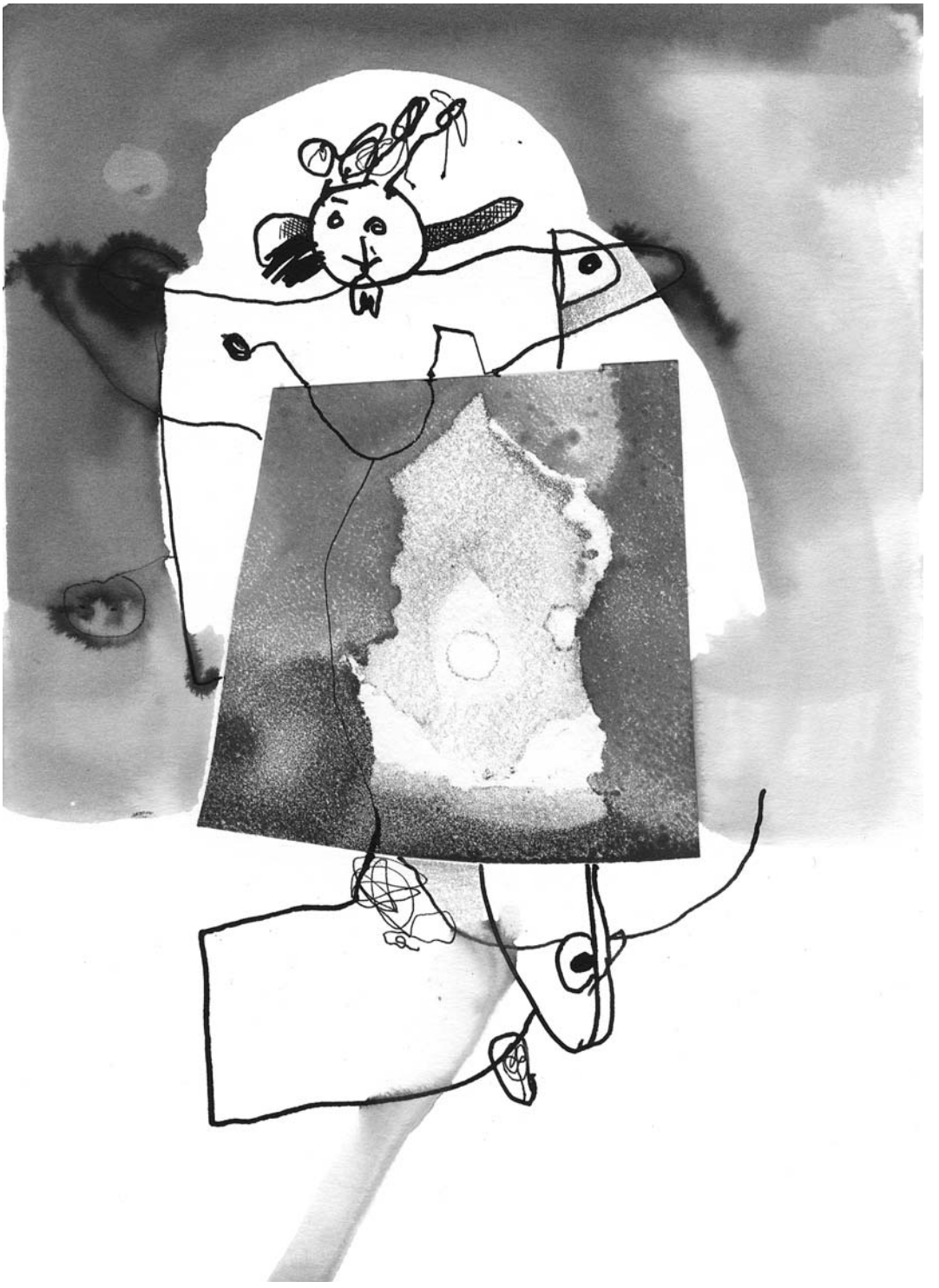
# NO WALTZ AT THE END OF THIS STORY EITHER



We do not give gestures the importance they have. A serious mistake, sometimes, since our entire fortune can consist of a gesture. Not a coin, or even a word, but a gesture.

What if I told you that the trace she left in you is not a memorable phrase, is not a lovely stroll with bourgeois airs that you took on a day that shone like the water in the shallows of a river on the back of a trout under the sun, it neither smiles nor weeps, its memory inspires in you behavior neither despicable nor commendable. What if I told you that the only trace she left in you was a gesture. Something that you learned from her and do unknowingly even today, after so many years have passed, a gesture that you make in sympathy with her, because you were near her and were one with her, a gesture that you copied from her unintentionally, and that you repeat without realizing it. A simple motion of hers that you perpetuate unknowingly. She infected you with it and through you, other girls will learn it, on and on, world without end.

Maybe that's all you are: the live wire that transmits the gesture of a person who has disappeared, the slender tube of the still that carries the essence of the gesture from one melting pot to another.

I'm not talking about heroic feats, nor about gestures that change the course of history; the ones I have in mind are not the thumbs up or thumbs down of a Roman emperor.

One thing is for sure: we do not give gestures the importance they have. We do not understand the transcendence of the nails bitten to the quick of the person we made suffer. We do not discern the true measure of the shattered dreams in the eyes, now cast down, of the young girl we disappointed.

Not only is the rolling gait of the drunkard who passes beneath the streetlamp on the main street of town and who will already have disappeared into the darkness before this sentence is finished a portent of a probable and imminent fall; not only is the turkey-proud bearing of the noblewoman of a certain age who cools herself with a paper fan and sticks her nose in the air conceitedly a sign of disdain for her servant

boy, a sign of the gestural alphabet between oppressor and oppressed; not only is the smile of the mother who offers her hand and lap to her toddler a definitive sign; it is not only a question of the barman's excessive rageful slap that twangs the bottle on the wooden table and the very roots of the bar and his own vocal cords. Let us bring to song and word the massaging gesture with which our hands ease the ache that our childhood bed left in our side, the graceful and dancing shrug of the shoulder that remains from a time when we affected such postures to beguile the girl we loved. If this story is to have any value, it must contain a dance, a waltz, it must have within it a composition to be danced in open, empty parks; remind me of this please if, when it reaches its end, I have not brought a dance to these lines.

For this is the story of a gesture. An adopted gesture, a learned, unconscious, involuntary, desired gesture, the story of a gesture that denies all description.

The street smelled of cinnamon. Not of ground cinnamon, but of stick cinnamon. It's different.

Very different.

Ground cinnamon carries within it an invitation to sweetness, the opportunity for the wind to scatter its dust, the threat of powder up your nose. Ground cinnamon brings to mind other types of powders, other sands, fine subtle desert veils lifted and borne by the wind. Not so the smell of cinnamon sticks.

Stick cinnamon brings tension to mind, bridges, muscles taut and ready to work, the child who gathers winter kindling every Sunday, issues yet to be resolved – and hence, yet to be stirred up. Tools standing at attention, too dry and too sere, perhaps; inflexible, but alive nonetheless.

It might have been because of the spice shop that brought essences and aromas from Turkey, but Chocimska Street smelled of cinnamon. If I'm going to begin at all, I must begin with this, now that I've decided that this story deserves to be told.

On Chocimska Street the boy who sold the *Warsaw Courier* was always on the corner; Minkiewicz was the milliner, Kotkowski had the bakery, and then, then there was the Turkish spice shop, where you

closed your eyes to breathe it in and who knew what other shops and doorways there were down to the end of the street. For my part, I limited my greetings to these three: bought my paper from the *Courier* boy whose name I didn't even know, waved hello from afar to the hatter Minkiewicz in his vest and with his measuring tape around his neck, and asked after the mischievous daughters of Mrs. Kotkowski.

The inflexibility of cinnamon sticks pervaded the street the first time I saw her. When we crossed paths, my gaze remained fixed on her. She walked quickly, holding onto her hat with one hand. I didn't release her face from the reins of my gaze. I tried to catch her eye, hey honey, hey, look this way, give me this small gift and today I will be happy. Her pupils bit on my lure, but instead of turning her head toward me, she turned to the right, resting her gaze finally on the muffins in Kotkowski's bakery, which happened to be across the street from her. This was the gesture she chose. But it wouldn't take much. Although she may not have realized that my lure was a lure, she was mine from that moment on.

We crossed paths often after that. I stared at her without trying to hide it, without stopping walking, holding her in the full ellipse of my gaze by turning my head to the left as I walked up the street along the sidewalk, to the left and further to the left, until I could no longer see what was behind me even out of the corner of my eye and had no choice but to look straight ahead again. What a shame not to be able to turn my head three hundred and sixty degrees, I thought at such times, deploring the short and limited range of my vision. And as soon as I turned my head to the left, she, coming down the street, turned hers to the right, toward Kotkowski's bakery across the street, toward Minkiewicz's hat shop or whatever happened to be there, as if she were looking not at herself and my reflection in the shop window, but at hats and muffins. She was naive enough to think I would believe it.

How many days were we to repeat that game of the heads? My gaze seeking her to the left up the street, hers always to the right, escaping my lure by looking at a shop window down the street.

After about three months, I approached her. She was looking into the hat shop window that day.

"Minkiewicz's hats must be made of cinnamon, don't you think?"

For the first time, her glance bit down completely on the lure of my gaze. She didn't pretend not to understand. She didn't bother to say that the cinnamon came from the Turkish spice shop. She gave me the gift of her gaze, neatly wrapped in the smell of cinnamon sticks.

Her name was Alma and she was a page-turner at the opera. She turned the pages of the scores for the pianist so that he wouldn't have to lift his fingers from the keys. She didn't answer when I asked her if that was a real job. Besides, it seemed more ridiculous to her that I wanted to be a writer. Did I think that to be a writer it was enough to get drunk in the Adria cabaret and drink coffee at the Zodiac café? But all the same, that was the day we first walked together along the banks of the Vistula, and my head kept turning to the left to watch her – she liked to walk on my left, had to – and her head kept turning to the right, but now no longer to look at cinnamon hats or Panama-style muffins, because now she was looking at me. I placed myself on her right, I replaced the hat shop and the muffins in her eyes, I became the walking hat that received her kisses in the darkest nook of the street. I knew I shouldn't allow myself to be so mushy, but I was in love, what else could I do?

Her gesture was the same, that is, but now she was turning to look at me, now we walked along together in the same direction.

One Sunday, we left Warsaw for the countryside, planning to picnic in a meadow. When we spread out the blanket, we noticed some bumps moving in the damp grass, twisting under the cloth. Slimy snails.

We marveled at the beauty of their spiral shells. Then she rubbed together her long white fingers – the fingers of a page-turner, whether or not that was a real job – in a way that would have made a snap were it not for the sticky mucous left by the snails. She brought her fingers to her face to smell the slime. She wrinkled her nose and my urgency increased; suddenly my pants felt too tight.

The next day, she took me to a practice room at the opera with a surprising boldness that increased my desire for her. A wooden music stand fell to the ground as we undressed each other. When she put her hand down my pants, my mind went blank. She easily guessed what had

happened since she heard my gasp and felt my wetness at the cuff of her blouse. The skin at her wrist was also hot and wet. Her dress was so thin it seemed like paper. She smiled at me, sweetly.

"You're faster than snails."

Then she brought her fingers to her nose, and as she was smelling my semen curiously, she smiled, rubbing her fingers together so that they would have snapped were it not for the slime, my cum.

Only a gesture, but memorable.

Although I hadn't forgotten my dreams of becoming a writer, I took a job as an office worker for a large carpentry company.

When I showed Alma my first story, she thought it was too complicated and accused me of never taking her dancing. She had an amazing ability to hop from one topic to another, the ability to turn pages quickly. That was her job, of course: elegantly turning the pages of scores.

"On New Year's Day," I told her. As I fed the pages of my first story into the fire in the kitchen at home, however, it occurred to me that I didn't know how to dance.

While the notebook of my stories and attempts at stories burned, my mother came into the kitchen.

"What are you burning?" she said.

Straw, I said to myself. But that wasn't what I said aloud.

"Will you teach me to dance, Mom?"

My mother tried, but didn't succeed. Dancing at home in the kitchen wasn't anything like dancing at the Zodiac café on New Year's Day. You could even say they were opposite ways of dancing.

Alma told me we had to move more, but I couldn't move beyond the borders of the kitchen even though there was plenty of open space on the giant dance floor of the Zodiac café. I was a kitchen dancer so to speak, not a ballroom dancer at all.

At work our boss was a real asshole.

He had a room on one side to himself, but he always left his jacket in the small room where the rest of us worked – the older man Slowacki, who did the accounting, young Jozef, who ran all sorts of errands

and who was my age, and myself – because he had placed a coat stand there for the purpose. He had more than enough room in his own office for the vertical stand if he had wanted to put it there, but no: he put the coat stand in our room and that's where he hung his jacket. As I realized later, the coat stand was a flagpole raised over a newly conquered land and the jacket he hung on that mast was his flag. Using it as an excuse, the boss could come into our room at any time to inspect our work and spy on our disposition, to see if we were carrying out his orders honestly and correctly.

"Is he in?" Mr. Slowacki would ask under his breath when he arrived late. Even though he was in his sixties, he was still afraid of the boss.

It was amazing how afraid Mr. Slowacki was of the boss. He had fought with General Haller in 1919 in the battle against the Russian Bolsheviks, but there it was: he was afraid. He had been decorated in the war, but that didn't earn him any respect. The medal didn't give him the nerve to stand up to the boss. Being able to survive in a war doesn't necessarily mean that you can survive outside of a war.

But I was talking about the coat stand.

In fact, it was not actually necessary for the boss to be in our room. His irritating jacket was the best possible substitute for his presence. The vertical stand was the symbol of his power, a pointed reminder to work quickly and carefully. Although I had no inkling of it at the time, within a year I would make the acquaintance of more coat stands than I ever wanted.

I was thinking about what Mr. Slowacki had said about the war.

The war was a place where gunpowder and yeast were confused, he said. A time when jails became granaries and granaries, jails.

"Once when we were waiting for gunpowder, they sent us twenty bags. When we opened the bags and started loading the cannons, we realized they were full of yeast, they had sent us the wrong shipment. They must have sent our gunpowder to an industrial bakery, we thought."

Just then the boss came in to hang his long jacket on the coat stand. Slowacki stopped talking about the war and opened his book of accounts, running his index finger over the columns of numbers.

When we learned that Germany had invaded Poland, our hearts were pierced to the core by the spiked point of the coat stand upon which Germany hung its hat and black raincoat.

When I went home, I found my mother by the window, weeping, a letter in her hands.

You didn't have to be a genius to figure out what the letter said.

"Oh, my son, my son!"

That's not what the letter said, of course.

It seemed my country needed me and I was excused from work. On the day I left, the boss handed me an envelope full of money.

"Poland needs you. Good luck, son," he said.

Even coat stands have a heart, I thought. Of course, I wouldn't have thought that if I had known then what my mother would say when she opened the boss' envelope.

"This is exactly the price of a coffin! Oh, my son, my son!"

Mr. Slowacki also had something to say to me: "if I weren't so old."

That's all. If I weren't so old. Then he brought his finger to the corner of his eye, hoping for once to wet in the inkpot of his eye that finger that was blackened from so much accounting. He couldn't and, because his eyes refused to reflect the extent of his inner sadness, he became more distressed. He looked at his dry finger for a long time, with the look of a fisherman who has got the lure in his finger, pained, but more than that, shamed.

Jozef didn't say anything. He had been missing from home since the night before.

Jozef's mother was clever: she went down to the town hall first thing in the morning to notify the soldiers before they went looking for him that her son was missing and she didn't know where he was.

"Problems, always problems," the town secretary grumbled, but he gave the message to the sergeant in charge of the soldiers' roll.

"You know perfectly well where your son is!"

"I just told you I don't! We're all worried about him at home!"

Jozef wasn't the only one of military age missing from home, not by a long shot.

Taking pity on her, the town secretary offered Jozef's mother a chair.

"Desertion is severely punished, ma'am. Did you know that?"

They seized Jozef a few kilometers from town, hidden in a cart pulled by horses, surrounded by milk churns.

"If he had hidden himself in a manure cart they wouldn't have caught him so quickly," said my mother.

"That's where I am, up to my neck in shit. And they found me anyway."

My mother started crying again.

I didn't want to say goodbye to Alma, but she surprised me at the station.

"We'll be together again soon, honey."

"Yes," I sighed, without faith.

She gave me a stick of cinnamon.

"To put in your hat."

"Or behind my ear, like carpenters do with a pencil, huh?"

"Yes, like that, behind your ear."

I felt a lump in my throat. The train started whistling. Alma followed the train, with her white umbrella – that's a lie, she wasn't carrying a white umbrella, but how lovely it would have been if it had happened like that – turning her head toward the train, turning to the right, until the platform dropped away at her feet.

"I'll write to you every day!"

"Don't worry, you're the rear guard!" they told us the first day. But within a few short weeks, the rear guard became the front line. Our generals were terrible at chess. I was lucky, though: I caught a bad case of pneumonia. As soon as I got better, I stole away from the hospital. While I was on the run, Alma and I exchanged several letters. When I had to bring myself to pleasure, I would gather my sticky semen on my fingers and bring it to my nose like she did, thinking that this finger-snapping gesture would ignite my memory of Alma. When we met again, it had been a year since we had last seen each other.

"I have to tell you something. I've met someone else."

A German. If I wanted, we could go for a walk. A walk. What good is a walk compared to a German? Put them next to each other, set them on a scale: a German, a walk. Do they balance by any chance? Does the walk slow the drop of the tray? Does the scale leave any doubt? Does it hesitate at all? Hah! The German wins easily. The weight of the German bears down like lead, and the tray on the side of the walk rises up, the loser. It rises up but nevertheless the walk is the loser: a type of poetic justice. That scant and worthless justice, invented by intellectuals with scrawny arms to absolve them of their hatred for the strong tattooed arms of the sailor who stole away their girlfriends. Poetic justice, that's what they call it.

A walk was too little: I asked her for a weekend. Next to a German, a weekend wasn't much either. But at least it was more than a walk.

"The war isn't over… Where will we go? We can't leave Warsaw."

I would choose where. We would go some place that had been destroyed. "To the bottom of my heart," I could have said, but I didn't want to be so corny.

"Don't worry, no one will see us."

I took her on my bicycle to a quarry that had been abandoned by the Germans because it was of little interest. "It must be worth something to know the ways of snails," I said to her. But she didn't answer me. She didn't smile. Knowing that the hope of love begins in complicity, she declined to bestow that complicity on me. Maybe she didn't remember about the snails, or was trying not to remember.

But even so, she told me she loved me after we made love. Just as she said it was the last time. But it wasn't the last time. A little later the desire rose in us anew and we made love again.

"I have to get back to Warsaw."

"What did you tell him?"

"Hans?"

Fucking hell. Hans, I thought. On top of everything else, he had to be called Hans. From now on, will I have to hate everyone named Hans? German wife-stealers and gifted string quartet composers alike? Humble coffee shop waiters and noble house painters, did I have to hate them solely for the sin of having the name Hans?

"I told him I had to visit a sick aunt."

Sick aunts. They are worth more than walks and weekends! They are even worth more than Germans. Today we inaugurate the monument to the Unknown Aunt, and ha-hah! I myself would unveil that piece of marble. I was thinking more and more like a writer, you see.

I picked up the bicycle: it was time to go back to town. When we arrived opposite a destroyed bridge, I made Alma get off the bike. Then I threw it into the river.

"What on earth are you doing?"

"It's not far, we'll walk along the railroad tracks. Didn't you ever do that when you were a kid, walk on the rails?"

"No."

"You must at least remember how you came to the station to see me off, when I went off to the front, with a white umbrella?"

"What white umbrella?"

"Just a manner of speaking, girl."

I wanted to gain time. To enjoy unhurriedly and on foot every moment I would spend with her. Every last moment. Throwing the bike into the river was a way of drawing the balance of the universe to my favor. I wanted to slow time, bring it under my control.

Alma carried at her side a small bag that she hadn't opened the whole weekend. She's carrying clothes she'll put on when she gets to Warsaw, I thought, pure and virginal clothes free of the smell of snails. If she's as clever as I think, the bag probably holds a gift from the alleged aunt, a gift she'll show innocently to her German when she gets back.

"Look, dear Hans, look what my aunt gave us for our house! A little ceramic box decorated with colorful flowers!"

"What do you have in the bag?" I asked.

She didn't answer me.

Silence is also an answer, I thought.

"Silence is no answer," I said.

She still kept silent.

We set off silently, side by side, walking down the secluded train tracks. A little further on, I pulled ahead, thinking that she would come up to my side. But she didn't catch up. She followed me, walking behind

me. That hurt my feelings. As when we walked by the side of the river, I wanted her beside me, for the last time.

We should have known, then, in wartime, that the trains went whenever and however they wanted, but we didn't know. Even though she was about to marry a German named Hans, even though I had already had a taste of the army, we were still young and innocent.

In short, there we were, before the day broke, but breaking inside ourselves, one following the other. I in front, she behind, walking along the railroad tracks. She didn't come up to my side. She won't take the lure again, I thought.

It was the day we had to say goodbye and we knew it.

When we heard the whistle of the train, we had just enough time to get off the tracks. In a reflexive movement, like on the cinnamon stick street, I turned my head to the left to look behind me, to look for Alma.

She, on the other hand, looked to the right when she heard the train behind her. Who knows why. It was just that she had always done so, ever since the very first time I saw her. Coming down the road opposite me and sheepishly, shyly, looking at cinnamon hats, or seeking the afternoon's kisses when we first started walking together along the Vistula, or that last time, when the train that took me to the front was pulling away and she was seeing me off… She turned her head to the right, always.

That turn of the head to the left or to the right saved my life and condemned her to death.

Even today, in this exile in Paris, when I walk along the Seine – river waters are consoling to exiles, because those waters, unlike the land I tread, can never be a banishment in their eternal calming mobility – every time an acquaintance greets me and I turn my head to the left, I feel a shiver penetrate my right ear like a knife.

It's her, I think. It's a message, I think. And I forgive myself the folly because folly, foolishness and idiocy are human things, and forgivable in their humanity.

The bag that Alma carried spilled its guts on the side of the tracks: it was the letters I had sent her from the front. I never knew why she had brought them, what plan she had in the back of her mind for that bundle of letters.

The train conductor didn't even realize that the train had hit a woman who now lay beside the tracks with blood on her face. That is, if the train even had a conductor: just as there are people with no soul, so are there trains with no conductor. Trains that have long since sold their conductor to the devil.

The weather was damp, snails would emerge later from their concealment, spirals on their backs, arriving too late like all good ideas, impulses, inspirations, strategies and hunches, now that nothing remained but to witness the city's ruins and burnt rafters.

I didn't have the courage to embrace her lifeless body.

One street, one life or more, broken like a cinnamon stick.

Kneeling on the ground, I fiercely gathered up twigs mixed with the mire from the side of the tracks, the damp twigs that looked the most like cinnamon sticks, and broke them and shredded them between my fingers, and brought the pieces to my mouth, choking my wails back into my belly with the mud and sticks.

Did I want to devour the world and make it disappear from before my eyes? Who knows. Grammar and storytelling have never been up to the task of describing desperation.

I don't know how long I wandered adrift, lost in the forest, begging at the top of my lungs for the snipers I couldn't see to shoot me. I didn't get lucky. Or I got very lucky, maybe. Before I got back to the town, on the ground floor of a small depot that had been bombed to bits, I saw a coat stand with a raincoat and hat hanging on it. The image gave me a shock: surrounded by fallen walls, the raincoat endured untouched, as if the stationmaster were about to return.

As I set off in the direction of the tiny depot, a dog barked at me, with reason or for no reason.

His bark had three beats.

"We're at war! We're at war!" as if he were proclaiming it.

The dog shook his head from one side to the other, left and right, to both sides with the same animal passion. Or with the same animal lack of passion perhaps I should say, since the damned dog was barking with the ancient strength of a creature who knows nothing about cinnamon streets or shop windows, hats or white umbrellas.

"We're at war! We're at war!"

"I know, you idiot, I know! Shut up!"

I threw a chunk of stone from the side of the tracks at the scrawny animal, nearly hitting it full on. The dog got the message and shut up. Whether because of the stone or because of my sobs, I didn't know.

I looked at the coat stand again: first at the red cord on the visor of the hat, then at the sea-blue raincoat with the stationmaster's insignia on it, and finally at the silver whistle that hung from its pocket.

This world belongs to objects, I thought, to forgotten and lost things, and is not, as my pseudo-humanist way of thinking had led me to believe until then, an abode for men and women.

The dog started barking again. My head was about to explode.

I wiped my tears on the arm of the raincoat hanging on the coat stand. The dog was barking louder now and more vigorously. I took the stationmaster's whistle and blew hard.

A tuneless blast came out. No page-turner came to turn the tattered white pages of the depot's fallen walls.

But the dog suddenly shut up.

As I continued walking along the tracks, the dog came along behind me, docile and obedient, as if he were bound to me by something that I didn't understand well and that he – somehow – understood clearly.

I don't know how long I walked. I arrived at the border, shoes awash and socks muddy. Even though there was a sign there to say it was the border, no one appeared. It was impossible to know if it was really the border of anything any more or not. There was nobody to ask.

The dog and I looked at each other futilely. The pathetic beast was the color of light brown suede.

We'll keep going west, Cinnamon.

He deserved a name too, after all.

As I walked on down the main street of a solitary village laid waste by air raids, I started talking to the dog about the cinnamon street.

The street smelled of cinnamon. Not of ground cinnamon, but of stick cinnamon. It's different, did you know that? Very different.

The dog seemed to be happy enough, perhaps thanks to his recent baptism. How else to interpret the joyful rhythm of his leaps and barks as he greeted the baker, the milliner and everybody else from the street that I was telling him about, the ghosts I conjured up with my words? I

shook hands with the fallen windows and doors that were hanging off their hinges, embraced the doors and windows of the debris-ridden entrances as if they were alive, saluted the broken timbers, kissed the tilting and fallen burnt rafters. I politely addressed the debris, the crushed rafters. What a shame I hadn't brought the stationmaster's hat to be able to doff it courteously to these deserving people. "How are you, Mr. Minkiewicz?" I asked of my own aged reflection in a bit of broken glass. "Nice weather for your rheumatism, isn't it? Give me a *Courier*, lad… Everyone well at home, Kotkowski? How about that, even your youngest is married now, at least you'll never want for bread!" Or, speaking with more feeling and placing my hand on a once golden doorknob, "Minkiewicz's hats must be made of cinnamon, don't you think?"

I must have been under the spell of a crazed optimism and energy. When you're shaking with cold and fear, you have to shout, you have to drag out at gun-point the laughable, thriftless, lazy god who lolls cozily by the fireside within you. Drag him to the window, dare the snipers, laugh at them and may they laugh at you! We don't need preachers, but jesters! Jesters!

And while I was saying all that to them, courteous in all particulars and head held high, I unfailingly bent my neck, that beloved fishing rod that directed the lure of my gaze, bowing my head to the people I greeted considerately, obeying the old ways of my town, which demanded an honorable and generous forty-five degree inclination to show our willingness to help our neighbors.

As I wished the whole ghost town good luck and said goodbye to the people with my best wishes, the dog was still there at my side, tongue lolling and a gleam in his eye, as if he knew the story of the henchman whose master gave him an island for helping to fight windmills.

"What should I give to you then?"

I had to get out of there, fast. I took off running, feeling a repellent crunching under my feet, a chilling sound that merged in my mind with the sound I would make chewing snail shells, the sound of forest sticks mixing with the sound of snail shells crushed by teeth, a sound sensed less in my mouth than under my feet. What impotence, this impression of having my mouth in my feet, but sewn shut! To rid myself of my rage,

I would have to howl from this throat in my feet, but I couldn't, I couldn't so much as draw a breath.

It wasn't going to snow, but it looked like snow and that was enough to ground the bombers.

I kept running, knowing that I would need a thousand years to obliterate the gestures of the inelegant and pathetic waltz dictated by my desperation. I kept running, treading on sylvan throats that were nothing but broken sticks, eyes straight ahead, not looking back at all.