr. Beauforêt

was her first demand, really important and at the same time realistic — something Benno could arrange through his Community, part officially, part privately.

19. Meeting in the living room of Kas-Kas— background. Ma-Doc appears

Our next conference, to describe our meeting with Benno another way, was to take place not in the Monastery, but in Kassajan’s studio. This meant something. As many as possible from the Colony were to come, as well as others whom Benno would invite. lived in a fairly large house above the port. It offered a large work space and a spacious living room where she displayed her newest works and received guests, most recently intrepid daredevils who ventured from the mainland, tourists with permits (I haven’t yet written to you about this newest possibility, yet it has existed). Several young female assistants live with her, plus a group of boys who study photography with her — that particular technique she discovered to continue her art despite The Loss. The girls take care of the house and the clothing Kas-Kas wears (learning for themselves how to dress artistically and design garments so dramatically that they overcome the fog of The Loss).

We left Auntie at Helen’s house with Perlat who promised to watch out for everything. A pity that he would not be with us, but by herself Auntie would be helpless if the persecutors tried something again. Perlat brought his specially marked cards to teach Auntie to play solitaire.

Kassajan’s studio was brightly lit, but in such a way that did not bother the eyes. On the main wall, hung a tapestry made from a photogram (an image made without a camera by placing an object directly onto the surface of a light-sensitive material and then exposing it to light). It depicted the play of waves which one could hear from the port through an open window. Her assistants wore festive dresses with little bells, each in a different shade and tinkling with a different tone. Tall greenery in flower pots had been placed beneath the windows. They smelled like pelargonium, especially when someone bumped against them. Kas-Kas warned against touching the cacti: “they are not the best for you, but I still love them and they grow well here.” With or without the cacti, the entire interior was not typical of Tyflonia. Here everything was organized permanently, whereas in our living quarters in the barracks or house, all was temporary, for the time being (presumably until we ended up at the Lazaret). Helen’s house was not entirely that way; much remained of what she had arranged and we maintained it as best we could. Kas-Kas created a world of beauty around herself, maybe the way she had lived before The Loss. Or different, but also beautiful.

Today we were to sit amid the greenery and softly colorful walls, everyone on mattresses on the floor or on soft ottomans. The girl assistants handed around cups and mugs with tea and coffee (again, something not from here — some theory or custom had deleted coffee from the list of cargo destined for us). Kadab and I took a cup of coffee with milk, as long ago. Alongside us, Lewis encouraged his future fiancée to try the coffee.

“We’ll drink coffee for breakfast.”

“Maybe on Sundays,” Terdu cautioned, as if the future “life together” was already arranged.

Why do I describe all this for you, Viso? Maybe for the pleasure of describing, since in memory all moments are significant. But no doubt also because I fear writing about the conversation itself. I can’t pretend that it’s easy for me to reconstruct it from memory — who, when, what was said, interpolated or claimed. I know all the voices, I know what to attribute to whom. I remember that when needed, Benno’s silver platter sounded so that several people would not all speak at once or to encourage a designated person to speak. But I am surely able to put together conclusions based on what I heard, and commenting, not some pseudo-record. In fact, Benno encouraged that. He wanted as soon as possible to think things over, or, in small groups, to hear personally what we took away from our common reflection on this or other topics.

So, Viso, you will read my notes for Benno! An honor, right? I have not committed an indiscretion. You yourself will see why you should not only read, but reflect and add your own thoughts when you meet Benno at the Reform Club.

First, however, two events preceded the start of the debate. While we were still looking for places to sit on the mattresses and carefully setting down our mugs with the remaining coffee, unexpectedly one more participant in the conversation appeared.

“Doctor Hedwig Beauforêt,” announced one of Kassajan’s assistants amid the sound of glass bells from her robe.

The doctor was tall, a bit rigid, wrapped in something gray and black. She embraced her with her arm (more little bells) and guided her into our group. “I-Ma-Doc,” she introduced herself, and clasping our hands with her large strong palms, she leaned her face close to ours. That way we could see her gray curls and old-fashioned glasses.

“It’s good that Doctor Hedwig is here. After our greetings there will still be a short concert.”

I had practically no idea what that would be, but I heard Jocelyn’s saxophone. Short, tentative sounds elicited a deep silence of expectation.

“What is it?” I nudged Kadab.

“Some motet, or perhaps one of their own variations.”

The bright, undulating walls of her studio helped absorb the sounds. In quiet moments the lapping of the tide reached us from outside the window.

On and on, it went, as if they did not want to break off the conversation that had begun, chasing thought after thought, in a hieratic dance. When at the end they went silent, not taking up another section, the Elder Brother said, “thank you.”

Benno waited a moment and then gave the cue, “Miss Kassajan has invited us to her house so that we could together examine the most important problems of all of the residents of the Island present here.”

NOTE — Habor to Brother Benno (and for Viso) from the meeting at Kassajan’s studio

What is the most important problem for the residents of Tyflonia?

First we must name and write down these problems, and then maybe try to describe the structure they create — meaning what most likely flows from what, and what are the different linkages that determine what we are becoming?

The initial observation that someone threw out (probably Lewis) was: “our little Tyflonia world finds itself in a state of accelerated evolution.”

The Loss caused various important changes in how individuals and groups function. This population now seeks equilibrium in new conditions. Who adapts and how is important. There will be those who collapse, even if together we keep them alive for a long time, which is possible thanks to our supplies and the work of the nurses ... The culture of care for those struggling to adapt is very weak, organized from the outside; its influence would be completely minimal were it not for the volunteers, Jeani’s efforts, and the care of families and small groups devoted to their less adapted members.

“What does it look like in practice?” said Lenbe. Jocelyn and one of ’s assistants (the one with the glass bells, named El-wa) agreed.

The details of these stories interested Ma-Doc. She wanted to know what people do to draw one another out of The Refusal. In this context a crucial question emerges: can our society, left in its current state, achieve anything, become capable of surviving?

And what about “evolution,” since we don’t reproduce? Will that too be “accelerated” until the last person dying with The Loss will be buried by people from the Monastery before the eyes of tourists outfitted in protective gear? This scenario is possible, provided the Monastery does not run out of vocations (I-Habor added this thought myself).

Do you have a problem? I-Habor will try to pinpoint it, I look for help in what others among The Afflicted say and observe. Well, in reality our problem is everything. Every person BEFORE was himself or herself, some particular individual. Then it happened, perhaps not all of a sudden, but fundamentally we became The Afflicted. As if we don’t see “normally,” that we see too little for our needs — as if that were the most important thing. As if it were only one question: will The Loss expand further? Will The Loss push me still further outside the world where it has not happened? One fights back against this, like , but her advice is not for everyone. Besides, don’t I fight back as well, I-Habor?

And what about people like Jeani or Lenbe? Many find a road like they do, their personal road on a small, completely private scale. Some people are not reduced to being just more of The Afflicted, since above all they exist as someone for someone else, like Auntie for Terdu, like Kubat was for Taddol, to say nothing of me for Kadab.

Do not underestimate these notes, Benno, and you too, Viso. One thing is clear from them: if someone wants to save or help us, The Afflicted, or as we term it effectively empathize with us, he or she must remember what the most important thing is for us. Such a person or institution must,

whatever the cost or complexity, do everything that enables us to create a small community with personal bonds, a family or something similar to it. Transport to the Island was a horrible attack on these very bonds.

Benno, and you, Viso, as well, I must ask you if the world knows, remembers how they suffered and still suffer, those who were taken from us? Were they somehow anesthetized? For us, The Loss caused a certain anesthetizing, and it continues, although it's unclear if it always happens and in different cases to the same degree and in the same direction. I-Habor don't know about this because I am not separated, but I can't imagine what that would be like. The Loss doesn't do everything to me that it might, effects that would logically result from it, because for Kadab, I am not lost.

In short, our problem is the lack of connections. Here on Tyflonia, a person's bonding factors function in a distorted way, as remnants. And what about our sexual life? Our conversation has barely touched upon this question, and what about fertility — whether prevented or forbidden? Those whom this concerns the most probably didn't take part in this meeting. Terdu, for example, got no response to the question and she surely must have about any drugs implanted in her.

The arrival of Dr. Bo-F promises something. Please, let her read this too, this part of the notes, and best would be my entire NOTE. Some of these questions are primarily for her.

Then the Elder Brother's question: what does Tyflonia need from the Monastery? How, on one hand, can the Community help The Afflicted escape the isolation thrust on them from the start and is now unbearable? But on the other hand, how to guard against and actually avoid a religious revival, so as not to repeat something like the defeat of the Petitioners?

I record these important questions, although no one took them up, neither Lewis nor Jocelyn. Only Lenbe said: "Without the help of the Brothers we won't manage with these Persecutors. Why are they doing this? Where did the "Black Refusal" come from? We should pray for harmony, for strength against The Refusal. Let the Brothers help us, come with prayer, with music to those who don't want to go to the Lazaret and don't want to give up their houses. I can always accompany them where they need to go. Perlat helps too, he understands people. And Brother Jocelyn, when he's fully recovered.

Hiza's question, taken up by Jocelyn, Lewis, and Jeani and then clarified by the Elder Brother: what is essential for us is that we don't understand in what way, why and when The Loss leads to The Refusal. The Loss is a unique kind of illness. We are here because of it. But we don't even know whether this illness, contagious or not, persists in us; do we continue to have The Loss like some highly dangerous and long-lasting flu? Or, maybe we had it and the fact that our sight is damaged and with time in most cases becomes increasingly damaged (no one even tells us whether this really happens to the majority slowly or faster)? Or, is it a continual presence of something damaging within us, gradually revealing the effects of the visitation of some pathogenic factor — as it was termed when The Loss took place, or began to take place?

We ask the scientists who study us (they study us from a distance and so we can only question them from a distance) whether The Refusal which slowly kills us is another stage of The Loss as an illness, or is it also a result of the factor that first brought on The Loss? Or maybe (as Jeani thinks) The Refusal is the response of our organism to the presence of The Loss? The organism or rather the psyche or soul, as Jocelyn says?

Our problem is that we don't evaluate our situation, our state in a critical way, scientifically (Lewis), so that each of us is alone with this problem and people think different nonsense (Lenbe). We think about our Loss alone, and alone, if at all, about religion, the sense of life.

Hiza's commentary: "I haven't asked this question yet. I am not able to pose it to anyone. Even myself. And I must first pose it to myself. Why me? Or better, why Terdu? Why has this happened at all, happened to anyone? I don't agree that it has to be a punishment. It is not a question of 'for what punishment?' It's rather, 'for what purpose?' But how should one think about this?"

Jeani: "This was supposed to be a conference about what to do, what to do with this Island, what to do more with others. Hiza, don't change this into metaphysics."

And she's right. Someone like Ma-Doc surely has her own metaphysics, but I want to learn something else from her — I need her medical and organizational knowledge.

[Note ends]

20. Spring. Examples. Perlat tracks down the Cantor

Terdu derives joy from everything; little is needed for her to pull herself out of a subdued state. At the moment, visiting the living room was a wonderful experience for her. Everything: the lightly pulsating glow on the wall, the greenery in the pots, the fragrance from the cut grooves of geranium leaves — “I got a little slip that I’ll plant and Auntie can smell it,” and the dresses of the assistants with the little bells! “I thought that I could only wear something like that. You-Habor, Hiza and Jeani ought to dress that way. I-Terdu can have only a tiny, little bell.”

I thought that I would try to arrange bells and a fragrant bouquet for Terdu’s wedding. But first we have to clear the way for the celebration, make it safe, so that no one would throw a clump of stinking seaweed at their feet and or any other threatening gifts.

Spring! Kras willingly went out onto her narrow but green pasture. Spring is a green haze for us because we can’t see individual leaves, only the presence of green on the tree shapes. If only the trees here bloomed and bees buzzed in them! But none of that is here. Just the hedgerows turn green, the seagulls screech more than usual, and there’s more ocean smell as if more salt in the air. At the graveyard, in addition to the white votive stones, there are spots of little white flowers. I think they are little daisies. A small wreath of daisies like these lays on Kubat’s grave — who put it there?

I am thinking about the wall in Kassajan’s studio. I’d like you to see it, Viso. She paints as she sees. But I, looking at her painting, see it differently. I’m not able to tell how differently. When I see a misty green spot, I take a branch in my hand, touch the leaves, confirm my memory about leaves, and sometimes up close I’m able to make out a single shining leaf emerging from the spot.

There’s another problem. I’ve written to you before about the “patterns,” about the imprinting (where? Probably in the brain) filter or shadow, as it were, of real images. Often I would see those imprinted patterns everywhere around. They overlap with my foggy view of shapes so that sometimes now I don’t know what is real — I see the walls of the Monastery in the ocean, but the colors of the water, the light on the waves penetrates them. I struggle with the patterns, I try to avoid them. Now, under the influence of Kas-Kas, I think it might be worth giving in to them sometimes; the walls in the water are beautiful. It’s worth marveling at what I alone see — but I don’t show that to Kadab or to you. But does Hiza, for example, see patterns as I do, or similar ones? After all, they come from reality although differently than ordinary images.

So I philosophize, but nevertheless it's a fact that the patterns are not a good phenomenon, and that for a long time no Controllers have checked my situation with The Loss. Lately we've been concerned with everything, not just the ordinary, prosaic Loss, the disappearance of light-sensitive cells. I write about this for the order of things, so that we don't lose sight of hard facts. The loss from sight should not be lost from sight! Unfortunately, Kadab is worried. Because with him, as with you Viso, what you are concerned with, I am not! Kadab and I must be honest with each other, that's the only way. Regarding worry, we are immune in a certain sense. We take what comes. Patterns are patterns.

Perlat decided to follow the Cantor. "You see, Lenbe, I will not be peaceful about you as long as I don't know what that fellow is doing, why he is hiding. The Auditors have their way, but I will find him in my own way.

It must be said that we, The Afflicted, are not the best suited to be detectives. Some of us use a jeweler's magnifying loupe, but that doesn't make one into a detective. We don't even recognize figures who are hiding if they don't want to reveal their characteristic features. When someone we meet says, "I-So and so," well, that's something. We recognize voices pretty well, and some even do very well. The Cantor has quite an individual voice. But conversation is the best terrain for us. Perlat rightly says he can pick up the traces of the Cantor. As the weather warms up, people sit outside, and here and there they chat. He hangs around the port and where cargo is delivered ...

"Maybe at the Lazaret too?" I suggested.

"No, he doesn't go there because he's known. What for? He isn't sick. And he would be afraid to sow his bad mischief there. It's packed with Controllers, that is, Auditors. The Controllers seemed to disappear although they remain at the port and are busy with something else there, checking cargo, tourist documents. Everywhere it's only Auditors, audi-audi... . Unlike the Controllers, the Auditors look closely at everyone and try to guess. The Cantor surely will be where they are not visible. You can tell them right away, they are different. They move quickly, their clothes are fresh, and at a distance they are different figures. They speak a bit like Jeani, only loud, as if they thought that because of The Loss, we are deaf as well.

21. Pilgrimage. Hiza and Endure

After a cold wave, it's really spring. Yellow patches of lichen shine on the rocks. Small shrubs typical here are in a green mist. The sea licks the Island with relish. More wood in the bays for bonfires. Perlat and Lewis brought back enough different planks and crates to Helen's house so probably they can begin a chimney.

At the Monastery, holiday after holiday, ringing bells and singing. Many come there again because something is happening. Jocelyn's music has returned. A bit different, more difficult to listen to, as they say, but nevertheless it lifts the spirit.

As often happens — and as Lewis's classical masters agreed — the crisis that absorbed attention for a short while, diffused, had a return wave (all the strange incidents), and then seemed to disappear. It left behind questions which persisted in some, rather than violent fear, a dangerous discouragement, or a preference to reply "it's not worth it."

Meantime, encouraged by spring, not succumbing to resignation, the Elder Brother announced a traditional pilgrimage around the Island for the coming Sunday, following the path of the monks, the blessed exiles. Maybe a number of people from the mainland could be invited, more as friends than as tourists. Everyone, all residents are welcome. There would be a time for prayer, but also a picnic among the rocks prepared by the brothers. People would need to sign up to have enough supplies from the cargo, in fact, to order them. The Elder Brother talked of "residents" because as I mentioned earlier, he did not like the term "Afflicted." He was successful because almost all the Auditors of both genders signed up for the pilgrimage, and even two or three nurses who were free at that time. The Island is not large, but a hike around it, including rest stops, would take a whole day.

In the end, not very many pilgrims gathered. One didn't want to go, another couldn't, one stayed with the one who couldn't manage or did not want to. The Colony too was only partly present. Lenbe was needed by her poor ones more than usual. Jeani was at the Lazaret because someone there had again succumbed to The Refusal. Perlat had his own plans, but would check in at the house. Lewis and Terdu brought Auntie in a wheelchair to the picnic place by an easier path and one of the brothers helped them too.

Kadab, Hiza and I joined the parade that formed at the Monastery and stretched out like a snake extending down toward the port, in order to go around it and reach further to the summer swimming spot with its relatively sandy beach and then again upward toward the stone workshops along the marble quarries where the white stones pile up. One could pick them up as prayer stones. We had begun to forget about the Petitioners' custom. It was simply a custom, pious and beautiful, and the stones were a worthy symbolic remembrance.

The traditional route for procession around the Island avoided the graveyard which had emerged later, but we turned in there for a moment and left some stones; I carried two small stones

further: for Auntie and for you, Viso. Maybe sometime you'll put it in the pocket of your tourist wetsuit.

We crossed the pasture where a great many clusters of grass grow and where the few half wild sheep come from. At first, we were silent because we push against the wind. We went quickly, my stick helped a great deal, and Kadab guarded against my stumbling.

It was a familiar path, the one toward the beach of "Longing for Ireland," toward the valley with the cross of the Petitioners. The fact that we were walking this way might have discouraged some. For us, The Afflicted, at least some of us, it is a place where something sinister happened. The passage of the procession might banish the evil shadow, return it to the longing for the place we've come from.

"When we look at the Cross like a Gate," said the Elder Brother, "it will be helpful for us. This cross as well."

The Brother began a psalm about wandering through a dark valley, and Benno and Hiza joined in. But Jocelyn's instrument did not sound (it would have been too difficult to carry).

Then, the longest section. The pastures, pastures beneath the shade of the dark and white rocks, the empty upland in the place where the former sheep barns were. The sheep stared at us. "All their little black faces turned toward us," said Kadab.

I went more slowly.

"Habor, perhaps tell me now, while we're walking and not puttering around, not escaping through work. Tell me how you manage with what is going on with us," Hiza began. "After all, I know, I can see — despite everything — that your Loss is greater now, yours and mine too. What do you tell yourself about this? I'm looking for my own answers, but you have some, it seems to me."

I am silent and we press on farther against the wind.

"Hizo, maybe you tell us, you have more strength. Or don't speak, because it's windy and you have to sing still."

"The wind is dying down now," Hiza replied. "But this is like with singing, a psalm, for example. Now just this one verse. Then a breath. Everything must be in this one verse. And then I take the next one. It's like that with The Refusal. It constantly whispers to me: silence, despair! And I say to it: 'NO!' Now I sing, you understand, Habor, not necessarily loud. It's about the song inside. One note, one verse, a breath. A new decision: I sing, I don't refuse."

This is not me now, but Kadab — Kadab who usually says nothing, or I don't hear him, as Kadab reminded me here:

"Once, at the beginning, you wrote in the one empty notebook that I found while looking for a letter, you wrote that one word which I found in a dictionary: ENDURE. Survive. Bear. Hold on. That's how you do it, just as Hiza said. One verse. I can do that much."

"I-Habor, agree with that much. YES. And then onward."

22. Around the campfire. Dani. Bodies on the beach

The picnic campfire is now lit amid sooty stones from years ago. The Little Valley is flat; you have to sit low so that the wind above doesn't penetrate jackets, windbreakers and sweaters. The Brothers had previously hammered together benches out of planks and brought in tables and blankets. Mugs were filled with hot tea from thermoses. Over the fire pieces of farm bread were toasted, little sausages too, and green bananas (from the cargo!). Trays with cake and baskets full of mandarins and apples from across the sea. It was not long after noon, again and again the sun slipped behind the fast-moving clouds. Pretty good weather.

The Elder Brother announced that we'd reached the turning point in our walk. From this spot part of the pilgrims will take a shorter route to return to the Monastery and home. The hardier ones, those who feel strong enough, will follow around the northern, somewhat wilder and more deserted part of the Island as far as the so-called "monks' bathing pool" (I had thought that was exactly where, contrary to the logic of the tides, Anmer's body was found). We would not leave right away. Here, beside the fire, in a sheltered spot near the center of the Island, is the "Good for us to be here" spot. It offered a time when those who still did not know one another or knew one another very little, could get closer. Maybe by offering someone one of the small things that we have in front of us. Until now, the brothers had moved among us with trays and baskets. Now many people reached for the mandarins which worked best for socializing. In general, this idea, while congenial, was hard for us to accomplish.

The Elder Brother, however, did not realize that to each other we are all a crowd of shadows or indistinct figures, everyone unknown, as it were. The Auditors or the brothers themselves were the easiest to recognize, and Kas-Kas and her girl assistants too. So, clutching a mandarin, Terdu found one of the assistants who, taking the fruit, said, "I-Elwa, and you-Sunshine?" It turned out afterward that Elwa immediately offered Terdu one of her own little bells and invited Terdu to visit the House Above the Port and as a start, and look at everything that might interest her. "Greenery? Greenery too. Lewis will bring me."

That is a later report, because above all I wanted to get to know Ma-Doc. It wasn't hard with Kadab. Besides, she stood out with her height and luxuriant gray hairdo. A little group had formed around her already, eager to share food and converse. She quickly arranged that we divide ourselves up, which would please the Elder Brother. If we have questions for her, she wanted to hear them and remember them. For answers there would be a time for a meeting to which she would invite us.

It is not that easy to ask a question when it's not about deciding yes or no, but about clarifying the future. What concerned me was confirmation of and development of what Benno had given us to understand: that the suspicions and hypotheses upon which our internment here had been based, are no longer valid; what practical conclusions ensue? For example, the question of excluding us from reproduction? Oh, what a press conference would this be! You, Viso, if you

want, you can interview Ma-Doc about these questions sometime. Here around the campfire, the Afflicted pilgrims know that they are dealing with a different kind of doctor than the Controllers; they want to know whether there's a chance that Ma-Doc (about whom they've already heard) will be able to examine them, they or their relatives whom The Refusal is killing.

Her answer to this was only a promise. And, of course, it went like this: I will do what I can to hasten the planned program of medical help for you. I believe that there is a lot to do and that you deserve it. Now we know more about The Loss and ... and so forth.

I thought that it would be different. Human at last. That she, this energetic woman would be someone who tells us, teaches. Even if not so much about how to not give in to the Black Refusal, or giving rise to persecutors, then at least would Terdu be able to give birth to a healthy child? And should we, The Afflicted, continue to be isolated?

In the end, I didn't ask about anything. I went to find someone to offer a mandarin to and maybe ask some question. I happened on an Auditor, one not occupied with anybody else. She said timidly that she was an Auditor and her name was Danielle, Dani. "Give me your fruit, Habor. I know about you, I saw you in the Lazaret. I knew Jeanine once, you know, before ... , that's why I am here. I want to work together with you. I am a therapist, I know something about this, and it might be useful."

A weird feeling: someone who knew Jeani in her previous world and actually came from there. Not someone like Benno, a human bridge, there and from there, our Great Brother (is he still in charge today? Maybe it was fitting for him to take half a mandarin as a sign that we still do not know him?) Viso, the appearance of Dani was like a signal that you can change your status from virtual to real. I would like to ask both Dani and Jeani whether they are happy with their meeting. How is it that meeting someone one says "last time I saw you there and there, long ago, before The Loss, ach, really not long ago, only before this happened" Why did Jeani say nothing about this?

How would it be if an auditor — visitor! — appeared from my forgotten world? Dani is surely young, younger than we are, younger than Jeani. How could she know Jeani? The way a girl scout knows her troop, or a student knows her teacher? All of that, the possibility that the Auditor, and so in a certain sense a Controller, turns out to be someone known, on T. would be something abnormal, a rupture. It violates our etiquette about where one comes from, that as in former convents, you didn't say someone-you, only I-Habor, you-Dani All of that passed through my mind while slowly we got started on the road, some to return, others to take the path through the hills, closer to the sea.

Before our groups parted, Kadab spotted Perlat who also was looking for us to report: "I know which barrack the Cantor has been in. He pretended to be helpless with The Refusal again, but sometimes at night he dragged himself out as if to go somewhere, but then he ran. Someone caught him at this and was surprised. A fellow who has good second sight. The worst is that I have no idea where the Cantor is now. Is he planning something maybe? So I'm going to return and look out for Lenbe, Terdu and Auntie. I can manage that much. Let Lewis go with you. He ought to be with the brothers." With her little bells tinkling, one of Kassajan's assistants ran after Perlat,

most likely it was Elwa, wanting to go with her new friend. Lewis waved his hand and went with us to join up with the Elder Brother, Benno and several other brothers along with a small group of pilgrims.

The road was little used, dotted with many loose stones, and the canes we'd been advised to bring really helped. Along the horizon enormous shadows from the clouds, and the sound of the sea followed us like a powerful breath. You didn't want to talk, even though we walked now as a more compact group. Hiza and Dani walked ahead of us, silent as well. Breath after breath, step after step. A pilgrimage is at its goal at each point along the way while it lasts. Like a postscript to an earlier conversation, but conceived as we go, each time we hit a slick stone again and again. The route is quite long, sweeping upland, from which we descend a steep path to the "Monks' Pool" in a quiet bay sheltered from the wind. Before going down, the procession stops. It's worth looking around again over the highland dotted with rocks. Kadab says, "I see an entire flock of sheep behind us."

A swarm of shrieking gulls descends in the direction of the pool. Suddenly Benno announces: "We will not go down to the beach. Something has happened there. One group will go up to the descent down to the pasture. Go very carefully, because the path is worn away. Lewis can lead you to the Monastery and there you can wait in the church."

We go. A murmuring in the group, someone has seen something, a black shape laying down. I ask Kadab, was it the Cantor?" "I don't know, but it could be him. It's a person in any case, and not a sheaf of seaweed."

At the lower pasture, Jocelyn, Lewis, and Hiza begin to sing the psalm with which the pilgrimage was to end: "How pleasant are Your tabernacles." In these verses, we escape fear, escape the renewed awareness of something lurking.

Kadab and I turn directly toward Helen's house which the procession had passed by. At the doorstep Terdu and Elwa welcomed us with a mug of milk. In the courtyard Kras takes up the military parade. But no one shouts out happy greetings. Only Lewis waves to Terdu (Kadab assures her about this but Terdu says that she saw it, maybe she actually has "second sight" after all?)

Perlat hastened somewhat because of Dani who soon arrived at the house together with Hiza. But he was calmed by the fact that we recognized her as one of ours. I liked it that Dani did not take advantage of her acquaintance with Jeani. Dani showed interest in Auntie, the puppy Heather, and the young girls.

Hiza related very matter of factly about the change in the pilgrimage route because of a body on the beach. Whose body? Unclear for now. Perlat assumed that it was about the Cantor. Soon Lewis brought a precise report — the remains of an old, decrepit man who had simply died, were taken to the Lazaret. The Controllers together with the Auditors would take up the question of his identity tomorrow.

For me, Perlat, and Dani, Lewis reserved detailed information: a broken prayer stone was found beneath the body and something like a bedroll of dry seaweed. "A symbolic installation," stated Dani. "Something significant psychiatrically. Do you have a schizophrenic here?"

“Maybe we do, but we don’t know where he stays. The remains were not of the Cantor, but it is his work.”

We asked Dani to share her suspicions as quickly as possible with her superiors. We did not know who the remains were, but there was no time to waste finding out. Lewis told Benno, while Perlat and Kadab would escort Elwa and Dani.

We collapsed from exhaustion. Come what may, The Afflicted must sleep.

23. Ma-Doc goes to work. The Initiative. Dani and Jeani. Diagnosis and prognosis

With the help of female volunteers, who included Lenbe and Terdu, Dr. Beauforêt issued an invitation to meet at the hospital villa next to the Lazaret. She began to set up her office there, although equipment had not yet arrived from the mainland. Mattresses to sit on were borrowed from Kas-Kas, and on the wall hung her picture, “Female Figure.” There was also a little potted tree with some greenish yellow blooms. Not many came; The Afflicted are cautious when offered something for an unknown purpose. The female volunteers didn’t persist with it. It was enough that their group expanded a little; they themselves know better what to say. Ma-Doc promised that she would stay long enough to accomplish something — learn about the situation and even advise on some issues.

The first thing was to get acquainted. I have to admit that “Miss Hedvigie,” as Jeanine called her, broached contact skillfully. As she had with , she approached each of us energetically, extending her big, strong hand. She told us about herself: why “Ma-Doc”? That was what her female patients called her. In her youth she had worked as a gynecologist in Africa. “It was there that I learned how much volunteers with some degree of authority can accomplish. Just such women are here today.”

The Initiative emerged during this meeting. Later, Lenbe summarized its goal to me. I had left, from the start I had wanted only to look in for a moment. I went on quickly to the Lazaret where Jeani and Kadab needed help because while there were fewer patients, the number of nurses had declined and nearly all the cases were far advanced, so only by devoting a lot of time to each one could anything be accomplished.

Jeani told me that it was already clear: the body found on the beach was someone who had died many days before as a result of emaciation caused by The Refusal. Most likely it was someone who had not been counted after the events in the Little Valley. The body was treated in the usual way; the burial would take place tomorrow.

What Lenbe told me: “Ma-Doc will examine all the women who come forward. Probably the lesbians from their barrack will be her first clients. They worry about their partners, as those who were at the meeting said.”

Of course! I think that no doubt not all of them are affected by The Loss. They’ve come here out of solidarity, not wanting to separate. Each of us may have some female problems and we suspect that The Loss somehow extinguishes the desire for sex, both for men and for women, but maybe it’s more The Refusal that strikes at desire.

“I’m a bit embarrassed to talk about this even with you, Habor, but with Ma-doc, it’s different; I tell her everything I happen to notice,” Lenbe went on. “In the sense that I know more about men, while here we have to think about women too. You ask what she told us in general about The Loss and about what was done to us — maybe she really wanted to know, but the women

immediately got her off track, talking about themselves and those close to them rather than having some kind of lecture, like with you”

Maybe that was best. I’ve noted down Lenbe’s conversation more for myself. It’s not necessary for you, Viso. After all, you have access to sources, to information which was and continues to be not for us.

In the evening, Dani, practically part of our household, questioned Lenbe about The Initiative. Dani’s advice was that someone like Lenbe organize a group of female activists who would reach out to others. Terdu said that she wouldn’t have any authority since everyone considered her a child. But she could help Elwa and the assistants, particularly in completing the project they have to make a display of the information that Ma-Doc would provide. Photographs and drawings done so that even The Afflicted could see something on them Dani suggested: maybe you could manage to make a small presentation Dani is ready to help. And if it is combined with a concert, then people will come.

Think of it, Viso, news like this from T. about an amateur presentation being prepared. As if this were some island resort like Pondwell off the coast of southern England! Don’t think, however, that this was it and then afterwards, nothing more but a happy end. What must be included in any happy end? Our meeting? Habor and Kadab somewhere in Euroland on old trash heaps (long ago cleaned up)? The trouble with that is that I myself cannot imagine any happy end. The marriage of Terdu and Lewis? That will surely happen, but with no down sides? Terdu has a baby, a sweet infant with healthy weight, all fingers and toes, and bright eyes?

Can I envision such a dream? The bottom fell out of my world once already, so I know that there’s no counting on any firm ground. It’s only as Hiza said: one verse at a time, one breath and a question mark. Not depending upon having some defined future.

All the time I really wanted to talk with Dr. Beauforêt. Explore her nature — that of a person who is able to heal and organize help whether in Paris or in Africa, in refugee camps and settlements out in the bush. For a long time no opportunity arose, so I concluded that the only way was to get on her list for an exam. I thought that I’d be a good subject, although it wasn’t necessary. There were so many people wanting an exam that I waited a month or more. No one was in the plant-filled waiting room. When a patient left, the rest of the time was for me. The examination chair was covered with a white drape, the rest of the room did not seem like a surgical clinic, but more like a living room. Ma-Doc clearly was the kind of person who creates her own preferred space wherever she goes. A tall, painted “Breton-style” cabinet, she explained, seeing my interest. “Something like that can be found here when Miss Kassajan helps. She knows numerous useful things.”

The examination, not among the most pleasant things, had to proceed. In truth, just as Terdu praised — it was entirely “humane.” One person touches another, just as we tried to do at the Lazaret.

Dr. Beauforêt seems to be pleased with the result which no doubt the laboratory test would confirm. “I don’t see anything outside of what is normal for your age.” But I had come with another question. “No, it’s not about me, but rather, what about us?”

“As a doctor I have no answer to that question. Not yet. Such an answer must be based on far more thorough and wide-ranging examinations. I trust that it will be possible to begin them shortly. Then we will be able to know more. Certainly, however — I see it now — there will be no single answer for everyone. What you call “The Loss,” is a multi-factored process with each one of you, different for male and female. It’s not a matter of the “event” only. Everything that happens afterward is important. The situation of being separated, one’s experiences, one’s own decisions. From the point of view of my specialization, what matters most is what was done to prevent your fertility, whether for some long period of time or permanently. This happened differently in different periods. We are now trying to recreate the course of this action. It certainly did not involve people already of advanced age; I hope that it did not include children. It’s not easy to say, because today who will admit to this? Besides, surely not everything was recorded. Data can be deleted. But we will ascertain something, publish everything it’s possible to learn with sufficient certainty, and for ourselves we will gather suppositions and suspicions. We will search, and examine individual fates.

To break the silence, I interjected, “And for now? We cannot postpone life until that moment when you publish your findings.”

“We can’t wait. And while not waiting for what we will eventually establish, all your rights must be returned to you now. Contraception can be only voluntary, as it is everywhere. Cautious people will choose it; the brave, those resistant to The Refusal, trust in the power of life that they have in themselves despite everything. They feel longing for those unknown ones for whom they want to be parents. Time after time in this office, I hear about this and want to help with what they decide. Many things are still possible today.”

“And even if ... ,” the doctor placed her warm hand on mine, “even if we, we are not completely helpless in the face of genetic damage. Already there are promising achievements and if we do not stint on science or block important directions in research — then we will not only understand and foresee dangers, but we can avoid them, treat them In some ways, The Loss resembles a known familiar disease, an autonomic dysfunction. Today this disease can be treated effectively. I can promise this much: I will keep an eye on your concern.”

Please keep this account to yourself alone. Change can happen, they can take Ma-Doc away from us. She sees T. as a place on the map of the world, a place like every other. Like some

Zululand. For us the curtains part slightly, open little by little; the screen that isolates our dubious, diseased tribe from others who are more healthy, dissolves.

Dani and Jeani sit next to each other at our scrubbed table. Mugs untouched. Jeani is crying. I've not seen her crying until now. Dani says: "Cry" and hugs her to herself. I go out to Kras. With her I can cry close to her warm side. I will never learn why Jeani is crying today, but I will cry with her.

Viso, be aware that no amount of amateur presentations, pilgrimages, religious services and concerns saves us from tears when two worlds meet if only for a brief moment.

24. Reitly and Olwer. More losses. Memory of Helen

It was not long to wait before something happened. The clear suicide of Reitly (she slashed her wrists) shocked everyone.

Until now there really hadn't been a suicide. The Refusal was such an easily accessible form of withdrawal and it began with the disappearance of the kind of energy needed for suicide. Reitly herself did not experience The Loss, but instead was affected together with her partner Olwer. Reitly had kept Olwer above water. Pulled her back from collapse, roused her, fed her. Reitly's strength seemed inexhaustible, a model of persevering and wise concern. And then it happened to her! She went to pick up cargo and didn't return. With the Auditors' help, she was found at the port in an unused wooden house, a fisherman's hut. Beneath Reitly's head was a sheet of paper with a note (not legible for Olwer, but no doubt written out for her): "Forgive." Perlat didn't believe that Reitly had done this alone. "Someone caused her to do this, the one who is gone." Dani was not so sure. But to Perlat she said, "that's nonsense."

It's not known who was responsible, but I also think that this was a murder, and doubly so, because Reitly's death dragged in Olwer too. And so several days later it happened, despite the efforts of Jeani and myself.

When things had settled down and the Auditors stopped guarding the fisherman's hut, Perlat went there with Lewis. In the trash in one corner they found a decomposing seagull with its eyes gouged out. Had it been there all the time or had someone thrown it there later?

Lewis and Benno shared this news with the Auditors. Benno had authority among them and maybe also he was (as I had thought from the outset) one of them, but in the past?

To clarify: Viso, as a rule we The Afflicted rarely think about who governs whom. Maybe it's because we are accustomed to the fog and not surprised when there's something we don't know. We don't need to know; nothing comes from it anyway. A Controller is a Controller, we don't make distinctions. With the Auditors it started to be a bit different. We met Dani, and little by little, others came to know those who visited them. Although the Controllers gave up "medical care," some remained for policing purposes. Their mobilization soon turned out to be essential because deaths similar to murders began to repeat.

It's true: people continually died here, not always at the Lazaret, more or less under supervision. It happened in isolation if no one had signaled earlier that they needed hospital care.

Now, however, the death of the lonely, the isolated, began to be a more frequent phenomenon. So the Auditors visited rooms in old houses, places with attics, basements, and cubby holes. This was how they often found corpses, or more often traces of human habitation, some kind of bedroll, rags. And traces of blood as well — human or animal? Perlat looked for seagull

feathers and one time found a dried wing and a discarded knife with which it had been cut off. Dani increasingly suspected that the “Installer” (as she called the instigator of gloomy events) might hide in the old houses near the port, changing places from time to time.

I didn’t learn the most terrible thing immediately from Perlat and Dani: each time the remains were in places that were locked from the outside. How were they locked in? I don’t know. I don’t know either if the keys were in the locks. Or had the entries been blocked?

We returned from the burial. Olwer. At the graveyard bathed in spring sunlight, the Elder Brother said: “We said farewell to our sister Olga. Receive her, Lord, the Most High and Merciful, in whom she placed hope and to whom with us she called out.”

I realized that Olwer was a Petitioner, but Reitly — probably not. Their graves lay alongside each other, separated by a narrower than usual furrow.

“The girls want to combine these two graves with one common rock. Prayer stones have been placed now on a single common cross. What do you think, Habor, can The Refusal be consent?” Jeani said, quietly. “I assume that Olwer, that Olga, told herself: After all, I don’t have to live this way. After all, I can leave, I want to go. That’s allowed, right, Habor?”

I wanted to say yes, to shout it out, recalling Olwer’s whisper in which it seemed to me that I heard “You forgive me.” But now I surely heard Renata’s name. To Jeani, however, I said: “It’s not always allowed to go.”

That’s what I really think, Viso. The key is in “not always.” But when? It’s good to believe in Someone who resolves it.

Hiza again sang a psalm. placed two fresh roses sent from the mainland on the graves. “A little theatrical,” she told me later, “but our theater here is so gloomy and disgusting that we need to oppose it with something we are capable of: pathos, sentiment, finery, something that emphasizes dignity.”

The roses bloomed for a long time among the damp stones, partially covered with moss. I know because Perlat began to keep watch over the graves, fearing that in place of the roses someone was ready to put dead birds or something worse.

I’m wondering, Viso, if the parts of my account that involve — call them by their right name, criminal events on T. — might be a useful source of information. Since the arrival of the Auditors, we are definitely less cut off from the world. Now so many people here have unfettered initiative, do not succumb to sleep, only experience a few hours of anxiety. But the Auditors do not have to, surely are not obliged, to speak or write about their lengthening mission, and particularly about such a dramatic topic. My commentary? Sometimes I myself attach significance to them. Kadab supports me in this, but Kadab is my Kadab, and moreover, he invests his effort

and ingenuity in my contact with the world, contact through you, Viso, and with the world. After all, I have no illusions about how important it can be for the world, an account from T.! Something totally from the periphery. But I've grown accustomed to that, so don't cease being a partner or recipient of my soliloquies, my talks to myself.

So know that we have more losses. When the investigations with the participation of the super Controller from the mainland (an old acquaintance of Benno, of course) end, we will bury two of Lenbe's "poor ones," practically neighbors of Perlat. Two small, unimportant little people, prematurely aged. Were it not for Lenbe, they would have been gone long ago. Spring and the prospect of Lenbe's care drew them out of the Lazaret. They enjoyed the little garden that Perlat tended, and his chatter, his promises of fishing excursions later when their health improved. But now they are gone. Both died on the same night, actually from cold and shock, not far from their barrack, amid the feldspar rocks and ruins, attached to the iron hooks jutting out there for tethering cattle. They had been unable to free themselves, nobody heard their cries for help. Like all the Afflicted, they soon fell asleep, unable to awaken. The next day Lenbe did not find them in their beds as usual. Perlat knew nothing; he was not in his quarters, but out patrolling another district with the Auditors.

With these deaths, depression descended on us, a fatigue somehow different from the usual. The Lazaret quickly filled up again. Additional help had to be mobilized, at the expense, to some degree, of Ma-Doc's Initiative. We asked Lewis and Terdu if they would come to take shifts again. Lenbe had to stay with someone from the Auditors from now on (good training for them).

Day after day. Psalm verse after psalm verse. Summer, our beautiful, short summer. Little Heather is now quite big, a happy terrier. He follows Lenbe in his red collar, sewn for him by Perlat. Unfortunately, he growls and barks at the poor ones if they are laying in their beds. But otherwise, he wanders around, begging all the Auditors to play with him.

"Dani could write a treatise on Little Heather's psychology," claimed Lenbe. At first, Dani said jokingly, and then seriously: "Little Heather diagnoses The Refusal. Maybe he distinguishes its changes? For the canine nose the whole chemistry of depression, excitement, and resignation can carry aromatic signals."

In Perlat's opinion, "Malnutrition, diapers, sweat-soaked clothes" — that's what Little Heather respects.

The beaches are empty, even the one adapted to our capabilities, safe, and without visitors, although the days have begun to be hot, relative to our climate. People fear the beach, as it were, the seaweed covering it has become ominous. No suntan oil and sunscreen could be found in the cargo.

Searching for cosmetics for Terdu, Dani found a shampoo which gave her hair a non-Tyflonia quality, as if revitalized. Such hair went nicely with the bell-decorated summer dress sewn by Elwa out of something that happened to be found in the cargo, from two peculiar house dresses no one wanted.

Lenbe continued to suffer over the death of her poor ones. “Had they died normally, it would be hard. I mourn each one, but the next person waits for care It’s true they slept because of the cold, but before they could have wakened; they must have because they struggled with pieces of the net, they couldn’t tear it or chew through it. So they went, that is they just slept in the end. I can’t reconcile myself to this. Jocelyn told me something like God being tied up too, the Son of God, that is. But was He with them — can I believe that's how it was? That there should be someone who can free them? Who can I talk to about this? Only with Brother Jocelyn, as I still call him in my mind, even though he doesn’t want to be called that. I cheered him up and now he cheers me”

I will tell you something, Viso, something that no one knows about. Really no one, for I tell nobody, but there are days when I’m afraid for my future. Not about the future, but of the future, of what will come. That I know absolutely nothing about it.

I am alone. I’m a burden to Kadab. I respond to him differently and him alone. I don’t collapse in hysterics, I don’t cry, only suddenly that’s how I understand everything.

You, Viso, are not here at all; I don’t have the strength to invent you for myself and when I feel this way, it’s as if you were completely invented. I say this to your face. It doesn’t mean “that’s how it is,” only that I then begin to think that way. Does this mean I am nearer the truth or farther away?

Before I allow Kadab to put his arms around me and once again say, “don’t philosophize,” I sometimes slip out alone to Helen’s grave. You know that she has no grave in the little cemetery? But still on her island there is a place that belongs totally to her, where her bones lay, an almost toothless rounded skull, maybe some strands of gray hair.

For Helen’s grave I chose an enormous boulder which juts out from the central crest of the island at a place where the wind plays its concerts. The boulder reaches practically the coast of the island, crushing the smaller rocks and burrows of some animals where it ends. This was long ago, so the boulder is mostly covered with heather mixed with dune grass.

I lean against the boulder and think about Helen. She is my savior in this way. I hear how she says — she who could never speak — “give them milk.” That was enough. “Give whom?” Everyone who comes. I think about Helen as if I met her today, just today or not long ago.

Why did I love her, and how has she become even more important to me now? I think about her similarity to my grandmother. I think about the similarity of character and not their features.

Small, bent over. But her hand holding a mug? I have a hand like that in my genes: my grandmother’s hand, my hand growing similar to her hand: dry, thickened at ends of the fingers with soft tips knowing how to caress. My grandmother spoke little, Helen was enveloped in silence.

It didn't matter. Not seeing clearly, only having to be silent, waiting until the feeling of contact comes with the first words or better — without them.

The boulder is silent that way, just the way I expect it to be.

Part 4.

25. The tent Town Hall. The Commissioner apologizes. Seaweed again

Here's super-important news that nevertheless didn't make the proper impression on us. Maybe because this event was not announced to us with appropriate fanfare. I heard from Lewis that Benno awaited the arrival of a competent person who would deal with the issue of safety on T. Naturally, it was his former acquaintance (from the Reform Club, I think). We called him "the New One" (an Auditor, or a Controller?), but Benno explained that he was the Commissioner. This was precisely the kind of person we needed.

The Commissioner — "the New One" — faced the challenge of meeting our local society. Where to organize it? He stayed in one barracks where the Controllers, now Auditors, lived like in a hotel. It was not actually one barrack but a small complex of temporary sections, not cozy in winter. But it was summer now. Still, there was no larger-sized room there. The Commissioner did not want to take advantage of the hospitality of the Monastery because that would disturb the line between Church and State, as the Elder Brother explained. Finally a circus tent was transported from the mainland and was quickly christened "the Town Hall." We were able to meet "the New One" here and there: at supper in Kassjan's place, at a lecture on genetics by Ma-Doc, after a service at the Monastery, and in the Lazaret where he paid a surprise visit, apologizing for his dropping in. It was mealtime and no one had time to look after him. He kissed Jeani's hand, and asked Terdu, "And you, little girl, are you a volunteer here?"

The New One was easily recognizable — by his height and unique "leaping" movements. "He doesn't walk in an ordinary way, just disappears, making himself smaller."

The new Commissioner was not handsome, but one felt that his hands sought the tiller to set the direction of what was going on. "You called him 'New,'" Perlat said, "but in fact he's 'old,' he could be a skipper or a captain." Lenbe added: "He knows a strange lot about us. More than the Brothers at the Monastery. He asked me whether I knew Helen. As if he'd been here already. He quickly learns his way around, but people don't speak to him like they do to the Controllers."

The white circus tent was set up in the pasture that began behind the little graveyard. Those who brought the tent set it up. They were afraid of us and we too did not seek out contact with them. But the very fact of their presence was a change. Until now, only specialists like nurses and the Controllers had come from the mainland. After tourist visits to the Monastery and possibly the workshop of Kassjan, this crew in overalls was another departure. No matter that they ate on the

ferry waiting for them and tried to ignore the fact that the Island is not uninhabited. Nevertheless, they were ordinary, just like everywhere else they went when they had to set up the tent.

After they left, we took over the Town Hall. On our own we set out cardboard cubes to sit on. “Let’s paint them!” suggested Kassajan’s assistants. The New One supplied buckets of paint. Inside the tent fantastic flowers and butterflies bloomed on the cartons.

But I continued to be afraid. Dani did not dispel my fear. All this could provoke the “Installer,” to use Dani’s term, not wanting to exaggerate the fact that this person was precisely the former Cantor. He may be no longer alive, but his inspiration remains, someone who instigated all of this.

“Your theories are like from Harry Potter, except that here life is real, The Afflicted are not just thought up,” I protested. Although sometimes I feel as if our events are imagined. In a certain sense, anyway, they are — if the Cantor-Installer creates them in his head first.

Nothing happened. For the time being the Auditors took care of the tent now set up. A couple of people watched over it throughout the night. Toward morning Dani perceived two dark figures (in the darkness each of us sees only figures). No one, however, neared the tent, although it was not lit up, as the Commissioner recommended. The nighttime walkers quickly disappeared among the rocks. Maybe the alarm should have been raised, but there had been no such instruction.

The next day the weather worsened. The canvas Town Hall flapped lightly in the wind, but inside it was cozy. Longer benches were made with the cartons shoved closer together so that more people could be accommodated. With the exception of the very ill with whom the nurses remained, practically everyone came, plus a group from the Monastery somewhat mixed in with those among The Afflicted whom they knew. Small candies were handed out, as in airplanes before take-off. Perhaps we were taking off? There was even the slight hum of ventilation. In front of a raised area with a large table covered with a sapphire colored cloth, there was a fairly large empty space. There the Commissioner paced back and forth. Kadab said, “He even has a briefcase under his arm. And we have to have a presiding table — everything authentic or how it really used to be.”

No doubt this effect was deliberate, since even Elwa, ringing her little bells, brought one of Kassajan’s plants, a green fern in a pot.

It began. I describe it in detail because precisely in the details — so unlike Tyflonia, and yet so significant — exceed the imagination, in any case that of The Afflicted, though maybe not yours, Viso. Then (such a description has to begin with “then”) the Commissioner asked people he’d selected to come up to the table, one after another, both predictable and unexpected: of course, Ma-Doc, the Elder Brother, a number of Auditors, and a nurse (not in uniform), as well as Lenbe and Perlat because they were some of the first to get involved in caring for others and in the medical Initiative.

“Kras was left by herself,” I thought and suddenly I grew fearful. “Kras and Little Heather,” though I did not worry about the cat. No one would ever be able to snatch Myrdal.

“Kadab, everyone is here with us. Go home, quickly.”

Kadab didn’t debate, just somehow slipped out of the tent. That will surely interest the Auditors, and rightly so.

The celebration progressed. Maybe someday its anniversary will become the T. holiday? We are to learn things that are important for us (had the New One learned well what might be important for us?), but first the Commissioner wants to perform an act which the “situation” requires (but who, in fact, requires it? Not us, we have forgotten about this type of demands; all we want is for everything to be humane). The Commissioner somewhat timidly, without emotion, referred to some Abstraction, in the name of which he now apologized to us, ceremoniously, for the breach of human rights we had experienced. (Jeani knew what to do, not wanting to sit behind the table during the Commissioner’s declaration).

In any case we cannot see one another’s faces. Maybe that is why it’s not possible to apologize to us. For us, the New One has no face at this moment, although he did when he visited the Lazaret.

When the Commissioner broke off his speech (which is what I have to call it, although it sounds ironic, but I realized since he had to speak, then he could only say this), a long silence ensued. As the silence went on, only the tent flapped and whipped. Suddenly someone impatiently pounded on the cardboard seating, others picked it up, then everyone, and the deafening beat went on and on. What was happening? Affirmation and protest, relief and suffocating anger, maybe hope, surely despair. Cries and weeping spread.

Very astutely, Jocelyn began to play some old tune, maybe a hymn from hippie days, unrecognized by most but still moving, the melody alone mingled with what our pounding made clear, the realization that our response is like the beating of the wind that carries fluttering and trembling.

Now about the changes the Commissioner announced next — no longer ceremonially, but normally, with some haste in order to move on to serving drinks in cartons and some Scottish cakes baked in the nearest port. These changes haven’t really happened yet, but finally there is a chance they will do what they promise and learn from the source. It was said that from now on, T. will not be a center, but a settlement with local governance and all that implies, that for now a program of visits here and for us to the mainland will begin, individually, for whoever feels strong enough to do so. Before, the now lapsed medical exams would have to take place. As to the autopsies (a reply to a question from Kas-Kas) general legal principles will apply, meaning only with prior consent, freely expressed in full psychological health — that is, not while in the condition of Refusal.

This should have been followed by another pounding, but instead only cries of “Finally!” rang out.

Kadab had shared my fears. Reaching home from the direction of the Monastery he saw two figures, a woman and man, already at the gate. Then he made a mistake: involuntarily he called out something like, “hey, there!” They reacted: the woman pulled the man by the hand and they took off running in the direction of the lower pasture and the path uphill. Little Heather suddenly

barked inside the house, jumping at the door. Kras was penned in the barn, whole and unharmed. But at the gate lay a cluster of seaweed that had just been tossed there.

26. The Commissioner. The Initiative and the “drummers”

The Town Hall was left in place for now. Its interior space was divided by low walls of cardboard seating, lightly secured at the bottom with stones. Volunteers from The Initiative set it up and brought their unit there. The Commissioner organized a workspace for himself — a little reception room. Part of it was taken up by a display of work by Kas-Kas and her assistant. In the evenings the tent looked like a flying saucer that had landed on the Island. For now, at least, the Commissioner did not appear in his investigative capacity. He began with efforts to improve the organization of our life, he sought out those able to initiate something and those who could accomplish things. The major change was that he rejected the assumption that we were not capable of anything. In the meantime, he cautiously reminded some of us who we once had been and perhaps still are.

Not everyone took this seriously. One has to internally gear up for even a slight change of roles. That was lacking.

Lewis immediately became the Commissioner’s primary support from the Monastery. “I will become a Civil Servant yet,” he said, “but the community of the Monastery will be my house, mine and Terdu’s.”

Lewis and Perlat were also convinced that the Cantor had to be tracked down, along with other stalkers (we already knew for certain there was someone else, that woman whom Kadab had seen, perhaps she was the one who gathered up dead seagulls and was noticed once by Perlat).

The atmosphere on T. changed a bit. This much was the Commissioner’s work. I know that at the Monastery prayers were said in his intention. Hiza told me about this and was offended when I laughed. “Vice-regent of the circus tent,” I quipped. But deeply serious, Hiza asked, “Why do you want to ridicule him? Ask yourself, really, what tempts you?” I don’t know. After all, I want The Initiative to succeed. I want to believe in it. The Commissioner, as best he can, changes things slowly.

Influenced by our drumming, Jocelyn decided to organize a percussion orchestra. It could be done with practically anything, but the Commissioner reacted enthusiastically to the idea and had a few different drums, large and small, noisemakers and rattles transported from the mainland. Stones were added to the ensemble. Quite a few wanted to play. In good weather during the daytime, the beach around the port became the drummers’ settlement. You could hear them in the Lazaret and probably on the other side of the straits.

Strangely enough, some of the patients quite deeply affected by The Refusal joined the drumming. Were they seeking Jocelyn’s presence? Was there something similar to the Petition in the drumming? I mentioned this to Perlat who was not drawn to the new fashion. “The fish are disturbed,” he said. In effect, for fishing only the Monks Pool was left for him, quiet, but shrouded in a somewhat sinister aura.

27. The Brother Barber. Attack on Jocelyn. Dicko and Cantor Efrem. Jocelyn — what next?

Jocelyn finally broke down on his own, or maybe got permission or an instruction to resume visiting the sick, those collapsing into The Refusal, and beyond the Lazaret as well. Lenbe remarked on it: “Brother Jocelyn, a few of my poor ones ask when will you come? They want to talk with you, to pray” Lenbe did not mention that they asked about the “holy water” too.

Jocelyn immediately agreed, although his uneasiness was apparent. “Is it good that it’s me?” Maybe Lewis would be better — or better yet, the Elder Brother! We thought, both of us, recalling what had been good with the Petitioners, about introducing the anointing of the sick the way Catholics do. Not at death, but in the struggle with sickness, as in the early Church. I can speak about this, but for sure, Lenbe, I want their blessing to allow me to do something myself like what you do. Diapers and all the rest.”

“They will be embarrassed with you,” Lenbe warned.

“Why? Well, if so, then maybe better somebody new, who doesn’t know me. Or you, Lenbe, ask in my name.”

Lenbe was right. There was resistance to Jocelyn in this role. “Better to have Brother pray for me” But Jocelyn turned out to be a good barber and beard shaver, although he was afraid to trim fingernails. His services were needed in the Lazaret. And so it was that Jocelyn became the Brother Barber.

Soon Jocelyn began to stay in the barracks and houses without Lenbe and Perlat who moved on further.

“Is it safe?” I asked.

“The Auditors look in on things. We continually meet them, particularly late at night.”

But it wasn’t late at night when Jocelyn shaved Dicko, one of the sickest of the poor ones, who until now did not want to let himself be shaved. Jocelyn worked slowly, all the time speaking to the sick person, quietly humming some peaceful melody. The doors creaked. Jocelyn had not even turned around when he heard the voice of the Cantor.

“I got rid of her. I won’t kill any more.”

“Whom did you get rid of, Brother?”

“Her. Death without eyes. She helped me, she issued the command. But I don’t want to go on that way now”

“What didn’t you want?”

“To stink of seaweed. Eat seagulls. I lost my voice from the sea salt. I am hairy all over, Brother Barber, I thought you could loan me a razor.”

Jocelyn raised the shaver that he was using.

“That won’t help, Jocelyn. Maybe you can lather me up. You and not the Elder Brother. You are my pal, we dunked the unbaptized together. Tell me, Brother Jocelyn, maybe it’s not me, but maybe God wants The Afflicted not to exist anymore? No Commissioner can do anything.”

The silence went on. The Cantor looked for something in his jacket. He found it; he pulled out a knife for gutting fish.

“A razor would be better. Too bad you don’t have razors, Jocelyn. That’s her order that I have, that you are to slit your wrists here with me, and that I take your holy paint instead of unsalted water. If you are afraid, I will help.”

Dicko, laying motionless until now, clutched Jocelyn’s arm and in an unexpectedly strong voice said cunningly to the Cantor:

“Efrem, Efremek, good Brother Jocelyn will have some chocolate for you too, if you come tomorrow. Come on, Efremek, say hello to Dicko, give me a kiss”

A thin, quivering hand reached out for Cantor Efrem’s crotch. The Cantor dropped the knife, accepted the caress, and clung to the half shaved old man.

Jocelyn fled from the room. A clump of seaweed lay dripping on the threshold of the doorway to the barrack.

Jocelyn stood motionless until he was able to gesture to an Auditor passing by.

“The Cantor has come here, he’s inside the room. What’s going on there isn’t an attack. Dicko himself offered the Cantor sex in order to save me.”

Was that how it was? Jocelyn didn’t want to talk about it at all. I have no access, of course, to his formal statement before the Commissioner. You are reading a product of my imagination, Viso. Jocelyn has not read it either. But he himself told me that his conversation with the Cantor (with Efrem, as he started to call him) was long, that it lasted probably an hour or more. Amid the strange, unnatural associations Efrem recounted some consistent themes appeared: their common responsibility for the death of those who had drowned. That death was to be proof of the stupidity of calling upon God on the cross. That someone Different is crucial, but that Different One will save only those who break with the Monastery and the supplies from Euroland. Fire will consume the tent of the Commissioner. The island will be vacated, entirely overgrown with seaweed, in which the blind will get themselves entangled and struggle against it until the tide takes away their breath.

Jocelyn spoke about these clichéd fantasies with horror. I didn’t want him to burrow into contemplation of what was, after all, a result of some unfortunate struggle in Efrem’s brain. That is where the hell was, not in the natural world; it did not involve this Island at all, whose gifts were Helen, Kras, and the terrier, Little Heather.

Efrem is now on the mainland, in a fine hospital, where doctors are able to help him, free him from his nightmares.

“Dicko said ‘Efremek,’” Jocelyn recalled.

“That’s it!” I replied.

“Lenbe says that Dicko feels pretty good, he gets up, asks for sweets. But he’s ashamed, Jocelyn, ashamed about what you think of him, that this was how he saved you, that he gave in to sex with the Cantor, and not always so that he would not be so nasty and angry because nobody wanted him. That woman too, who sought access to Brother Jocelyn through Efrem, she seemed to have drowned, but then she walked along the beach. You have to visit Dicko, Jocelyn, in a completely natural way. Let him see that you are happy with life, that you are the happy brother of the poor ones.”

That was how I clarified it all to Jocelyn and arranged, or tried to arrange, his behavior in which I was fairly successful. Everything was as if it were I-not-Habor, I from before The Loss. But now I cannot think that if The Loss had not occurred, how it could be invented or take place only in the brain, in the skull — like with the crazy Cantor — and not in nature. Digging around in the brains of our deceased, those who did the autopsies looked for some physical, some natural sign of The Loss. Maybe The Refusal too? What goes on in the cells, in their network of connections? Could that be determined after death, when only decomposition is present? Does The Refusal, a person’s decision to say “No,” summon or trigger the decomposition? Or maybe the decomposition is reflected in the psychic realm and we, interacting with someone who has begun to die from the inside, see what we called “The Refusal”? If that is how it was, then how is it possible that sometimes we, The Afflicted ourselves, were able to alter the process, suspend, or reverse it? That seems more mysterious than the fact that some affected by The Loss never enter into The Refusal.

Finally, what happened to the Cantor — madness. Instead of resignation — anger, aggression. We really did not encounter that in the Lazaret, but maybe it happened in the barracks? Lenbe talked about it. Fear of the “Black Refusal,” thought to be horrible pain, and the one who had it was dangerous for others. It reminds me of very old images about rabies. But that doesn’t fit with the Cantor or the Gatherers of the Dead Seagulls. In them I see something more like an unusual case of schizophrenia in which the world of imaginings is full of horror and provokes crime.

You will say, and you will be right — that this is all a matter of names. Names matter little when someone straps half-conscious, helpless people to iron rods used as cattle tethers and waits until they die of cold and fear. Where does such evil come from? Isn’t that like some causal factor of The Loss falling from the sky like ordinary hail? That’s what I-Habor think, having experienced what I’ve experienced. It matters little to me what you say about this, Viso. On the contrary: what matters will depend on how we will be seen, how the world classifies us, to what it’s likely we will return, what the Commissioner plans and what Brother Benno believes. In any case, the Monastery no doubt prays for this intention. I can write without fear because prayer in a thousand-year-old Monastery is a familiar and expected phenomenon. It abides by other laws than The Petition. Monks do not demand, they only trust.

28. Dicko. Efrem. Jocelyn — what is remembered?

What happened with Jocelyn? Dicko gave him to understand that Efremek had many friends who “helped” — in what? To achieve orgasm or in killing? Dicko admitted only to caresses and those rather long ago, before The Petition movement began. Later, Dicko had little strength or desire. For Jocelyn, in order to save him, Dicko remembered Efrem’s favorite pleasures.

Jocelyn? It seemed that he had put aside the recollections of being a spiritual leader of The Petitioners. A closed chapter, so it seemed. He still did not remember what happened afterward, how together with the crowd of enthusiasts he walked into the water with no plan to push further into the depths. Later, the pressure of the crowd, the attempt to support the woman who couldn’t swim, the wave that separated them, his floating to tow someone to shore, being hit by water — maybe someone’s despairing grasp, and then nothing more. Nothing. How did he waken? In a cell with Jeani’s care? Lenbe’s prayer? Had something preceded it, another awakening while in the nightmare? Shadow. Some gouged out, dead motionless eyes. Cold. Smoke. No, more still; there was crawling over stones.

Day after day, the longer he lives as if like before, Jocelyn begins to doubt: did Benno or the Elder Brother do the right thing by protecting him from responsibility and confession? After all, because of that silence, and particularly about Anmer, he himself, the Brother Jocelyn of before, became an accomplice with them.

The Commissioner is different from the Controllers — Jocelyn is more certain than I am when he talks to me about this. The difference is not overwhelming, but it is there. Thanks to this difference we now know that Anmer was able to survive the day of catastrophe. She disappeared from the Monastery before that day. It was logical, in line with her obsession, that she wanted to live like one of The Afflicted, who feels like one of The Afflicted. It was a matter of “supernatural solidarity,” as she put it.

“I can’t forgive myself that I fell for that,” Jeani says. The plan to smuggle out Taddol with the help of Anmer was exciting. I figured that Taddol would work on our behalf, and it was important to send him out. Only later Anmer began to be disturbingly strange.

Jeani did not say anything more. You know her reticence, Viso. According to Lewis who is less reticent, yes, Anmer was “strange,” if you want to call it that. The Petition became the subject of her imagined fantasies. Those fantasies involved her own role alongside Jocelyn. At first, he didn’t notice this, for certain he did not want to, but she trailed him like a shadow. I saw her continually just three steps behind him. It was strange because she didn’t know how to sing or lead the prayers. It was a problem for a psychologist, and now, clearly, a psychiatrist.

When the Elder Brother counsels us (he persists in this habit), Jeani and I urge him to include Jocelyn with the Commissioner in the conversation. That way the question of Anmer would be unavoidable. Now that Jocelyn is a known figure for the Commissioner, after having

helped so many times and taken part in The Initiative ... a conversation couldn't have negative consequences.

As a result of conversations-confessions it turned out that Jocelyn wanted to undergo therapy in order to remember his experiences after the near-drowning. This will take time. Dani is qualified. Lewis asked, "Dani, don't change our Jocelyn, he's needed here as he is."

"If I could, I'd prefer to change you, Lewis, but I can't and it's not needed because you have begun to be more grown upon your own."

"That's through Ter-ter, she changes me."

29. What about the former inhabitants? Caves. A “movie” ending?

Something emerges in the clashes between the Commissioner’s thoughts and our approach to things. The Commissioner long ago encouraged the Auditors and Controllers to take a thorough look at the entire area of the Island. They were to update the maps and search for places where someone could hide or conceal something. Including the sheep, of which there were fewer, and dogs — they were supposed to have complete care; the Commissioner made it one of the goals of The Initiative.

We will see whether or not anything comes of this. There’s a chance that at the outset the Auditors will take this up. Neither the previous farmers nor ordinary sheep breeders were capable of achieving this. Here the sheep are supposed to live the way deer once did in the parks of the wealthy — to be something active in the landscape, so that the heather didn’t die, choked out by grass where no animals grazed. As to the dogs, the Commissioner was obviously a dog lover. Little Heather delighted him, and after that, the entire pack.

Now a veterinarian comes regularly to the Island to examine the sheep and the dogs; he also gives lectures about animals as a part of The Initiative that many attend. The vet is certainly right when he says that in the love of animals there is something that counteracts The Refusal (canine therapy — have I mentioned this?). The most important difference between the approach of the Commissioner and us is that the Commissioner clearly realizes that local people here were uprooted from the Island in order to make it a center for our isolation. For me, these people are the ones who left Helen, with no thought about her fate. But maybe they did think something, after all, since they left Kras, such a fine cow?

Those who were expelled were not numerous. I think that they wouldn’t want to return now. But they live somewhere out there, where they were re-settled, or where they moved to later. They fear us and The Loss. No doubt they try to forget that something like this happened to them, that they were sacrificed for Euroland, for the Human Family, so that it would not be infected.

At the order of the Commissioner, his wish in the context of cooperation, several former residents of the Island were sought out. Following this directive, Lewis, a sociologist after all, spent several days talking with the Island fisherman and brought back some news: small caves exist on the Island. Their entries are under water, but some are accessible through tunnels beneath boulders covered by heather, not far from the shore where there is no beach but only a cliff dropping straight down to the water. One of the fishermen even sketched a crude map with a mark indicating the cave he knew about. There are more of them, several, maybe dozens. Families had their own caves, but rarely took much care about them. Entering a cave is difficult. Outsiders were not told anything about them. The Monastery does not know about them either, although it is probable that the true monks of ancient times knew about them and hid there during attacks or they themselves practiced the life of hermits.

Viso, maybe you would like to come here with a spelunking team? That might be a real “movie ending” to the epic of T., “a monastic treasure discovered in caves assigned by the government as a Colony for those Afflicted by The Loss as reparations for unlawful internment.” Who could imagine that T. is something like Easter Island, only without statues?

After Lewis’s report about the family caves, I had to think once more about Helen’s departure. At the time, we took in her disappearance about the same way we accepted those leaving with The Refusal: with regret and the feeling that it is unavoidable. But now the thought occurred to me that maybe Helen decided to visit the cave belonging to her family. She went down into it and was unable to get back out. Or maybe she decided to die there? Did she take refuge there, sensing that her time would come?

I decided however not to tell the Commissioner this past story. They will search out the caves, but maybe they won’t find hers. I was prepared to improve the camouflage if I knew where it was important to do so.

The Commissioner efficiently organized the search effort — searching for what, really? The caves or maybe traces of Anmer? He wanted to avoid sensationalism and “movie effects.” He chose Lewis, Perlat and two of the Auditors with whom he worked most closely. They started at the place the old fisherman had indicated. It was not long before they found a quite smooth, damp hole under a flat stone beautifully overgrown with lichen. Lewis boasted that he had pointed out the stone. Empty bottles lay in the hole, probably belonging to the fisherman. Perlat had thought that the place they were looking for would be above the beach, probably one that not every low tide would expose. Places like that were on the Commissioner’s map. Rocks were above; among them were strong planks of wood brought from the beach. And again, a smooth stone, surrounded by a hump of slightly yellowed moss. Move away the stone? They all hesitated. Even the Commissioner. Later Lewis told me, “I wanted to leave the place. Take a little used path that I noticed in the grass and heather.” Perlat had no scruples. “You’ve never seen a body? Think about those ones tied to the hooks until they die. I saw them.”

After moving the rock away — it went easily, being just balanced there — an entry to a good-sized space, more a basement than a cave. Traces of a fire were on the floor, a lot of litter, strips of sheepskin and human remains wrapped in seaweed. “I see only a massacred face,” said the Commissioner, who slipped in with his flashlight and then quickly crawled out.

“This is a matter for the police from the mainland. A criminal investigation will be needed. But basically we know Anmer’s fate now.”

Viso, whatever you think about this, whatever I know about the remaining loose threads that would make this story more like real life ... this time one particular thread was closed.

30. The Lazaret. Anointing. The Town Hall — Action. Sound signals and “second sight”

How does it all end, Viso? You know as much as I do. This question bothers me more now than before, before this awakening. Walking to the Lazaret, I pass by the Monastery, I see how people work maintaining the old graveyard, the grass surrounded by the stone wall. Some litter must have accumulated here, probably some feathers from the seagulls and gannets, bits of concrete, rags. Large, bald patches where grass should be seeded. I see that several of The Afflicted hover around one of the brothers. I watch these figures moving about somewhat lethargically, but their pottering around continued. This hadn't happened before.

Life in the Lazaret was more intense than usual. Jeani, motionless with someone whom today she'd been unable to waken. Together we listened to the uneven breathing. That is how it was sometimes. Still, Jeani seemed to me to be somehow less overwhelmed by this, something that had always crushed her. I also felt relieved at the thought that this one we did not have to hand over and would not put in the hands of the dissection lab.

I understand, Viso, that science is important, but you first need to convince us that handing over the bodies of The Afflicted truly serves us too; that we, most of all, could know, understand more and find some practical help. You cannot demand that we just believe in it. It's been a long time since anyone “freely agreed to an autopsy,” as the now Commissioner asks. So for a day or two after the moment when breath ceases, a less angry burial takes place, Hiza sings, somebody places a white prayer stone. Jeani's whisper: “That's a Petitioner. See, he has his stone in his hand.”

And it's good. Maybe that was why it all happened?

The Elder Brother came with a small silver bowl of oil. With his finger dipped in the oil he traces a cross on the foreheads of all those today who have not awakened. A female Petitioner opens her eyes momentarily. Her eyes follow the Brother. As if to smile this way. No, not really. I expect this, but cannot watch it. But Jeani says it's so. The Elder Brother confirms it: since he began to anoint the sick, he's convinced that it's true, that they smile.

The white tent, more and more commonly called “The Town Hall,” is not particularly visible during the day. It glows at night, and the light can be seen even at a distance. It's increasingly apparent that something like this is needed by us. One can more easily meet Ma-Doc, Kas-Kas, or Perlat, rather than the Commissioner. The girls from “The Initiative” too (mainly girls, although there is one boy, Elwy, whom everyone calls Sebi-Sebi). “The Initiative” meets in The Town Hall more than actually doing anything. When I say this at the table in Helen's house, Terdu protests: “You don't know, and yet you criticize. Maybe we do discuss ordinary things too much, but we don't know how to debate, so it is hard for us.”

Well, it's true. The Afflicted lack the advantage of reading each other's faces. When Lewis, who can see, joins in, things move faster.

"Take advantage of those who have developed 'second sight,'" I suggest.

But I know that it is not that simple. Second sight works the most effectively when the people involved are very close, those who live in union together. Or in cases where it is specialized — like Lenbe who became astute, aware of everything that affects her "poor ones," how they feel, whether they respond to attempts to waken them, whether feeding irritates or comforts them.

Can this develop in the course of a discussion? At the outset, Brother Benno worked a bit in this direction. Maybe The Initiative might borrow the silver platter from the Monastery?

"Not the platter, but we took the idea and now we have something better: bottles, each with a few pebbles, sand, shells. Whoever has something to say reaches for the bottle and makes a sound, different sounds."

"Terdu makes a lot of sound," says Lewis. "A language of signals develops from this. And democracy doesn't need a second sight so much as it needs an ear for where it is noisy."

And what resulted from all of this? Something concrete now? I am recounting it all, that is, the events of "The Initiative," because it's definitely a topic for a reporter, especially with good photos, not in the style of Kas-Kas, but with details: blonde Terdu in a blue dress, signaling with the bottle, the instrument of democracy among The Afflicted! Write about them, how they try to learn how to conduct meetings, and how the Commissioner slips around to overhear what his Afflicted protégés might come up with.

But "The Initiative" had begun to aggravate me. Terdu can feel it. Maybe others too. Why do I-Habor behave this way, when, after all, it was the passivity of The Afflicted that irritated me, that I saw as the foundation, the compost for The Refusal which kills.

31. What is happening in Helen's house? Elwa and Sebi

Why did The Initiative, now under the eyes of Ma-Doc and the Commissioner, sometimes make me laugh, sometimes irritate me? Probably because I realize that The Initiative destroys our Colony. It practically doesn't exist anymore and would be gone entirely if not for Terdu's Auntie and Kras. Little Heather scampers around the barracks with Lenbe (no doubt there will be canine therapy for the poor ones), while Myrdal began to catch field mice and would be wild were it not for Auntie. He always purrs for her.

We are increasingly alone in Helen's house, Kadab and I. Terdu and Lewis now really live in the Pilgrim's House. And Hiza? Hiza also is departing. She came to tell me. Never for a moment do I doubt Hiza's sincerity. She said that she belongs here to us, she will never forget anything, that she will come when she can, but it came down to the fact that she must go now, before it's too late, and enter more deeply into the life of the Monastery. She will live there as the first from among The Afflicted aspiring to be a member of the Community, and before Terdu comes there as the wife of Lewis. Hiza in the Monastery, wearing the cape of a female monk. It's not news. In reality, she has belonged there for a long time.

And us — Kadab and I? Certainly not yet now.

Terdu, tell me how you love Lewis? Of course, she doesn't reply, that's my thinking about her, not Terdu from T., but in my imagination.

You don't need to shake the bottle, Terdu, noise isn't necessary. I am listening to you closely, I hear you inside myself. You are saying to me: don't worry, Habor. I-Terdu exist without Lewis as well; he has taught me that. I have learned from loving myself. We go upwards side by side. You-Habor try to look after us and you see two figures. But we feel one another as if we were one. I-Terdu, you-Lewis, we belong to one another, each being our own self and that is why we are going off to our own nest. But you-Habor watch from behind, even though you do not see us. If we turn around, Lewis sees you standing there and waves his hand, forgetting about your Loss even when he remembers mine and he says: Habor is still standing at the gate. And he still, as always, says when we are at home, tell what you know, Habor.

And so, Viso, I really can't have regrets about them. "Two hearts ...," and so on. Terdu sings at the table while she scrubs. Good. What does it matter that now the table remains dirty, long since unscrubbed and only wiped now and then. Lenbe always says that she must do it tomorrow. But she doesn't have time, The Initiative has a meeting soon, time can't be skimped with the poor ones ever and especially now when the Commissioner wants to pay her as if she were an Auditor or something.

Kadab willingly brought in a bag of sand. When I am getting ready to scrub, Elwa drops in, the little bells of her dress jingling. Behind her comes her boy, Sebi. They are looking for Terdu, but sit down with me. I warn them that the table is full of sand for scrubbing. Elwa touches it and exclaims, “Oh, Habor, what are you doing this for? I’ll bring you some powder from the cargo, the kind for cleaning.”

“No,” I reply, “the powder will make the table smell differently.”

“OK!” Elwa agrees. “So, we’ll help you with this sand and salt.”

Later they mop the floor too. Then they are late for the meeting of The Initiative. Initiative versus Initiative? Now there’s a conflict for a reporter.

32. A meeting at Helen's house. A conversation with Hiza. Is it The End?

A conversation with Hiza isn't a figment of imagination. I can piece together what Terdu would say if such a conversation came about. But Hiza, despite all her warmth and ease of contact, is just as secretive as Jeani or even more so. Jeani just remains silent about much of her affairs. If it is necessary, she decides to explain something and does so and we understand everything. But I have the impression that in Hiza's case, her inner thoughts and feelings involve matters about which she is silent because even I would not understand them. That's how it is with this entering the Community of the Monastery too. First she said that she had the desire to do it, that she'd made the decision — doubtless the Elder Brother agreed to it. She must have seen how much that moved me. Then, for days and days, nothing more happened.

One day, Elwa asked if she could come and live in the House — there were candidates for her place with Kas-Kas and it would be better for The Initiative whenever she would become, as she termed it, “a more important person.”

“We welcome you,” I said — but for “a little bit.”

It was as if Hiza was waiting for this. “Wonderful! It won't be empty in the House at all when I go there, where I want to be and where they are waiting for me That's right. Elwa will help run the household, and Sebi will follow and stay, if you don't scare him away, Habor.”

On the last evening everyone came a bit early on purpose. Terdu and Lewis stayed after their evening visit to Auntie, and we tied Kras, as usual, on the grass outside the window. The surprise: Jocelyn came with his saxophone. Lenbe pulled her new little drum out of her backpack.

Hiza beamed, you could hear it in her voice. I noticed that her forehead was wrapped as it had been when she'd been wounded but the new headband gleamed gold.

Jocelyn played quite a while alone. Then Hiza took up the dialog. Lewis searched for chords on the guitar. In the end we all sang, those who could sing, and those like me who don't sing well.

Very late, after everyone had departed, I stayed at the table by myself, happy that it was so clean. Then Hiza came back; we remained quiet for a little bit, with all our former ease.

Hiza to me-Habor: “Why my strong connection with the Monastery? Why now? It's easier to explain it now than show you why. Now, because I see that soon our separateness from the world as The Afflicted will disappear. It won't be the cargo that will flood in and change everything. There, in Euroland, people lived through something too. It's not just about our disappearance. Benno tried to tell us about changes there, but they didn't interest us much. In general, people are egocentric and we, The Afflicted, following the path of least resistance, consider our egoism justified. The Loss becomes an empty nucleus, a black hole around which everything has to revolve. I fear my own egoism, I also want to cut off the temptation of return to the old place. And return would be possible because I can still sing. Yes, Habor, the confrontation

is approaching. The Commissioner is a deceptively positive signal; other powers in Euroland surely won't have such empathy. The Monastery is an asylum for me."

"Hizo, do you think that you can rely on the Monastery community? Really? But maybe that Community owes its entire chance to us, The Afflicted, creating a defensive bastion around it? Benno could not have obtained the Commissioner for the Monastery itself and a handful of pious fishermen and pilgrims. Do you remember the movie "The Mission?" Maybe we are destined to become a more successful version of people made more happy ... ?"

After a longer while thinking, Hiza said: "I don't know, but this is what I think. Generally speaking, I don't like to over-philosophize things. What drew me to the Monastery continues to do so. Some reasons for my taking the decisive step now may be weak, but I also hurry because I am getting older, nearly forty. Something in me says, 'When?' and urges me: 'Don't wait.'

This has some connection with The Loss, with how it began. Habor, I will tell you something that I've not told anyone, only the Elder Brother who had to hear this too. He was alarmed, but did not waver in his willingness to accept me.

I don't know how it was for you, Habor. For me, The Loss began the very same night when it came to me, swept over me for a moment, the awareness that there is something, a powerful music that cannot be sung, that cannot be heard internally like song, but close by, and now opening. Habor, I long for this. I do not reject ordinary life and I want to sing in my own way, but I feel a longing. I need the Monastery in order to experience this longing safely. And to study as well, to learn how to distinguish this longing from the feeling of happiness of longing for its source. Together with our entire bunch of ordinary people, awkward and half-deaf, verse after verse Habor, don't be afraid, I-Hiza know that living in the Monastery is no different from any barrack of The Afflicted or ward in the Lazaret where half the residents escape through sleep and sometimes in anger. But there, in the Monastery, something guides me to the source and I guide others a little."

Why am I writing what Hiza said? Why do I want to be a witness to something so private? I cannot get over asking Hiza, or it doesn't add up. The fate of this part of the text will remain suspended. Maybe Hiza will say "yes" when she reads other parts of our correspondence and sees that it is an important completion.

And then there's our correspondence. Will you make use of it? And how?

Now that Euroland is closer, it's obviously not enough that the Commissioner, an acquaintance of Brother Benno, just listens to how The Afflicted breathe. We need a reporter — someone to reveal our ordinary humanity. That sounds melodramatic, contrary to my intent. Let me put it another way: it's easier to squash ants on a path when you don't see them. They aren't seen because they don't sing in a voice we can hear. What if they had names we knew? Like the philosophical fable by Stefan Themerson, "Professor Mmaa's Lecture," where a society of termites learns about humans?

Viso, in your writing, and to some degree thanks to me, you can hint: “Pay more attention to The Afflicted. Be careful with this sanctuary.”

I myself must decide whether to write to you up to the last moment, or to break off now — soon — because it’s not possible to finish.

END — ENDURE?

Epilog

From Habor's notebooks. The beginning, without the further parts.— TL

Good weather today in the afternoon, only distant clouds. We walk out to look at the bay, “where Ireland is not visible.” We’ve not been there for a long time. The cross of the Petitioners remains white against the background of the sky. On the prayer stones at its foot someone has placed a crown of heather with colorful ribbons. The sun is already very low, darkness is coming. We gaze a long time at the incoming waves, we listen to the rush and rippling on the stones. Both of us see that one of the still distant waves brings, instead of a furl of foam, a row of dolphin flukes that disappears and then reappears closer, more clearly.

Suddenly, with great strength, a painful and sweet longing envelops us. We turn away from the view and toward one another. Supporting ourselves with our embrace we walk upward toward the lighted windows of the Lazaret. There people await who must be roused and fed for the evening. Today Jocelyn and the drummers from a distance help with their playing, the sound wafting in through the open windows.

Part 5.

EDITOR'S NOTES AND APPENDICES

I-Terlew am organizing Habor's notes, her letters to Viso. I found them in the attic of Helen's house, together with an old computer stored under a bed. Packets were tied up with pieces of fishermen's netting. One packet contained a few printouts, fairly well preserved, although the paper is brittle. Habor's handwritten notebooks were in better shape, only two on top had been chewed by mice, probably recently, because there was once a cat in the house who was a good mouser.

Uncle Sebi helped me get the old computer going. We were able to open almost all the files. I compared them with what is in the notebooks. The notebooks contain more, I'm now convinced of that. Maybe I will still discover something more and add it before a book appears. This is a difficult task. My uncle does what he can to help me; my father, Lewis, could do more but he really has no time, since he takes care of the entire island, meaning everyone who settled here, or returned, like the fishermen and the pilgrims.

My father says: ask your mother, she knows everything the best. But mama weeps when I talk about the notebooks and read her a little, particularly the passages about her and how it was with her parents. I tell her: I'm practically grown up now and someday I will be a historian. This is my first project, and I strive to make it scientific, meaning useful for scholars. I cannot overlook anything, because then it would perish and scholars would not be able to understand how it was. So I omit nothing, neither what is boring or nor what is improper. People can pass over the names if they don't like it that their parents' names appear in the book.

I am and will always be Terlew. I am working on this project at age 15 and in the 40th year since the Event, according to the calculation of time in Habor's notes.

FROM HAVOR'S NOTEBOOKS

These pages were not — probably not — letters to Viso. Maybe Havor wrote them for herself, or maybe for someone else, perhaps for me, for Terlew, although I had not been born yet. I was expected, however; I've realized that from reading about my parents. Someone was expected, someone who would have the right to the name "Terlew."

An expectation like that is strange. One has to be careful with it because perhaps someone might come for that name who is completely different than they think. I-Terlew (also called Terlu), am different. What did they think about this someone, meaning about me? Actually, I don't want to know. That would complicate my being myself. Forgive me, but that's the most important to me: to be myself.

—TL

The wedding of Terdu and Lewis. Terdu has her dreamed-of white dress with a multitude of little glass bells on it. Auntie is in a wheelchair, Terdu embraces her knee, crying and forgetting about her festive dress and the ceremony which must begin now.

Kadab (begged by me) enters in his role to bring Terdu to the chapel where the brothers wait with Lewis, no doubt pale and tense. But Terdu first hugs and kisses Kadab, then me and Jeani. The two figures disappear through the doorway and the rest of us follow behind them.

Later everything for me is mingled with the melody of Jocelyn's saxophone. The sound doesn't cease, but grows quiet when we need to hear the voices of the young pair, their mutual promises, the blessing upon them by the Elder Brother, the words of the prose poem "Desiderata" recited by Brother Benno as he draped Terdu and Lewis with the gray-brown cape of the monks. Then Hiza sings a song for them.

In the portico the first to extend congratulations are Lenbe and Perlat. Lenbe in a pink dress, also with bells, and Perlat with a fishing rod as a wedding gift. Then in the refectory Terdu serves everyone the first mug of tea and passes around some sweet baked loaf. This was intended as a sign: Lewis's wife has become the daughter of the monastery. In gratitude for Terdu, all the brothers offered some small remembrance to Lewis, filling up a little basket designated for gifts. Candies, flowers, little packages, and napkins. On top, Jocelyn placed a new saxophone and Brother Benno a book of the Monastery rules.

Everything came to an end around twilight. Together we accompanied them to their house on the hill. There a messenger appeared with a large basket of flowers from the Commissioner and Dr. Beauforêt, both of whom were away on the mainland.

Finally, one more thing. Over the fireplace was a picture hung personally by Kas-Kas which I hope still remains there.

The following text comes from a separate notebook with a marbled cover. It is not a letter from Habor to Viso, but something like an introduction to memoirs or a book. My opinion is that it fits more here at the end when you know all the characters. — TL

---RECOLLECTION---

I'm noting down some of our recollections. Some are mine (Habor), others semi-audible, arising in my imagination, triggered by words used by others' speaking. That is how a kind of psychic aerobics occurs: someone's words spark something from memory, someone else exercises with it in order to imagine the description the way the words suggest. If someone afflicted by The Loss does not exercise the imagination, then the imagination weakens as well (I must have written about this somewhere before, but it's important here, and should not be forgotten). I will share several of these recollections.

Lenbe: I once had a long skirt with wide vertical stripes. Each was made up of little, tiny flowers, violets and colorful pansies. We are supposed to recollect what we saw when we could see. So, I remember when I was wearing this skirt. When I ironed it, I could see even narrower white stripes between each of the larger ones and the little black centers of the blue and violet flowers. I can't help but recall how it was that I put on that beautiful skirt with a white blouse and then walked out along a path in a wheat field. I can see bits of grass and yellow flowers along the path and such little white ones, and alongside barley with tassels. There's no such grass here or ears of grain; I can only remember them, not because I don't see them, but because of The Loss. None of that is here, nothing is here except heather and stones.

Hiza: When I sang in the church, I saw the faces of people, in detail, how they smile, how they blink their eyes, close them or look at me. In the theater you see much less, it was more like it is now. Figures. But the movement of the figures conveyed more than.

And something more — I remember seeing myself in the mirror. With all the details, my skin, the gleam of make-up, eyes with details, made up, different little strokes, spots. The effect of my work visualizing and which I evaluate critically. I see, not only know, that it is there.

Lenbe: I also tinted my brows, because I had ... I have brows that are too light. That was important for me, even when I was only going out to clean.

Olwer: Yes, Hizo, I also remember best seeing my own face, conversing in a way that one knows, that is, sees what one says, what the face of the other person registers. Now I would not be able to make friends with someone new.

I am not able to describe this, but I know how the face changes, I remember how that was.

I-Habor am writing down my own little recollections: I remember most in the form of knowledge, not as images. I know from long experience that leaves flutter on the branches of trees, and are not a green fog. The Loss works this way, at least in my case, so that it ought to be called "losing" rather than "loss." I am no longer able to check by looking, I have to try a different way. I reach out for the branch and finger the leaves with my hands. But it's true, I can't do this with my face, touching my own or someone else's face doesn't give me useful information the way a leaf does.

It seems to me that I heard recollections of other people. Olwer! It was she who said the most important thing: that The Loss pushes one into loneliness that deepens because of the lack of courage for contact. Nothing replaces this courage, no signs of recognition. Those say only that

“someone” is approaching, no indication with what, no indication of some signal of acceptance. That a smile does not function in our world is awful and depressing. Once one had only to say something and a smile was enough.

One can have a smile in one’s voice (like Hiza!).

And another thing: don’t give up the habit of smiling, because without it our faces will be dead to those who are not afflicted, not knowing our signs. Whom to ask? Is it time now? How to ask, so that it doesn’t come out artificially, so that the person questioned doesn’t think I demand separate confirmation. My fear is based on recollections from before I was afflicted by The Loss. I met blind people with frozen faces, as if they’d been frightened. Conversation alone was not always enough to get close to someone.

These are all the “recollections” that I found. A pity that there were not more, because I think that they are interesting. My mother didn’t want to tell me what she herself remembers. Or maybe she doesn’t remember: “It’s not possible to recount anything. Only what started it all. That comes back to me. But before that only what I felt and not what I saw for sure.”

That affected me so that now I try to remember what I see. Differently than before that talk with my mother.

In between the notebooks I found a thick, sealed envelope. I wondered whether I could open it. Maybe it would be Habor’s testament that had not been found? But it turned out to be something different, but still very important. You have the right to read it although I’d prefer not to open the envelope, or seal it up again. But I do understand more now.

—Terlew (here I want to write my full first name again)

MYTHS ABOUT THE LOSS

What Kas-Kas said:

It happened this way. One day at dawn heavy hail clouds (which seldom happen) stretched out over the city and its environs. They hadn't been forecast in the weather report. The clouds appeared out of nowhere, moving slowly until they covered an enormous expanse of the sky. The airport personnel must have been concerned, they put out an alert and soon closed the airport. Aside from that, few noticed the unusually bad weather. It was the peak of the summer season when dawn comes very early, shortly after 3 am. At the first light hail poured down without being preceded by rain. It beat hard against all metal, the roofs, and buildings. It passed quickly leaving the ground strewn with translucent, iridescent bits of hail. A beautiful sight. The pounding of the hail woke me up and I rushed out of the house to photograph. Valuable stones everywhere, I thought. I began to gather them up into a plastic bag, when I noticed that some of the hailstones didn't melt. They were hard, but warm to the touch, like opals that I sometimes wear around my neck to return their gleam. These were like opals too, each with its own inner fire. I took many photos with my old camera, but none of them turned out. All were overexposed. Water from the melting hail dripped from the bag. I laid out the "opals" on the table and looked at them for a long time. Soon, however, they dried and their fire disappeared. All that remained was an opalizing mist. Everything around me was somehow befogged. I didn't see the pictures on the wall clearly. Wherever I looked, little flickers of fire danced, even beneath my eyelids. Fear gripped me — what had those clouds been, what was that hail? We'd never been warned in advance about something like this.

What Kubat said:

The DJ in our club was fantastic at keeping up the atmosphere, and it was just how it ought to be, although Tad hadn't come. I didn't want to go anywhere. I sat, slowly drinking my beer, when the lights went out. We unplugged all the blinking lights that went with the music. It went off too. "A short," I thought. I looked out the window to check if it was dark everywhere. I heard noise, the banging of the rain against the sill. Coming down from above were spark-like little lights, little flames — yellow, red, green and even violet. Soon it was light, dawn, but the sparks were quite strong. But after them was fog in which I could not see further. It wasn't good to look, but I couldn't break away until I fell asleep. It was hypnotic, took away one's strength. Burned me up. That's why my Loss is so great. But I also know something that you don't know. The Loss? It happened by accident because we (I, for example) were too weak. We were bound to get something. It was already in me, but I did not collapse. Tadol, did that Tadol then not help with anything? I got it — barely, barely, but not him. Better to let him play. And let Hiza sing.

What Hiza said:

Do I have to talk about this? I feel that something bad will come from it. Is this necessary? I was with a particular person at the time. I woke up, but he said, "Close the curtain, it's too bright." It was almost dawn. I got up and looked out in the distance. We lived nearly at the top of a high rise at the time. I saw how a very dark cloud was moving toward us, like a cluster of smoke filled

with sparks at its lower edge. First I heard noise, then music as if a low buzzing chorus. I was transfixed by the view and the sound which was followed by the sparks. My partner called me to come, but I continued to stand there until he grabbed me and pulled me with him, breaking the spell. We lay in this strange light, I cried until he got fearful too. Hail mixed with sparks rained down. I wanted to look at it, but he wouldn't let me. Wrapped in blankets, we fled to the elevator and went down. From the hall I saw sparks beating into the grass, I felt them in myself, their buzzing quieter and quieter.

What Lenbe said:

Lenbe went to work in the morning — cleaning a house which was empty after everyone had gone to work. She came from a distant district and hurried because on this day she had several more houses to do. She began with an attempt to feed the cat whom she was friendly with. The cat acted strangely somehow. He didn't want to eat, made a mess outside his litter box, and hid from Lenbe in the darkest corner. She began by cleaning the dirty spot and the litter box itself. In the litter that she had to change she saw a large glass pendant in the shape of a teardrop. She rinsed it under the faucet and noticed an inner wisp, blinking red — now weaker, now stronger. She didn't have any pendants at all, and this one was beautiful. "They lost it in the litter box," Lenbe thought and she placed the little jewel on a tray in the kitchen. "They will be happy to find it." Before she left, she took it in her hand one more time. The little wisp brightened up again. "Something peculiar," she thought and rinsed her hands once more under the faucet in order to cool them. She felt a huge tiredness and something like fear without knowing why. She left the little wisp in its glass teardrop on the table, but continued to have the impression that it was on her.

When asked if that was all, Lenbe said, "I remember one more strange thing. It was as if somehow sweet. I felt sweetness, though I never put it in my mouth — lick something from a cat's litter box! But first I thought about this little piece of "jewelry," and then a piece of candy. Ice candy — there was something like that long ago when I was a little girl."

What Terdu said:

"This is supposed to help? That I say something about something I don't want to think about, even though now I dream it, but less often. And sometimes the dream seems frightening to me. When I feel pain, my husband is able to dispel it. I am sorry, but probably that is all I can say, maybe it's enough."

That evening, although it was late, I went home because I didn't want to be with them, meaning my parents. I went to the park, but it was empty. Around that gay bar there you could hear nice music. Then the wind picked up and rain began. So I thought that I would return. I saw the light and thought that it came from the bar which had different attractions and fireworks. Then I saw the sparks in the grass and the parkway. Little by little, they went out, although the rain had stopped. That made me sad, funny — right? I gathered up a few and put them in my beret, not caring that it was wet on the outside. When I took these flickering bits in my hand, they began to glow brighter. I didn't think about what they are, only I was more and more sorry that they were all dying out.

When I got into the house with my beret full of those wisps, mama was still awake. The usual routine began ... I didn't say anything, but she snatched my beret from my hand: "What have you got there?" When she tugged on the beret, the wisps burned more brightly. She threw the beret

on the floor, the wisps scattered across the carpet. It looked like a fire. At the sound of mama and me shrieking, my dad burst in and began to stamp out the little flames with his shoes, but they escaped into the air and disappeared as if with a crackle. And I heard it, but only me; they didn't hear the tiny squeak, like a mouse. Afterward, not right away, our Loss began. Do you have to have me talk about that too? Enough? Thank you.

Terdu to Dani:

I'll say something more — something that might really help others who are Afflicted and people in general. I constantly think about this, the regret over The Loss I felt, not to those wisps in my beret, but to my parents, to my father the most: why did he stamp them out that way? Did he really think that the best carpet would burn? Did he want to crush with his feet what I brought in? My wisps What would have happened with these wisps if I'd gone somewhere else and not come home? Maybe I should have run away? Somewhere where I could have kept them But there was no place like that. Now I know that if I find something and I bring it home, my husband won't take it away from me, only admire it. And I believe that because of that nothing bad will happen. It would be good if

I hug you all and send kisses,
Your Ter-ter

What Perlat said:

I can recount precisely how it was for me. Who could forget how something took away the life that he once had? That evening I was fishing with my little tent in a place that I know is good for fish, fairly close to town.

The wind came up and it rained, so I sheltered in the little tent, lacing up the entry. It didn't have a window opening so I didn't see anything, but I could hear how the rain beat down and then something like hail. I peeked out and bolt after bolt of lightning flashed over the lake, but without thunder. There was a strong smell — not only reeds, but also something technical like when a transformer stinks. Obviously, there was no current, just overheated insulation. I felt something like that in the air, in the breeze off the water.

When it quieted down, I looked into the bucket where I saved the fish I had caught, four big ones and one smaller one. When I was near the bucket, something struck it, a spawn or fish egg, only bigger. The fish quivered, the little one had already gone, even though it was in water. Then I did something foolish, I'm ashamed to say. Instead of pouring out this strange thing along with the fish back into the water just to be safe, foolish me, I looked and looked. In my hands the spawn clarified like fireflies only redder. When I saw that all the fish were dead, I should have thrown them all out and the bucket too, but out of curiosity — as if I were an inquisitive person — I wrapped up one little flame embedded in something soft, in a leaf and in paper in order to examine it at home, show it. Then, well, in the bar I looked at it with friends until by the time we were going for the second round, it disappeared from the leaf.

So now you know, the rest went the same way as it did for everyone. I can still see not too badly, probably because I threw out those fish and picked up only one little flame. And it was a good idea to wrap the thing like a still, live fish and take it home that way. I know that nothing will return my former eyes as they were, but I'd like to know what happened. Surely, I have the right to ask? Me, too, not the Commissioner alone.

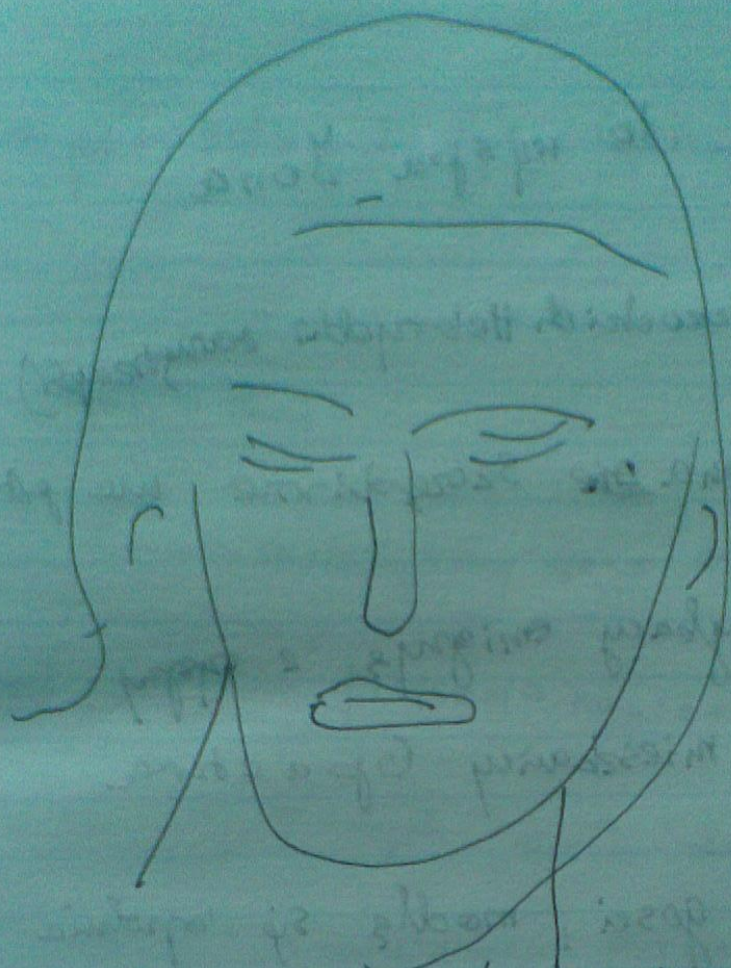
Author's Note:

I have to admit — I am Habor; but she is not me. Our bond is greater than what usually links an author with a character. That is bad for me and for her, but I cannot change it.

Tyflonia is the island Iona (in the archipelago of the Scottish Inner Hebrides), but Sacred Iona happily is not Tyflonia. Fishermen emigrate from the island of Iona because they want to; residents of the Monastery accept guests, pray in common and discuss topics like the European Union. The community engages in hospice work and in Christian *aggiornamento*.

Thank you for the possibility of visiting Iona, and in particular for the ecumenical kindness of Ian Frazer, a member of the Community.

Halina Bortnowska



Muszę przyznać - to ja jestem
Habor; ale ona nie jest mną.

Łączy mnie z nią ściślejsza więź
niż łączy autor z postacią.

To źle dla mnie i dla niej,