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Woodcutters

THOMAS BERNHARD

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Translated from the German by David McLintock

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*Being unable to make people more reasonable,
I preferred to be happy away from them.*

VOLTAIRE

While everyone was waiting for the actor, who had promised to join the dinner party at the Gentzgasse after the premiere of *The Wild Duck*, I observed the Auersbergers carefully from the same wing chair I had sat in nearly every day during the fifties, reflecting that it had been a grave mistake to accept their invitation. I had not seen the couple for twenty years and then, on the very day that our mutual friend *Joana* had died, I had met them by chance in the *Graben*, and without further ado I had accepted their invitation to this *artistic dinner*, and they described the supper they were giving. For twenty years I had not wanted to know anything about the Auersbergers; for twenty years I had not seen the Auersbergers, and for these twenty years the very mention of the name Auersberger had brought on third-degree nausea, I thought, sitting in the wing chair. And now this couple is bringing me face to face once more with the life we led in the fifties. For twenty years I've avoided the Auersbergers; for twenty years I haven't even met them, and then I have to run into them in the *Graben*, I thought. It had been a piece of monumental folly not only to go to the *Graben* in the first place, but to walk up and down the *Graben* several times, as I was in the habit of doing, at least since returning to Vienna from London: it was a street where I might have known I would be *sure* to meet the Auersbergers one day, and not only the Auersbergers, but all the other people I had been avoiding for the last twenty or thirty years, people with whom I had had close ties in the fifties, what the Auersbergers used to call close *artistic ties*, ties which I had severed a quarter of a century ago, when I got away from the Auersbergers and went to London, *breaking*, as they say, with all my Viennese acquaintances of that period, not wanting to see them again or have anything more to do with them. Going for a walk in the *Graben*, I thought as I sat in the wing chair, means nothing more nor less than walking straight into the social hell of Vienna and meeting the very people I have no wish to meet, people whose sudden appearance brings on all kinds of physical and mental strains. Hence in recent years whenever I came over from London to Vienna, I had chosen different routes for my walk, avoiding not only the *Graben*, but also the *Kohlmarkt* and, of course, the *Kärntnerstrasse*. I had avoided the *Spiegelgasse*, the *Stallburggasse* and the *Dorotheergasse* too, not to mention the dreaded *Wollzeile* and the *Operngasse*, where I have so often been trapped by the very people I most detest. But in recent weeks, I reflected as I sat in the wing chair, I had suddenly felt an urgent need to go to the *Graben* and the *Kärntnerstrasse*, because the air there was healthy, and because I suddenly found it pleasant to mingle with the morning crowds, both in the *Graben* and in the *Kärntnerstrasse*, and no doubt also because I wanted to escape from the

months of solitude in my Währing apartment, to get away from the isolation that had begun to deaden my brain. In recent weeks I had always found it relaxing, both mentally and physically, to walk along the Kärntnerstrasse and the Graben, then back along the Graben and the Kärntnerstrasse. Walking back and forth like this was as beneficial to my mind as it was to my body, and in recent weeks I had walked up the Kärntnerstrasse and the Graben and back *every single day*, as though there were nothing I needed so much as just to walk up and down the Graben and the Kärntnerstrasse. It was in the Kärntnerstrasse and the Graben that I suddenly recovered my vitality and became myself again, after months of what I can only describe as mental and physical debility; walking along the Kärntnerstrasse and the Graben and back I felt refreshed. *All I need to do is to walk up and down like this*, I would think to myself, though that was not all I needed. Just to walk up and down, I kept on telling myself. And in fact it did enable me to start thinking again, even to philosophize, to take an interest once more in philosophy and literature, which had for so long been suppressed, even killed within me. It was a mistake, as I now realize, to spend the winter in Vienna and not, like previous winters, in London, I thought, sitting in the wing chair. It was this long, sickening winter that killed off everything literary and philosophical there was inside me, and now I've made it all come back by walking up and down the Graben and the Kärntnerstrasse. And I actually attributed my Viennese mental condition, *my restored mental condition*, as I now feel able to call it, to the therapy I had first prescribed for myself in the middle of January, the Graben and Kärntnerstrasse therapy. This dreadful city of Vienna, I thought, having plunged me yet again into profound despair and utter hopelessness, has suddenly become the motor that enables my mind to function again as a living mind and my body as a living body; day by day I observed the progressive revival of mind and body, of everything inside me that had been dead during the whole of the winter; having blamed Vienna throughout the winter for my mental and physical atrophy, it was to Vienna that I now owed my restored vitality. I sat in the wing chair and silently paid tribute to the Kärntnerstrasse and the Graben, ascribing my mental and physical recovery solely to my Kärntnerstrasse and Graben therapy; and I told myself that I naturally had to pay a price for this therapy, and meeting the Auersbergers in the Graben, I thought, was the price of its success. It's a very high price, I thought, but it could have been much higher; after all I could have met much worse people in the Graben for the Auersbergers aren't the worst people in the world, at least not the very worst. All the same it's bad enough to have met the Auersbergers in the Graben, I thought, sitting in the wing chair. A strong person, with strength of character to match, would have declined the invitation, I thought, but I'm not strong and I've no strength of character: on the contrary I'm the very weakest person, with the very weakest character, and that's what makes me more or less everyone's victim. And again I reflected that it had been a grave mistake to accept the couple's invitation: having resolved to have nothing more to do with them for the rest of my life, I cross the Graben, only to be accosted by them; they ask me whether I've heard about Joana's death, about her hanging herself, and then I go and accept their invitation. I momentarily gave way to the most shameful sentimentality, I thought, and the Auersbergers immediately took advantage of it; they took advantage of the suicide of our mutual friend Joana, I thought, to issue their invitation, which I at once accepted, though it would have been wiser to turn it down. But I didn't have the time, I thought, sitting in the wing chair, they *came up on me from behind* and told me what I already knew—that Joana had hanged

herself at Kilb, at her parents' home—and then they invited me to dinner, to a *very artist dinner*, they stressed—all our friends from the old days. They'd actually begun to walk on ahead of me when they issued their invitation, I thought, and they were already a few yards in front when I said yes, accepting their invitation and saying I'd come to their dinner party in the hideous apartment in the Gentzgasse. They were carrying a number of parcels, paper-wrapped parcels from various well-known shops in the center of the city, and they were wearing the same English overcoats they had worn thirty years before for shopping expeditions to the city center. Everything about them was what is called *shabby-genteel*. Actually she did all the talking in the Graben: her husband, a composer in the Webern tradition as he is described, didn't say a word to me, wishing to offend me by not speaking to me, I thought as I sat in the wing chair. They had said that they had no idea when Joana's funeral at Kilb would take place. I had been informed that day by a childhood friend of Joana's, just before I left home, that Joana had hanged herself. This friend, who runs a general store in Kilb, did not want to tell me over the telephone that Joana had *hanged* herself; she simply told me that she had *died*, but I told her outright that Joana had *not died*, but *killed herself*. She, as her friend, must know how she had done it, I said, but she simply would not tell me. Country people are more inhibited than townspeople about saying openly that *somebody has killed himself*, and they find it hardest of all to say how. I guessed at once that Joana had hanged herself; in fact I said to the woman from the general store, *Joana hanged herself, didn't she?* She was taken aback and simply said *Yes*. People like Joana hang themselves, I said. They don't throw themselves in the river or jump out of fourth-floor windows: they get a piece of rope, deftly tie a noose in it, attach it firmly to a beam, then let themselves drop into the noose. *Ballerinas and actresses hang themselves*, I told the woman from the general store. The fact that I had not heard from Joana for so long, I thought, sitting in the wing chair, had for some time struck me as suspicious, and I had often wondered lately whether Joana, a woman who had been deeply wounded, who had been cheated, deserted and scorned, might one day commit suicide. But in the Graben I had *pretended* to the Auersbergers that I knew nothing of Joana's suicide, feigning utter astonishment and shock, even though by eleven o'clock in the Graben I was no longer astonished or shocked by the tragedy, having heard about it at seven o'clock that morning; after walking up and down the Graben and the Kärntnerstrasse several times I found I was able to *endure* Joana's suicide, that I was able to bear it, in the bracing air of the Graben. Actually it would have been better had I not appeared utterly astonished by the Auersbergers' announcement of Joana's suicide; I should have told them that I had known about it for some time and that I even knew *how* she had killed herself. I ought to have told them the precise circumstances, I thought, and so deprived them of their triumph, which they were actually reveling in and savoring to the full, as I noted at the time while we were standing in front of Knizes'; for by pretending to know nothing whatever about Joana's death, by acting as though I had been stunned and shattered and dumbfounded by the terrible news, I had allowed the Auersbergers the thrill of being the sudden bearers of ill tidings, which naturally had not been my intention, though this was what I managed to achieve by my ineptitude, by claiming to know nothing whatever about Joana's suicide at the time of our meeting. All the time I was standing there with the Auersbergers I feigned ignorance, while knowing more or less everything about Joana's suicide. I did not know how they came to know that Joana had hanged herself, but the

likelihood was that they too had been told by the woman from the general store. She would certainly have told them what she told me, I thought, though *not as much*; otherwise the Auersbergers would have told me more than they did about Joana's suicide. Of course they would be going to the funeral at Kilb, Auersberger's wife said, and she said it in a way which suggested that it would not be a matter of course for me to go to Joana's funeral; it was a kind of reproach, implying that I might possibly *not* go to Joana's funeral, that I might even find it convenient to avoid going to the funeral of our mutual friend, even though, like them, I had been on terms of the *most intimate friendship with her for so many years, indeed for decades*. The way she said it, I thought, was actually insulting, as was the fact that, after saying she would see me at Joana's funeral, she immediately went on to invite me to come to their so-called *artistic dinner* in the Gentzgasse the following Tuesday, that is, today, the day of Joana's funeral. It was in fact through Auersberger that I had first met Joana thirty years before, at a birthday party given for her husband in the Sebastiansplatz, in the Third District, a so-called *studio party* attended by nearly all the well-known artists of Vienna. Joana's husband was a so-called tapestry artist, a carpet weaver in other words, who had originally been a painter, and he had once won the first prize with one of his carpets at the Bienal in São Paulo in the mid-sixties. That Joana should commit suicide was the last thing they would have expected, the Auersbergers had said in the Graben, and before rushing off with all their parcels they told me that they had bought *everything by Ludwig Wittgenstein*, so that they could *immerse themselves in Wittgenstein during the coming weeks*. They've probably got Wittgenstein in the smallest parcel, I thought, the one dangling from her right arm. And again I reflected that it had been a grave error to accept the Auersbergers' invitation, considering how I detest all such invitations, and how for so many years I had avoided invitations to *artistic dinners* of this kind, having attended so many of them until I was well into my forties. I was thoroughly familiar with what they were like—and I know of scarcely anything more repugnant. Actually, these Auersberger invitations haven't changed, I thought, sitting in the wing chair: they're just the same as they were in the fifties, when they not only bored me to death, but drove me half demented. For twenty years you've detested the Auersbergers, I told myself, sitting in the wing chair, and then you run into them in the Graben and accept their invitation, and you actually turn up in the Gentzgasse at the appointed time. What's more, you know all the others who've been invited to this dinner party, and still you turn up. And it struck me that I would have done better to spend this evening—or rather this whole night—reading Gogol or Dostoevski or Chekhov, rather than to come to this hateful dinner party in the Gentzgasse. The Auersbergers are the people who destroyed your existence, your very life, I told myself sitting in the wing chair; they were the people who, in the early fifties, drove you into such an appalling mental and physical state, into what amounted to an existential crisis, into a state of such complete helplessness that you ended up in the Steinhof mental clinic, yet you still had to come here tonight. If you hadn't turned your back on them at the crucial moment, you'd have been annihilated. First they'd have destroyed you, then they'd have annihilated you. If I'd stayed with them only a few days longer at Maria Zaal, I thought, sitting in the wing chair, it would have been certain death. They'd have squeezed you dry, I told myself. I sat in the wing chair, and then discarded you. You run into your ghastly destroyers and murderers in the Graben, and in a momentary access of sentimentality you let yourself be invited to the Gentzgasse—and you actually turn up, I said to myself as I sat in the wing

chair. And again it struck me that I would have done better to read my Pascal or my Gogol or my Montaigne, or play some Satie or Schönberg on the piano, even though my old piano is so badly out of tune. You walk to the Graben, to get some fresh air and recoup your vitality, and run straight into the arms of your former destroyers and annihilators, and you even tell them how much you're looking forward to the evening, to their *artistic dinner*, which can't be anything but dreary, like all their dinner parties, like all the evenings you can recall spending with them. Only a half-wit devoid of all character could accept an invitation like that, I thought, sitting in the wing chair. It's now thirty years since they lured you into their trap and you let yourself be caught. It's thirty years since these people subjected you to daily indignities and you abjectly submitted to them, I thought as I sat in the wing chair—thirty years since you more or less *sold* yourself to them in the most despicable fashion, thirty years since you played the fool for them, I thought, sitting in the wing chair. And it's twenty-seven years since you escaped from them—at the last possible moment. For twenty years you haven't set eyes on them, and then, all unsuspecting, you go for a walk in the Graben and fall right into their hands; you let yourself be invited to the Gentzgasse, and, what's more, you actually turn up, and you even tell them you're looking forward to their *artistic dinner*, I thought, sitting in the wing chair. Auersberger's wife was talking incessantly about the *superb actor* who had reached the peak of his career in the new production of *The Wild Duck*. Meanwhile the guests, having arrived two hours before midnight, consoled themselves with one bottle of champagne after another; every fifteen minutes the hostess circulated among them to replenish the glasses which all these more or less distasteful people held out to her. She was wearing the yellow dress I knew so well. Possibly she's put it on *specially for me*, I thought, because thirty years ago I used to compliment her on this dress, which at the time I thought looked extremely good on her, though now I did not find it at all becoming—on the contrary I actually found it tasteless—and which now had a black velvet collar instead of the red one it had had thirty years ago. She kept repeating the words *a superb actor* and *fascinating production of The Wild Duck* in that voice of hers which even thirty years ago used to grate on me, though thirty years ago I had thought it an interesting voice, even if it did grate, whereas now I found it simply vulgar and repellent. The way she said *altogether the most important actor* and *the greatest living actor* I found quite unendurable. I never could stand her voice, but now that it was old and cracked and carried a permanent undertone of hysteria—now that it was strained and worn out, as they say of singers—I found it quite insupportable. This was the voice, I reflected, that used to sing Purcell and the *Songbook* of Anna Magdalena Bach, and when her husband, who was my friend (and whom the experimenter always called a composer in the Webern tradition), accompanied her at the Steinway it used to bring tears to my eyes. I was twenty-two at the time and in love with everything that Maria Zaal and the Gentzgasse stood for; I even used to write poems. But now I was sickened at the thought of the loathsome scenes I had been quite happy to take part in thirty years earlier. I would accompany the Auersbergers as they moved back and forth between Maria Zaal and the Gentzgasse every two weeks, continually switching between their two residences, I thought as I sat in the wing chair, having drunk several glasses of champagne in a very short time. Observing the Auersbergers from my wing chair, I recalled that it was she who had spoken to me in the Graben, not her husband. And you immediately accepted her invitation! *They came up from behind and spoke to you*, I told myself; they'd probably been

observing you from behind for some time, *following you and observing you*, and then suddenly *when the time was ripe*, they addressed you. Sitting in the wing chair, I recalled that thirty years earlier I had once seen Auersberger—who incidentally has been drunk for the last thirty years—walking along the Rotenturmstrasse with a woman I did not know, a woman of about forty who looked thoroughly dissipated and was obviously down at heel, with long hair and worn-out leather boots. I observed everything about him and his companion fairly thoroughly, wondering all the time whether I should speak to him or not, but in the end I did not speak to him. My instinct told me, You mustn't speak to him; if you do he'll make some offensive remark that will demoralize you for days. And so I refrained: I controlled myself and observed him all the way down to the Schwedenplatz, where he and the woman disappeared into an old house that was due for demolition. All the time I could not take my eyes off his revolting legs, clad in coarse-knit knee-length stockings, his oddly perverted rhythmical gait, and the bald patch at the back of his head. He seemed a good match for his seedy companion, who was doubtless an artiste of some kind, a worn-out singer or a low-class unemployed actress, I thought as I sat in the wing chair. Sitting in the wing chair, I recalled how I had turned around, quivering with revulsion, and set off toward the Stephansplatz after the pair had disappeared into that dilapidated building. I was so sickened by what I had just witnessed that I turned to throw up against the wall in front of the Aida coffeehouse; but then I looked into one of the mirrors of the coffeehouse and found myself staring at my own dissipated face, and my own debauched body, and I felt more sickened by myself than I had been by Auersberger and his companion, so I turned around and walked as fast as I could in the direction of the Stephansplatz and the Graben and the Kohlmarkt. Finally, as I now recalled in the wing chair, I reached the café *Eiles*, where I fell upon a pile of newspapers in order to forget the sight of Auersberger and his companion and my encounter with myself. This trick of going to the café *Eiles* had always worked. I would go in, get myself a pile of newspapers, and recover my composure. Nor did it have to be the café *Eiles*: the *Museum* or the *Bräunerhof* also produced the desired effect. Just as some people run to the park or the woods in search of calm and distraction, I have always run to the coffeehouse. Thus it was as likely as not, I reflected in the wing chair, that before finally addressing me the Auersbergers had observed me for some time, just as closely as I had observed Auersberger that day in the Rotenturmstrasse, and no doubt with the same ruthlessness, the same monstrous inhumanity. We learn a great deal, I reflected in the wing chair, if we observe people from behind when they are unaware of being observed, observing them for as long we can, prolonging our ruthless and monstrous observation for as long as possible without addressing them, keeping control of ourselves and refraining from speaking to them, then being able simply to turn on our heel and walk away from them, in the true sense of the phrase—if we have the skill and the cunning that I displayed that day at the bottom of the Rotenturmstrasse, when I turned on my heel and walked away. We should apply this observation procedure both to people we love and to people we hate, I thought sitting in the wing chair and observing Auersberger's wife, who kept glancing at the clock and trying to console her guests for having to wait for supper so long, that is to say until the actor made his entrance. I had once seen this actor at the Burgtheater, many years before, in one of those emetic English society farces the inanity of which is tolerable only because it is English inanity and not the German or Austrian variety, and which have been put on at the

Burgtheater again and again with appalling regularity over the past quarter of a century because during this time the Burgtheater has made a specialty of English inanity and the Viennese public has grown accustomed to it. I remembered him as a so-called matinee idol, one of the theatrical dandies who own villas in Grinzing or Hietzing and pander to the sort of Austrian theatrical imbecility that has its home in the Burgtheater, one of the mindless hams who, over the last quarter of a century, have collaborated with all the directors appointed to the *Burg*, as it is affectionately called, to turn it into a thoroughly brainless institution dedicated to ranting and the murder of the classics. The Burgtheater has been artistically bankrupt for so long, I thought, sitting in the wing chair, that it is impossible to say precisely when it went into liquidation, and the actors who make their nightly appearances there are the bankrupts. Nevertheless, to invite one of these barnstormers to supper, to a so-called *artistic dinner*, I thought, sitting in the wing chair and observing the Auersbergers and their guests, is still regarded by people like the Auersbergers who own apartments in the Gentzgasse as something out of this world. It's a peculiarly Austrian perversion, I thought, sitting in the wing chair, and I realized just what a special occasion this must be for the Auersbergers, when supper was delayed for over an hour after it was due to be served, in other words until half past twelve, when the doorbell would finally ring and the actor would make his appearance at the Auersbergers' apartment in the Gentzgasse, signaling his entrance with the ostentatious clearing of the throat that Burgtheater actors affect. Secretly I have always detested actors, and those who perform at the Burgtheater have always earned me special detestation—except of course for the very greatest, like Wessely and Gold, for whom I have always had the profoundest affection—and the one whom the Auersbergers had invited to the Gentzgasse that evening was unquestionably one of the most objectionable specimens I have met. Born in the Tyrol and having, in the course of three decades, *acted his way into the hearts of the Viennese by his performances in Grillparzer* (as I once saw it expressed), he is for me the personification of the anti-artist, I thought, sitting in the wing chair; he's the archetypal mindless ham, who's always been popular at the Burgtheater and in Austria generally, utterly devoid of imagination and hence of wit, one of those unspeakable emotionalists who tread the boards of the Burgtheater every evening in droves, wringing their hands in their unnatural provincial fashion, falling upon whatever work is being performed, and clubbing it to death with the sheer brute force of their histrionics. For decades, I thought as I sat in the wing chair, these people have annihilated everything with their mimic muscle-power. It's not only the gentle Raimund and the sensitive Kleist who get beaten to a pulp at the Burgtheater, which fancies it's taken a perpetual lease on the theatrical art: even the great Shakespeare falls victim to the butchers of the Burgtheater. But in this country, I thought, sitting in the wing chair, the Burgtheater actor is regarded as a superior being, and to have so much as a nodding acquaintance with an actor from the Burgtheater, to say nothing of having one to supper in one's apartment, is regarded by the Austrians, and above all by the Viennese, as an unparalleled honor. Yet to me, I thought as I sat in the wing chair, this has always made the Austrians, and above all the Viennese, appear ridiculous, whether they lay claim to a slight personal acquaintance with an actor from the Burgtheater or tell you that they have even had one to supper. These actors are petty bourgeois nonentities who know nothing whatever about the art of the theater and have long since turned the Burgtheater into a hospice for their terminal dilettantism. It was not for

nothing, I thought, that back in the fifties I chose this particular wing chair, which still stands in the same place, though the Auersbergers have since had it re-covered. Sitting here, I can see and hear everything—nothing escapes me. I was wearing my so-called *funeral suit*, which I bought twenty-three years ago in Graz, on my way to Trieste, and which is now far too tight for me. I had worn it to Joana's funeral at Kilb, which did not end until late in the afternoon. As I sat there I reflected that once more, contrary to my better judgment, I was making myself cheap and contemptible, having accepted the Auersbergers' supper invitation instead of declining it. That day in the Graben I had momentarily become soft and weak and so acted contrary to my nature, and tonight I was standing not only my character, but my whole nature, on its head. Only Joana's suicide could have prompted such an irrational reaction. Had I not been so devastated by her suicide, I would naturally have declined the invitation, I now thought, sitting in the wing chair, when the Auersbergers issued it in that abrupt, direct manner of theirs, employing their customary surprise tactics, which I've always found so distasteful. Almost all the supper guests were still in their funeral attire, I noted, sitting in the wing chair; only one or two had changed for the party, and so nearly everybody was dressed in black, looking just as exhausted as I was from the strain of what we had been through at Kilb, where it had actually rained heavily during the ceremony. And naturally their sole topic of conversation, of which I caught only snatches, was Joana's funeral and *the tragedy of her life*, which had been brought on by her husband's walking out on her seventeen or eighteen years earlier and going off to Mexico. One or two tapestries hung on the Auersbergers' walls—the work of this self-same husband who, they all said, had Joana's suicide *on his conscience*—and as they hung there, accusing their creator, they darkened the scene, which was in any case only dimly lit by a number of Empire-style lamps. The tapestry artist had bolted to Mexico with, of all people, his wife's best friend, as I heard people recall more than once in the semidarkness of the Gentzgasse, leaving the *unhappy Joana* all alone. To Mexico of all places, and at the very moment when it was bound to be a *mortal blow* to her. Left alone at forty, in the studio in the Sebastiansplatz, with no financial support, with virtually nothing. More than once I heard somebody say that it was surprising Joana had not hanged herself in the studio in the Sebastiansplatz, rather than at her parents' home in Kilb—that she had chosen to do it in the country and not in the city. Several times I heard somebody remark that it was homesickness that had driven her to Kilb, away from Vienna, away from the *urban quagmire* to the *rural idyll*. I actually heard somebody use the phrases *urban quagmire* and *rural idyll*, not without a malignant undertone; I think it was Auersberger who kept on repeating them as I sat in the wing chair observing his wife, who was constantly bursting into hysterical laughter, trying to keep everybody's spirits up until the actor made his entrance. The apartment, on the third floor of the house, consists of seven or eight rooms filled with Josephine and Biedermeier furniture. It formerly belonged to Auersberger's parents-in-law. His wife's father, a rather feeble-minded physician from Graz, had his consulting room here in the Gentzgasse, though he never made a career as a doctor. Her mother, an unshapely, chubby-cheeked creature from the rural gentry of Styria, permanently lost her hair at the age of forty after being treated for influenza by her husband, and prematurely withdrew from society. She and her husband were able to live in the Gentzgasse thanks to her mother's fortune, which derived from the family estates in Styria and then devolved upon *her*. She provided for everything, since her husband earned nothing as a doctor. He was a socialist

what is known as a beau, who went to all the big Viennese balls during the carnival season and throughout his life was able to conceal his stupidity behind a pleasingly slim exterior. Throughout her life Auersberger's mother-in-law had a raw deal from her husband, but was content to accept her modest social station, not that of a member of the nobility, but one that was thoroughly petit bourgeois. Her son-in-law, as I suddenly recalled, sitting in the wing chair, made a point of hiding her wig from time to time—whenever the mood took him—both in the Gentzgasse and at Maria Zaal in Styria, so that the poor woman was unable to leave the house. It used to amuse him, after he had hidden her wig, to drive his mother-in-law up the wall, as they say. Even when he was going on forty he used to hide her wigs—both at that time she had provided herself with several—which was a symptom of his sickness and infantility. I often witnessed this game of hide-and-seek at Maria Zaal and in the Gentzgasse, and I honestly have to say that I was amused by it and did not feel in the least ashamed of myself. His mother-in-law would be forced to stay at home because her son-in-law had hidden her wigs, and this was especially likely to happen on public holidays. In the end he would throw her wigs in her face. He needed his mother-in-law's humiliation, I reflected, sitting in the wing chair and observing him in the background of the music room, just as he needed the triumph that this diabolical behavior of his brought him. I was revolted to see Auersberger practicing a simple finger exercise on the piano, raising his pale face, which was already glassy and vacant as a result of the alcohol he had consumed, and sticking the tip of his tongue out of his tiny mouth, which by now had a bluish tinge. He's chosen Giovanni Gabrieli for this sick little scene, I thought. And I recalled that at the time when my friendship with the Auersbergers was at its most intense, I would often stand by the Steinway and sing Italian, German and English arias—grossly overrating my talent, as I now realize. I had completed my studies at the Mozarteum, the so-called academy of music and performing arts in Salzburg, though I never took advantage of my musical training; I had left the Mozarteum as a deep bass-baritone, with no prospect, and indeed no intention, of becoming a performing artist. But at Maria Zaal the afternoons were long, and in the Gentzgasse the afternoons and nights were equally long; and so virtually every day Auersberger would sit down at his grand piano, with me standing beside him, and in the course of several weeks, as I now recalled, sitting in the wing chair, we would work our way through the whole classical repertoire of arias and *Lieder*. Auersberger, whom I once called the *Novalis of sound*, had always been a first-class pianist, I thought, sitting in the wing chair, and even now, drunk though he is, he would need to sit at the Steinway for no more than two or three minutes to prove his artistry. But he's gone to seed, I thought, sitting in the wing chair; through years of alcohol addiction he's allowed everything within him to degenerate, even his musical talent, which he once prized above all else. We may know for decades that someone close to us is a ridiculous person, but it's only after a lapse of decades that we suddenly see it, I thought, sitting in the wing chair, just as I'm suddenly seeing now, with absolute clarity, that Auersberger (the so-called successor of Webern) is a ridiculous person. And just as Auersberger, who's continually drunk, is ridiculous in his own way, and probably always has been, I thought, sitting in the wing chair, so too his wife is ridiculous and always has been. You used to be in love with these ridiculous people, I told myself as I sat in the wing chair, head over heels in love with these ridiculous, low, vicious people, who suddenly saw you again after twenty years, in the Graben of all places, and on the very day Joana killed herself. They came up and spoke

you and invited you to attend their *artistic dinner party with the famous Burgtheater actor* in the Gentsgasse. What ridiculous, vicious people they are! I thought, sitting in the wing chair. And suddenly it struck me what a low, ridiculous character I myself was, having accepted the invitation and nonchalantly taken my place in their wing chair as though nothing had happened—stretching out and crossing my legs and finishing off what must by now have been my third or fourth glass of champagne. And I told myself that I was actually far more base and vicious than the Auersbergers. They caught you out with their invitation, and you promptly accepted it, I told myself. Though they were all waiting for the actor, everybody was *obsessed* with Joana's suicide, and also with her funeral, which had taken place the afternoon and had clearly left its mark on them. As I sat in the wing chair, waiting like all the others until well after midnight for the actor to arrive, I could think of nothing but Joana's appalling funeral, of the events that had led up to it, of the reasons for the utter despair that had driven her to take her life. Sitting in the wing chair, I was left undisturbed, since it stood behind the door through which the guests entered the apartment, and in the semidarkness of the anteroom I was able to devote myself to the thoughts and fantasies that occupied my mind. When guests arrived they did not recognize me until after they had walked past me and then only if they happened to turn around after entering the apartment, which very few of them did: most of them went straight through the anteroom to the music room, the door of which was always kept open. For as far back as I can remember, the door between the anteroom and the music room has never been closed; I can remember that even when the Auersbergers had nobody but me staying with them they never closed the door to the music room, because with the door open the room had excellent acoustics, something to which Auersberger, being a composer, naturally attached the greatest importance. From my vantage point in the wing chair I could see the people in the music room without their seeing me. They all walked straight from the entrance to the music room. This was how it had always been, and on this evening the guests seemed positively to race through the anteroom and into the music room, where Auersberger's wife was waiting to welcome them with arms outstretched, as though it was to *her* that condolences were due for Joana's death, as though *she* was now exploiting Joana's death for her own purposes. Since most of them had already seen one another that afternoon at Kilb, they contented themselves with a brief embrace after which they each sat down with a glass of champagne in one of the chairs in the music room. While Auersberger's wife went on and on about the *great actor*, this *supremely great actor*, this *incomparable actor*, this *genius of an actor*, the guests could be heard almost continually uttering the name *Joana*. The name had always sounded good, but it was only her professional name. In reality she was plain *Elfriede Slukal* from Kilb, and it never did her any good to call herself Joana; she did so in the hope of making a career for herself in Vienna, but she never made a career. Having gone from Kilb to Vienna, without the slightest idea of what to do next, she had been advised by a former dancer and choreographer, who had once choreographed a ballet at the State Opera, to take the name *Joana*, which had an exotic ring to it—at any rate in Vienna. *Little Elfriede*, as her mother used to call her, at once acted upon this advice, hoping that as Joana she could make a career for herself that would have been impossible for someone called Elfriede, let alone Elfriede Slukal. But it was a grave miscalculation, I thought, sitting in the wing chair: there was obviously no career for Elfriede Slukal, even under the name Joana, but that evening in the Gentsgasse, all the guests at the

artistic dinner uttered the name Joana as though some human miracle lay concealed behind it. To judge by what I heard from my wing chair, they all spoke of Joana's *death*, not of her *suicide*, and I did not once hear the word *hanged*. By now some sixteen or seventeen guests must have arrived for this *artistic dinner*, I thought, sitting in the wing chair. I knew most of them, and nodded to them without getting up. Five or six of them were strangers to me, and two of these appeared to be young writers. I have a gift for behaving in such a way that people leave me alone whenever I wish, and as I sat in the wing chair I showed myself to be a past master in the art of being left alone; people recognized me in the half-light of the anteroom and tried to strike up a conversation, but I at once deterred them simply by remaining seated and pretending not to understand what they said, and then, at precisely the right moment, looking down at the ground instead of into their faces. I behaved as though I were still completely taken up with Joana's suicide, sitting in the wing chair and affecting an absentminded air whenever there was a risk that one of the guests might take it into his head to keep me company, which was something I was determined to prevent. I was willing to risk being thought unfriendly, even ill-mannered, if not downright offensive; it is quite contrary to my nature to behave badly in company, but I have to confess that on this occasion my behavior was impolite, dismissive and hostile. Some of the guests had already heard about my notorious strangeness and oddity, what somebody once called my *dangerous eccentricity*; they had even been told that my years in London had produced in me a *quite disturbing madness*. People hated me and everything I wrote, and ganged up against me in the most vicious fashion whenever they saw me. But ever since my return from London I had been on my guard against them, against all the people I had known previously, but above all against the so-called *artistic figures from the fifties*, and especially those who had come to this *artistic dinner*. As soon as they entered the apartment they more or less fell into my trap, behaving as though they were unobserved, while in fact I was observing them intently from my wing chair. They walked over to Auersberger's wife, who was standing by the door of the music room, and let themselves be embraced. They were all without exception consummate performers who knew how to get the maximum mileage out of the *Joana Case*. The Auersbergers had always been, at least ostensibly, what are called *good hosts*; they were uniquely and uninhibitedly liberal in their mania for throwing parties and in their endless zeal for things artistic and cultural, and so they were forever hunting down celebrities. It had to be admitted that, dreadful and distasteful though they were, they had a fair measure of what is called *Austrian charm*. But the fact that I accepted their invitation wasn't due to the *Austrian charm*, I thought as I sat in the wing chair, but to the insolent way they issued it without warning that day in the Graben; and I watched Auersberger sitting at the Steinway, leaning forward because of his shortsightedness and leafing through some music, which I eventually recognized as the *Anton von Webern Album* I knew so well. He was sorting out the music for a short recital to be given by his wife. Curiously enough, I've managed to keep my sight up to now, I thought, sitting in the wing chair, though I've reached an age when many people rapidly become farsighted; a lot of people begin to lose their sight in their mid-forties suddenly finding that they have to hold the newspaper a couple of feet away from them in order to read it. I was still spared any such impairment of vision; I could now see better than ever, I thought, more sharply and ruthlessly than ever, with London eyes, it would seem. The champagne the Auersbergers are serving this evening isn't absolutely the best in the world,

thought, sitting in the wing chair, but all the same it's one of the three or four most expensive—no doubt what they deem appropriate to mark the visit of an actor from the Burgtheater. Naturally I had sweated a good deal at Joana's funeral, and, not wishing to change for the *artistic dinner*, I had sprayed cologne on my clothes—rather too freely, it now occurred to me. I have always found it unpardonable to turn up stinking of cologne, but this evening the stench was not noticeable: to judge by the atmosphere in the Auersbergers' apartment, they had all splashed too much scent on their clothes. Every now and then I saw the cook appear from the kitchen and stick her head around the door of the music room to find out whether she could start serving supper, but the actor had still not arrived. Auersberger's wife was now sitting in one of those slender Empire chairs whose backs consist simply of a lyre carved out of walnut, doing her best to keep the guests happy. Most of them were smoking and, like me, drinking champagne, while at the same time nibbling at the snacks that the hostess had disposed all around the apartment in little dishes made of fine Herend porcelain. There was one next to me, but having always had an equal dislike for Herend porcelain and pre-dinner snacks, I did not eat any. I have never been partial to savory snacks, and certainly not to the Japanese variety that it has recently become fashionable to serve at all Viennese receptions. It really is an impertinence, I said to myself, to make us all wait for the actor, to demean all the guests, including myself, by turning us into a stage set for this man from the Burgtheater. At one point Auersberger remarked that he detested the theater. Whenever he had had more to drink than his wife permitted, he would suddenly reveal his innermost self, and on this occasion he suddenly started inveighing against the actor, who had not even arrived, calling the Burgtheater a *pigsty* (admittedly not without justification) and the actor himself a *megalomaniac cliché-monger*, but his wife immediately rebuked him, rolling her eyes and telling him to go back to the piano where he belonged and keep quiet. They haven't changed, I said to myself, sitting in the wing chair: she's anxious to preserve the harmony of her *artist's dinner*, and he's threatening to destroy it. They're both committed to the same ends, the same social ends, I thought, but late in the evening he puts on a show of wanting to escape, remembering what he owes himself, so to speak, as an artistic personality. Essentially they're both completely taken up with society, I thought, without which they couldn't exist—the higher reaches of society of course, because they've never been able to make it to the heights—while on the other hand they've never abandoned their artistic pretensions, their links with Webern, Berg, Schönberg and the rest, which they've always felt obliged to harp on at every opportunity in their craze for social recognition. Joana wasn't Auersberger's best friend, as people often said, but she certainly was the *one* artistic friend he had, I thought as I sat in the wing chair, and it was through him, as I have said, that I first met her at the studio in the Sebastiansplatz. Joana was a country girl who had been spoiled by her mother, the wife of a railroad worker in Kilb; her parents anticipated her every wish, and if possible fulfilled it. This was certainly *one* of the reasons for her suicide, it now struck me—this continuous *pampering* which goes on in the families of small country tradesmen, especially in Lower Austria. What a beautiful village Kilb is! I thought. I've spent many afternoons and evenings there, and sometimes even stayed the night; the Slukals, Joana's parents, often could not pick me up in their little one-story house, which, though damp, was always cozy, and so on those occasions I would stay at the local inn, which was called the *Iron Hand*. I would spend hours walking with Joana, discussing the art of dance and the so-called *movement studio* she ran

Vienna. From her very earliest childhood, when she was still at the elementary school in Kilb, Joana had wanted to become famous either as an actress or as a ballerina—she was never sure which. Finally she decided to call herself a *choreographer*, and arranged appearances for herself in a number of plays based on fairy tales, which were staged in various small Viennese theaters. She got extremely favorable press notices and finally succeeded in putting on a *deportment class* at the Burgtheater. It was utterly futile, of course, to imagine that she could teach deportment to the actors at the Burgtheater: they could no more be taught how to deport themselves than they could be taught how to speak. In the mid-fifties, however, through the good offices of a senior official in the Burgtheater management, she was engaged to coach the actors in the art of deportment. This was a failure because the actors showed absolutely no interest and because in the end she lost interest too. Yet for a whole year she got a decent fee for her efforts. Basically she could never make up her mind whether she wanted to be an actress or a ballerina; and so she had danced and acted throughout her childhood, and when she went to Vienna she actually studied drama at the Reinhardt Seminar, where she finally qualified, though no theater ever engaged her. At the height of her indecision, which she constantly referred to as her *artistic crisis*, she married the carpenter designer, the *tapestry artist* as she used to call him, I recalled, sitting in the wing chair. For over ten years Joana and her tapestry artist lived in the Third District, in a patrician house on the Sebastiansplatz that had been built in 1880. Here they occupied a penthouse studio with a thousand square feet of floor space under three enormous glass domes. It was beneath these domes that he wove the tapestries that made him famous—and not just in Europe. Coming from an old Jewish family and having started out as a painter, he always averred that the art of weaving, in other words tapestry making, had been the *saving* of him. He ran into Joana at just the right moment, for it was her freshness and beauty that very soon turned the studio on the Sebastiansplatz into one of the artistic centers of Viennese society. He wove the tapestries and she sold them. It was Joana's charm that made the works of her tapestry artist famous first in Vienna, then in Europe, and finally in America, I thought as I sat in the wing chair and at once I recalled that it was at the height of his fame (which he undoubtedly owed to Joana!) that he bolted, as they say, with his wife's best friend and ended up in Mexico. They married in Mexico City, but he divorced his new wife only a year later to marry a Mexican (the daughter of a Mexican minister!), to whom he is still married. Joana really was a *unlucky creature*, from the day she was born until the day she died, I thought, sitting in the wing chair. And it was on the very day Joana killed herself that I went to the Graben and ran into the Auersbergers—I don't believe that was pure chance, I thought, sitting in the wing chair. For ten years I didn't bother about Joana, I thought; I completely lost sight of her for years and didn't hear anything more of her. And today at Kilb I learned that during the last few years of her life she had had what is called a *constant companion*, a second companion in other words; I saw this man for the first time at the *Iron Hand*, I thought, a Carinthian from the Gail Valley, who made a continual effort to speak standard German, though it came across as the most pathetic variety of standard German I've ever heard. This man had put on an ankle-length black coat for his friend's funeral, as well as a broad-brimmed black hat, a so-called slouch hat of the kind that has recently come back into fashion, especially among provincial actors. Of course we can't judge people by their clothes, I thought—that's a mistake I've never made—but at first everything about Joana's companion, with whom she

said to have lived for eight years, struck me as revolting—the way he spoke, what he said, the way he walked, and above all the way he ate his food in the *Iron Hand*. I was shattered to discover that Joana had in the end landed up with someone so *seedy*, who, after a spell as an actor at a small theater in the Josefstadt, had become a commercial traveler, hawking cheap earrings manufactured in Hong Kong; even for a commercial traveler he made a shabby impression, reminding me rather of a market trader—and the humblest kind of market trader at that. The way he pronounced the words *potato salad* to the waitress in the *Iron Hand* almost made me want to vomit, I thought, sitting in the wing chair and watching the guests in the music room. They somehow seemed like figures on a distant stage; it was rather like watching a moving photograph through the haze of cigarette smoke that had formed as a result of everyone's smoking. The Auersbergers suddenly announced they would hold supper only for another quarter of an hour. We'll wait till *half past twelve at the latest*, the hostess said to the writer Jeannie Billroth, to whom she had been talking for some time, naturally about Joana. This woman, who was now fat and gross and ugly, fancied herself as the Viennese Virginia Woolf, though everything she wrote was the most dreadful kitsch, and in her novels and short stories she never rose above a kind of loquacious, convoluted sentimentality. The woman, who had come to the Gentzgasse in a black home-knitted woolen dress, had also been a friend of Joana's. She lived in the Second District, not far from the Praterhauptallee and had for years actually imagined herself to be *Austria's greatest writer, its greatest literary artist*. This evening—or rather night—in the Gentzgasse she had no compunction in telling Auersberger's wife that in her latest novel she had *gone a step further* than Virginia Woolf (I was able to hear her say this because I have such acute hearing, especially at night). Her new book far surpassed *The Waves*, she said, whereupon she lit a cigarette and crossed her legs. She said she intended to go and see *The Wild Duck* again. In Ibsen there's so much beneath the surface, she remarked to Auersberger's wife. She had been unable to buy a copy of the play in any Viennese bookshop; not one bookshop in the city center had *The Wild Duck* in stock, she said—she had not even managed to find a paperback edition. But naturally she knew *The Wild Duck*; she loved Ibsen, especially *Peer Gynt*, she said, speaking through a smoke screen of her own making. She was a heavy smoker and consequently had a raucous voice, and her face was bloated from overindulgence in white wine. In the days when I had close ties with the Auersbergers I used to spend a good deal of time with Jeannie Billroth—far too much time, I now realize—in her municipal apartment, where she lived for more than ten years with a chemist called Ernstl, who never got around to marrying her—or whom she never got around to marrying. Ernstl earned the money, and Jeannie contributed her reputation, attracting artists and pseudo-artists, scientists and pseudo-scientists, and—as Joana used to say—*bringing color into their drab municipal apartment* with its utterly petit bourgeois atmosphere. Jeannie herself was nothing if not petit bourgeois and had become set in her petit bourgeois way over the years, I thought as I sat in the wing chair. After the death of my friend Josef Mari who hanged himself just as Joana did later, and who edited Austria's first official *literary magazine*, entitled *Literature in Our Time*, in the early fifties, Jeannie took over the editorship with the result that the magazine became unreadable. It became a thoroughly dreadful publication, utterly worthless and witless, subsidized by our dreadful, disgusting and benighted state, and carrying only the most fatuous and inane contributions, pride of place being given time and again to poems by Jeannie Billroth herself, who was convinced that she

was not only the successor, even the surpasser, of Virginia Woolf, but also a *direct successor and surpasser of Annette von Droste-Hülshoff*, Germany's greatest woman poet. She fancied she wrote *the best poetry in Austria*, but she actually wrote unrelievedly bad poetry, in which neither the sentiments nor the ideas had the slightest literary merit. For fifteen years she edited this pedestrian periodical, until she was finally bought out with the promise of a life pension. But this did nothing to improve its quality, I thought: on the contrary, the present editor is if anything even more stupid and inept than Jeannie. It was unfortunate, I thought, sitting in the wing chair, that I had chosen that particular day, March 14, to go to the Graber intending to buy myself a tie in the Kohlmarkt or the Naglergasse—I've always bought my ties in the Kohlmarkt and the Naglergasse—only to fall into the clutches of the Auersbergers. In all probability they wouldn't have spoken to me, I now reflected, had they not had the pretext of telling me about Joana's death, and I'd never have accepted their supper invitation had I not been *thrown off balance*, as it were, by Joana's death. Naturally I had not recognized the woman from the general store in Kilb when she telephoned; I did not recognize her voice having last heard it twenty years before at Kilb, when I had taken her and Joana to the *Iron Hand*, for a meal of cold sausage and salad—for a few hours' relaxation and amusement, in other words—as I now recalled distinctly, sitting in the wing chair. She had told me over the telephone that Joana must have hanged herself between three and four in the morning. That was the conclusion reached by the doctor, who had cut down the body with his own hands from a beam over the door of the entrance hall. Country doctors aren't squeamish, I thought. I had seen this doctor, a childhood friend of Joana's, at the cemetery. The funeral was a grotesque affair. I had taken the train to St. Pölten and then changed onto the Maria Zeil branch, arriving at Kilb at half past ten. In order to arrive by ten thirty (the funeral was scheduled for one thirty) I had to be at the Vienna West Station by half past seven. I had turned down various offers from friends to drive me there. I attach the greatest importance to being independent, and there is hardly anything I hate more than accepting lifts from other people and so being at their mercy for good or ill. I had clear recollections of the landscape between St. Pölten and Kilb, and even on this sad occasion it did not disappoint me. During the journey through the hills of Lower Austria I naturally recalled my earlier visits to Joana, most of which I had made either with her husband, the tapestry artist, or with the Auersbergers. But I had often gone there alone too, when I happened to be over from England; I recalled these cross-country journeys to Kilb with the utmost pleasure. Wherever I travel I prefer to be alone, just as I prefer to be alone when I am out *walking*. Yet it has always been a great joy to know that at the end of the journey to Kilb I would find Joana at her parents' little one-story house. I always made these journeys in the spring or the fall, never in summer and never in winter. Country girls, as soon as they are capable of making plans, set their sights on Vienna, the big city, I thought as I sat in the wing chair, and that hasn't changed. Joana had to go to Vienna, as she wanted at all costs to make a *career* for herself. She just couldn't wait for the day when she would board the Vienna train for good, so to speak. But Vienna brought her more heartache than happiness, I thought, sitting in the wing chair. Young people set off for the capital and come to grief, in the truest sense of the word, in the very place where they have placed all their hopes, thanks to the appalling society they find there, as well as to their own natures, which are generally no match for the cannibalistic city. After all, Auersberger too had set his heart on making a career in Vienna.

yet he'd made no more of a career there than Joana; all this time he's been chasing after a career that has so far eluded him, I reflected in the wing chair. He made life too easy for himself, I thought, sitting in the wing chair, and so did Joana: when it comes to making a career in the big city things don't just happen by themselves, and in Vienna they're even less likely to happen by themselves than they are elsewhere. The mistake they both made, I now reflected in the wing chair, was to think that Vienna would come to their aid, that it would grab them under the arms, so to speak, and stop them from falling. But the city doesn't grab anyone under the arms: on the contrary, it constantly seeks to fend off the unfortunate people who repair to it in search of a career, to destroy them and annihilate them. It destroyed and annihilated not only Joana, but Auersberger too, who once believed that in Vienna he would be able to develop into an important composer, a composer of international importance, though to tell the truth he was not only unable to develop in Vienna—he was utterly ruined by the city. The genius he brought with him from Styria, of which there were unmistakable signs some thirty years ago, I now reflected, soon wasted away in Vienna; first it suffered a body blow, and then it became stunted, like countless other geniuses before it, especially musical geniuses. In Vienna he inevitably succumbed to atrophy and dwindled into a so-called *successor of Webern*, and he has remained a *successor of Webern* ever since. And Joana dreamed all her life of making a career for herself as a ballerina at the Opera, and finally of becoming a famous actress at the Burgtheater, yet all her life she remained a dilettante both as a dancer and as an actress, a movement therapist, so to speak, giving private lessons in deportment. It's now twenty-five years, I thought, since I used to write playlets for her, which she would then perform for me during the afternoons and evenings we spent in her high-rise in the Simmeringer Hauptstrasse, and which we would record on tape for all time, as it were—dozens of pieces for two voices, in which she would try to prove how gifted she was and I would try to show off my literary and histrionic talents. These playlets have been lost; they were quite devoid of literary merit, but for years they kept Joana and me alive, I now thought, sitting in the wing chair. For years I would set out, every two or three days, from my apartment in the Eighteenth District and catch the No. 71 tram out on the Simmeringer Hauptstrasse, call at Dittrich's liquor store opposite Joana's high-rise and buy three or four two-liter bottles of the cheapest white wine, then take the elevator to Joana's apartment on the eleventh floor. As we drank we would practice the *total theatrical art*, which comprises both acting and play writing, more or less relying on the wine to sustain us, until we were quite exhausted. When we were no longer capable of performing, we would play back the recordings we had made and get high on them until well into the night, in fact until morning came. My relationship with Joana, I reflected in the wing chair, played an important part in my own development. It was Joana who brought me back to the theater, which I had abandoned after passing out of the Academy. I'd left the Academy with my certificate, I now recalled, thinking as I went down the staircase that I was now through with theater studies and that I wanted nothing more to do with the theater for the rest of my life. I actually shunned the theater for years, until Auersberger introduced me to Joana. Then the moment I met her she suggested the idea of writing playlets for her—short dramatic sketches in other words. She had the perfect voice. It was not *the way she looked* that fascinated me, but *the way she spoke*. And in fact it was my acquaintance with her, which eventually developed into a friendship, that quite simply brought me back into contact with art and

things artistic, after I had been averse to them for so long. For me Joana, and everything about her, represented the theater. Besides, her husband painted, and this also fascinated me right from the beginning, I recalled in the wing chair. Under the right circumstances she could probably have become one of the greatest artists, either as a dancer or as an actress, I thought as I sat in the wing chair, had she not met her artistic husband, Fritz, the painter turned tapestry artist, and had she not given in when she came up against the first serious obstacles to her ambition. On the other hand those of her fellow students from the Reinhardt Seminar who actually went on to act at the Theater in the Josefstadt or the Burgtheater although they are now famous, succeeded only in becoming rather ridiculous and basically futile theatrical figures, who appear in perhaps one Shakespeare play, one Nestroy play and one Grillparzer play a year and are assuredly a thousand times more stupid than Joana ever was. This evening's gathering, though planned as an *artistic dinner* in honor of the actor, is in fact only a requiem for Joana, I said to myself: the smell of that afternoon's funeral was suddenly present in the Gentzgasse, the smell of the cemetery at Kilb was here in the Auersbergers' apartment. This so-called *artistic dinner* is really a funeral feast, I thought, and at once it occurred to me that to my certain knowledge the actor we were waiting for was the only supper guest who had *not* known Joana. The date for this *artistic dinner* had already been agreed, first of all with the actor from the Burgtheater, before Joana killed herself; the Auersbergers had said more than once that it was intended as a belated celebration of the premiere of *The Wild Duck*, which had just opened at the Burgtheater. Joana's death had intervened in their dinner arrangements; they told the guests that it was a dinner in honor of the actor, but then intimated—though not in so many words—that it was in memory of Joana. The actor's convinced that this *artistic dinner* is being given for him, and that's enough to satisfy the Auersbergers, though of course they are giving it more for Joana, since it is taking place on the day of her funeral, I thought, sitting in the wing chair. At that moment I recalled that on the previous day I too had intended to read *The Wild Duck*, in order to be able to keep up with the actor, thinking that I needed only to open my bookcase and get out the text. But I was wrong: I had no copy of *The Wild Duck*, though I had been convinced that I had one. I'm bound to have a copy of the play, I had thought as I opened my bookcase. I've read it several times during the course of my life, I had thought, and I can even remember what the editions look like. But I really did not have a copy, and so, like Jeannie Billroth, I decided to buy myself one in town, but was unable to find one. However, sitting in the wing chair, I remembered that one of the characters in the play was called *Old Ekdal*, and that he had a son, *Young Ekdal*, who was a photographer. And I remembered that the first act took place at the home of a manufacturer called Werle. Ekdal has a studio in the attic, I reminded myself; gradually it all came back, and so I no longer had to exert my memory. Can the production of *The Wild Duck* be any good, I wondered, sitting in the wing chair, *if it's being put on by actors from the Burgtheater?* And again I thought of the *Iron Hand*, where I had taken the woman from the general store, who was dressed all in black, after arriving at Kilb. She entered the store only for a moment, to let her know that I had arrived. She immediately put on a black coat and accompanied me to the *Iron Hand*, the operations room, so to speak, for Joana's funeral. We both ordered a small goulash and waited for Joana's companion to arrive. He arrived at about half past eleven and joined us at our table. When people are dressed in black they appear unusually pale, and this companion of Joana's (the woman from

the general store insisted on calling her *Elfriede*) was so pale that he looked as though he were about to vomit at any moment. He actually did feel like vomiting when he approached the table, as he had come straight from the mortuary chapel next to the church, where he said he had been shattered by what they had shown him: without any prior warning he had had to *endure the sight* of Joana's body in a plastic bag. It appeared that the mortician, who as usual was the local carpenter, had been given no precise instructions about how the deceased was to be buried and had simply put Joana's body in a plastic bag pending the arrival of her companion that morning—this being the cheapest way of dealing with it—and left it on a trestle support in the mortuary chapel. He told us that on seeing the plastic bag he had felt sick and instructed the sexton to cover the body in a shroud and put it in a beech coffin; these instructions had been carried out with his assistance. While we all ate our goulash he told us that he simply could not describe what it had been like to pull Joana's body out of the plastic bag and cover it with a shroud—it had all been so *gruesome*. Finally he had chosen the most expensive coffin the carpenter had in stock. Having eaten half his goulash he went out into the corridor to wash his hands; when he returned I could see tears in his eyes. There were no relatives left, he said; they'd all *died on her* long ago, as he put it, and so all the funeral arrangements *fell to him*. He had expected that the woman from the general store would have been seen to Joana's body and everything arising from her suicide, but at this she shook her head and said that she could not have left her shop even for an hour and had assumed that he had all the arrangements in hand. Be that as it may, Joana's companion ate his goulash so quickly that he had already finished it when I was only halfway through mine. He accidentally splashed some of the gravy on his white starched shirt—or rather on his white starched shirtfront, for I noticed that he was not wearing a shirt, only a shirtfront over a woollen undervest, I recalled in the wing chair. This starched shirtfront spotted with gravy more or less confirms my impression that Joana's companion was completely down and out, I thought as I sat in the wing chair. Having finished his goulash he waited impatiently for us to finish ours, but neither of us could eat any faster. In the end I left nearly half of mine, but the woman from the general store managed to force down the rest of hers. If there's nobody around to pay the expenses, said Joana's companion, they simply put the body in a plastic bag. And then he said that there had been a frightful *stench* in the mortuary chapel. Looking out of the window of the inn, I saw several cars go past with people I knew in them; they had clearly come to Kilb for the funeral and were making for the cemetery. What a good thing I've brought my English umbrella with me, I thought, when it began to rain. The street outside grew dark, and the inn parlor even darker. Jeannie Billroth, the writer, walked past with her retinue, all of them young people under twenty. It was actually *in the high-rise* that I last saw Joana, I now recalled saying to myself in the *Iron Hand*; her face was bloated and her legs swollen. She spoke in what anybody would have described as a *drunken voice*. Over the bed hung one of her husband's tapestries, thick with dust, a reminder of the fact that she had once been happy with this man. The apartment was full of dirty laundry and stank abominably. The tape recorder by the bed, where I could see she spent virtually the whole day, was out of order. On the floor were dozens of empty white wine bottles, some standing, some knocked over. I wanted to hear a particular tape we had made four or five years before this surprise visit of mine, a tape of a sketch in which I had played a king and Joana a princess, but the tape was nowhere to be found. Even if we had found it there would have

been no point, as the tape recorder was broken. *Naturally you were a naked princess*, I said to Joana as she lay in bed. *And you were a naked king*, she replied. She tried to laugh, but could not. There was nothing touching about this last visit of mine, nothing sentimental, I thought, sitting in the wing chair—I found it simply nauseating. There were signs of a companion about the apartment—a pack of cigarettes here, an old tie there, a dirty sock, and so on. She told me several times that I had let her down. She could hardly sit up in bed; she tried several times, but each time she fell back. *You let me down, you let me down*, she kept on saying. For the last few years, she said, she had lived by selling off the tapestries her husband had left behind. She had not heard from Fritz. And she had not heard from the others either—she meant *the artistic crowd*—she had heard *nothing from any of them*. She asked me to go down to Dittrich's and get two two-liter bottles of white wine. *Go on!* she said, just as she always had. *Go on! Go on!* She ordered me down to the liquor store, and I obeyed, just as I had done twenty or twenty-five years before. When I got back I put the two bottles by the bed and took my leave. There would have been no point in having any further conversation with her, I told myself as I sat in the wing chair. At the time I thought she was finished, yet she went on living for several years, and that was what amazed me most. I can truthfully say that until I learned of her death I had assumed that she must have been dead for years. Not having seen her or heard from her for so many years, I had simply forgotten about her, I thought, sitting in the wing chair. The truth is that at times we are so close to certain people that we believe there is a lifelong bond between us, and then suddenly they vanish from our memory overnight, I thought as I sat in the wing chair. It's the way with actors, I told myself, sitting in the Auersbergers' wing chair, that they don't dine much before midnight, and those who keep company with actors have to pay for this dreadful habit of theirs. If we go to a restaurant with actors the soup is never served until half past eleven at the earliest, and the coffee stage isn't reached until about half past one. *The Wild Duck* is a relatively short play, I told myself, but then it takes at least half an hour to get from the Burgtheater to the Gentzgasse, and after the performance the actors have to take their curtain calls—and since *The Wild Duck* is such a great success, there'll have been fairly prolonged applause—so it'll be at least half an hour before the actors have taken off their makeup. So if the performance finished at ten thirty it'll take the actor, who after all is the person for whom this *artistic dinner* is being given, at least until twelve thirty to get to the Gentzgasse. The Auersbergers invited their guests for half past ten—that's monstrous, I told myself as I sat in the wing chair: they must have known that *The Wild Duck* went on till ten thirty and that consequently their Ekdal couldn't be in the Gentzgasse before half past twelve. If I'd thought carefully about when this *artistic dinner* was actually going to start, I certainly wouldn't have come, I thought. I go to the Graben to look for a tie, which naturally I don't find, I thought, and at the most inauspicious moment I run into the Auersbergers. It's as though time had stood still, I thought: all the guests at this *artistic dinner* are people who were their closest and most intimate friends thirty years ago, back in the fifties. Clearly none of these friends had ever severed their relations with the Auersbergers; throughout the twenty or thirty years in which I had had no contact with the Auersbergers, all these people had kept up with them, as they say. I suddenly felt like a deserter, a traitor. It's as though I'd betrayed the Auersbergers and everything I associate with them, I thought, and the same thought must have occurred to the Auersbergers and their guests too. But that did not worry me—quite the contrary, for even

now, sitting in their wing chair in their apartment, I found the Auersbergers utterly repugnant, and their guests equally so; indeed I hated all of them, because they were in every way the exact *opposite* of myself. And now, as I tried to sit it out in the Auersberger apartment, anesthetized by a few glasses of champagne, I felt that my dislike of them had in fact always amounted to hatred, hatred of everything to do with them. We may be on terms of the most intimate friendship with people and believe that our friendship will last all our lives, and then one day we think we've been let down by these people whom we've always respected, admired, even loved more than all others, and consequently we hate and despise them and want nothing more to do with them, I thought as I sat in the wing chair; not wanting to spend the rest of our lives pursuing them with our hatred as we previously pursued them with our love and affection, we quite simply erase them from our memories. In fact I succeeded in evading the Auersbergers for more than two decades and avoiding any risk of meeting them, having devised a deliberate strategy for avoiding any further contact with *these monsters*, as I could not help calling them privately, and so the fact that I had evaded them for over twenty years was in no way fortuitous, I thought, sitting in the wing chair. Joana's suicide alone is to blame for the fact that, in spite of everything, I quite suddenly ran into them in the Graben. Their abrupt invitation to their dinner in honor of the *Wild Duck* artist and my equally abrupt acceptance were a classic illustration of the irrational way one reacts under stress. After all, even though I'd accepted the invitation, I didn't have to act upon it, especially as I've never been punctilious about keeping my promises to visit people, I thought. In fact during the whole of the interval between being invited to this *artistic dinner* and the dinner itself I had kept on wondering whether I would really go to it. At one moment I thought I would, at another I thought I wouldn't; now I told myself I'd go, now I told myself I wouldn't go. I'll go, I won't go—this word game went on in my head day after day, almost driving me insane, and even this evening, shortly before I finally set off for the Gentsgasse, I still wasn't sure whether I would go to the Gentsgasse. Only a few minutes before I finally decided to go I said to myself, Since you've just seen all over again, at the funeral in Kilbuck that the Auersbergers are as repulsive as ever, you naturally *won't* go. The Auersbergers are repulsive people; it was they who betrayed you, not you who betrayed them, I kept thinking as I tried to freshen up in the bathroom, running ice-cold water over my wrists and at one stage trying to cool my face by holding it under the tap. Over the past twenty years they've run you down and denigrated you wherever they could, perverting the truth about everything connected with you and taking every opportunity to assassinate your character, I thought they've told stories about you that aren't true, they've spread lies about you, vicious lies and more and more lies, hundreds and thousands of lies in the last twenty years, telling everybody that it was *you* who exploited *them* at Maria Zaal, not *they* who exploited *you*, that it was *you* who behaved outrageously, not they, that it was *you* who defamed *them*, not they who defamed you, that *you* were the traitor, and so on. I took into account all the reasons for not visiting them; I could find none in favor of doing so after being out of contact for twenty years, yet finally, despite my repugnance, despite the immense hatred I bore them, I made up my mind that I would visit them, and so I slipped on my coat and set out for the Gentsgasse. I've come to the Gentsgasse, I told myself, sitting in the wing chair, even though it's the last thing I wanted to do. Everything was against my coming to the Gentsgasse, everything was against such a ludicrous *artistic dinner*, yet now I'm here. *On the way to the Gentsgasse I kept*

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