

Slowly and heavily, a hippopotamus rising from the Nile, he rose from the paper mountain, beat the nightmare of virginal lewdness out of his clothes and stood there, a squat man of sixty with short gray hair and swollen lips, crossing his hands over his forehead, and looked around him darkly. Have you been watching me again while I was asleep? Have you been spying on me, you scum? You're living by my sufferance, remember that. Tomorrow it will be all up with you. I'll throw you both out. Both of you. What time is it?

Nine o'clock, Father. Aslan called him Father because of the difference in their ages and in token of devotion and gratitude. Nine o'clock, eh? Wacholder was now able to shout, so he shouted.

Yes, nine o'clock, Father.

What about my tea?

Leo jumped out of bed again (has he gone plumb crazy?) and picked at his molar with satisfaction as Aslan obediently brought down his own tea. Aslan can do what he likes, I'm here to work.

Wacholder warmed his hands on the lukewarm tea. They've been here again, Aslan, the big black ones, do you hear. They've visited me again, Aslan, as big as gothic letters, up and down the wall of my heart, Aslan, up and down, and the Latin letters too, as green and thick as creepers. A whole bellyful, Aslan, it turned my stomach, Aslan. And then the rats, as big as big steamships, back and forth, back and forth. What do you think, Aslan, should I call the doctor?

Call the doctor, Father.

No, I won't call the doctor. I've changed my mind. Let them crawl, let them bob up and down, let them gnaw and creep and root about. Let them hollow me out. Man is a pipe.

Yes, Father.

Man is a connecting pipe between feed trough and garbage pail. Here's the trough and here's the pail, and across here is man and they send things through him. A hose. You see what I mean?

Yes, Father.

Do I get Würz or don't I?

Not for the present, Father.

He's half my mutilated soul, do you understand that at least?

There's something between the two of you. Something. Something that cuts across the river and through all the walls. An umbilical cord.

That's it, Aslan. An umbilical cord.

You're twins. Still unborn.

That's it, my dear poet.

Nibbling in your sleep at the placenta of this world.

That's right, Aslan, that's right.

Floating in the dark, amniotic fluid . . .

Yes, Aslan, we're both floating. I in my bleached wood fibers, in my glue, breathless,

airless, and he over there on the other side in his mattress. Have you drafted the letter?

Here it is, Father. The seventy-fourth.

Let's see.

Wacholder stared at the large sheet of paper crowded with writing and turned it in all directions. My eyes hurt. Read it to me.

Aslan read: Now, Würz, you've got to go. And quick. The house is on fire. Your face is black with smoke and soot. Get down to the river. You're on fire. Into the sand with you. Put yourself out. Make it fast. Drop your brushes. Run. The beams are falling. Hurry. The housecleaning can wait. Out with you. The fire is consuming you. You're half charred. You eggshell. You sheet of wrapping paper. You tree-stump goblin. You tin can. Run for your life. I'll put you out in Greenland. Don't be afraid. Seventeen years is enough. Hurry up. Yours, Wacholder. [. . .]

Fire didn't worry him. Wacholder had used more effective threats. Cats, rats, ants, dynamite, floods. What worried him wasn't the substance or the curses. What bothered him was that people didn't take him and his work seriously. Ossiass Würz was frantically busy making preparations for his seventeenth wedding anniversary. And now comes this letter, the seventy-fourth, and the preparations have to be postponed. As usual, he first put Wacholder's letter in an envelope. So as not to forget it, he wrote Wacholder's address on the outside (Alsterhof, City) and affixed a stamp. Only then did he start working on the answer.

Good Lord, Wacholder, what's got into you again, what are you driving at with your fire? I'm burning with eagerness to do my work, and you want to smoke me out of here. How often must I tell you that I want to be left in peace? I need peace to do my peaceful work. I wish to build, not to sit around, to preserve, not to destroy. I am a man of progress, a man of the future, I have values, yes, values. I am the future. The future is I. Don't you see that? Me, a sheet of wrapping paper, an eggshell, an empty tin can? And where do you get the tree-stump goblin? I'm telling you for the last time: my home is not a cave. This is no womb, it doesn't smell of sweat and blood, of milk and urine, of afterbirth and yesterday. Don't make me think of those things, I'm always thinking of them. And when I think of them, I feel as I did then. It was an uninterrupted movement of the lips, eating deeper and deeper into the flesh. It was hunger, lust. If you remember, stop remembering. Those were the lip-smacking years, but we didn't get fat. Not I. Did you? It took me a long time, but now I know. It's no good chasing after your daily bread, don't move from your four walls. Exertion is a waste of energy. I have all nature delivered to my back door. Here in my home it's chopped small and grated fine, crushed and salted, boiled

and eaten. I've got my domestic animals in jars and bottles. That's the way to do it. And the beauties of nature aren't lacking either. I

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have butterflies in tissue paper, a marten and a fox on top of the cupboard, two elks, a roe and a bear on the wall. A swallow and a sea gull under glass. And it's all fresh and clean. Here I can breathe. I don't need your Greenland or your river, and I can do without your café. What would I do in your café? What have you to offer me? A noise that's always in my ears? Faces that smack their lips and talk and stare at me, that I see the whole time as it is? What have you got out there that I haven't got in here? Neatness and order are freedom, that's why I stay here. ■