

Catalogue 1011
May 2019
20488 words
80 pages

Pages from My Knapsack

Written in Military Service on the Border, 1939

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We were just coming out of the woods early that morning, a gardener's boy and I, where we had been cutting down young ash trees. To be made into graceful little stilts under a dovecote in the municipal park. This was my first professional job, just begun; my first design that would actually be built. Not just paper any more, not just lines, words, images. These slender little tree trunks were absolutely real; you could touch them, half a wagon full. We wanted to drive to the carpenter's shop—

Then the bells rang.

Today, on the eve of the military call-up, all the train stations and bridges are already being guarded by shiny bayonets. Soldiers in field gray swarm everywhere as if sprung out of the earth. In the train corridor, one squats near me so that we have to get up at every station and move our gear. He hadn't known there were so many men in Switzerland, he says with half a smile.

We ride through the night. The windows are black now, as if we were traveling through an endless tunnel. Here, too, no one seems really surprised.

There's only a certain seriousness, a certain bitterness that it has indeed happened as we thought it might. Quite a few pretend to sleep. So they can close their eyes. What a hurried farewell it was. Others simply sit there, elbows on their knees, and stare at their shoes. Thankfully no one sings, and we don't hear any grand platitudes either.

After all, what can anyone say?

Only a young woman who rides with us loses her nerve while an old soldier takes her child on his knee. She babbles on and on about her husband, who is going into the auxiliary service, and expects us soldiers to be overcome with sympathy.

At last, shortly before midnight, we arrive. We walk down a moonlit country road. People are waving at us from their windows. Even a very young boy in his nightshirt is still awake.

"Evviva la Svizzera!" he cries.

We have absolutely no idea where we are. In a picturesque little courtyard. It looks like something out of an opera, with an absurdly large moon hanging over a black roof and a grotesque chimney. There's no lack of dainty little balconies either or round arches or strange figures gaping from the half-darkness of ruined arcades. Out in the bogs or fields where the maize stands tall as a man birds are singing and chattering. Or maybe they're just crickets, I don't know. As at the train stations, here too a sentry is already striding back and

forth. Only this time he's one of us. We stand at attention under chestnut trees black as ravens while our names are read out loud.

We were expected. It's a good feeling to know where we belong.

Work is over for today, they tell us; in exchange there's bread and soup. The artillery has been camouflaged for several hours, so we pick up our packs, rifles, and helmets again and carry everything into the nearby shed where straw has already been spread out. Then we shake the moth powder from our woolen blankets.

It's been a long day. In the morning, still at my drafting table; then the ride home where everything had been made ready. A quick coffee, then back to the train station. A quarter of an hour, a throng of soldiers and helmets, a single face that means more than anything, and now we sit here, not just in another corner of our country but in a different world entirely.

As if time itself had split open, and no one remembers how the two pieces ever fit together.

The others, the real core of the unit, aren't expected until early tomorrow morning. Everyone is still hoping for familiar faces.

In all the years that are now past, who was always longing for life to be transformed?

Perhaps change always comes about in an unexpected way. Because it always takes fear to move us forward. What matters is whether we evade

change or embrace it. Why so much cursing? In principle, only your own heart can decide whether this is a fallow or a fruitful time.

Besides, what did peace mean to us while we had it? Without the darkness of night, why should we kneel before the sun? How could we ever understand existence without the horror of death? All life grows out of danger.

The outfitting continues.

Each man gets his own material for bandages, emergency rations, a gas mask. Suddenly we're all standing there in field-gray snouts. Like mythical pigs or some kind of ghostly wasps. And what do our people think to do when they see themselves in this get-up? They sing:

"In those mountains you can see
To highest heaven unfurled,
There our life is truly free—"

Their dull and nasally voices come through all the little flaps available for exhaling used air.

"There our life is truly free,
Up in our Alpine world."

A lieutenant gives the order for silence.

Wherever I hear people talking, I learn I'm not the only one who feels like a miserable insect thrust backwards by a huge, seemingly wanton hand just as, after years of effort, it's finally nearing a way out.

Only a very few can go home. One man on furlough until Christmas is so happy he buys us all another round of drinks.

Until *Christmas*?

All we can do is stare, envy makes us so shortsighted. At least in the moment. Every man would go with him right now if they had the choice. Without a doubt. And it's a good thing we don't. After all, who would really want to sit it out at a time like this? Who could keep on with their own work now, calmly and with enjoyment, while everyone else is up in the mountains rubbing their blue hands together? Who could pursue their own dreams when only women and old men and children are left to stand in the fields and bind the ripe sheaves? Now, when young girls are registering at the hospitals?

There's no holiday from Time, you know.

Not at home either.

The rest of us, already equipped with live ammunition, have lined up this morning to take the oath of allegiance we soldiers swear on the flag. A field-gray rectangle in an open space where autumn leaves are crumbling off the trees. Alas, we don't have a flag. No representative from the government either. Just a captain and his battery, soldiers all, and, not far from us, the silent guns. . . .

Please, no platitudes right now!

We were born and didn't ask to be born, we didn't choose our country. But having been born, we love the country that is our fatherland even if we don't talk about it, even if it causes us pain. We've seen people whose fatherland has been ripped out of their souls so that they are slowly bleeding to death. But

we, too, who have a flag—a tiny spot on earth where only conscience rules— must first seek our final homeland, and who knows if that’s on earth? We don’t want to give up our idea of the infinite, whether you call that God or something else, and we never want to make the ground it has lent us into an idol that will strangle our humanity. We will cherish and defend our fatherland, not bow down before it.

“I swear or pledge. . . .”

We hold our helmets in our left hands. No one hears who swears and who pledges. Every bright hand is raised on high, and in this moment each man acts only for himself. You don’t take the oath for your neighbor, and he doesn’t take it for you. In reality, it’s a settling of accounts. All these years, we had the benefit of being Swiss citizens without ever having taken an oath to the Swiss Confederation. Now the hour has come in which we may have to pay our bill. The price, to be sure, is high. Our entire unique, never-to-be-repeated existence. On a morning like this, when the drooping leaves glow against the autumn sky, against this unspeakably cheerful blue, who knows what that means?

We put our helmets back on.

Two men didn’t take the oath. The captain orders them to step forward, then questions them in private.

It’s all in order. They fall back in, and that’s the end of it. For the rest of the day, not a single word is spoken about the oath.

Like industrious elves, the children of Tessin, as we call Ticino, help us clear out their school, which is still filled with tiny desks. There's a projection screen, too; a machine for showing educational slides; a map of Europe as it was only recently; and an entire table covered with fragrant linden blossoms spread out to dry. . . .

Suddenly the children are having a grand old time.

"Eh, la Madonna!" they cry. *"La Madonna!"*

We take down everything we think fragile as carefully as we can. This is no time for glass. From now on, all faith will have to prove its worth on bare walls.

Meanwhile, the vehicles have arrived. From every possible firm. We spread ourselves out along the ropes and load the artillery so that by the end of the evening, we're for the most part ready to go.

But who knows if we will and if so, where?

It's a clear night again, with only a mist pale as milk at the bottom of the valley. At the place where a rushing stream curves around the bend, the gravel banks shimmer moon-white.

They say England and France have declared war, or are about to.

We load basket after basket, four grenades at a time, while one man blathers on and on about when we'll get leave, asking every other minute what time it is. Until someone tells him to stop being such a chump.

The place looks like a cloister, it's so quiet and lonely. We load and overload the vans until their headlights tremble, almost stand up on their springs, and reach out into the dark thicket with their electric antennae. Which not everyone welcomes. Two men are swearing so hard it's enough to make your hair stand on end. In this task the first slackers emerge—those who know how, in the darkness, to skip every other turn while those who keep on loading haven't known for a long time which shoulder to put under the next basket.

Our rucksacks lie on the ground in rank and file as if we ourselves were lying there, and we should open them or pick them up although we know very well that under our trousers, neatly folded according to regulations, there may be a small, almost graceful cadaver.

I wake in terror it's my own corpse I'm loading on my back.

A little while later, we hear the sound of reveille.

Every morning we do gymnastics before the sun rises over the blue-tinged mountains. Then, all properly warmed up, we eat breakfast from our little oblong soldiers' bowls, as if each man holds a field-gray trough in front of him while he stands. Only a few are so experienced they can sit comfortably on any kind of ground and, cheerfully wordless, expose their warm lumps of food like an animal baring its fangs.

I read in a letter: "I think again about how things would have to be if the worst were to pass us by. So many things in my life would have to made new,

would have to be completely different. At the same time I know how quickly this will all be forgotten as soon as I breathe a sigh of relief. That's the most dreadful thing of all. I'm ashamed that I wanted to hope we would be spared—I don't want that any more..”

And further on:

“This is a time in which everything left unfinished is twice as hard to bear.”

Our corporal is a mason, submissive as an African slave when it suits him and then, when his mood shifts, completely unresponsive. He doesn't bellow; he just contradicts whenever he can. When an officer appears, he likes to refer to orders he says he gave but never did. His special favorites are those he treats dismissively in every way, as if they were university students.

I'm truly astonished at my recklessly open display of joy when one day we hear that he has to be hospitalized, probably for a long time.

Our new corporal, a young master painter, is a different type of man indeed. He'd rather work too hard and doesn't like giving orders. During the breaks when we vanish into the nearby shrubs, we find him there too, equally removed from the world's gaze, a small black Bible in his hand.

At least for now, everyone is resigned to spending all their free time in the pubs. There's a very young woman in one, not especially pretty but an

artless, lively creature—a peasant, really—filled with curiosity about the other language.

“Hoor?” she asks. *“What does that mean?”*

We give our opinion, but she’s not satisfied.

“Hoor or Hoar?” she says.

The more we dodge the question, the more insistently she wants to know the answer. She knows a few things already and takes a childish pleasure in the German words. Her little mother, who sits nearby knitting, doesn’t know what the word means either, she says. The soldiers said it yesterday, she assures us.

Waking up, an hour earlier or an hour later, you just sit there every time, dull as a beast, gaping through your tattered sleep at the familiar, essentially strange, faces. Again and again, you think it must all be a dream.

“It’s starting!” someone shouts. *“We’re moving out!”*

You pack, you tie up your blanket, all in a half sleep, you pick up your weapon, you may give your whole life in a half-sleep. Then we’re trotting between the nocturnal vineyards, between low walls colorless as the moon, and on down to the vehicles, whose motors are already running. With helmet, with weapons, with knapsack and gas mask, we sit there and shiver. It’s one o’clock in the morning. There’s an alert.

“We’re moving out!” someone shouts again.

No answer.

Only the orders ring out, back and forth. The auxiliary service drivers wave their flashlights and spring up into the cabs. And then, when a jolt has woken us up again, we're already rumbling through the narrow village.

But not up toward the Gotthard Pass, and where else might we be going, who knows? Again and again the whole world simply stops, the moon and the war, and my helmet slips forward until it strikes the rifle I'm holding between my freezing fists. If I could just remember what I was dreaming about a moment ago. . . .

We stop for a while between unfamiliar houses; the whole village lies in a deep sleep. Our columns need to be spread further apart. A young woman is waving from an open window nearby—a dark-skinned Tessin girl, not very pretty.

We take off with a start that makes us almost tumble off the gun carriage. And then we're there, on a narrow dirt road, and everyone has to man the ropes. *One - two!* rings out everywhere in the night. *One - two! One - two!* I'm not the first and not the last to stumble on barbed wire and lick warm blood off my hand. As soon as the artillery is up on blocks, we take out our pocketknives and cut what we need for camouflage. That done, we report in, still before the first light of dawn—ready for action.

Later, while we wait for breakfast to arrive, we lie under the camouflage. Swamp mosquitoes visit our dreamless slumber until our faces and hands are covered with stings.

Finally the cocks crow.

At an hour when, at home, the ringing of an alarm clock would startle us out of our wits, we're already evacuating the post. With a great to-do.

And now the first rays are descending over the broad and flat valley, sudden and magnificent—like a bundle of glass spears.

All the rumors that we would be coming into the Jura region seem to have been forgotten. All the signs that we are settling down are multiplying. Our captain has ordered wooden benches built so we won't always have just the trees to lean on while we're eating. A carpenter has even made hinged brackets for our newspapers, as in the better inns. Besides all this, we've found our way to a secret kitchen. In the real tavern nearby, things seem much as they were in General Wallenstein's camp during the Thirty Years' War of the seventeenth century. It seems odd to the two scrawny Tessin women who run back and forth the whole evening how remarkably gentle and dignified the bold intruders become as soon as they are in the kitchen.

Do we have a hidden agenda?

I almost think so. We need to settle in now if someday we want to sit by a warm fireplace, a hot mulled wine over the fire and a piece of cheese on an iron spit. . . .

Our moods, of course, still swing back and forth. The very same people who were just talking about "three to five years" are now sure we'll be going home next week.

Only one man has stopped fooling himself. After reading the most recent newspaper, he went over to the barber's without a word and came back with his skull bald, completely shorn.

Every day our army costs five million. And every day our physically and mentally handicapped cost one million!

While we sit in the meadow, the young doctor, a lively young man from Tessin, teaches us about venereal diseases. He explains everything very clearly and without apology. Which perhaps is best. Anticipating his listeners, he comes up with the jokes himself, leaving them with the sober, embarrassing truth.

I've been strolling outside the village for half an hour now, a letter in my pocket and a bag of grapes in my hand. There's no lack of little walls on which to sit or completely stretch out on my back. And once more the crickets are chirping. Just as on that first evening. I can't believe it's not even a week yet.

Every night we hear this thin buzzing, this chirping outside in the fields or swamps over which milk-pale autumn mists are floating. The stars stare from the clear heavens above, silent and glassy above a Nature filled with passionate noise.

There's much to be said for this state where everything falls away that doesn't fit in your rucksack, everything you can't load on your back every hour. You've left behind so many things that until a very short while ago you thought so important. But no matter what happens, you will always have the indelible

memory of that person most dear to you. That, and your faith that everything external will go on if we can keep our internal world in order. Your belief that, at all times and in all places, the human heart even now is more real than that supposedly important world event that, like a gray shadow, may seize, crush, or refine us—who knows?—or simply use us up, leaving us to lie at the edge of roads wide enough for armies.

As soon we have mastered the artillery, we're trained, one by one, on the light machine gun. There's no help for it: it's a real pleasure to work with this gun, a pleasure that overwhelms even those loudest in their scorn for war.

That's fantastic! they say as soon as they are able to get up from the ground. That is, they add as an afterthought, if you can say that about a weapon.

We are also positively in love with the little cannons with which our army defends its tanks. They tear through our village now and then like raging fire engines. It's the child in man, I don't know, or the warrior. Or perhaps the craftsman, who can wax enthusiastic about a swing axle. Or all three at once. As we practice changing the barrel on the light machine gun and keep track of how much time each man needs, we're suddenly filled with as much zeal and ambition as if we were the most battle-thirsty men ever under arms!

We keep on working right into the break.

By the way, the captain called me out later on during drill. Still a stranger to most of us, he had recently made an excellent impression when he brought us together for a few welcoming words of manly fellowship.

Alas, the feeling does not seem to be mutual!

I'm the most difficult soldier in the entire unit, he tells me. Not that I can't do the job. I don't want to; I don't have the right attitude. And so on and so forth. The heavy boots hurt his feet too, but other things matter now, more serious things.

I asked if I might answer.

No.

There could be very special kinds of assignments in a war for people like me, he added.

Then he gave the order to be at ease.

In the evening, after we had stood down, he summoned me again and allowed me to answer in private.

But really, what could I say?

I could of course concede—while still standing at attention—that I was well aware I had made a mistake. Why else would his words have so struck home? The time for dreaming is over. That mistake that can cost us our lives. I know. And even more than our lives. I know. I was just thinking about that again. And about how, for example, it can happen that at age twenty-five a man goes back to sit at a school desk and follow in his father's footsteps. At long last he starts out in a respectable, socially useful profession. He reaches the point

where, one beautiful morning, out in the forest, he's bringing back the first slender pillars—

Shall I tell that story?

On evening watch, one man reeks so strongly of *Schnapps* we can smell him before we see him.

Of course he'll stay at his post! he says. All the more loudly, the more we try to calm him down.

"Just let one of them come!" he says. He'll be ready to shoot. Even if it's a colonel. He's not there to be a toy. If he is, they should send him home straight away.

"Fire the artillery!" he says. "Lay down a barrage!"

Someone has to relieve him. Even if he takes great offense. . . .

Again and again, someone breaks down. Without any warning—just like that. Everything's a fraud, a trick. A scheme against his esteemed personage devised by a nameless group of unspeakable scoundrels.

Does anyone want to claim the contrary?

No, no. Certainly not.

"Well now," he says. And keeps on smoking.

Answering with fact and logic is like throwing water on a firebomb: everyone gets sprayed. Anything but that. Silence is the only sand. And after a while, so they say with confidence, we'll be able to remove every bomb with the simplest shovel.

Yesterday, on Saturday, we went swimming. Out in the river. We could barely manage, it was so cold. Only after the first one had gone in did the rest of us venture to follow. Out we swam out into the swift, rushing waves. Many of us had trouble getting back to shore before we got cramp. Even so, it was splendid. And probably for the last time this year. Afterwards, we were very happy to be in the sun. They let us frolic on the sandbanks for almost two hours. Most of us were bare as Adam since the postman hadn't come yet. It was a good thing only the birds saw us.

Today, on Sunday, we're off duty after eleven but aren't allowed to go beyond our three villages.

We write letters.

We play a game of *bocce*.

We sit outside again on the river.

We sit there drinking in the moments, each for itself, the way we enjoy grapes, one after the other. It feels like a warmth still filled with a memory of summer that almost makes us sweat. Only now the sun's rays no longer sting. As if their outermost tips have broken off. They are soft and liquefied now. They dissolve on our foreheads and our eyelids in a golden balminess. And everywhere you can see what makes the moment so inebriating: the enchantment of the last time.

Why read a book?

Why play another round of cards?

Quite by chance, you've put your hand down on a withered root. For some time now, the quiet sun has been brooding on the topmost layer of your skin—a sweet, small, glowing sensuality without boundaries. And just beneath, inside your hand that hangs down, you feel the shadows, moisture, coolness, death. . . .

That is autumn.

And who hasn't thought now and then that we should experience all of life like this day, as a grand, unique, continuous farewell. To roam and not to linger. To wander from city to city, from goal to goal, from person to person, always roaming and moving on, even when you are in love and would be happy to stay, even where your heart breaks when you leave. . . . Not to put things off into the future, but to experience each moment fully as a perpetual fading away. And to do this one's whole life long, seizing everything in order to lose it and then moving on, from farewell to farewell. . . .

Ah, who has a soul with that much resilience!

Sometimes, you almost think you could do it. On a day like this you could do it. And perhaps that is why, of all the seasons, autumn always affects us the most deeply.

Spring is a becoming, an evolution—nothing more.

Summer is without change. You lie under a green tree, draw a stalk through your mouth, and listen to the chirping in the meadows, see the trembling in the haze, in the hot blue, and the motionless clouds that hang white

and hard over the land as if made of plaster. And you don't ask what was, and you don't ask what will be. Summer has no time. Summer is without questions, like the happiness of love. Summer is the plenty that is satisfied with itself, that is simply there, as if nothing could ever be different, as if everything would go on forever—

How different is the autumn!

Look at the air, how full of gold it is. You can't get enough of it. And when a small breeze passes by, it brings a slight chill that is suddenly a little cooler than you expected, and it's like a tiny fright. Everything is transition, movement and time, ripening and withering. Everything is farewell.

I love the autumn because, like no other season, it turns the sound at the center of our existence into poetry.

We are there again, drinking in the moments, and it's like the thin mist that now hangs over the fields and the forests, reconciling the burning colors in a dream-like way. That takes the whole world out of its stubborn heaviness, revealing it to be nothing more than a transitory flame, a hovering glow breathed onto a background tinged with blue whose very existence we can only suspect. Or perhaps onto a dark and cool nothingness.

And you stop asking whether this is bliss or woe. It is life, and that's enough. It is the moment, and that's enough. Again and again, it is the epiphany of farewell.

A piece of writing due to the government in the next few days has been causing me the most dreadful labor pains. The money—and it was good money, too—has already passed through many hands, but where is the work ready for the printer I promised for this autumn with such overweening confidence like a farmer certain of his plum tree?

I was going to write, “I didn’t have time. . . .”

This morning, during Sunday morning roll call, the captain summoned me again. What can it be? A button left unfastened, a buckle not properly centered, a twisted strap? My knapsack on the wrong side? Can’t be anything good.

“At ease,” he says.

It’s about a journal that has to be kept, a diary of our service on the border. Every day during artillery training I’ll have an hour at my disposal, even a field-gray typewriter.

I didn’t have time. . . ?

Our word and our duty, so it seems, are like our shadows, which overtake us at each lantern we pass by.

Little by little, one gets used to wearing a gas mask. As if it were part of oneself. Yesterday, in an old shed outside the village, we were persuaded of this. We stood in groups in a space being gassed, probably for quite a few minutes, as if it were nothing. We thought it a lark. Only when you took a finger and opened

up a little space did you suddenly realize what was in the air. Everyone rubbed their eyes, and even the strongest man wept.

For the first time, the good weather that favored the Tessin Mountain Brigade above all others has abandoned us, too. Today when we relieved the surly, ill-tempered sentry after a hissing rain, our vehicles and artillery stood in the middle of brown ponds as if the kitchen staff had spilled the remains of our milky coffee. Everything glistened and trickled away. For a long time now, rain has been tumbling down from shiny black branches onto the rotting leaves that are now pasted all over the ground. We see splashes dancing like silver fleas jumping about in all the pools, and some alders that only yesterday were still an enchantment of shimmering gold are now completely bare. Each gust of wind unleashes a new maelstrom of leaves, a new roaring and crackling of raindrops.

For the first time, we are thoroughly convinced of the reality of winter without being able to believe in spring.

All around us, the mountains are befogged.

A driver leaning back in his dry car of whom, as we hasten back and forth, we occasionally ask the time, shows us the entire contents of his wallet. For no reason we can understand. Photographs of himself: a gentleman standing in a meadow with a smile on his face; a gentleman who has done well for himself, as they say; a gentleman with white shoes and an improbable tie. Photographs, too, of a shiny car where he sits behind the wheel like a film star of the first order. And pictures of his wife on a bench in the forest, somewhat overweight, a bit drab. The kind of photo people take on Sundays. Her head

inclined to one side, with a vacant smile. And at the end, as if this were the crowning glory, he shows us an image of male and female sexual organs.

“What a bastard!” says my colleague.

We go back to patrolling.

Earlier, without a doubt, this would have thoroughly upset me, perhaps even just a little bit earlier. Because I wanted the world to be in a state of harmony. I could only accept the world that way.

Yesterday General Guisan, whose photograph has been up on our notice board for several days, issued a command that all soldiers be given a day and a half of leave to put their affairs, whatever they may be, in order one more time.

Meanwhile, we have begun building our first emplacement adequate for war. The artillery is to be completely dug in. Every day now those going on furlough abandon us, crammed into a truck like cattle. With a shrill, piercing song, they ride down into the valley. . . .

We keep on shoveling.

At noon, when the steaming hot food arrives and, with it, the postman, we squat down at the edge of the road no matter what its condition, between cow dung or horse manure. In our right hand we hold a spoon and in our left, a letter, until our soup, grown ever more tepid, finally turns chalky.

“From your sweetie?” one man ventures. “Found someone else, eh?”

Did I make such a face?

“Well, my wife must be doing all right,” says another. “She hasn’t written a word since the auxiliary service came to our village.”

And so on. . . .

Later, we lie about in the meadows like the slain, like the fallen, our hands behind our necks, a cigarette in our mouths or a two-day old newspaper before our eyes. When someone goes to sleep, they put a green horse chestnut next to his cheek, prickly as a hedgehog, so he’ll spring up when he turns over. Of course no one did it. It’s just chance, every time.

Others who were going down to the nearby little brook half an hour ago are still standing there, unwashed dishes in their hands. No doubt they’re talking about Hitler again; about Might versus Right; the future or the downfall of Western civilization. There’s a lot of talk, too, about the Russians. Sometimes feelings run so high they even talk with their bowls.

How unreal all this history seems to me!

Here, a wire cable is hanging again over the quiet, seemingly deserted valley, the kind of wire on which they send down bundles of wood, often in a single astonishing shot. Now and then one stops and hangs stock still, high and lonely over the valley, until they try to free it by sending down another. Once, just as I was watching, both plunged into the valley without a sound, and again the cable hung empty and invisible over the ravine.

At two o’clock we go back to work.

Since not everyone can wield a pickax while standing in the holes, the rest of us take up ax and saw, scramble up the slopes, and set to work cutting

down the trees. They sing out under the dull blows, moaning and groaning voluptuously. About once an hour we send these magnificent trees down over the steep meadows on sleds, like conquered vixens.

Later on, we suddenly hear that the emplacement will not be constructed as originally planned. A communication trench and a dugout were apparently out of the question. Since we didn't have a pencil, we had marked the outline by turning the earth over with our shovels, and now we have to cover everything back up. With that well-known covering, grass bricks.

We're all very disappointed. It had been a task, a long-term goal, and the work, when it was still connected with the tools of peacetime and created the illusion of productive effort, gave everyone joy and we carried on bravely. Never had we been in better spirits.

Now the cursing has begun again.

It rained in Zürich almost the whole time I was on leave. Thirty-six hours! And now I'm back here again. . . .

How was it? Was it good?

Our tenants wanted to give notice, and this took half a day because people who stay at home and tend to their own affairs were livid about the noise a child was making, a child who had to be relocated from a town on the border.

We simply won't put up with this, they said. It's over the limit.

And what else?

In a tram that consisted only of one car, people were upset because it was so crowded, because they came in contact with wet overcoats. . . . I went to see a friend who wasn't home. Of course he hadn't known I was coming. I went out for coffee nevertheless, amazed at the clean cups and amazed, too, at how everyone was talking about such big ideas—nations and battles and peoples, continents, and history. For us, all questions are much closer and therefore much smaller—questions for which we are much more responsible, much more accountable.

I think we're better off.

I stood for a while in front of the drawer in my writing table, my hands so to speak behind my back, because there's no longer any point in touching these objects that once meant so very much. Things that, whatever happens and however I may come back, I won't be taking up again. Of course in principle it's never possible to return. . . .

If I could just get that into my head once and for all. . . .

At the station.

She—the Clear-Sighted One, the Brave, the Wise—why did she suddenly burst into tears? They were jeering from all the windows as the train pulled out; the noise boomed in the halls.

Now, as I said, we're back again. We had to report in at the guardhouse, where they were taking an amusing photograph: two shiny bayonets were

being held at the chest of a half-naked man whose had been stood up against the wall, the proverbial wall, a rusty wash basin for his helmet. His distorted expression gave rise to uproarious laughter.

They say Russia has entered the war as well, also against Poland, whose borders Russia is said to have overrun this morning.

Here in our village, once more the peacefulness of Sunday reigns. The sun shimmers between the alders while the foliage grows ever more golden, ever more sparse. No one from my unit is here. Only the locals playing their *bocce* again in the flickering half-shadows of an autumn vine bower.

And afterwards, when it's over—then what?

Everything is so completely filled with the present, in small things as well as large, completely lacking in any sense of a future. Families without income, or income without any work being done. Soldiers and those who stayed home will come into conflict, and much will have to be done to keep rifts from opening up.

Many, though, and not just the worst, won't be willing to return to the way things used to be. The longer it goes on, the more they'll ask themselves what these times mean. They'll want a world made new, and who will give it to them? A time of universal searching and questioning will begin as soon as we take off our field-gray uniforms. All kinds of ways to go astray will open up again. Some will come to their senses sooner for having had this extraordinary

shared experience. These will be, so to speak, spiritual war profiteers—perhaps the last possible justification for war. But the crowd, which can't bear such uncertainty for very long, will once more have a limitless need for scapegoats. New ideologies no one can imagine will shoot up from this hatred, like mushrooms from putrid ground.

Our military duties continue. Left, right. Loading and unloading. And again: left, right.

From where we stand on the riverbank, we can see fish under the fast-moving water as if under a green glass. While we're sitting on the cannons, aiming and turning and forbidden to look up, the leaves swing down to us, yellow and red, some already violet. Scraps with an indescribably cheerful glow.

To be sure: at this very same moment others are running toward a machine gun, toward a row of tanks that is closing in on their trenches. Still others are tangled up in wire near the point of impact, their faces pressed in the muck, waiting to find out whether they too will be torn to shreds, or not.

I think: please, no flight into Beauty.

But what good does it do all of them if we sit here cursing heaven and our sergeant—just because our soup's grown cold?

We still think very often about the Swiss National Exhibition in Zürich. Especially, of course, now that our leave is over. It came at exactly the right

time, inspiring us and many others with enthusiasm for the essential feature of the Swiss Confederation: its voluntary brotherhood of different languages.

Here in our Tessin village, though, we can barely manage to order another beer, buy a handful of grapes, or ask where the next latrine is. Even when we're face-to-face with a little tyke who, having put on one of our helmets, gazes admiringly at us soldiers in a youthful, innocent way, we're helpless. We laugh, we run our fingers through the little rascal's hair. The only other thing we can do is shrug our shoulders—a friendly confederation shrug.

The other day we sat on a railway embankment as if in a sloping lecture hall and had an Italian lesson. "The infinitive form of a verb"—what's that? Our men are like wild horses, and the young, somewhat pale, somewhat scrawny, somewhat nervous, and very scholarly professor had considerable trouble carrying out his systematic approach, which many find too academic.

What our men want to know is: How can I talk to a woman about love, successfully that is? That's the question. To them, all method—that is, all simplification to what is fundamental and recurrent—feels like a detour if not simply a trick to lead them about by the nose.

To be and to have, says the slight, frail teacher. That's enough for today.
To be and to have, essere and avere. What more do we want?

Then it's time to go back to the guns.

By the way, the young teacher is the same one who sat in the fresh straw that first evening, shook his head, and said that if his pupils saw him like that all his authority would go to the devil.

“You still have so much to learn,” a young locksmith said then. . . .

But it seems the teacher learns very slowly, as most teachers do. He’s in a constant state of agitation that he has to be a soldier when so much scholarly work remains to be done back home, behind the Front. And because, as a soldier, you can’t think, you can hardly form a single thought. . . .

Perhaps that’s a blessing.

The time of the soul that no one watches over is finally coming, and that soul will doubtless break through many dams, lay waste many gardens, and fertilize them with slime. And no one will stop this. No one, including those who are at home and can think perfectly well; they can’t imagine what goes on inside of us any more than we can.

But something does.

Sometimes, during a break for example, this happens: you rest your elbows on your knees, you watch a beetle running passionately back and forth nearby, and it happens completely by accident, that business with your hands. Without intending it, without your being aware of it, just like *that*. . . . You’ve folded your hands together. You’re dozing, asleep with your eyes open, when you suddenly feel a slight sensation in both hands, joined together—a tiny sensation, not a cramp but a pressure that increasingly escapes your will. A feeling of being enclosed. A ring, a circle. And a sudden calm, as if your spirit, too, were enclosed. A whole; a roundness.

This happens very rarely.

A minute later, you suddenly seem very large to yourself. You're more than a little astonished at how much room you displace, amazed at the height from which a human being can look down on the ground. And then you feel very small again, downright ridiculous compared to your surroundings, positively dwarf-like. All sense of scale seems to have been lost, as if all connection to your environment, to what we call reality, has so dissolved that it can't disturb us any more, can't frighten or even distract us. Indeed, you feel for an instant the way you imagine the inner face of a stone must feel: surrounded on every side, peaceful, solid and whole, thoroughly present. You're aware of your own existence in the moment, you feel the soul that has come into your body. As if you have pulled yourself back together.

Today there was an accident. A van with seven men driving down a street that had been closed to vehicles struck another van and turned over.

The van had crates containing communications equipment on its roof. These created a space that kept the people inside from being completely crushed. We hear that four men have been hospitalized, one with a shattered jaw; another, a telephone specialist, is in critical condition. When we heard his name, we all thought we knew who it was. You could see this on every face. We were not a little stunned when, shortly thereafter, the man we were thinking of came down through the village, grapes in his hand and in the best of moods. . . .

"Well, don't you have all the luck," one man said to him.

"Me?" he said, astonished. "What are you talking about?"

Little Bühler, who with his boyish face would occasionally make the most outrageous jokes, will unfortunately be leaving our unit for good. He has to be hospitalized. On the other side of the Gotthard Pass. Because of his stomach again, poisoned in the course of his work as an electroplater.

It may all be nothing, he said to me once, but a stomach that can't be healed—well, he wouldn't wish that on his worst enemy. And now, he was just saying, they want to cut him open again. If we haven't had a postcard from him in three weeks, he thinks it'll be three rounds over a cold grave!

He laughs, very depressed.

Someone offers him cigarettes

He's engaged, not yet twenty-four, was planning to marry at Christmas. He'd like to have the courage to do as everyone is urging and go under the knife one more time. But if it doesn't improve then—

As the trumpet sounds, we promise to save the seat behind the stove for him.

Poor devil! we all say, we'll have to send him a postcard.

Then we roll ourselves up in our warm blankets.

It's a peacefulness that absorbs everything outside itself, everything—every whistle, every shot that echoes over the valley, every noise in the alders, every sparkle on the river, every whisper in the fallen leaves—eerily conscious, bright, clear—and, strangely enough, without any alarming signs of decay. You feel so safe as you take it all in, you feel yourself being transformed, changed

with every breath, constantly changing, and all without any real risk of ever losing yourself.

That's what makes it so wonderful.

Each time it's over, your hands feel as if they were very far away, unbelievably small, so hard and heavy you think you'll never be able to lift them again, not for all eternity. And you have no idea—none at all—how long this has been going on, a quarter of an hour or a second. You don't have the slightest feeling for time, external time, as little as in dreams until suddenly, out of God knows what strength and determination, you rip one hand from the other and wake up.

And what's left?

An almost painful ebbing away, a small emptiness. You're tired, you yawn, you ask the fellow next to you what time it is, you couldn't say what it was you thought or saw. . . .

You have fallen out of the sphere of a deeper, more profound wakefulness and there's no calling it back, no stopping when it comes and no stopping when it goes. All you can do is put your jacket back on, pick up your knapsack and gasmask, light a cigarette if there's still time, or walk over to another group.

"Heard the latest?" one of them says.

You laugh, you swear, you talk about the state of the world, you spit on the ground, you take up your rifle and step forward in two rows, you do your work—and dream that you're awake.

Next morning as we're sitting on the gun carriage all ready to go, I get a very different kind of command, and I just have time to leap from the moving vehicle, landing of course on all fours. They throw my helmet and pack after me like ballast from a sinking ship.

In a comfortable passenger car, we drive up to the first outpost with our lieutenant from the Reserves, a sculptor from the group of older soldiers, and an even older corporal who owns a large quarry. We have two days to draw up plans for a bombproof dugout together with a cost estimate. We measure the terrain, which is very well suited for this purpose, and by noon we've set up our drafting workshop in an evacuated kitchen. The ladles on the sooty wall don't bother us, and the running water is very welcome. Even smoking would be permitted at the outpost if I had a pipe. Since I don't even have a watch, the corporal puts his own down on the table.

"Till tomorrow night!" he says.

Then they leave, and I'm alone. I take off my Army jacket, fasten down the clean paper, and sharpen my pencil again. Just like three weeks ago, in my first professional post. Not surprisingly, I feel like a fish thrown back in water—even if it's only the water in a fisherman's pail.

"See the little inn so fine,

"Where the barrel says the blessing,

"And our host pours out red wine."

And what red wine!

First, a dovecote with an airy thatched roof and now a secure dugout with a roof made of railroad tracks and concrete—these were my first two assignments as an architect.

About that time we quite unexpectedly came into possession of a radio. A gift from an anonymous donor. And no one asked who he was, this donor. For our people, everything that gives pleasure isn't worth talking about.

"I have one just like this at home," a man says, crouching down and turning the knobs. "I wouldn't dream of giving away a machine like that."

Now there's an honest soldier!

It's on all the time now, without intermission, without end. A Viennese waltz; an official from the French government; the silvery sound of village bells; then a crash, a howling and moaning, a crackling like that of machine guns. But it's just thunderstorms, they say, static in the atmosphere. Next an Italian aria, very clear and precise; a signal that identifies the station; and then a German voice reporting on the spitefulness and deceit of the British; a Beethoven sonata. All this resounds in the bare schoolhouse vestibule where at the same time our cobbler is sitting, ceaselessly hammering nails into our boots, tirelessly praising his own work. . . .

They're playing an accordion in the loft above.

Oh yes, we often have some fine old times here. Those who have been in the village come and sing, too. Mostly pretending to be in better spirits than they really are. They sing and dance, the men forming couples, until at last they

understand why everyone is cursing at them: Time for the news! With our hands on our leather belts, an extinguished cigar stump or pipe in our mouths, we stand in a half circle around the impersonal, always monotonous, invariably harmonious voice. Every free citizen apparently reaches the same opinion about these events as everyone else—a view so unanimous it's hardly ever expressed. Not even in looks. Wordless, seemingly quite indifferent, the circle breaks up as soon as the speaker goes on to the daily weather report or wants to tell us who, on this day when the Polish army was defeated, celebrated their ninetieth birthday in our country. Then everyone goes back to his own business—a game of cards, the newspaper, some to their Italian textbook or a letter. Others, bare to the waist, walk down to the little spring, a washcloth and bar of soap in one hand.

After just three weeks, visits to the inns have become less frequent. Three weeks. That's the length of the annual military refresher course.

Today, as we expected, our captain paid a visit to our drafting kitchen. Our plans are finished, hopefully accurate although by no means beautiful. Nevertheless it's time now to let them go, time to restrain ourselves from any more prettifying. They are burial chambers, like those in the rock temples on the Nile. All that's missing is for our first lieutenant, the sculptor, to deliver a statue of Ramses.

Our captain seems satisfied.

Every architectural plan, whether for a house or another kind of building, must have an arrow. Our bunker plans are no exception. Only our arrow doesn't point to the sun, it points to our enemy.

Do we have an enemy?

To be sure, there's a rage and fury in the air today there for anyone who wants it, a feeling that could not be more closed, more sure of itself. In the tavern, for example, when the poor young Tessin girl, who doesn't know languages, tunes in the wrong station again, she can't understand what has come over our dear people. Suddenly they're all drumming their fists on the table, rattling their empty bowls, whistling through their fingers, hurling a piece of stale bread a hand's breadth away from this speaking box. All in a dither, the poor young girl runs out, wailing.

Beromünster! they shout. *We want Beromünster!*

As soon as the Swiss national radio station is back on, everything returns to normal. There's not another word about it. We ladle out our noodles, our meat. There's even salad to go with it. The meal is flawless in all respects. All of a sudden a fellow holding a full bowl stops, takes you by the arm in a brotherly way and, wanting to give you a piece of advice, tells you what a wonderful meal this is, so much better than in the low-class pub.

You get used to that, too.

That there's still some time left—we grasp this on our chins; we feel it in our beards. Evenings, at the sun's last rays, we stand at the wooden sluice, lathering ourselves. It's always more or less the same fellows who feel a need to

do this. Which is enough to create a special club, like an association of people all the same age. We shave, tell dirty jokes, or keep silent. Then, without any preamble, someone lets fall a few words about real things. While we're cleaning our blades, while we're washing out our brushes. About what part we would play in a war. Always very shyly, not at all like those fine military men you see nowadays in the weekly newspapers, high on a lofty crag, looking like a monument for young girls to admire: "never pale in the face of danger." And so on. As I said before, we're standing at a wooden water gutter soaping our underarms. The question so much discussed in recent years of whether it makes any sense to oppose so superior a military power has disappeared from everyone's head as if vaporized. You imagine many different things when you have a loaded gun in your hand. None of us knows what's coming next—but neither does anyone on the other side.

Often they sit gazing quietly at the photograph of a tank, somewhat thoughtful but calm. They must be feeling something then that no one puts into words. Otherwise, how could they stay so still, without any suspiciously boastful bravado? A feeling that we can only be attacked on the basis of a complete lie and also that we will always have a certain advantage. Not the help of divine justice, that invention of the moralists, but what, unpatented, we simply call "Nature": the sacred fury of a human being who, standing on his own soil, doesn't need any "idea" to send him into battle but feels impelled by a deeper force, an inborn, dull force that can only grow stronger when someone

shoots at him. A force that, once unleashed, may have even a cruelty so savage it will be able to crush tanks.

Our unit has set up an emergency fund. Whoever chooses can give one or more day's salary out of every ten, or more. Our officers, who only recently gave money for a football, led the way, as befits their rank, and many ordinary soldiers signed up as well. Some with very generous pledges. An officer, a corporal, and a gunner will administer the fund, making sure that those less fortunate who may need shoes or underwear in the coming winter will receive a useful contribution without word getting around.

By the end of the first evening, we had already collected more than 200 francs.

The marvelous weather goes on and on. Out of a dull early morning, a bright, almost cloudless day unveils itself—a sudden, unspeakably cheerful blue. Between the alders, more and more space opens up. Only here and there, an occasional rippling flicker, a brittle rustling. Out of the forests comes a gray and warm, secretly reddening brown with the slender white of isolated birches in it. And toward evening, a faint autumn mist one more descends over the slopes and the vineyards brimming with blue grapes, transforming everything to a floating golden shimmer.

We have just inspected the other unit's emplacements, as if we were the local construction authorities. The countless logs they've laid in for firewood

are truly impressive! Without asking, they went ahead and raided a nearby lumber company. War is war. A neatly written bill for more than two hundred francs reminded them soon enough that we still have civil order in these parts.

Our village, the last one on the road, lies on the slope so picturesquely that whenever you see it, you wish you had a day off and a box of watercolors, although at heart you're glad you don't. As if only our duty made this impossible and not our own lack of talent, of which we are only too well aware and keep forgetting. Up here, as everywhere else in the valley, all the houses have simple stone roofs, heavy and gray like the scales on a clumsy animal. Moss grows green on them in places. And when you look down from the peak at the village, it looks like a flock clustered around its good shepherd, around a bold little church whose tower bears a large Swiss flag.

Most beautiful of all, however, is the crumbling masonry, a crude and living wall composed of unhewn stone, without plaster of course, and covered only by the half-shadow of a grapevine, interrupted by the darkness of an open arch. Pigs grunt from a pen where flies are swarming. Children are always standing on a vineyard wall like so many organ pipes, waving and cheering at the sight of our vehicle, which whirrs and stinks of crude oil, as if we were coming from the greatest of all victories!

Later, after our meal, we see them again. Silent and shy, they wait with their little pots, their tin cans, for the leftover soup they get from our kitchen.

Our captain certainly did the right thing when recently he stood before the unit, both hands full of half-loaves discarded only because they were a day

old. He threatened us with severe disciplinary action. Since then things have gotten better. Perhaps because of his threat. Perhaps because of the silent children, the visible poverty that now confronts us every day.

(Most people are not really evil, just dull witted. And mostly not even stupid, just lacking in imagination. Or, what comes to the same thing: a sluggishness of the heart.)

Just as we had finished inspecting the emplacements and wanted to drive off before the road was closed, just then our car broke down. Which meant: free time. . . .

I watched as a young woman in a blue-and-white dress stood over a laundry bucket, washing and wringing, while an old Tessin soldier, a farmer's pipe in his mouth, hung the brightly colored scraps on a tightly stretched rope. Back and forth they flapped in the wind. Below the little schoolhouse, which consisted of one room and a toilet but had a bird's eye view of the green slopes and the lonely valley's winding gorge, we came upon the first canteen established by the *Schweizer Verband Volksdienst*, a temperance organization that serves meals to soldiers. We paid thirty centimes for a cup of coffee and a pastry. Tipping was not permitted. Instead, I asked questions about this and that until our tire was patched. The strapping young damsel lives all by herself up here in this border valley forgotten by the world where there are only troops and horses, engines and weapons.

"Good for you!" I say.

"You know," she opines, "women are part of the Swiss people, too."

With a forceful swing, she throws the dark brown soapy water down over the slope; she doesn't have time to waste on every idle onlooker.

My colleagues came back very grumpy with hardly anything to say. They had to sit up on their hind legs and beg, as the saying goes. This according to an officer of the General Staff. They were already cursing yesterday as we practiced our marching drill up and down the village.

As in every mid-size hamlet, here too there's an idiot always underfoot, gaping with inexhaustible stupidity at the routine events of daily life. With his mouth open, needless to say. Once, when I was on guard duty, he caused me great anxiety as he repeatedly crouched down near the ammunition.

"Halt!" I cried.

He just grinned.

I was supposed to shoot after giving that kind of command on watch. I tried everything I knew to get through to him. Finally he grasped what I was saying—at least I thought so—and crept over to the next cannon on all fours, eyeballing me through the open gun barrel. I saw then that he had no fingernails, presumably all bitten off, and I paused in front of him. I began to reflect on what it would be like if I were to shoot. . . .

It's easy to imagine what it would be like: the bundle on the ground, a small hole through which dark blood drips, the imbecilic face with its mouth half-open. . . . Naturally, once more it remained just a thought.

Today, as we returned from lunch carrying our knapsacks, we saw him again, the idiot, walking up and down the village, an old picket over his shoulder, trying with pious devotion to be our equal. He looked so absurd that suddenly everyone, the devil knows why, made their peace with the past few days.

I read in a letter: "If we were people who milked animals for a living, we would know why we worked. But people like us? I could have my hands full of work if that's what I wanted. But what is achieved now if I paint? In theory it's the same in war or peace, but at a time like this, when everything is called into question, I hear this one question clearer, louder, every minute. Only a fellow who could paint among the dying could do it. That's too much for me. I volunteered for the auxiliary service, but I'm still here cleaning around my paintbrushes. No one knows whether or how or when they will use us."

And in another place:

"Be glad you're not here—what's happening in the city would make you retch. Everywhere it looks like a Women's Society. People turn around and stare at you, a young man. They actually turn around. Why isn't he on the border? Wherever you go, you walk under a cloud, suspected of treason. Some positively ooze with self-importance, giving themselves airs because they have a husband, a brother, a fiancé on the border. In every tram you sense an awareness of the larger, shared experience, but this apparently does not make the Philistines any less schoolmarmish, including when they wear a martyr's halo."

This is the first Sunday when my colleague and I are both off at the same time. At least until six in the evening. Then I go back on guard duty.

Even here on the *Langensee*, it's already too cold for swimming so we lie out in the sun. Your face sweats while you sleep, and your back freezes. When you open your eyes, it seems as if a shimmer of smoke is hovering over the lake ...

What more could anyone want?

Here comes the invisible wind, carrying a quiet, caressing splash up onto the beach. There's a rustling, a crackling in the fallen leaves that are growing more and more fragile. They lie scattered about in the sand and sedge, as dark brown as clotted blood. And every blade of grass, every bit of foliage, has its own shadow, like a tiny strip of bluish silk. And your own body is here, which you stretch out and enjoy. You enjoy the way it stands upright like a sudden revelation. You enjoy how the sinking sun bathes it, free of clothes, firmer than ever, harder and healthier even though, as we can see, our legs are covered in fleabites. And here, too are a few grapes we brought with us instead of a meal, and we detonate them between our lips, one after the other.

Where, I often wonder, where is the specter of war, the picture of killing and the faces of the dead, the visage of all those others who at this very minute are running back and forth like hunted animals, a bundle under one arm and despair in their hearts. And where are the smoking cities?

I see nothing. Even when I think about it, out of a sense of decency. . . .

I see smoke from burnt shrubs forming a veil between the blue tree trunks, the alders and aspens and birches. Smoke creeping slowly over the glistening lake. As evening falls, I stand on the beach, my feet in the glassy water, and what's it to me that there's a war?

My grapes taste marvelous.

I keep thinking about it.

We tip our hats when a hearse drives by, just as others will tip theirs to me when they pass. Or we smile when there's a wedding and go off to work as usual while the bridegroom in his car, the one who is affected, may well be thinking: They're lucky. For them it's just another day. They can go and do their work. It's not their affair. We know that people marry, people die, and the trains keep on running. It's enough that human beings have these experiences when it's their turn. Everyone will have their turn one day.

But this time, the others say, this concerns only you, and nothing can be done. Only the parish priests who are now in office will act in a sincere manner, as if they, too, were affected.

In a little volume that slips easily into my pocket, I recently read Homer again, the first time since school days.

What surprises me the most is how huge, how terrifyingly huge is the void that lies behind all the events leading up to the Trojan War. A blankness

out of which comes the boredom, the ennui, that drives not only human beings to their actions but rules the gods as well. Only with this one difference: for them—for the gods—it's all a game. They may know pain, too, but they don't bleed to death from their wounds. They don't ask what it all means. Only human beings, who are mortal, do that.

For us, it's all deadly serious.

But the gods—aren't they just oversized children? So comely and cheerful, so innocent and cruel. They laugh with closed mouths. At human need and desire and torment. Like children who toy with animals. Even pain is a game to them, and dying a game, and happiness and life—they know what lies behind it, but they never say.

Because we couldn't bear it. One would have to be immortal to live without faith.

There's no meaning in this world, no consolation: nothing beyond what we see. We have songs about pleasure and songs about suffering, and human life is rich in both. That has to be enough, that has to be our meaning.

Isn't that what Homer thinks?

Hate and rage and longing, love and envy—everything is comic for the gods, but with human beings, these same passions always end in tragedy.

Because a human being always has to ask: Why?

The gods don't ask, they don't need a *Why*. Of course—they're not subject to death. That's why they don't need gods over them the way humans always do: as an iridescent veil between themselves and the void.

Here comes Zeus, father of the gods. He strides up Mount Ida and sits on a rock. A pair of scales in one hand, he watches to see whether good fortune swings toward the Trojans or the Greeks.

Of everyone in the world, whom does he ask?

Doesn't he behave just like a human being who can't make a decision on his own and in the end takes a coin and throws it, heads or tails—Zeus the Almighty, who in all other situations hurls down thunderbolts, Zeus, whom even in this Olympian quarrel we still view as the Supreme Father?

Homer calls that fate, what Zeus is testing with his balance and to which he, too, is subject: fate that disregards even the will of the gods. Fate as chance, as blind and random rule. Fate as Nothingness.

We see this again and again: Zeus is the supreme god who steers the clouds; the heavenly gambler; the divine trifler who rolls his dreams up into a ball over and over, gives them a shape, then lets them stretch out and die away. He is the artist for whom the mere act of creation suffices, an act endlessly repeated. After all, what's it to him if he's making clouds or peoples? In the end, both are merely transitory. It's the same with Zeus as with the artist, the real artist: he loves the act of making things, not the things made.

What lies behind everything is a boredom like that of the gods, which is also the wellspring of all creativity. And of wars, vices, great undertakings.

Goethe says it in his own unique phrase:

“Shaping, unshaping—
The Eternal Spirit’s
Entertainment unending.

But why, you wonder, do the goddesses intervene whenever a conflict between humans, clarified through reason, is moving slowly and naturally in the direction of the way they would decide it?

I was just reading how Paris and Menelaus, the men for whom this is a quarrel between their ancestral houses, wanted to fight each other in single combat. I find that so completely reasonable, honorable, and welcome. As if one day we heard that the armies that burden all countries were being called home, and the two leaders stepped forward for a duel. . . .

But no! The first trembling javelins have barely been let loose when the divine hussies rush in again, and Aphrodite—as so often—puts off a clear, manly decision. She envelops their heads in fog. Why? Because the game can’t end yet, the game that has cost so much in wit and wile. What a delightful raid it was! They want to enjoy the match a little longer up in heaven, that’s all. . . .

Like a cat playing with a mouse.

In this way it continues, and many more songs and battles follow. Everywhere you catch hold of the magnificent web, a nothingness shimmers through. With human beings, too, although for them, enmeshed in the delusion of their own importance, everything is more gilded, more solemn—done with raised eyebrows, so to speak.

But still. . .

Are these noble Greeks really so foolish that they spend ten years on the battlefield because of Helen—a woman!—who was beautiful once and lived quite happily with another man? Is it for this they leave their own women? Gamble away their flourishing youth? Bleed themselves to death in battles filled with noise?

All this for Helen?

Oh God, how thankful they are for the flimsiest pretext that justifies them at home and in their own minds! How grateful for these notions of honor they let themselves believe in: that they fought for Menelaus, for the deceived consort, for the honor of their Prince, for the honor of Greek womanhood. How thankful for everything that throws a meaning for their lives down before their feet!

But what if Paris hadn't played his prank? They would have had to invent it, they would have had come up with something themselves.

Because that's what's so human about it: human beings need a reason to make war. A reason or at least an aim, a goal. Not like the gods, who can do

without one. Human beings always need an excuse so they don't have to see that *We fight in order to fight!*

For that would be to gaze again into the very night of the world. Into the void, into nothingness.

Only one kind of human being is truly above war: the creator, but only in those rare hours when he is completely absorbed in creating.

And the rest of us?

We talk about universal, constant, natural, and perpetual peace.

Homer's god of war is called Ares, a god of primitive passion and rage for slaughter. As Homer portrays him, Ares doesn't give a tinker's dam who wins. He rampages everywhere. He doesn't take sides. Ares is purely and simply the lust for battle: frenzied, unseeing, and indiscriminate. A figure filled up to the very edge with chaos, with nothingness.

Ares is the god of fighter bombers, of those who have a compulsion to destroy everything, trample everything underfoot, tear everything apart in order to fill their own emptiness.

It's no accident that Ares, god of the basest kind of fighting, is so hated by all the other gods, especially by those who are also war gods, like Athena and Apollo. These lead their very own heroes, their darlings, into the fray, hurling the shining spear with their own hand, yet remain gods of a generative spirit.

Gods of wisdom, the arts, beauty, and truth; gods of the entertainment that is creativity.

To which I think Homer might well say that there's a kind of battle that comes from profusion and another kind that comes from the void.

Ares or Apollo?

A human being who wants to be honest won't always find it easy to know which god he's serving.

It seems the last men are now being called up for military training. As we sit under the fig tree and play a game of chess while on guard duty, we hear a sudden cry: *Come quickly! The Bourbaki are advancing!*

"Who?"

The French Bourbaki Army, defeated by the Germans in 1871, who lay down their arms and walked into Switzerland seeking refuge?

It's a highly amusing sight, these men from widely differing age groups, some in low oxford shoes and long, creased trousers, others in alpine boots and knickerbocker short pants, most still wearing colorful ties—but all in blue overcoats with government buttons and a rifle they've just been given on one shoulder. We greet the sweating followers, "inspect" the parade, and can't suppress a scornful laugh.

"Just grin," one of them says.

But the column goes on for some length, so we don't grin the whole time.

Yesterday, ordered back to drafting. We're supposed to draw each emplacement in exact dimensions, once and for all. Ground plans and sectional views, everything is to be made as clear as possible in small blueprints. The idea is that we will hand these off to all the artillery captains, who can then be expected to produce reliable work without someone constantly standing over them.

It's not easy for a common soldier who is temporarily entrusted with a leadership position. To be sure, your fellow soldiers will do everything as you suggest, or as you and they agree. Even some officers, obeying a natural impulse, will take off their jackets and pick up a shovel. They'll do it because it's a pleasure to do it. Only a foolish mistrust of yourself, a fear that you are taking advantage of your momentarily superior position to be wickedly lazy, finally leads you to put your own hand to the task. The result is inevitable: you lose yourself in the details when you wield a pick-axe or lay the bricks yourself.

Later, when you step back and look at the whole, it's too late—the mistakes have already been made; the signs of haste and arbitrariness are clear. What remains is the insight that nothing happens without orders, even if everyone has the best will in the world. One must be able to obey on command—but also to command when needed.

Otherwise, our military service will go back to the old ways, and all the letters we write and the drawings we make will remain misrepresentations. We're constantly absorbed in events—sometimes even the very smallest ones.

Because we can't take anything else in. Yet what is most real, most difficult and time-consuming, is the uneventful.

I find it remarkable that all the letters that reach us in military service have an incomparably different tone, a seriousness that abandoned us some time ago. This despite the fact that when we take off our shirts to wash, each of us has a miniature white death notice around his neck.

I believe that for all of us the moment the war really begins will be a total shock. No one can say what or who he will be then. We can only be sure of one thing: we will be honest, perhaps for the very first time. Without a mask, without the manners we've been taught. We say *War*, but it's really the sight of our own countenance we fear, perhaps even more than death, which is equally certain for us at home.

No doubt we'll see this more and more often, this general epidemic of leave requests. Conscience seizes every other man, certain he is so important to the economy he shouldn't be taken out of it, not in these times.

Sometimes it's enough to make you sick.

We have some heads of households who were in the call-up at the time of the last war and some Swiss from abroad who have abandoned their businesses. They don't talk at all, they just tend to their business correspondence insofar as they still have any. Machines just bought still have to be paid for even if they're idle now and aren't bringing in any income. . . . And at

the same table, others are writing their requests for leave. One is a farmer with at least two farmhands, and we understand why he wants to go on leave. Or a young university student, a year and a half behind. He failed his preliminary examination last spring, and now he absolutely has to have time off—six weeks—or he'll have no choice but to claim there's something wrong with his liver. He ruptured it a while ago but, as he confesses with a sly smile, it doesn't bother him at all now.

Each of us has an ambition for which our lifespan will be too brief. Everyone will fail to catch what can't be caught. Not everyone talks about it, though. The man who didn't strive to escape, to remove himself from what should be a shared sacrifice, doesn't have any easy time of it when someone is dancing and rejoicing in the loft because he's reached the goal.

"Six weeks!" he says.

He gets absolutely no answer.

He'll send us a cake, a really fine one. Besides, there'll at least be more room now. For us, the dumb ones.

"You'll do it just as I did," he laughs. "If you can!"

Don't worry—we will.

Meanwhile, a beautiful day. We marched through the mountains. With, of course, rifle, knapsack, and gas mask—always with all our gear, whose straps tighten across our chests. It was so hot you could only throw off the sweat by shaking your head. Strict but not ill-tempered orders got more out of us than

anything we could have done by ourselves. Everyone finished, even the older men among us, even in the fifth hour as the path wound up steep woodland slopes. . . .

When we reached the top, tea was being made. We weren't alone. Here, too, soldiers are housed, so completely absorbed in their own lives that they gazed at us almost as if we were invaders when we sat down between the wires they'd stretched all over the meadow.

No one is more tired.

It's the first time some of us have seen mountains like these: peak after peak, like a handwriting with jagged edges at the glittering edge of the world. All these ridges floating over the valley mists. Not that the men go into raptures or even talk about it. Just that a man who's supposed to be keeping his mug back looks out, wordless, while the fellow next to him pours out hot water, scalding his hand. A minor quarrel breaks out. . . .

I had borrowed a pair of binoculars.

Lonely and rather bleak, the border mountains lie before us barely two hours away. The clouds draw on above, and there's hardly a break in the sky. None on earth, either. Only forests filled with mushrooms and blueberries, and alpine pastures with low bushes offering splendid opportunities for hiding oneself, with marvelous pine trees and scree, everywhere scree--

So that's to be our battlefield?

The trail leads downward through a low-lying autumn grove, steep and stony. The glimmering fade of the light is exquisite: the crimson of the autumn

berries, the white birches between them, the perpetually bluish haze over the valley, and the dull silvery ribbon of the Tessin River that simply refuses to come any closer. How we curse as we walk over these Tessin paths, these trails with rocks like bullets, these martyrs' ways! How we pant after the dark blue grapes above the dusty little walls. In vain, of course. We wipe the burning sweat out of our eyes

When we're finally down in the valley, where walking on level ground is a relief to our knees, we burst into full-throated song. Not on order, but out of pleasure and pride, which all evening long trumps the secret burning of our feet.

By the way, it's exactly a month today. One thing, at least, has been achieved: we don't count the days any more. Or the weeks. We are here, and whoever now thinks about home is thinking about going on leave: about making a visit to himself. It's as if we were on an endless march, day after day, and the longer we walk, the more our inner goal recedes, further and further as if some day, in a terrifying surprise, it means to catch up with us from behind.

Our captain has just touched lightly on the delicate question of what we understand by *military discipline*, by *obedience*. As at school, you are called on. No escape—you have to answer. He asks whether we understand these terms to mean what is called *blind obedience*. Who can come up with an all-

encompassing word right now, while they're standing, that conveys everything we Swiss understand by this concept?

I'm going to hear the echo of the words *trusting obedience* for a long time. I only meant that there has to be some kind of obedience, that is to say, a subordination of oneself to the dominant view. Which will doubtless be more productive the less it's brought about by force, punishment, or threat, and the more by an understanding reached freely, through trust. Trust in those who, in the end, bear the responsibility and have to gain this confidence by force of character if they want to be obeyed.

Brownnoser is the mildest name I'm called that evening. Many are convinced I've betrayed our soldiers, our superior officers. How quickly one becomes an enemy of the people, an enemy of democracy. It's good when people keep a vigilant, even jealous watch over their rights and freedoms, but sad when they become so stupid that every word reminding them of the foundation of all those rights and freedoms—that is, *duty*—affects them like a red flag.

We're going to the theater tonight, all very posh. But in open trucks, where the military jackets we brushed so passionately will be covered with dust in no time. We hold onto the roof grid, we sway, we swing to and fro and sing, we keep on singing, two or three songs at the same time. No matter, the rumbling drowns us out.

Two weeks ago the brigade had a similar outing: Verdi, Rossini, and so on. This time, it's an evening of music and entertainment.

As at a school recital, paper planes fly about in the hall, sent down from the upper circles, and land in the box where the elegantly dressed officers sit, including our Brigadiergeneral. Jubilation over the little toy's unpunishable irreverence knows no bounds. Our Brigadier smiles. Almost all of them are from Tessin; they whistle to each other from one circle to the next. It's like being in a cage of monkeys. They almost crush the chests of those of us up front. The whole circle reeks of sweat and horses. One hardly needs a performance in such an atmosphere. Again and again, the feeling in the hall erupts in loud singing while the curtain is still closed.

"At last!" a man near me sighs. "Just look at those legs!"

It's a well-known singer from Zürich, blond, rosy-cheeked, bold and saucy even before the silence of this field-gray hall. She stands in a flood of applause. And why? After short while, she gets on with it. She sings and makes some patter between the songs. She sings in German, Italian, French. About love and jealousy, about betrayal. About the inhibited soul of a waitress in a blue and white uniform, a vamp in her dreams. These little ditties present themselves as popular songs. But the irony, that outgrowth of urban life, doesn't come off. As little as with children. It falls through like water through a sieve, and not even our cabaret poets, who aim for it, could say: *They all understand me.*

"*La Bella!*" they cry excitedly. "*La Bella!*"

It's a roaring success. . . .

“La Bionda,” they chant. *“La bella Bionda!”*

She—the great *artiste*—has to come back over and over, taking bow after bow, laughing and shaking her head. Almost somewhat helpless, as if it made her uncomfortable now to enter into so many dreams.

At the end, as the whole stage was filling up with little Tessin blooms colorful as a flowerbed, everyone rose, without any signal, without any cue from the wind section. All at once everyone was singing—as if from another region of their ardent souls—the national anthem.

Sunday. Guard duty again. Back and forth, back and forth. Two hours can be so very long.

I think, I walk and think some more. . . . About what, really? The moon rises slowly over the black mountains like a Chinese lantern shimmering behind the dark tree trunks. Oh yes, it’s beautiful! It’s always beautiful. And again: what use is that, what good does it do us, that the world is so beautiful? I take aim at the moon, which of course is probably forbidden, my front and rear sights correctly aligned at a distance of 300 meters.

As in the little verse:

“See the moonlight in the tree-tops.

All the birds are now at rest.

Stars are twinkling in the heavens.

Imagine a God that all has blessed.”

And then:

“See how this enormous silence
Sears the clouds’ distorted face.
Silver tears upon the branches:
Look—the moon has hanged itself.”

Later, when you’re finally going to be relieved and you hear nocturnal footsteps on the pavement, you’re completely taken by surprise. They’re coming down the path straight toward you: six identical helmets. Now you are more awake than awake. In the village across the way, the clock strikes three. . . . You think, you sit in the guardhouse and think some more. About what, really? . . . There’s a candle. That’s all. That, and the snores and groans coming from men with doubled up, curved bodies. Don’t they look as if they’d like to go back to the womb, weapons and all?

As time goes on, we care less and less whether there’s an alert. We eat our noodles, as long as they last. They last long enough for a second helping. Afterwards we go to the inn, the only one we’re specifically allowed to visit this evening. So that if the alarm sounds, they can find everyone right away. We wait in vain. Finally they let us sleep. Not until the next morning at eight o’clock, after gymnastics and breakfast, do we first get our orders.

Under a gray fog that covers everything, we take up a position and wait in the crackling rain until the exercise is broken off again.

Then home, and under our roof.

We're filthy up to our knees. We hang up our overcoats on the stone floor. You can see how high the moisture goes on these shapes standing in the straw in their underwear that look like Friedrich Holder's grotesque paintings. Many of those who haven't gotten any mail may well be in favor of peace again. One man, also in his underwear, just stands there, bewildered, and smokes his pipe.

Our first lieutenant, who was in the call-up at the time of the last war, tells us about the land and people of Tessin, in particular about its economic situation, which is well-nigh desperate. To the south, there is the border and the customs tariff; to the north, in our own country, the Gotthard pass and costs of shipping by rail.

Other lectures are supposed to follow. For a start, each of us is expected to think about what he will be able to report to his comrades-in-arms when the rains come. We have gardeners and goldsmiths, milkers and doctors, handymen, painters, and brewers. We should have more than enough material for at least the first winter.

What do I have to say that concerns everyone? That's the question. Sometimes it feels like a cord around my neck that tightens the more I hang on it with all my being.

Amazingly, we sit in the kitchen evening after evening as if we were all one family. We wash the dishes, the plates that look a little bit like gear wheels,

and Bianca, who speaks French, bridges the gaps between the two languages as we find ourselves perpetually helpless.

What do we talk about? We can hardly say. It's as if language were having a conversation with itself, and it's enough that we know the words. Words from every subject, words that don't fit well together. Nevertheless, our parlor game is to make a sentence out of them. You can say so much more when you don't know the language; people will always forgive you. Even the most off-color curse seems charming in a slight foreign accent; it makes people laugh. We talk about love and kisses; there's no obligation. In the end it's all just talk. Or an example of something moving toward talk, toward language.

Once, when you are alone for a quarter of an hour with the prettier of the two women, you tell your life story—with your hands, in gestures, such a short, succinct story—all in a way you've never managed to do before. In large motions, always just as far as your vocabulary will reach

"Oh, je comprends!" she says.

What more can anyone want?

We have this experience every day, and not only while we're on duty: someone comes by seeking to agree with an opinion near and dear to our hearts, but with reasons we can't respect.

Should we nod and accept it?

Brotherhood in a *No*—nothing is easier, nothing more dreary and sterile, nothing more common. Demagogues know very well the spellbinding power of

this *No*, including when it's veiled, hidden, or not even expressed, when it's perhaps an apparent *Yes* that immediately lets them conquer the greatest number. Yes, a feeling of fraternity, even a semblance of it, can be so intoxicating that people completely stop caring about the subject at hand—let alone their own convictions—and give up all moral values for a fleeting sense of connectedness. And this creates the opening for a *No*, for the hatred of a common enemy that lets them join in every *Yes*—every one.

But that's exactly what we don't want.

Fewer and fewer, pleased with themselves, approach us to express their agreement, and we feel obliged to offend them by rejecting their overtures—all the more harshly, the more the sense of brotherhood is merely an illusion, the less they're willing to see the chasm between their way of thinking and ours.

All thought moves in a spiral. . . .

Our relationship to the war, for example: from the most primitive *Yes*, the *Yes* of the wild animal, it ascends to a *No*, the *No* of aunts and hairdressers; then to a second *Yes*, the *Yes* of those in good health who are spoiling for a fight; and then to a second *No*, the *No* of those who are creative—and finally perhaps back to a *Yes*, the cruel and inhuman *Yes* of the gods.

And the nihilists.

How readily the sparrow mistakes itself in all respects for the lion when, by chance, they drink from the same puddle.

He who doesn't dissent—and of course most of the time one doesn't, out of indifference, politeness, shyness, a fear of being seen as stubborn, or a feeling that the times demand that blind unanimity of views that always comes at the expense of integrity—afterwards one feels keenly that we haven't served our beliefs very well by giving them up for a brief inebriation, nor have we served our country.

Especially not ours!

Only that man whose goal is power in the world can't let any opportunity go by. Every person is useful, even when they misunderstand. He needs them, just as he needs their beliefs, but only as a means to power. Always in the hope there may be a force on this earth so strong it can simply declare itself pure again, and he can attain this if first he sacrifices everything, forgives himself everything.

That's not what we believe.

We are the people of a small country. What in this world can we conquer other than the breadth of the heart, the innocence and nobility of a conviction?

Little Bühler, the poor devil with the stomach that can't be healed, returned to our unit today. By the way, we completely forgot to send him the postcard we promised. They didn't operate. What will happen to him now? We ask as we stand around him in a circle. He shrugs his shoulders. . . .

"And you?" he asks. "What's new with you?"

We shrug our shoulders. We're still building the emplacements. Day before yesterday, we took a warm shower for the first time. Nothing else new.

Singing A young lieutenant orders us to sing. Loudly and with spirit. If we don't, we'll have drill.

And what happens?

They actually sing, the cowardly group. Lamely and tediously. . . . One song after another. . . .

Little by little, boredom and homesickness seize our strongest men. As we crouch in the sun on the low wall outside the guard station, it comes on suddenly: disgust, rage, a sense of desolation. Anger without an object. You could spit on the ground in front of you until the world drowned, just like that—

Why are we sitting here? Why?

And today, you should know, is the most beautiful day. Overhead between the rooftops, in curious spandrels, the sky turns blue as the sea, and white clouds drift by silent and aimless as swans. Like a summer memory. You could come here on holiday, take walks, work, sit on a low wall, all the same things we do. Only without a steel helmet.

We can see the proud, defiant towers of the old city between the silvery alders in the valley, and the slopes emerge from the lake of mist floating over the vast plain. They rise up like a ribbon of sound. The higher, the clearer; the purer and more brilliantly luminous against the cool blue of an autumn sky.

Snow has already fallen on the last ridges, in the cleft of a rock pale as bone:
white, like a shout of joy.

That's where we'd like to be.

We crouch down and spit some more between our shoes. Meanwhile, I
ask a man who even despite the most deadly boredom wouldn't think to reach
for a book what he does at home, in his leisure time.

I work in my garden, he says.

Don't we have gardens here, too?

But not his. That's the difference. He's not content to be an observer. He
has to enjoy the countryside with his spade, turn the soil over, plant, weed, sow,
spread dung, procreate—

He's a man.

He doesn't flirt with the earth.

A young lieutenant who doesn't bring much to the job except his rank
doesn't have an easy time with our men.

Don't worry! the word was in the first few days. We'll bring him along!

With the pitiless cruelty of schoolchildren, they set to work. They obey
him, to be sure, but with a gaze of utter contempt. He has to notice. Once a week,
right on schedule, they reduce him to such a state of despair that all he can do is
to order us to march in double time. They give one another a look and march at
the double, smiling. Or they stand outside in the rain, smiling. Or, gasping for

breath, they haul cables up the steepest knoll as he ordered them to do. They don't deny him obedience, just respect.

And really, why?

It's been like this for weeks. . . .

Recently, when our officers had a task of their own to do, the young lieutenant had to take control of the whole battery, which meant he had to be present at all our routines. He makes a good appearance, looks quite stylish, comes from a good family. He stood there, peered into the holes, sat down on a log, and thumbed through his map case as if he didn't know what to do with himself. After two hours, when someone approached him, stood at attention, and observed that we were due for a break, naturally he didn't admit his little oversight. He acted as if he'd already thought of it, as he had of course thought of everything. And ordered us to keep on working until he gave the signal.

An order is an order.

"Poor devil," one man says. "I wonder what he does in civilian life."

They laugh and keep on shoveling.

"Oh look—he's going to scream now, he's going to call for his father. . . ."

You can hardly believe what a keen nose the unit—that enigmatic creature—has in such things. When it comes to the things that have to get done. Everyone knows what's wrong, even the most backward fellow who milks animals for a living, by no means an educated judge of character. And they show him they know. After all, he doesn't believe in his own superiority, he doesn't have it by right and we're supposed to believe in it?

They really don't make it easy for him.

While I'm on this subject, I want to say—as the captain has said about the squad—we're completely satisfied with our officers. Some are even genuinely popular, and by no means the more lenient ones. It seems to me our soldier is looking for a comrade-in-arms in his officer, one who is firm, strict, objective, and a superior human being. Our soldier wants to have confidence in his officer, but he filters that desire through all his doubts as long as he needs to.

...

His trust comes slowly.

Every Saturday he stands in line, presents his pocketknife, his socks, the three needles he's been allocated, and his cup. Often it's hard to tell which of the two men standing across from one another is being inspected.

Neither will let himself be fooled, not even a little.

Certainly not our soldier.

Sometimes an officer, trying to be friendly, adopts what he thinks is the tone of a common soldier. In an effort to be affable, a quality that, as we know, counts for so much in our country. Then the officer comes out with an off-color joke. It's a sure thing, everyone laughs. But our soldier, who after this will have to obey orders again, would really like think that other man, the one who is better dressed, can't also have such dirty thoughts.

It's Sunday, and at last I'm alone again, alone as a king. Here at the ancient ruined castle of Misox. Bird-like above the meadows of this autumnal valley, above the rushing silvery river, above the murmur of the gleaming forest.

What has happened? . . . A sleep, a dream perhaps. Nothing more. A slumber on the mid-day earth. As if I had sunk into a deeper consciousness and at the same time as if my body were being sucked down into the earth. So heavy, so filled with pain was this sleep. And above all this, the ceaseless rustling of the wind. Sweat drips from every pore, and I feel every minute how time is passing. I feel it in my defenseless sleep, with a hollow, distant sense of horror. I feel it in a wholly physical way: how my limbs will decompose, disintegrate, die and cease to exist, like tinder. . . .

Afterwards, when I wake up, my pipe lies extinguished in the grass. Nearby, people are laughing and talking—locals out for the day. The sun barely hangs above the ridge, and all around a sea of shadows is rising, slowly but inexorably.

How should we express our gratitude that we're alive! That we are beings who decay, who see what is eternal and understand why we're not stones. Who are conscious at every moment that we will have to die and for this reason can experience beauty and everything greater than beauty, which is also only a name, one of many. We should be able to give thanks, too, for pain, for fear and disgust, for empty despair.

How will they be able to destroy us if they aren't the servants of our own fate? And how shall we be able to prevent them if they are?

Hundredfold are the names a Being cries out to us but don't we keep on going for years past all the signposts, all the warning signs? You dream that you're awake, and yet on a day burning with light, a muffled terror is nearby. We get up and do our work, and the day is so blue, the day is like an image made of glass, and we go right through it, we whistle, we don't push up against it. . . .

Suddenly the walls—the familiar walls, solid and safe—fall silently away. Outside, the sun shines blindly in the night of the world, like a moon in the airless universe.

That evening there's once more an indescribable hullabaloo in the straw. As always at the end of a Sunday. You can hear the sound of a puck. . . .

We're playing handball with helmets. One fellow's already bleeding. Outside on the stairs they're playing a hand organ and a clarinet, singing and dancing to it. Then, the high point of the evening: Willi, already in his blanket, jumps up again and, playing the clown, leaps out of the window, coming to rest on a chestnut branch.

We breathe a sigh of relief.

That's Willi, the prince. We call him that because he's chauffeur to a baron who is fairy-tale rich. Willi lives near him in a house of his own. He seems to be a man who succeeds at everything, not just the handstand he does on

every balustrade, on every treetop, and at every inn. A man who, from birth, has known how to make the best out of every situation.

Once, during the last roll call before leave, a lieutenant said this to him: Don't have such a blank expression on the face you present to the world.

Willi smiled thinly. Most likely he meant, I've seen a lot more of the world than that fellow.

Sometimes he says, always very modestly, *When we were in Australia*. Or, off-handedly, *We have a beautiful estate in Holland, too*. He and the Baron, that is. Just as an Englishman has his business representatives, Willi has women all over the world. He's not trying to show off when he says things like this. Oh no—it just comes out when he's talking about something else. When it meets with a reaction, he smiles discreetly, like a true man of style.

Every Sunday he invites one of the men to dinner—down to the Baron's, that is. They eat a meal of fish and chicken in the servants' quarters they're still talking about two days later. An African manservant serves them; they go out in a motorboat afterwards for black coffee.

Two of our fellows have already had this experience. And what do they say? *You have to experience it yourself*. One whom he invited to the servants' kitchen was a man from a very well-to-do family. He said it was unimaginable how women flocked to Willi in every part of the city; you could hardly get away from them.

The second man came from an extremely poor family. A worker in a spinning mill. Two bratwurst for nine children, he told me once, that was a

Sunday dinner for them. Through his own efforts and tireless will, he became chief foreman, a young man whose sound understanding of people and upright, open attitude are among the best we know. His conscientiousness often puts me to shame, all the more because it is without any trace of bourgeois narrow-mindedness. He's a member of the town council, a representative of the Worker's Party. And now this man, who has never in his entire life known what it is to have a holiday, enters the baron's world, sits in a kitchen where no one counts the chickens, strolls through a seemingly endless park, and visits the house where Willi lives and takes life as it comes

When they came back, all the councilman could do was smile. He kept shaking his head, then coined this phrase: "Willi, the Prince!"

When we were seated in the straw, the prince offered everyone a *Bols* liqueur, one small glass for each man. . . .

Recently, we took a position again at an emplacement under cover of darkness. We stood next to the cannons, all of us in thoroughly drenched tarpaulins, shivering and still ferociously thirsty from the hot, spicy soup we had eaten earlier. At midnight, as we continued to wait in the lightless gloom, the councilman and another man finally went out in search of water.

Or would we rather have wine? asked Willi the Prince, as if in this field without any sign of human life he could conjure some up by tapping the trees, like a young imp.

We knew that on this night the whole brigade was on full alert. Our officer had been displaying that special kind of virtue, that cheery affability, that usually means a colonel is coming. . . .

At length we heard a rustling in the underbrush. The water patrol was back, their buckets empty. The night was pitch black. You couldn't see ten paces ahead.

We saw that.

Finally we heard another rustling. Willi the Prince set down an old coal sack with seven clinking bottles, beer and wine—

Where did that come from?

He had walked across the field, he said, climbed over walls and fences, over the railway embankment and across the road until, spying a solitary light, he realized he was looking at a *Grotto*, a Tessin wine bar.

And all the officers? we asked.

He saw them, of course, but they didn't see him. The room was positively swarming with colonels. Meanwhile he lay in the ditch with his bottles. It was all over in a minute. One hand badly scraped up, and then—

“Cheers!”

He doesn't drink at all. He didn't touch a drop. He wasn't thirsty.

We'll be staying on in our schoolhouse after all. Last week a colonel and a captain came by, accompanied by our quartermaster, and the rumors they wanted to turn us out couldn't be contained any longer. Everyone was furious.

You'd think we were about to be expelled from our family seat, our ancestral home, or whatever you want to call it. It was a shock to us, as if we couldn't bear to be parted from the bits of tubes, string, and the few tables with which we've furnished our schoolhouse in the last few weeks. Every man fears for his place in the straw! He doesn't want any new neighbors, he suddenly feels so at home. Strange but true. We feel at home now and don't want to be driven out. . . .

Habit is everything.

Here, where the latrine always stinks and sometimes, too, the sweat socks your neighbor has hung over your washcloth, we have a different and inspiring vision: that on this very same evening, people are at a concert, men in clean shirts are talking about us, silken women are walking about selling sandwiches, and it's all for the troops. To us, it's like when a child at home, touching in his devotion, snips out the image of a soldier with a little pair of nail scissors.

"Poppi—iss dot you?" he says.

What father would say *No*?

In our minds, we have really settled down here—as if, after an initial hesitation, it's once more a foregone conclusion that the Good Lord has decided in favor of Switzerland.

(As if he had a choice!)

Besides this, the recent fresh supply of females has clearly set a precedent. Seven or eight men already have sent for their wives. After the last

roll call they go for a walk together as if they were at home, the child between them. Sometimes they look like a campaign placard. Only the slogan below is missing: *We stand for the family. For our wives, for our children.*

One of our loudest windbags, up to now a tireless complainer and faultfinder, is suddenly quiet and content—an affable fellow who smiles all the time. There are other benefits, too. A young girl is staying at the inn, a young lady if you prefer, a soldier’s girlfriend, and suddenly you don’t hear any more obscenities. It’s as if someone had sprinkled holy water into hell. The devils can hardly recognize themselves, and pure gentlemen are everywhere.

“Yes, Miss!”

“No, Miss!”

Once more you can distinguish individual voices.

“Would you like a chair, Miss?”

All are two-faced, which is not to say that both faces aren’t real and valid.

But when the girl with the red mouth and large eyes has vanished back over the Gotthard pass, not even an hour passes before he says: That was nothing at all ! Just wait—another one’s coming next week. Then we’ll really have something to stare at. And he tells us a big story about how he had to lie so they wouldn’t both come at the same time. Given the situation, he really couldn’t have done anything else.

Last week we came upon a real sports field not far away. Since then, we've been playing handball whenever our duties allow. We've already formed two teams, and there's a fighting spirit in the air that even at day's end won't let us fall silent long after we've been lying in the dark under our blankets.

Lightweight trousers and sneakers arrive in every post. We're going all out. We think our team will be in condition to compete against other units, ultimately against the whole brigade by next spring. The material for this sport, our expert has assured us, is definitely available, including with respect to physical brawn.

The other day we took up a position very close to the playing ground. We were practicing sharpshooting, but a fog spread over the target area. A fine, gray, steady rain was greeted with universal rejoicing: we could lay down our weapons. One man vaulted himself onto his motorcycle, thundered off, and came back a moment later with the ball. In heavy mountain boots edged with nails we played football so hard it would make your hair stand on end. Not everyone could play at the same time, so we didn't think it a calamity when, on average, every quarter of an hour one man limped off the field and was replaced by another.

After an hour and a half, the match remained undecided. We stood still and panted, supporting ourselves on our knees, let the sweat trickle off, and resolved to keep playing until someone won. Which did in fact happen after another half-hour. It was an ordeal, but no one grumbled since we weren't doing it under orders. Except perhaps the doctor. Two whole center lines had to

be hospitalized. From now on, only handball will be permitted and then only in lightweight shoes.

Today we made the field ready for the upcoming games. A van, five sacks filled with sawdust, and four men We reported ourselves off duty, as is required, and scattered sawdust over the site according to all the rules as if we were preparing for an international match. Germany and the Allies, that's a side issue for us now. Who still talks about that? Only the newspapers and the radio stations of the world and the letters we get. Our own conversation, as I said, is very different. Everything takes second place to next week's event: Reserves versus Young Soldiers.

Both sides are already engaged in a terrible war of words to scold and intimidate their future opponents.

It's come at last—the long-awaited moment when you swing your pack over your back, envied by all those lying in the straw who will be staying behind, and shake their hands.

“I'll be back in two weeks!”

(Why the apology?)

“Take care!” they say.

“Good luck with your wife!”

“Don't drink too much!”

Laughing so you don't spoil their jealousy, you play the part of a man who is unbelievably overjoyed. And you do it again for the sentry who is

walking back and forth. He gazes after you for a long time as I, too, have done.
With his eyes, with his thoughts . . .

Then suddenly you're alone on the darkened country road. Far and wide.
There's only your shadow, which silently overtakes you when another lantern
comes by. It's one in the morning, and the only sound you hear is your own
footstep on the road. All at once, as if you've forgotten where you're going, you
think of your home, your room, the candles, the cups, the flowers, the books. . . .

Why did I ask for this leave?

You don't even know why the joy you have cherished for so long has
completely vanished. . . .

The train leaves at three. I sit in the cantina for railway employees,
almost no sleep for the last forty hours, and wait, keep on waiting, a cup
between my hands, feeling like a blockhead.

I'll know when I get home.

We come to it as if out of a roaring noise; they have to tell us two, three
times: Absence brings insight. And even then it's still as if we hadn't woken up. .
..

Suddenly I think of that sleep I had at the old ruin.

Life is so strange, so eerie. Everything is there: the candles, the cups, the
flowers, the books, even the clock, the old clock—and that it's just now stopping
is altogether too comical, too appropriate, too witty for a soldier who wanted to
come home.

Outside, they're moving through the city to the sound of drums. Since yesterday. You couldn't get by. The windowpanes roared. In a soft felt hat that was almost falling off, you stood at the edge of the street between shiny wet umbrellas, under a dry, lightweight raincoat, and stared as if you'd never seen such a thing before: soldiers' faces, tired and wet, silent.

Where do I fit, where do I belong?

Once, in the early days, we were filled with a sense of terror we could lose everything, and then overwhelmed by a desire for our own safety that knew no limits. We believed we could only find this in a relationship with another person. We gave in to the vulgar temptation of believing you could rely on a human being the way you can rely on an object, a parcel of land, a piece of property that time can't affect, to which you can return at any time. That you could be intimate with the soul of another in a way that no soul that lives honestly will tolerate. . . .

But such is not the case.

How differently everything turns out from what one had expected! On the same evening when I confess to my friend I'm glad I have to return to military service next week, the order is already waiting for me at home:

"Monday 06.00 return to duty. Purpose: unit demobilization."

It's 05.00 now.

There's no point now in lying down between the snoring men. One lies crosswise over my space, making rattling noises in his dream, knees raised, hands in his trouser pockets. . . . Outside, where the night is melting away like a piece of blotting paper, rain is falling in strings. We hear the drops on the rotting leaves, the cheerful burble of an overflowing gutter, and the sentry walking back and forth on the pavement. There's a freight train trundling through the valley almost every hour of the early morning: coal from Germany. As always, roosters are crowing in the farmyards, and it may be that everything that happened in between was a dream.

They say the troops found out just as they were about to go onto the playing ground, Reserves versus Young Soldiers.

Home? they asked. Who says?

It wasn't a joke.

Home. Do you understand?

You couldn't say there was an explosion of joy. Nothing like what they'd always said they'd do: that they'd buy whole barrels, vats full of grapes. Only God knew what all would happen. They stood around the news, the ball in their hands, and took it in.

"Really?" one said. "Then we have to stop."

But for how long?

No one knows.

Everything is being brought into the armory.

Four men have to go up to the emplacements again and take down the supporting beams. And whatever else is left on the construction sites. We have more than enough time, and when a pelting rain drenches us as we're riding back in an open truck, it doesn't bother our conscience to get out and take shelter, pleasantly aware that others, too, are also lying about and taking their leisure.

We celebrate our good-byes at the fireplace, our shoes by the embers, with the two Tessin women between us. We hold out the bread until it toasts, turn the cheese on the sooty skewer, and drink hot mulled wine as we had planned to do next winter.

"So it's agreed?" one shouts. "You'll go?"

"*Cosa?*"

"Next Sunday. *Exposizione Nazionale!* We invite you, both of you!"

Bianca translates, word for word.

"*Santa Maria!*" the little one shrieks

She's never been over the Gotthard pass.

She holds her head in both hands.

Then, when we have to leave and once more wrap ourselves up in the wet tarpaulins, it's our goldsmith—the quiet one, the one who is always so sensible, who is married, who now at the end, in the last hour, starts kissing everyone all around as if only today he understands the freedom he's lost.

"Time to go!" the driver shouts.

Absence brings insight. . . .

That may well be!

Even in those things that from now on will be yours and yours alone, Time will have the mastery. Time, that extraordinary force, will press forward everywhere for faster growth and change. In friendship, in marriage, in the family, in work. Human decisions will be made more abruptly, more ruthlessly, and with more pain, but also more clearly and in a more authentic, generous, courageous way under the blessing of this enormous danger we know towers over everything, every moment.