

Lojze Kovačič
CRYSTALLINE TIME

You can fall in love with this terror or you can find yourself hating it from the depths of your being - especially when trapped in a crowded city bus - and both states, love one day and hatred the next, without the slightest hint of a false note. When I get home I crawl straight under my blanket, knees tucked under my chin as though I were still young. This is hardly a noble posture, I know, because our children expect us to become wise Indian elders... It's not the clamor of the apartment building or from the street that bothers me, but silence, which sometimes rattles and wheezes like that bellows, a bag with no pipes that during my year of military service in Kičevo would put me to sleep as the air was pressed out of it... What I miss is a clamor to drown out the one in my head. All the racket first thing in the morning, the squeak of buses, the hollow buzzing of cranes, the rattle of cement mixers and the sliding of sand down chutes leading out of the workshops in a gravel pit - all of this calms me and reminds me of Basel, of the work in the harbor, of Bremerhaven, of industry. It whisks away the junk left by the night's oppressive dreams, the pangs of conscience and moral order that are always devastating, even if I don't believe in them. All those aural fragments in the morning — the mechanical impacts, the slap of tires, the ignition of motors in parking lots — are also the beginning of all sorts of incidents, intrigues and tricks of the day just emerging — they come without any processing, scruples or second thoughts straight from the great technological spirit outside to provide mine with an alibi. Even the early footsteps of a woman in high heels exploding from the pavement twelve stories below like the impact of huge drops of water on the bottom of a well as the woman hurries to catch her early bus to work evoke the first sentence of the Lord's Prayer. And then lights go on in the apartments across the way, mute explosions of light that illuminate the wall above my bed, etching out enlarged patterns from the curtains on my window, so that only now do I notice their intricate design... Where all have I been during the night, in what kind of absurd situations was I quite specifically caught, especially in the dreams just before waking? Sometimes, more and more frequently over time, the open wardrobe by the door reminds me of an elevator or a sidewalk phone booth that someone is calling from. Recently the hard plastic vacuum and some clothes hung up in the wardrobe reminded me of some people, of a man in a white smock who in his sleep was passing some message on a sheet of paper along to people wearing guilt smocks who were standing outside, whereupon these in turn passed the message on to some figures wearing white smocks ... until the one in the

wardrobe, not part of this circle, was the only one left. I can't remember everything, or else I can't remember a thing, because all the flora and fauna of my dreams sink into my pillow just as soon as my head pulls away from it, and then I'm left staring at my pillow as though it were some living creature, a vulture, or a fluffy rabbit, or sometimes even someone who sleeps in the same bed as me but prefers not to become visible or wake up. I have this from childhood, when I used to imagine that at least my pillow must have a recollection of the long night extending through multiple dreams. Now all I can remember is some feeling that I had while asleep, most often this one: that I had just participated in the life of some rare plant or animal species that I may very well actually have belonged to a long time before my present self, or that I am about to join — quite soon, in the days ahead when I conclude this human existence — as a full-fledged member, perhaps an ancestor or a descendant. There is this persistent thought pervading my dreams: that in some far distant past, even before the battle of the seeds, in one of the countless segments of time before my consciousness entered the world, some merciless war took place in which my raw energy faced down some other equally elemental force, and that this struggle was relentless and took place in unbearable circumstances. Did I win or was I just lucky? In any event, I fought my way through to the most highly developed species — after one final battle fought in the uterine canal by a multitude of spermatozoa, two hundred million, consisting of all heads and tails — and in this manifestation all conceivable goods and opportunities were served up to me, as if on a platter, to partake of the highest experiences and accomplishments and the greatest conceivable suffering and delights. This was the final mutational stage to which I had excavated my way and the choicest opportunity to prove myself. And because I didn't have any aces on my side (or at least that's how it seemed to me) in my struggle with the incomprehensible and the unseen, where the challenge was to endure the tension of the cosmos to the last, I had to use various disguises, tricks and pretexts, but above all to conceal my essence, etc. I had no capabilities, perhaps they were damaged or I didn't know how to summon them up to the surface — partly from a conviction that the spirit had to mature on its own, precisely the way legs one day start walking all of their own —, in any case, I don't believe in one or the other, and nothing can comfort me; I've wasted my chance to move on (to what?), period, I've closed the circuit of all possible mutations and now I'm about to head off to my true final rest, into a darkness of death that will never again open up to reveal a patch of the world overhead. It's as though I've only now come to sense all the transformations inherent in those

various species, and not until this instant have I begun to detect a pulse from some of those abandoned skins, which is no more than a sign that I'm ready to graduate; there's nothing that can run to my rescue, I've finally arrived at the wall. Here I am now, sitting on my bed after some difficult dreams, and nothing, not a handsome face, nor a muscular body, nor smooth skin, nor clever clowning around or a harsh, ironic look at my inner self can save me or straighten out my spirit, which is, strictly speaking, more crushed than spoiled. No matter how big a stupidity or unbridled cliché I say out loud, for the whole bedroom to hear ... for instance that man is more a creature of earth than of spirit, because he asserts himself technically, or that man is more a spiritual entity than an earthly one, because as a rule he comes out beaten, smashed mightily, continually, definitively against the rock of his hurt conscience and that all things fragile strike like an axe into cobwebs ... At every commonplace I might utter the darkness in the room shoots back, "That is so incredibly stupid, that if it were any more so, it would be wisdom..." Quite simply, there's nothing you can trick the spirit with, that vanquished slave of sleep. If even once in your denial you've tried to conceal ... what? If you've so much as complained to someone that you can't take the effort of all the asceticism any longer, an abyss has opened up beneath you that has swallowed you up along with everything that belonged to you. And if you thought you might continue practicing your denial where you left off, it has rejected you, moved to some other hilltop where its flames now shoot up in even greater ardor, radiant and blinding, demanding of you a completely different kind of denial and a different way of sacrifice that you have yet to discover if you want it to let you even draw close again... Worst of all is your own faith. That's why the emerging day and all the noise from outside and within the apartment building, caused by people whose essence is inaccessible and alien to you, in a way expunge the difficult night before the tense onset of day. You dip into it like a public swimming pool, where you don't need to swim in your own way, but the way you've been taught by the signboards.

I fix coffee and sit down at the table next to the windowpane that separates the kitchen from the balcony and I try to wake up. With the help of fragments: a paragraph from a book, a look at some scribbled-on papers, from which I can sometimes only make out a sketch in my own hand, a piece from yesterday's paper (some technological, surgical or aeronautical news, the sort of thing that draws my attention)... Like this table, the day is a big, beautiful, clean, hard rectangle. You took your flying leap at it in the dark at five in the morning, as night was fading away. The light conceals everything, inside and out, like a transparent beast, into whose

invisibility everything you're about to do in the next twenty-four hours will vanish insatiably. Day is a dangerous playground. Its plot is unpredictable. It's more like a raft, a plain board on a raging current (a diary) than it is like a ship with a compass and rudder (a novel). It can always take you off course and send you wherever the current is rushing. You can't be distracted. You look up at the sky, which is very bright. There's a very specific, or vague, but in any case smudgy and somewhat gentle ethical adventure written on it, which you have to adhere to — although, because it's not labeled, there is the risk you won't recognize it. It doesn't appear to you, so you have to appear to it.... But how? ... To your relief the day progresses from hour to hour. These are definitive, but each incomplete. That's why you have to prepare like a machine: sharpen your cogs, rationally distribute the weight and counterweight, so that you can function clearly and simply. But the minutes can expand into hours, the hours into days, a day sometimes into a whole week, and I wind up crafting a tactical draft of my strategy, and in the process forget about the anonymous nature of the adventure written across the sky: at the table I write out my report in order not to lose time on it at work. When I get off the bus, I'll get my newspaper at the cigarette kiosk and not at the newspaper stand, because the latter is closed until eight so that the saleswoman can deposit the previous day's take in the bank across the street. I'll read my report to the secretary in the administrative office, which is located at the front of the building, so that she doesn't get lost in my handwriting, mistype, then have to call me back in the afternoon for corrections. After that I'll register the time of my arrival in my department's log, which is kept in the courtyard, then continue my path toward the rear of the building, where the classrooms are located, so I can retrieve some equipment that I need for my class from the basement. This way I save myself a hundred steps and two trips upstairs, about fifteen minutes that I can then use to look through the day's newspaper. Then I'll turn to my work schedule: in the course of five hours I need to get everything done, plus prepare a few things for the following day. That will leave me three hours during the most energetic part of the day, in which I can free up my mind for anything ... maybe for writing. It's a good plan for outwitting fate up *there*, though down *here* there can always be some trap lurking around a corner ... something could happen to Tina, our daughter, outside or at home ... it's horrible how in the middle of the day, with plenty of light all around, those blobs from the night can appear and a fine day starts to collapse into a black box and your armor drops off... But I only started putting these breastplates and spaulders on each morning recently, a few months ago... Now in the mornings

I'm tired to the point of not caring, while the previous night and the botched day graze outside and indoors like a pair in cahoots on the same rope. I'm scared - after thirty years! - of the children, who demand the same diligence, effort and dedication from me as they did before I went down... In looking for answers, excuses ... if you could find them in the most littered recesses of yourself, they'd be some support, but they're not there, so it's best to just slam the door shut on that cellar and go ... don't worry, the demons will find you... This is one more reason I trust nothing, least of all myself or my doubts... They can always turn into a kind of flattery, a way of saying look what a hero you are, doggedly dealing with such huge challenges despite your sudden attack of doubt in the midst of the battle, or rather: your faith in distrust. That's for the media, for roundtables, electronic reality. Doubt breeds further doubt... Between *what I'm about to write*, as I pace back and forth in my room, and the moment when I *pull out my chair* to sit down and *write it*, it's already written *differently*. An inferno of labyrinths furrows my brain ... there's no place where you can confidently plant your flags. But in spite of the indifference that has come over me lately, these past months, the past year, and the amazement that's more powerful than skepticism at the changes and reactions of age - which is as interesting as any other period of life - I keep myself on a leash and keep watch on myself. As I nap, in my half-sleep it sometimes seems as though the sins, trespasses, erstwhile weaknesses or appetites wouldn't have been nearly as inappropriate if only I hadn't studied them all the time, tailing my every step, keeping myself under watch... It would be wonderful if a person could speak of himself as a mere fact, the way newspapers fire their machine guns non-stop every day like some crazed NCO. But facts come fraught with pain and the interpretations we use to process them, and these are quite a bit bigger and harsher than the facts themselves. We wind up having to withhold our actions to the point of miserliness, so that they don't break through your shell like your last dinar, until they devour you. And thus each individual with his unknown image of the world vanishes from the face of the earth, something I've so often regretted with people, because I've always been filled with such curiosity to know what sorts of screams they used to destroy the world. Who or what could possibly command my living image of the world to wander the earth like a shadow among shadows, lost, the way I am for myself?

When B. arrives, I focus all my effort. For the simple reason that I love her. And this love is more important than me and everything that's interesting about me: indeed, B. stands at the center of it. If only I weren't constantly afraid that something bad will happen to her while

she's running around town shopping and doing errands for others, knowing as I do what dangerous streets she has to cross everywhere. Or evenings, when she leaves work and waits alone at the bus stop. So far I've done everything I can to intercept her. Perhaps my apprehension is exaggerated, but now I look on this time as though it were the enlarged structure of some very complex insect, some magical louse or worm, for instance, that in the extent of its convolutions doesn't lag one bit behind human life. And I imagine quick changes of place, emotional affects, incidents she could get entangled in at work or in town ... women draw the most attention in a crowd and always pay a premium. By nature people are rats ready to denounce anyone to everyone, condemning anything they don't understand with penetrating arguments - anything to keep their listeners happy... I like everything about B., the different way she feels and wants things, her strange unconditional trust in people, her readiness to help everyone, the thoroughness with which she does favors, and the way that she's not even aware of that dedication. Then on the other hand, the confidence that her students and others have in her (their "beautiful and young teacher," born in 1934), in her cosmic kindness, as some of them call it, which makes it hard for them to know how to repay her. She is my last straw, a kind of escape to a forest or garden where everything is as fresh as in childhood, where it seems there is no silence, no threatening lack of existence in the emptiness around you, and where your whole being, as strange and pointless as it is, readily grants you such an intimate contemporary. I'm unable to describe her, probably because I love her too much, and if I ever did succeed, that image of her would be faithful for only an instant, because soon, within a week or a couple of days, it would be lacking, because in the meantime something new would have happened, she would have done something different, told some stories from when she was a girl, from her high school years, from the time of her first love, from the years when she looked after her ailing father, from the time when she made her living in England as the lowliest of nurses ... in short, suddenly you see her in completely different surroundings or you see other spaces in her, and in the sudden attraction of some previously unnoticed detail you discover a striking, not quite fully formed thought that takes your breath away, as though someone who'd been sitting silent and forgotten in some corner suddenly got up and said something fundamentally compelling about life... Perhaps I oughtn't say anything at all about my wife ... I couldn't care less if somebody finds this inappropriate ... I'm writing this now for myself ("as yet unknown or otherwise"), in isolation, without readers, goddamn it! ... Anyone is welcome to skip over it, just make sure

some day when you run into me that you don't come up and bore me, standing there, asking questions and expecting me to answer as you gape like some jackass waiting to be saddled ... whatever you could want to know is right here... Actually the solution is quite simple: in life's final phase, before the grave, your wife always turns into what she's been all along, a kind of comrade at the front, your buddy in the first or last trench, it doesn't matter. Forced into a state of uncertain endurance, she makes a new day out of each one that comes, ensuring that it passes without any failures or catastrophes. I only wish she could relax, sleep, not keep thinking of new favors to do for others, have long dreams she could tell me about, instead of having to jump to her feet as soon as she opens her eyes — and rush off to take charge of the day, that mystery of light lasting a few hours. When she steps through the sliding door like that - her hair tousled, pretty in her light blue pajamas, I always feel as though I've been optically enchanted, every morning. I love her skin with its light down, every part and line of which I know as I know her face, where there is nothing to separate the sacred from the profane. I love to press my mouth between her neck and shoulder, hug her around her waist and back, which is as lithe as a young girl's. She is fixed in the metaphor: a fresh blossom. I always used to think, "beauty, sure!" ... but her body is actually more like an exuberant line whose essence is the soul that gives it its charming light gait and light movements. Most of all I'm amazed at how different her everyday state of mind is, the way it organizes the day into differently colored fields of activity and rest, which is probably something every woman does, but which I've become aware of only now; and that some of her abilities long since presumed discarded can suddenly reappear. She's odd. She doesn't like to show off. As though she has no energy for herself. She never assumes the limelight, anywhere. And she always blushes as though she were the least realized individual of all. She has skills that she conceals. Perhaps her case could be explained with a maxim from the *Book of Changes*: "And though she has the strength of a dragon, she never shows it to others." B. moves among people and I see how she notices them. She gladly accepts whatever they give her and then does the same for them, giving them what they need or even what they've just wished for on a whim. That's how she relates to people - she makes them happy. I know, I'm ridiculous and pathetic skipping over literature's code of silence about one's private life and various other taboos, but this is how I am, whether she's in the forefront of what I'm describing or just in the background. It's possible that I ascribe my own thoughts, emotions and hopes to her, but then everyone does that whether they love or hate, because otherwise they'd be

indifferent to everyone and everything. It's also possible that all this is a result of my late understanding of women, which went to school for a long time and has only now graduated ... perhaps the maturity in each of us was seeking the other one out ... in which case there are no similes left, just a simple "no more lies," which is to say that you love truly. But we have to preserve this climate, this sky that we've pitched over our territory, securing it to nothing but ourselves, because life is too unconvincing, too open, too much the antithesis of everything, a chaos that moves through all spheres. We work to survive and then earn our graves ... I'm even writing this for money (what a revolting form of business, and doubly so, because it "mixes love and talent").

excerpt from the novel translated by Michael Biggins