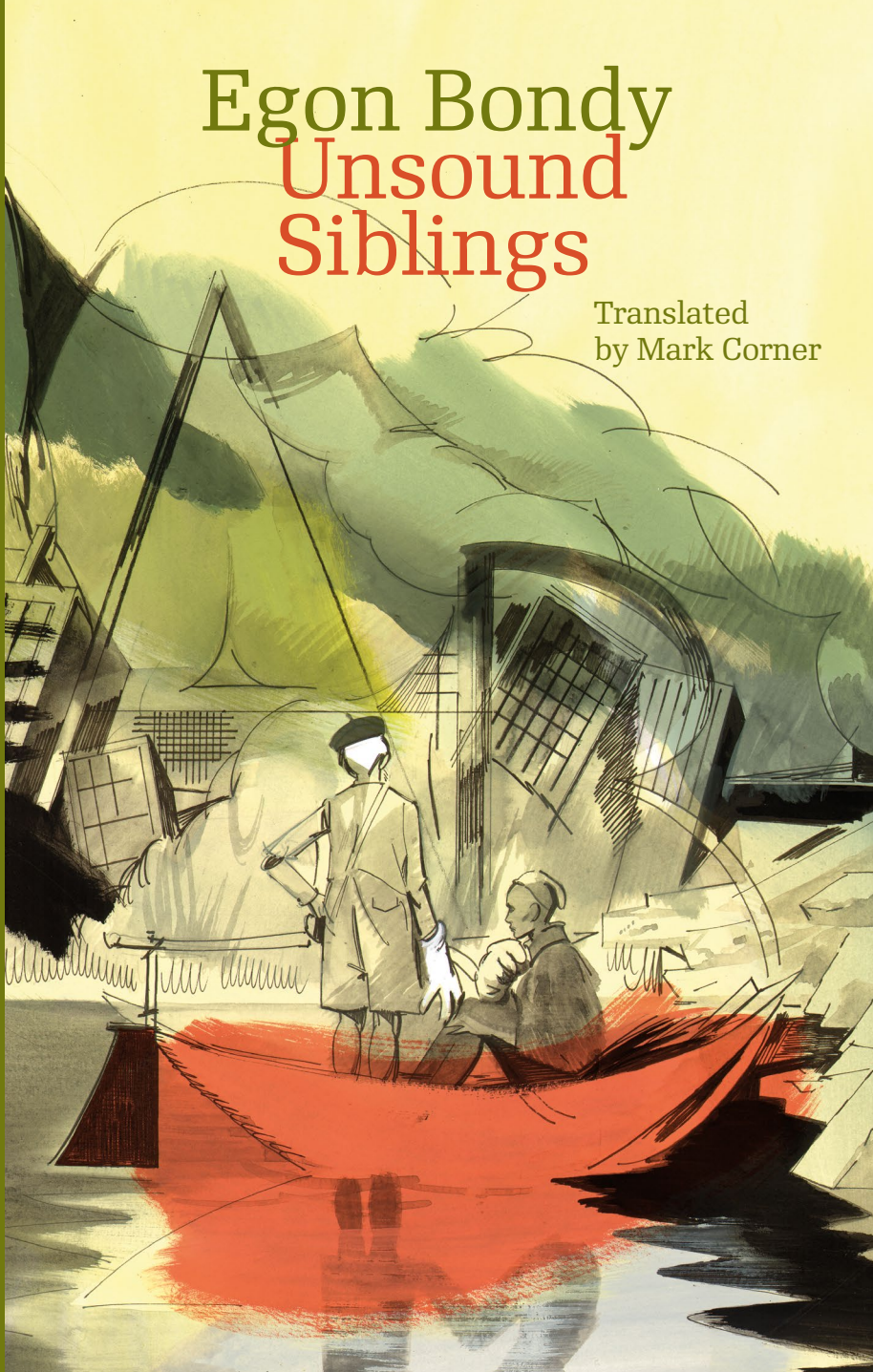
Egon Bondy
Unsound Siblings

Translated by Mark Corner



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Egon Bondy

Translated from the Czech by Mark Corner
Afterword by David Vaughan

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

The Czech poet, prose writer, philosopher, and icon of the Czech underground, Zbyněk Fišer—known as Egon Bondy—was born in Prague on January 20, 1930. The son of a Czechoslovak army colonel, Bondy dropped out of high school and embraced a bohemian existence. That same year he joined the communist party, but left after February 1948. He adopted his Jewish pseudonym in protest against the fabricated anti-Semitic trials that took place in Czechoslovakia along with the Soviet bloc overall.

The following years Bondy scraped by without steady employment, resorting to begging and petty theft, even serving a term in prison. It was Bondy's deep interest in philosophy that prompted him to return to school, eventually earning his university degree in 1961. Bondy went on to write a multivolume history of philosophy that was singular in its treatment of Eastern philosophical traditions. From the late 50s until 1967 Bondy worked as a night watchman at the National Museum and in the bibliographic department of the State Library. In 1967, he went on disability retirement. Bondy's engagement with the Czech underground began in the 1970s, when he began collaborating with the Plastic People of the Universe, led by Ivan Martin Jirous, with the band setting some Bondy texts to music.

After the breakup of Czechoslovakia in 1993, Egon Bondy moved to Bratislava, where he lived the rest of his life. He died there in 2007.

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For Sis



When he reached the top of the hill, a plain spread out before him. Three trees were standing in a field. The road was full of puddles and what was left of melting snow. Dirt stuck in whole clumps to his boots. When he reached the trees, he tripped over a corpse. It was already in an advanced state of decomposition. It was impossible to tell if it was a man or a woman. He dug into it with his foot and mud oozed out. It was the corpse of the world. The weather was ugly, and the sky was dull. After a few miles he reached the pub. He was very hung over. For the last few days, he had been drinking heavily without stopping.

The innkeeper poured him a beer. She was more advanced in size than in years. Her black and shiny hair was permed but tousled. As he settled into a corner, she went into the kitchen behind a glass door. The next moment she could be heard mating with someone. The cupboard shook and dishes and glasses rattled. Words from the man met with her groans. There was a sound of two pairs of feet stamping and scraping on the floor. Outside the window the small village square was empty. Little coloured or crocheted curtains were drawn across all the darkened windows of the tiny houses. Even at noon the rooms must have stayed in the dark. Only a few chimneys showed signs of smoke.

While he walked on, putting distance between himself and the centre of the plain, he thought about the corpse. It had probably been lying there through the winter. It was hard to suppose that no one in the village knew about it. It was right next to the village, lying close to the road. They seemed to have taken its shoes, its hat, and certainly, its watch. At the end of the plain, where the hill began to decline, he stopped. Through the thin line of trees he could see all the way down in the grey but clear air. It seemed to him that the water level was on the way up again. It hadn't moved for several months, with only the tide claiming a few

extra metres of land for a while. Since yesterday, however, it seemed to have risen again during the night. All they could do was wait to see if it would stop again. This was how the whole land had already ended up flooded, though in a strange manner, for the hill on which he was standing was by no means the highest one. But water had flooded even the high mountains, covering them like a cloak that trembled and billowed, but stuck to them with a surprising stability before spilling over again to absorb more of the lowlands. Perhaps this was the last of the land. On the other side there was a city below the hill. That was where he lived. On the outskirts, the water had already flooded some houses. But in any case, they had already been standing empty. He had once stopped in a nearby tavern nestling in a small hollow. It couldn't be ruled out that it was now under water. He decided to go back by another route, having



time on his hands before night came. There were two more villages on this side of the hill below the forest and there would be beer in each of them.

This night was like any other in the way the heavens opened up. He lingered in the last village and the nausea ebbed away a little. It was dark by the time he was walking home across the side of the hill above the water. The path was comfortable and familiar, allowing him to look ahead without thinking and up at the sky, where a film was unfolding whose changes of scene were so inconsequential that there was no point in watching it. A blazing fire spread itself out across a black sky from which the moon and the stars had long since disappeared. From time to time, strange objects appeared against the glow of the fire, human limbs, bodies and heads of some kind flying around, opening their mouths and shouting something, but from far away their voices could not be heard. Sometimes a face would appear out of the flames, one so large that only its chin and mouth and the tip of its nose could be seen, so that it was impossible to say who it might belong to. Then there was the big green bum up there which stayed for months at a time. In the early days, the teenagers found it a source of amusement and waited for it outside until nightfall. But after a while it ceased to amuse them and instead they stayed in front of the TV or went to the pictures. When something new happened to turn up, like the once ever-so-amusing head of a goat, it was the night owls who brought the news from their walks, and the drunks were given something to gawp at for a few days. But before long the novelty always wore off.

Some people said – though they had no reason for saying so and were taken no more seriously than those who tell fortunes or read palms – that something was up there keeping an eye on the spectators below and adjusting the programme according to their reaction. Various tipplers



said that after the pub had shut they saw a large glass of beer all aglow, and another time rum pouring from a bottomless bottle. In any case no one could confirm this or suggest a way of putting it to the test. On the night in question nothing new was on display. He carried on looking at what he had seen for months on his nocturnal ramblings.

The pub in his part of town was still busy. He found out that the water level had only risen a little. A fellow playing cards whom he knew well by sight but not by name, explained that this time it wouldn't stop rising and everything would be over in a few weeks' time. He announced this at least twice a year, every time the water rose an inch. He'd been in and out of the funny farm and his friends knew how to make him the butt of a joke because he fell for everything. But in other ways he was a good man who simply suffered the misfortune of having seven children already, the births virtually an annual event. Now it was slowly beginning to pay off, as his child allowance had risen higher than his wages. You could tell he was content enough, even an object of envy now and again, and in fact they were a little envious of him now. At least they could touch him for funds when they lost at cards. Meanwhile the radio churned out the latest hits.

* * *

He drank two beers without sitting and went home. He lived in a small house which was once a luxury garage and had now been partitioned to form two living rooms. The toilet was outside the front door, making it the first port of call for anyone who wasn't familiar with the house. It was a small contribution to the last word in architectural design.

Inside the room his sister was lying on a couch from which bits of seagrass (or was it sea onion?) padding were sticking out, but whose springs were still firm. His sister – or was it half-sister? Or maybe stepsister? Or half-cousin?

The answer was not clear to either of them, for long ago the designation of siblings who had one father but a different mother had fallen out of use. She was listening to records, reading detective stories and darning socks. Anyone with a stomach-ache should lie down on it, and that's what this sister was doing. Her stomach was aching because they'd had too much to drink the day before.

"Back already? What's it like out there?" she asked, sitting up.

Because of the slippery nature of language, they both addressed each other either by their first names or as "Cuz" and "Sis".

"The weather's foul," he said, "it's going to rain, it might even snow again. But it's not too cold."

He undressed and sat down. Sis poured him tea made of orange leaves, which was the only sort of tea he drank. It was perhaps difficult to get hold of, but that was something they didn't have to think about, having a store of sealed boxes behind the garage. This was a small inheritance from their father, who had brought them from his travels to what then used to be overseas.

The two had always loved each other. Even as teens their heads had never been turned by anyone else. Now they were at the best, if not the wisest, age of thirty. Both mothers had given birth to them in the same year, the same month and on the same day.

Outside it began to sleet. There was no wind, and through a wall of glass they watched a silent and slow pilgrimage of drops and flakes before they drifted into sleep. How happy they were!

The fire crackled in the cast-iron stove.

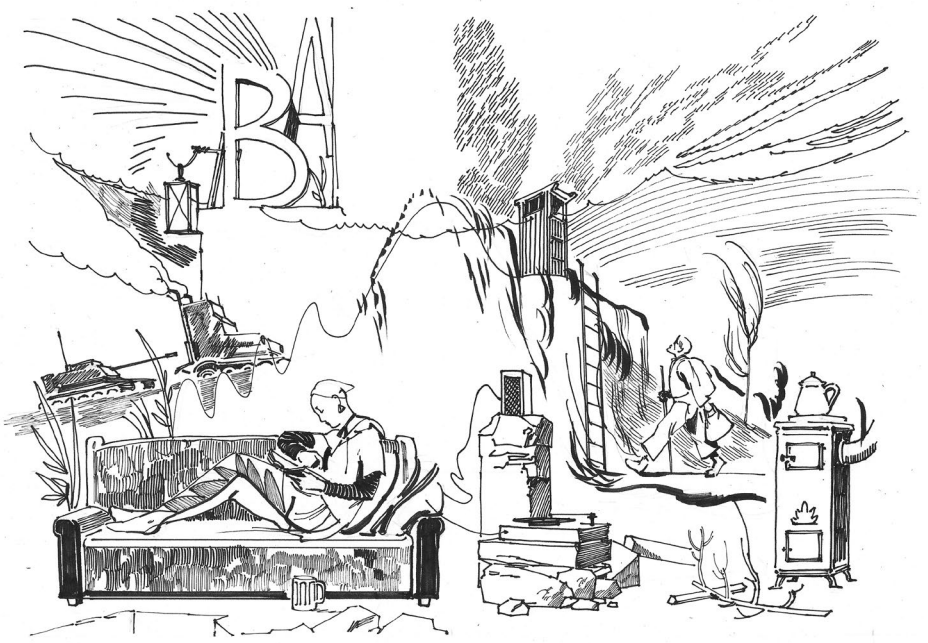
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They were asleep when morning came. In March the dawn already comes early, and people find the sun rising

to accompany them to work. When the sun rises over the rooftops or penetrates the windows of the trams, or when suddenly a beam of light finds its way into their backyards, the workers smile as if a hand has caressed them. Nothing can hold back the beautiful summer season as it approaches, the time of holidays, swimming in the open air, sunbathing and warmth. But the siblings did not salute the dawn because they were not working. Even in winter in these Northern regions, when the sun takes its time about rising, they hardly ever saw the red sky of dawn, but this was never a source of regret to them because they could go on sleeping instead. On this particular day, the brightness of noon was almost upon them before they opened their eyes at the same time. They took pleasure in the sun and the prospect of a long dark season finally coming to an end.

They were both happy from the moment they woke up. They poured hot water to make more orange tea and went to the loo. The pair of them did not have much of an income, but they could just about manage. They received modest benefits because they were deemed unfit for work. At the end of the month, however, they always came up short by a small amount. It was a topic they came back to now.

"One thing that never ceases to fascinate me," began Cuz, "is the fact that a mere two or three centuries ago we would hardly have been able to survive. Only the most advanced industrial society can also provide the means of subsistence for all those who are not working. But it does so only by making a virtue out of necessity because it is more economically advantageous to provide people like us with charity than to provide us with work. As elements of the production process, we would be more trouble than use, and the result would be inefficiency in society. It is fascinating to think that just a few generations ago we would have had to work, starve to death or else beg and steal. Here we are living at the most advanced stage in the evolution of



society, towards which all generations have worked for a thousand centuries of history. For thousands of generations, unfortunates like us have withered away and died, and only today are we deservedly harvesting the fruits of their suffering. The march of history and the progress confirmed by dialectical reasoning are for me a never-ending source of excitement."

Sis nodded intently, knowing how much history meant to him. She was familiar with this statement but recognised that to him it wasn't just a matter of repetition.

Enraptured by the sun's caress as soon as they began to cross from the door of their garage to the door of their loo, they swiftly got ready to go out.

Sis put on a dress made from sacking she had discovered and then dyed a new colour. Since the dyeing was

not handled in a very professional manner, the dress was dyed different shades of orange, and she took advantage of this by contouring the dyes with purple Indian ink. Where the ink spread, it made for beautiful transitions that could never have been created naturally. The dress was cut very simply, the tunic only slightly taken in at the waist, the sleeves short and the belt made from a gold electric cable whose original purpose as part of a radio set would never have occurred to anyone. The dress tightened only slightly across her breasts, which were proportionate to the half-sibling's figure, neither small nor uncomfortably large. Reaching well below the knees, the dress was decorated with natural fringes, which were partly left in their original colour of sackcloth. There was no hemming on the small neckline, so the fabric had unravelled slightly, something which gave it an unexpected charm all its own. Underneath the dress, however, Sis put on warm underwear, for A. (i.e. Cuz) was very worried about her catching cold. The thermal underwear, however, had been so modified that it complemented rather than clashed with her top layer, right down to the subtle contrasting colours of the cuffs on her wrists and ankles. Around her neck small shells collected each day from the water's edge made up a necklace. With their delicate chestnut hue the shells were a perfect match for the home-made clothes. A. handed her a scarf, which was bushy enough to match any fox fur, and over it she put on a sealskin coat, another keepsake from her father's voyages at sea – so it was certainly more than half a century old.

She was wearing her mud boots, the third of her three pairs of footwear: winter shoes, summer shoes and mud boots. They were half boots with a folkloric appearance but with tops made from a washable plastic.

It must be said that there was hardly anything to be seen of the clothes that she had so carefully selected, but it made

A. happy when she was beautifully dressed, and besides, one could count on there being a rock by the water where they could bask in the spring sunshine.

Sis tied on a silk scarf, now faded to a pleasantly indeterminate colour, and left at home the fur hat that had served her throughout the winter.

A. dressed in his usual manner.

* * *

When they set out, they didn't make a beeline for the water, for that would have required them to go across town but headed for the hill, which they wanted to cross to reach the other side if they felt up to it. There was mud everywhere after the sleet of the night before, but despite this they left the road behind the city and opted for dirt-tracks that skirted the edges of fields, because they liked having their peace together.

It took more than three hours to reach the brow of the hill and it was already well past noon. They had not yet stopped, for it was still too cold for lying in the sun, and they kept talking all the way. They had an inexhaustible fund of stories to draw upon, even though they had grown up together since they were children. New things were always coming to mind, there was always something to say about what they were thinking, reading or seeing, for even though they might be seeing the same things each day, they never saw them in the same way. Whether it was the things in their home, the look of the city, the features of the landscape, the open sky or the ever-overflowing waters, they saw so much that was new each day that they were scarcely able to make it all known. And every experience which one of them had when on their own – like A. the day before when he had walked across the plain – was so rich that it took a while to put it across in its fullness. When they reached the top of the island, they found a pair of dry

stumps to rest on. When they were children, there used to be woodland here. The sun was shining steadily and slowly beginning its descent towards dusk.

* * *

It was their first spring hike over the hill together. The day before had been A.'s first time taking the hillside route after the winter. In autumn he had still not found anything of note on the path leading to the upper village. After the long winter, they were both curious to see what was new, and A. had originally had it in mind to repeat his journey of the day before so that he could show B. (Sis) what had caught his eye every step of the way – but now they had taken a circuitous route and it was not worth returning to the upper village. A. thought it best to go down from where they were to the water and then walk along the bank to the tram terminus. They would still be able to visit friends or have a good dinner. In the tender forgetfulness of youth, they had taken nothing to eat with them.

They went down to the water just after sunset. There was still some illumination, but red clouds cast a completely red light onto the earth. The water had not spilled over the sand but instead had soaked the ploughed fields. They had forgotten about rising water levels and now had to plough through mud. For several years there had been a well-trodden footpath along the shoreline, but now it was flooded. Walking felt unpleasant. They fell silent.

"Look!" B. said, laying hold of A.'s fur coat. "What's going on over there?"

A. turned round straight away to see what Sis was pointing to. A dark smudge of sorts, perhaps no more than a line, seemed to be looming at the top of the water mountain range which towered high above the island on this side. It was a dark line on the landscape, distinct in its blackness from the blue and white of the breaking waves. Even as a

trick of the light no one had ever seen the waters behaving like that – they both knew this, for there were still enough people with their eyes fixed on the surge, scanning the watery horizon to see whether something might rise to the surface.

It was easy to make out the black line, floating or sliding down the water mountains. When they stopped, it didn't take long for them to realise that this line was coming nearer. And as it approached the trough of the water landscape, finer lines of some kind began to show on the surface of the water. Not so easy to see as the first line, but seemingly travelling in its wake.

At a guess it was very far away – but not being experts in surveying, they had no precise idea how far away the crest of the water mountain was and never gave the matter a thought. And so they continued walking along the water's edge, looking for where the evening frost had already frozen the mud. The hoarfrost clinging to the ground told them where to tread.

"Look!" said B., catching hold of A.'s coat again. "It's following us!"

A. stopped and looked. The black line on the horizon had already taken solid form. It looked like a small boat. And behind it, only slightly rippling the surface, what looked like a convoy made up of a couple of dozen scratches in the water. But there was nothing afloat inside those.

They had been walking a fair distance for half an hour. While they did so the direction in which the thing was travelling had changed. It was now coming right for them at an angle.

"Let's go slowly," said Cuz. "Something interesting's heading for us, in any case."

While they shuffled forward dragging one foot after the other, a boat landed on the shore before they reached the first houses on the outskirts of the city. Behind it, the con-

voy of two dozen scratches was left quivering in the water, each like the ripple left in the wake of a rowing boat steered by a rudder. But these made no attempt to land.

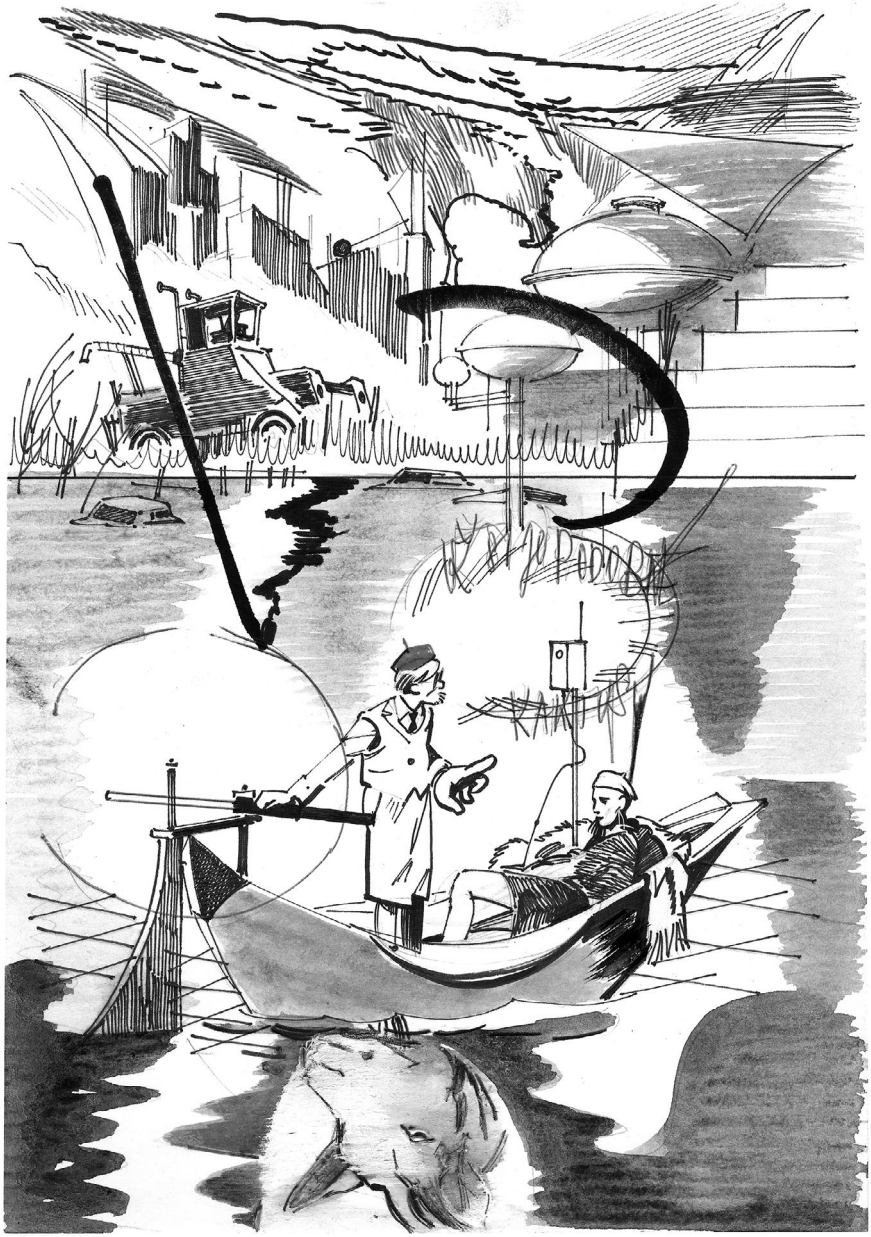
A. sighed. "Our top scientists would say that this is impossible. It would be interesting to know what they would say if it was right before their eyes, but it is possible that they would still not see it."

"Why does the boat keep following us?" remarked B., "It must want something."

"In that case we'll do without dinner to-night," said A., "We'll get into the boat and make it happy with some rocking."

Taking care not to get their boots wet, and carefully supporting each other, they got into the boat, the half-brother, after a short argument, being the first and carrying Sis across the shallows. At this point the boat began to move and moving faster than before headed towards the crest of the water mountains, the convoy of furrows in the water marking the invisible fleet in its wake. It was a little after sunset, and the first electrical discharges of the night could be seen as they flashed in the sky. Any pangs of hunger and thirst the siblings might have felt could be satisfied from the food and drink set out at the bottom of the red boat. The hull was curiously deep in the water, giving them room to lie down comfortably with ribbing that was unexpectedly soft like the best kind of foam rubber. Even so the ship – the boat had expanded so much as to merit this name – clearly demonstrated that she was of a certain age. Every one of these ribs of hers, smoothed by water and permeated by sea salt, could have belonged to some kind of petrified fossil.

They moved swiftly along and it felt as if the water mountains were immediately within reach right next to them. They began to go higher. The slope of the water was so steep in places, and the waves tumbling down from it so great and alarming, that they were afraid they would fall



out and be swallowed up by the waves. But the crests of the waves parted before the boat. As they looked around, the gagging sensation of riding the big dipper at the funfair came back to them from their childhood. So they stopped looking around and kept their eyes fixed on the heights before them, but even that was enough to make their heads spin.

Nevertheless, they were curious to find out what they would see beyond the mountains of water; after all, their books had told them all about the size of the earth. Then the boat surmounted the final watery peak and the view beyond opened up: there was nothing to be seen; more precisely, nothing was the only thing to be seen. (Note for the translator: In German: Nur das Nichts war zu sehen. In Russian: ничего видеть не было, только ничто. In Czech: bylo tam vidět jen nic.)

At that very moment, the night sky came ablaze as if in the aftermath of an explosion and they could see nothing but a dazzling white light. They shut their eyes, and then opened them to find themselves in darkness so thick and black that they could not see the hands in front of their faces. It was by feeling alone that they recognised they were still afloat, less in water than as if they were suspended in mid-air.

Even this lasted but a short while. With a slight bump the boat thrust itself into soft sand. They disembarked.

The dawn had arrived.

Looking around, they saw no water anywhere. The boat simply stood in the sand, while to the right and left of it lay a dozen furrows carved by the bows of the unseen boats that had accompanied them. But where there should have been water, there was only blackness without movement.

Cautiously they walked a few paces from the shore, holding hands. It seemed that dawn came all of a sudden, revealing a thin grove of trees from which they heard the voices of many people.

And then they saw them too, talking in groups and a few playing with something, perhaps balls or small animals.

Although they were dressed differently in winter clothes, whereas here it was evidently high summer, no one paid any attention to them, and so they just made their way among the people while taking careful note of them. But they were just like the rest of their friends, young and old, small and large, beautiful and ugly. They were also dressed in a variety of ways, some taking care about their clothes, some evidently not caring and others not even dressed at all, which didn't matter to them, seeing that it was hot weather. In the meantime, A. and B. were weighed down by their furs. Suddenly they came to the attention of one group who burst out laughing, thinking their outfit must be fancy-dress meant to contribute to the general merriment. The group collapsed in stitches.

They decided to take off their fur coats and heavy mud boots. Having taken everything off, they stashed it beneath a tree.

"We mustn't forget where it is," Sis blurted out.

Strangely enough the people here spoke a foreign language, but A. and B. recognised this only by its unusual sound, and otherwise to all intents and purposes they understood them.

Half a dozen young men and girls were heading away from the shore, evidently to eat and drink. They were chatting about all sorts of things and people that A. and B. had never heard of. But the two of them kept off the topic of how they arrived there. When they came to the tables with food and drink, they were afraid they wouldn't be able to pay, but helped themselves anyway, taking whatever they wanted just as the others did.

B. wanted to tell A. that they probably didn't even look foreign here, but she could only use that foreign language, so she stopped herself in mid-sentence. After all, they were

both a little shell shocked. That was when they first heard sounds coming from an insane band some way away.

"Oh no," Sis couldn't hold herself back, "this is how I always imagined Egon Bondy's funeral with who else but Plastic People of the Universe playing!"

"It can't be worse than that" said A., "we'd better hear it up close, then."

They slipped away from the table and started after the sound. They came to the end of the grove of trees, which stretched along the shore, and emerged into the open sunlight where about six irresistibly agile savages were playing on a raised stage.

Hundreds of other irresistibly hairy individuals were standing around, lounging about or cavorting. Their rhythm was so invasive and their cries so captivating that A. and B. could not resist joining the dance. The tangle of sounds, deranged to perfection, was best compared to the roar of mammoths on heat at first, but then everything else gave way to an incredible melody which like a psalm united musicians and listeners into one body, slowly but inexorably weaving its way from a depth beyond reach to the surface of sound.

It was unbelievable, but it was so.

And without a pause, amplified by electronic means to a thousand decibels, the musicians started shrieking again without a break, and A. and B. found themselves moving with an unfamiliar rhythm, one which resembled the irregular spasms of epileptic convulsion. Before long, A. and B. were running out of power, but then the two girls dancing beside them handed them a tantalisingly fragrant sweet which they proceeded to share, not doubting that it was some drug they had never encountered before. At this point they all began to sing another fantastic song, one that even seemed somehow familiar to them, though they didn't know from where. They sang along with the others, even though

they didn't know the words and couldn't even make them out, for the melody was dominated by some kind of devilish flute that drowned out everything else. It was impossible to tell whether the flautist had held them in thrall for one hour or for five – it was unstoppable, never-ending, no end even thinkable, until a sudden silence fell over all of them, no one was to be seen on the stage, and the audience of hundreds carried on dancing in silence for the last few minutes, since it was beyond anyone to come to a sudden stop.

A. and B. sank enchanted onto the sand, hot, firm but elastic, the colour more orange turning red than yellow or white, and looked each other in the eyes.

What they had heard was unbelievable; it was beyond their imaginings. They were weak with joy and had to catch their breath.

The music they'd heard was completely different in form to anything they'd come across before. There was nothing you could compare it to. Perhaps it was not just a question of new instruments, a new rhythm, new tone scale or new ways of linking melodies and transitioning between them. It was sound waves at a different frequency to anything found on earth. It seemed to A. and B. as if they'd been put under a spell. They were unable to analyse or make any sense of the music they had just heard. Perhaps it was a local variety of the most primitive dance music, but then perhaps it was a symphony, they couldn't say, and they knew they couldn't, so they just shook their heads and looked at each other and stayed mum. Eventually a wave of tiredness came over them.

It seemed that not as much time had passed as they'd thought. The sun, which never stopped shining, was actually hidden inside the endless radiance of the sky. They had not yet become aware of how and in which direction the shadows moved in the course of the day, but it seemed that either they had eternal morning here or it was really not yet noon. So they walked slowly back to the shore, preferring to

avoid further encounters and experiences, hoping instead to find a spot where they could get some sleep. After all, they hadn't slept since the evening before when they got into the boat.

By a happy coincidence, they recognized the way they'd come and retrieved their fur coats lying in a small heap, the thermal underclothes and mud shoes under the tree right where they'd placed them. But looking around, they couldn't find anywhere to lie down, so they instinctively turned back to the shore, each of them carrying an armful of clothes.

They reached the boat, now looking paunchy as a cradle, rather than narrow as a canoe, and A. spread his fine fur cloak in it, so that Sis could settle down in comfort. But it was as if his cloak had expanded because there was room for A. too, and so he lay down calmly but carefully beside her. As they lay down, they wondered what would be ready to surprise them when they woke up.

* * *

They awoke to find themselves on a muddy bank of land. The boat had drifted away with them in it while they slept.

"What a pity," said Sis, "that you didn't remain at the helm to make sure that we never came back here. Or else the two of us could have dragged the boat far enough ashore to prevent the tide carrying it away."

"You're right," agreed Cuz, "it's a pity I didn't think of that. I would rather have missed a night's sleep if the cost of such a stupid oversight was to be back in this world again. Now there's nothing we can do. It will be hard enough now for us to find somewhere to pee."

"The affair deserves the sort of sobriety that goes into a biography of Mohammed," replied Sis. "Everything that has happened is simply an oversight on our part. The same thing often happened to Mohammed."

With these words she got up, and surprisingly enough it was not so hard to relieve herself. Then they considered what to do with the boat, for whoever came upon it here would not make use of their find but rather report its presence. Since they didn't care about being denounced, they left the boat to sway where they got out of it.

It was again as dark as it had been all winter, so they hurried quickly home. Fortunately, they caught a tram at the terminus, and in three-quarters of an hour they were at the garage. As the whole place had turned cold while they'd been away, A. at once concentrated on making a fire, and as this was not something he liked doing, he rushed the job. Meanwhile B. sat dangling her legs from the couch, reciting once again in a low voice the poem which was printed on a large poster they'd pinned above the door. It was an old poem from a national classic, banned in this version, but that was nothing to concern her. She read it half-aloud to herself because she'd been taken with it since she was young, though she couldn't for the life of her learn it by heart.

The character of our state
Is a problem constitition
For the citizen mussed wait
For a legal definnition
As applied at eny rate
By a policemun with a mition

"That reminds me," remarked Sis, "we haven't got presents for our friends on the national holiday, and it's already only three weeks away."

The national holiday commemorated the poet's burial or in any case the day on which he was reputed to have been buried.

That is because when he wrote this poem, the poet was brought before a judge who condemned him to the gallows,

though later the sentence was commuted to life in a psychiatric institution.

To this day, a favourite subject of legal dissertations is whether charges can be brought against anyone for the above text, for if we stick to the exact words, there is nothing here to offer the slightest justification for recourse to law. The possibility of prosecution only arises if we distort the text in some way, but then it is possible to distort any text at all, and absolutely nothing can avoid criminal charges. Most experts on the matter agree that it is the duty of the judicial authorities not to stick to the literal meaning of any text, but to discover its real meaning. That is why they recommend that it's best for mouths to remain shut.

Then, a year later, our writer of classics penned another poem, and this one Sis, and likewise all the friends of the siblings, knew by heart – and it ran thus:

Long live our Barmy
and Obscurity Corps
The gurl forls so charmy
Beast Bonndy before.

After this poem became known, the poet died from complications to his piles, which he had caused by sitting inadvertently on a cold stone in a warm cell during his exercise routine. And so logic dictated that he had to be buried a few days later.

This day then became a national holiday based on his letter to Citizen Lopatka a few days before the funeral. The letter has been preserved and, although officially pronounced non-existent, it has done the rounds with the poet's writings in many editions and has become a matter of common knowledge.

Sis reached for the book on her shelf and read:

Dear Mr. Lopatka!
Throughout my existence I have assuredly been a rewarding source of guidance and amusement to you and your friends. Now that my work is over and I have completed the forty-fifth year of my life, I plan to draw up a will concerning my last rites. For the services which you have rendered me and continue to render me, I am bequeathing to you one hundred thousand memories, which you will surely use to my benefit as well as that of yourself and your family. At the same time, however, I ask you to ensure that I am buried like a normal person rather than incinerated or scattered on some lawn. Find some cemetery in the vicinity of Prague that has not yet been decommissioned and deposit my remains there.

During my life, I have often devoted myself to reflecting on my death, and this has borne fruit in the form of several funereal poems and epitaphs which I have put together for myself. In order that there should be no misunderstanding, I am therefore expressly stipulating that nothing but the following epitaph, (assuredly familiar to you), should be engraved on the "marble slab," (paying homage to the popular "dog and sausage" song).

Zbyněk Fišer's last breath.
Fuck life and fuck death
If the appropriate churchwarden does not show the requisite understanding, it is up to your friend Dr Deutsch to inspire such understanding or to secure it by means of authorisation from the Holy See.

Take out a subscription to the grave for an appropriate length of time, for as is well known, I intend to be transferred to the cemetery of the illustrious of Slavín in Vyšehrad at the earliest opportunity, and there are therefore arrangements to be made to ensure that even in a couple of generations' time there will still be something left to transfer.

The easiest thing would be to get the funeral ceremony over and done with quietly. But if anyone wishes to make it an august occasion, then let a stern letter of invitation be sent to as many people as can be rounded up from town and country, making sure that everyone puts in an appearance with all their family on the enclosed list and that they invite as many others as they can. Issue a summons to those with long hair in all the Prague pubs and encourage everyone to take the day off. Let the musical accompaniment to the ceremony be from the Plastic People (if they are not allowed to play inside the cemetery, then let them stand outside the wall), so that the ceremony is combined with a cultural programme, for which invitations are sent out or tickets are sold.

During their music-making, don't let them lose sight of the fact that at that very moment all the Vikings who were having their skulls split open by axes, were drowning in the ocean or were finishing up at the end of a rope roared with enthusiasm, that all the poets that ever existed were chanting, for in the heavenly heights poet knows poet and poet loves poet, that even the select few philosophical giants, with the goalkeeper of the famous Arsenal football club, Karl Marx, in the vanguard, are delivering eulogies, that screeching comes from all the swans and celestial cranes on which my friends Lao-Tzu and Chairman Mao are flying, so that in that moment the clamour in the heavens will fuse with the Plastics Band into one single symphony without end – let this be a moral stimulant to the Plastics, inspiring them to make as much noise as possible and make it come from the heart. For just as the curtain of the temple was once torn from top to bottom, so at this very moment shall the buttons fall from the flies of all policemen, none shall give them succour, all the members of central party committees shall cover their heads with chamber pots while all the ministers suffer a migraine which shall keep them from performing their duties, turning the funeral into a real public holiday, whose anniversary shall be celebrated at

first only by scattered communities of mourners, but in time by more and more people of all kinds, for everyone knows that Buddha didn't know he wanted something, Jesus wanted something but didn't know what it was, Lao-Tzu knew that the most sensible thing was not to want anything but didn't keep to his own rule, but I know what I want, and I want what I know,

that everyone should have a feast,

every day at least.

And so to you, my dear friend Lopatka, all the aforementioned hundred thousand memories, when all's said and done may make it worth your while to become trained in reading my handwriting, which otherwise nobody will be capable of.

Sincerely yours, Bondy

The poet was, of course, rehabilitated in the usual manner after a few years, but they didn't give him a national holiday in the end, which didn't bother those who observed it anyway. Among them were A. and B. and their friends.

"We really have nothing prepared, Sis," said A., as he finished lighting the stove. "Unless we let them all know about our trip."

By this time, however, they were feeling very hungry, and Sis set about preparing supper. And after it they fell asleep at once, going out like a light.

* * *

A few days later the sun got its act together. The sky cleared and the rain stopped, while the power supply was no longer being cut off in town because the snow emergency was over. The roads outside were drying out and work was already underway in the fields to make this year an even more stunning success than last year.

The waters even seemed to have receded, at least in some places, leaving in their wake only a lot of pebbles and shells that the children enjoyed collecting.

A. went out for a hike while B. went with the children to collect shells.

She took her mud boots, but with them only a short skirt made from an old duster, which was warm though already worn down by washings, and a beautifully embroidered bodice given to her by Stanislava, an actress friend, who had purloined it from the dressing room of the National Theatre, and a turtleneck sweater she had once knitted for A.'s birthday. Like Athena's shield, it depicted a great number of people and events. First of all, there was the legend of the building of the Tower of Babel, which rose from the hips across the back up to the neckline. On the right side flowed the white-grey waves of water with which we are already familiar, and above them could be seen the atomic argosy on which the father of our honorary twins in times of old had sailed what used to be overseas. It was a large and very fine ship, the last one, and half a century ago it was still going round the island when it had nowhere else to go, and always took half a day to do so. Oldtimers still remember this, and it was from their tales that Sis pictured a ship that she had never seen, for after it had been doing the rounds twice every day for twenty-five years, it was decided not to throw money out of the window in that way, and the ship was taken out of service and sold for scrap. Nevertheless, the argosy portrayed on the bodice was an almost exact replica, and on it stood, larger than life, so far as a comparison with the dimensions of the argosy was concerned, the father of our half-siblings, with a long telescope and a white beard. So beautiful was the retractable telescope that it appeared once more, this time knitted separately, in a larger size using an artificial fibre the colour of brass and stretching along the left sleeve.

It was certainly a telescope worthy of a museum, and the captain of the ship had most likely never laid eyes on it, since he would have used a fine radar system, but it

had remained engraved on Sis's memory from her days of reading children's books, and though in her lifetime she had never even seen the ship, it did not concern her to have a telescope she had never seen associated with her knitwear.

The left side of the sweater depicted a sequence of significant historical events. There was the first manned flight to the moon and to Mars, the victory of the United Nations over the Disunited Nations, Mao Zedong's Long March across the mountains using an umbrella, and the funeral of the poet mentioned a few moments ago. There was the drummer of the Plastic People throwing his drumsticks into the air and drumming with his feet, while other Plastic People were grouped around him playing violin, harp and a tape recorder (no scientifically verified record has been kept of the actual line-up of the band at the poet's funeral), and another had the sun, moon and stars emerging from his wide-open mouth (Sis had depicted the moon and stars as large red soap bubbles, based on surviving photographs) and above them, on the cemetery wall, stood Mr. Lopatka addressing the crowds (who could not be seen because they were concealed by the cemetery wall). Any depiction of the poet's funeral was forbidden and punished, but no one bothered about that.

Over her breasts Sis had knitted symbols of ancient religious rites in a magical tangle of artistic design alongside countless naive historical anachronisms, such as a Buddha with a Star of David, a cross with a swastika crucified on it, the feathered serpent Quetzalcoatl sporting a Ford emblem, and so on and so on. On the other sleeve were likenesses of her dearest friends. In developing the intricate iconography that made her soft and warm sweater a true tapestry, she allowed herself to be guided only by the free hand of chance that is the very soul of all true encounters. The result was a whole that was rich in subject matter but was not round-

ed off artistically. However, Sis made up for this through another sweater she wore in the sunny but cool autumn weather.

She didn't know the children she came across on the shore, and it was no wonder that her beautiful sweater attracted them almost as much as the tiny, coloured shells left behind by the receding tide. She answered all their questions and soon made friends with them. They brought her shells of azure blue, forget-me-not blue and blue-grey, shells with tiny red squiggles, shells of pearl, rainbow-coloured shells, shells of brilliant white and flesh-pink, but they were all small and even minute, none of them able to cover even half a girl's palm. It was a wonder that nothing had ever come out of the water, nothing had ever been washed up that had grown bigger than these miniatures, and it was equally, or perhaps even more, striking that the shells of scallops, clams, cockles and mussels had been washed up as empty houses, devoid of their living occupants, so that they seemed like pebbles driven into the shallows by currents of water that no longer had anything living beneath the surface. Certainly not even the oldest inhabitants could remember seeing fish there, although some agricultural cooperatives had fish farms where pike and carp, pikeperch and freshwater moray eels that grew to a decent size were reared in man-made ponds. Sis wiped her hands on the stones and with a scarf full of the prettiest shells made her way home.

She began to sing to herself in a low voice. The song seemed beautiful, but unfamiliar to her, haunting her to the point where she stopped in her tracks and searched her memory for the record she had heard it from and the friends she had heard it with, but nothing came to her. She had forgotten the song. As she started up the hill it came back to her again, but still she couldn't recognise it. She was left shaking her head.

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