Bettina Galvagni was born in Bolzano, Italy, in 1976, and lives in Paris. While a student in Vienna, she burst onto the literary scene at the age of twenty-one with her novel, *Melancholia*; her second novel, *Persona*, followed in 2002. “The Final Icon” won third prize in the prestigious Ingeborg Bachmann competition in 1997, and was published by Piper Verlag in Munich the same year in *Klagenfurter Texte: Ingeborg-Bachmann- Wettbewerb*. This is her first work to appear in English.
Our churches do not have real candles made of wax, which are of great significance, but tin tubes instead, into which nearly everything gets dumped, never holy oil, just any old concoction.

— Pawel Florenski, Thought and Language

I was a girl who would dress up in lemon yellow to read Duras’s Emily L. and would compose insipid texts. The black ink, staying wet till it hopped from one word into the next. The chalk-white stockings the girl used to wear. Yes, she said, yes. Diaphanous. The girl would often sleep with her eyes open and stand in front of people who were dancing.

Winter returned, and with it the wind. It was raining. It was February, mid-February. It was cold. The mulberry tree was cold, and I longed for the sea, for Africa. I didn’t tell that to a soul. I constantly dreamed about an underground church with a crypt in the Vienna of maybe sixty years ago, and about a hotel that appeared to be on Alserstrasse, where I would lock myself in the second-floor bathroom night after night. The concierge looked like an actress and would often see to it that a hot bath was drawn for me. The strange irritation the dream caused was one of those trivial secrets you nevertheless keep to yourself. When I was in this state of mind back then, Max phoned me, just after he returned from Spain. Sometimes we used to meet at night in a little pub where the owner wore a doctor’s smock. Max would drink a lot, and I’d be awash in red Pompadour tea, and it would get very late. We hadn’t seen each other for quite some time. My hair was a mess, and I’d made up my face to look very pale. I was wearing two gray jackets and didn’t even have the strength to take them off. I eventually got so tired I started to smile. That scared the hell out of Max. We left the pub and went to the Gürtel, the outer ring road. It had been raining. We went and sat somewhere along the Gürtel, it was loud and bright. I listened to him, and sleep lay there in front of me, a thin fog. It was gloomy outside, no lights, a black cella.

Spring had come in the meantime. The red glow of the evening sun
The Final Icon

would spill over the books at Posch's bookstore, and every morning, beside the Danube Canal, the Second District would open up. The water in the canal, flowing away in a futile gray, and a futile gray feeling would curl around our feet like a cat in heat. There, beside the canal, Max told me he was reading Dionysius Areopagita, about demons, about angels. You buy these things, you squander them, he said. Nevertheless, I have to summon up all my strength to protect myself against you. The wind came up above my thighs.

The Danube Canal, the Otto Wagner House. Noon, blossoming, hemlock-green, like the Hüteldorf District. The obscene stories Max told me on the quay while I was hanging on tight to his raincoat. And the exhaustion, after Max. You feel you're at somebody's mercy, like being faced with a sick person and sensing just how far the disease has taken him away. Three days with Max, the blood singing. They disappeared back into the abyss they'd come out of. Schiffamtsgasse, noon. A gentle heat, shooed away by the wind. The empty street, a holiday. I was trying to get my mind off things. That's why those stories faded away, the ones I didn't want to lose, no matter what. I looked at the water, at a ship ready to sail. I couldn't help but think of Cividale. The river cuts Cividale in two, bloody on one side, glassy on the other. I've spent several summers in Cividale. Some of them must have been nice. That's so easy to say, about the past. It's the place that reminds me of the man who'd been one of my teachers for a while.

We'd gone for a walk on the Castelfeder, the ancient hill that closes off the village. That evening I discovered little cuts on my feet from the Castelfeder grass. My fingers were smudged and tinged with yellow from picking little flowers. I must have been sitting somewhere for a long time with my fingers in the grass. The triangle of trees when I looked up at the sky, wide-eyed, and thought the oncoming rain must be made of lead. Lead, my favorite material, Max said later, but what did I know. It was on the Castelfeder that the teacher asked me if I'd like to put my head next to his and lean on a part of a fallen tree. We lay in the grass, leaving about a yard between him and me. He told me a story about Eurydice, who had looked into the Underworld but not at Orpheus, and that made me feel uneasy. He told another story, but it wasn't any different. And I tried to defend myself against that story, as hard as anyone could. No, I did not
defend myself. But he did leave me alone, and from then on I’d wake up from my dreams screaming. I’d often babble away, incoherently, about Eurydice, who was woven into the fabric of that story like a thread.

But I would spend those days at the canal reminiscing about Cividale. And in my mind I was back in Trieste as well, only half an hour away by car. I fell in love with Trieste right away, as if I’d been running after it, finally caught it, only to lose it again. Trieste, in the Cafe Specchi, and somewhere away from the city center there’s a façade with the word “mythos” on it, and a stylized Parthenon on a white sign. It was very quiet at the time, a ghostly silence, but sometimes you’d be surrounded by people and couldn’t breathe, couldn’t even swallow and were afraid that this was the end, it’s going to come like the rain. And then it dawned on me that Trieste was like Marilen, that beautiful woman whose disease was turning her insides into fish bones.

Karst on one side of the road, the poplars of Fossalon on the other, sucking their way down into the salty earth. The fluttering of starlings in the fig tree at Duino, the orange of the asphodels in among the houses. The swampy, Stygian landscape. Ivy, tamarisk, and myrtle. The snowball bushes with their bluish berries. And the cypress, as slender as the columns of a circus. Here it was that an Avar once wrote love letters to his girl, Chuldrika, after she’d locked herself away in a cloister. I had been told the whole story. About the Langobards pushing into Friuli, about La consolare, the road that ran between Aquileia and Julia Emona, the Ljubljana of today. About Albuin, about Gisulf II, about the fortresses of Cormòns, Nimis, Osoppo. About the fear the Avar felt in the Tempietto Longobardo, where the frescos had just been finished. About the swarm of sparrows at the edge of a field that sank their claws into a female bird, and about those nauseating phases of the moon that could be observed from Cormòns. The Avar offered up a futile prayer for a long winter’s sleep. The dragonflies outside, and the Natisone gorge, slinking off into the distance. The thatched roofs, a few solariatae houses here and there, and the Hyperborean Dionysus asleep in the tympanum. The eyes of the Christos Logos are opened wide. The cochineal red made out of powder from the crushed endocrine glands of female lice. And throughout it all the shadow of the girl the Avar would love in vain. All this had been told to me.

That whole summer I’d been holding mere names in my hands, holding
the breath of wind off the Slovenian landscape, the mussel-colored cat in front of the Specchi. Back in Vienna, I went to see Claudia at the School of Applied Art. I don’t know why I went, it was windy and sleeting, and there was this apathy that was driving me crazy. Claudia was standing in front of the Museum of Applied Art and waiting for Kari. Kari gave Claudia a peck on the cheek, that’s the little game they were playing. I counted the heaters, the benches, and all I could feel was nothing. Professor Erben’s master class was vast, a big mutilated park. Music was hopping out of a black instrument and out over the city roofs. Chickens that wander off are always doomed to die, sooner or later. I sat down on the ground with Claudia and looked at her portfolio, her studies of nudes and her graphic work. Naked women, naked men. An elephant on an aniline blue stripe, bigger and fatter than anything. Something made the wind-chicks scatter in all directions, and I watched them go. In Professor Frohner’s master class there were orgies, guts, animals. Silver-colored doors to the Underworld. A fat girl with a man, on a mattress, his eyes gazing through the chaos. A locked-out world, a Chinese park with singing birds, artificial nightingales. The blazing, sweetly scented rose, “Diane vaincue.” I felt as if I’d blacked out. Fog. Cosmetics. A bedstead in a room, constructed like a cage. The Naschmarkt, afterwards, green and triumphant. The air was chilly and sticky. I lay awake for a good part of the night.

A few days later I was in the bus, Graz to Vienna. I was half asleep, half dreaming. I could sense the nakedness of my arms. I kept thinking I had to give them some protection. Somebody touched me. The bus got in to Vienna, I didn’t know when. I couldn’t hear the sound of my footsteps feeling their way across the snakeskin of the city. My apartment is small, and in the twilight I couldn’t free myself from the dark, from its transparent chains. I was constantly on the verge of falling asleep. Being half asleep aroused an unstoppable urge. I groped my way into the dark bathroom, though it is white, and it’s tiny too. It has a little window, my apartment is high up. My semi-conscious state grew more and more pressing. It came on the way a twinge of nausea does. I was on the floor, all huddled up, and my stunned and confused mind kept revolving around thoughts of urine. All my clothes were going to get drenched with it.

Twilight is falling. The Avar is drinking his wine in a tavern, and he feels a lewd thrill as he listens to the painter of the Tempietto telling his
stories about Ravenna. He said he had been up on the scaffolding, and all
that could be seen of the mosaics close up was a chaos of colored stones,
but from a certain distance the whole picture took on shape, its expressive
quality, its shading, its bloodiness. They are drinking Raboso wine, and the
girl passes by outside. I will dissect her beauty, capture her scream, the
painter of the Tempietto says. It will be at the center of the feast. His laughter
makes the Avar’s throat clamp shut. Necrophilia. The death agony. The
Christos Logos was not the finale, a bloodied Christ was still to come. Here
is where the girl lives. The Avar goes up the stairs to her. The girl’s beauty
is his final obsession. The room, bordello pink. Everything is cryptic, like at
a child’s birthday party. The girl has a cat and an elderberry bush in her
garden. Two little boys laugh as they watch the girl pissing into the trough.
And the girl goes over to the elderberry bush, she has nothing on under
her tunic, and she asks the Avar: Quis tu es? An autistic act of a fallen
angel. And then, at the moment when everything is hanging in the balance,
he says: Nescio. And no one will ever be able to take that beauty out of the
night and change it into gold because it will be turned to face the Underworld
forever. The final icon will die out as the final candle dies out that was
lighted for it, in a little, dark church.

Maybe I will never ever be able to see over the glass rim of this
void, never.

The picture by Duchamp that used to be in Max’s studio on
Gymnasiumstrasse, the one he gave me as a present, back then, during
that night. Duchamp and a naked woman with a big bosom and very full
mid-length hair of a Callas-like shade, a deep black. The woman and
Duchamp are playing chess. I love that picture, only that picture. But that’s
not true, nothing I’m going to say is true. The picture doesn’t bring a thing
to mind, even today. Reminds me a little of the pin board in the studio
bedroom, of the two desks placed at right angles to each other to go round
a corner, of the small typewriter on one of them, of the little Schneider fax
machine on the far end of the desk around the corner. Of the woman who
phoned from Spain, from Lanzarote or Grand Canary, and then sent a fax.
Maybe she was that woman on the boat, the time Max took his car along
on the boat to Lanzarote. I knew Max had a lot of women. When I saw him
for the very first time, it was an a gloomy afternoon and time stood still, as
if a storm was about to break. I was ordering two books at Posch’s that
Max happened to know quite well, and it gave him an excuse for inviting
me to Cafe Hummel. I just knew he was exactly the sort of person who’d do
that sort of thing. The Hummel was like the Hummel always is. I once took
ballet lessons from a teacher whose name was Suzanne and who went
around naked in the dressing room every now and then, which made a
great impression on me because I couldn’t imagine anymore what nakedness
was. She had a beautiful white body, and it looked so pure in its nakedness.
I always went to the Hummel after dancing class and tried to rescue her
body through memory, to preserve it, like a pane of glass. She had honey-
blond hair down to below her ears, and I thought I saw her again later on
in the train station, on the escalator to the U3 subway, the day I’d been to
the General Hospital and had been sitting in a big white room as bright as
a Greek island, and I’d kept staring at a girl sitting on the steps not too far
away who was painting flowers and ornaments on a sheet of paper and
was maddeningly beautiful.

Some people probably can’t stand Cafe Hummel. It’s a place where
men play chess, and old women have their soup, and they cough. After the
Hummel Max took me to the Pelikan, a wine-pub. We talked about an
author we both were fond of and others like her who we both were fond of.
We could sense that an incestuous relationship was already beginning to
weigh heavily on us, like lead. We left the pub, and the fine rain was
hanging down like old tinsel. The half-soaked shoes, the half-soaked coat.
Drinking water together, later, in the Eighth District. He told me about a
lover of his who was like a little boy. She’d wear a black silk nightgown
with fine silver stripes. The last night he was with her he shaved her pubic
hair off. Fragments of memory, the shards of Cleisthenes. He told me about
a girl who used to expose herself to him while he played the violin. That
was in Berlin. She was a violinist, and she played the Lolita. She’d wear
high heels and put her hair up and begin to gratify herself. And she was so
hungry for money that she’d do anything Max asked her to, like a good
little puppy. But back then, that evening in his studio, I’d sat at one of the
two desks, trembling. I looked out the window into a sort of shaft that
seemed to be brightly lit for some reason. The whole room was done in a
strong white, and that made a big impression on me. It turned out that Max
wanted me to stay the night, to sleep in his bed, and he said he wouldn’t
lay a finger on me, I’d just lie next to him, virgin-like. The bed was a high
one, with drawers under it that appeared to be silver-colored. I looked at the Duchamp. I begged him to get me a reproduction of that picture. I couldn’t think about anything else that night. Sometimes things just pop into your head during the night. You think about the past, or you think about the corn poppy rotting away high above the past and teasing out some skimpy stimulation from it. I knew the 38 went through this district the next morning, and it wasn’t summertime, no squealing, just the 38, a red streetcar like all red streetcars. I was very tired in the morning, Max offered to make me some tea. I was so far removed from other people and wanted to run after them, the way I would run after the 38.

The Avar goes to Lutetia. And the lights in the windows there. The polyelaios, the gold candelabrum, gives off enough light to illuminate the faces shining down from the iconostase on the wall. People today throw money into a little casket and make a wish. That is beautiful to watch in the Chiesa dei Frari in Venice. In Ravenna people throw coins into a basin, and there they glitter. The Avar hallucinates the attacks of the iconoclasts, the icons which will be burned. The first libraries. And he climbs Mons Corvinus. The ladder of the shaman’s ascent. The sixth phase is the sphere of Virgo and the sphere dedicated to the month of the Serpent. It is Judith’s room. This is where he finds the dress she had taken off, the dress with razdelki, with threads of gold. She had ripped off the jewel necklace he had given her and left it behind, its chain broken. The clasp with five round little plates portraying a head with square-shaped eyes. Judith had prepared herself for the painter’s visit. She had turned herself into an artificium. She is gone, she of the cat-like pupils, she of the gaze which calls forth love and comes from the atropine extracted from deadly nightshade. Her absence and the scent of her body lingering in the bath, her body so white which she had bathed in essences and bedecked with jewels. Perfumes, small bowls, and oils. Beeswax and myron. The powdered antimony known as stimmi. Blue pigment and oil of the juniper berry. And even in antiquity, thus had he read in Athenaios, women painted their cheeks with white lead and mulberry juice. “Intoxicating yellow and intoxicating red.”

I don’t remember what happened afterwards.

I took a taxi to the Inner City to buy some clothes. Half the city roared through that taxi. The cliffs of the Getreidemarkt, and the Secession, like fire, all ablaze. There were gray and cream-colored dresses in a shop
window. A white linen dress, with two false pockets at the midriff, where the dress was slightly tucked in. Egyptian white. The dress seemed to have some significance. It seemed to remind me of something. The dream about that trip to Africa during my schooldays. Africa, by boat. The teacher was supposed to come with us. Actually, I was dreaming about a woman, an old teacher of mine. She'd been sitting by my bedside, and I was sick. We pulled odd-looking clothes out of the closet for the trip, gray for summer? We were in Africa, and all of a sudden Max was there. I guided Max through a wilderness of plants, all from the nightshade family. And the only thing lit up was a bull ring with red cushions. I writhed in my bed, as if bound in chains.

Max came and picked me up one evening. It was dark, raining a little. We went to the Konzerthaus, to a La Monte Young concert. Chronos Kristalla. That's where I saw Natalie. She had not been one of Max's lovers, and yet she was something more. She had a head of black hair with two streaks of white in front that lit up her face. She lifted her head, turning it in different directions; she appeared to be dreaming without losing total concentration. Her sovereign air. Max talked to me in the car for quite some time afterwards. It was cold, very dark, with high wind. I'd done my hair up in braids. As I often did that year. Then I went and sat in the dark in my apartment, and the thought came to me that I could be sitting here forever, in among these orange and black books, and would never leave this place. I read through everything from Max, all his letters, from the first day on. Ten in the morning, the first bit of sunshine, the Grinzing streetcar.

Now I find some words written in red ink.

I'd often be in the U4 Stadtpark subway station. Girls, men would be walking around. The streetcar would smell of hospital cough syrup. Back home I wrote to Max, “I don't know a single thing about my life. You can't just revoke an oracle that prophesies danger. I simply cannot cope with language.” And Max said that language doesn't lie. Max said he knows when I'm lying. And that he watches containers when they shatter and understands the miracle in those fragments. Max once said something about black stockings. About leather, about a cage. And how he wanted to break my bones. Max says that I will come when I have to come, that I will lie beside him.

The artists' festival, by the sea. Performances, dances, pantomimes.
And Clothsuind, as she is playing upon her lute, happens to knock over a lamp. Judith performs a dance with a tiny ball. Ute danced that way, in Stuttgart, for ten years until she killed herself. A little black-haired girl takes Judith’s hand to her breast. The painter of the Tempietto rips Judith’s tunic apart. And the cries of cats copulating outside, and the sea.

I was with Max in Burgenland once. It was on a Sunday. One of those indecisive spring days. We sat on a brown sofa for a while. Max told me about Pessoa. We talked in the car about going to the Hungarian border sometime. I’ve always loved borders. Lake Neusiedl was covered with an impenetrable, low-lying fog. The air was gray, like gray birds. We ate at a restaurant, in a large room where we were almost completely alone. I was overcome by a strange calm, a kind of imperturbable feeling. I had forgotten everything. The city drifted off into a distant unreality, the lake, the sea.

Max flew off to Spain again. At least, we’d stopped seeing each other. I seldom went out with anybody. Max’s absence was omnipresent.

It was a Friday. I’ve been longing for this so much, the stranger said. His silver-gray car crosses over the Danube Canal. The canal, disappearing into the distance, brings Turner’s Venice to mind. The girl doesn’t say a thing. The stranger touches the dark gray jacket—she has another jacket on under that one—and takes her to a hotel bar. She has some red tea, and the man has a Coke. The man talks about Beirut, Tel Aviv, and Sarajevo. Beirut, she thought to herself, but it died away as she was thinking about it. She’d been sitting around at home for such a long time, in a sand-colored dress that made her freeze. The man was a stranger to her, and he talked about Beirut as though it wasn’t Beirut at all. The Second District, a giant lightning bug. She toys with the string on the red tea bag. The man had poured hot water into her cup. That ceremonial gesture. The violet glow has died out, the one in Feuerbach’s painting of Orpheus that’s in the Belvedere. Words have ceased to exist. Why the hell am I sitting here, she thinks. Later on, in the Odeon, Agorita Bakali, the beautiful Greek actress. She’d come to Vienna a few years ago. The girl takes off her jacket and presses her bright blue scarf to her breast. The man laughs now and then, and she’s a little annoyed because she doesn’t know what she’s supposed to be looking at. The man buys her a program, and she looks for the beautiful Greek lady in it. They drive through the Second District. He points out the streets, their names. The Mexican church, the tiny Russian church, the
Venetian house. Lasallestrasse, the Praterstern. The night, black, outspread. The Vienna International Center and the IBM building. The giant Ferris wheel. Then the Ministry of War. The bright blue scarf clings to her breast. She starts telling a story, and it’s because of this the man comes up to her apartment. A wildflower’s growing there, in a giant green-and-white-striped vase. The man kisses her pallid cheek and says he’s been longing to come here for days. This man presses her little head to his chest. His shirt is black, or blue-black. That man, and he says, you’re like a little birdie. It feels as though the man’s protecting her, but the blood is singing, and she sings against it, softly and unresisting. His pecks on her cheeks were a scattered spray of powder. The man holds her head in his hands. Her eyes, unresisting, on the man’s chest, and her lungs contract.

The Avar scans the area and sees poplar trees and the exact distance separating them, 49:50, with 5:7 paces between the stone road markers. He is going to meet the woman with the herbs. Somewhere between Cormons and Cividale. There are vipers in the area, and she has herbs for a snakebite. His longing, for a woman. The grass is dried out, and the night sea is coming up. He rides on ahead until his steed comes to a halt. A beetle, burst open, and a cat lying on the limestone, in a lime pit, its eyes opened wide, cauterized. The lady with the herbs is not there. Swarming birds, and music tames the savage beast. And Judith’s shadow, on the journey back. He wanted to kiss her. He wanted to make certain that she was still behind him.

Max was back. We haven’t talked on the phone for some time now. I’m reminiscing. The implacable river-gray, the wind, the jackets pressed to my breast, and Max’s raincoat, and the distant Second District. How come I think I know these things? How come I can watch them the way I do a girl jumping rope? Max talks about a woman they fished out of the Danube, and about the silhouette of her hand. That night, he says. It was precious to me, important.

Judith’s body was found. On the bank of the Natisone. Near the solariatae houses where the painter lives. The ligamentum puberale had been cut through. “But,” said someone who knew Judith, “to laugh is to be more god-like and, even more than tears, it passes all understanding.”

But I was waiting now as I’d waited before, even though there was nothing more to wait for. I was in my bed, asleep, but could hear the
streetcar rattling past. That night I had contrapuntal dreams.

It was not Dornbach... They say the Vienna Woods begin at Dornbach. I was going there by train. It was dark. The sea was sparkling behind the bars of a balustrade. There was a broad beach. It looked like the one on that postcard of Rio. I don’t know when we got there. The trees were dripping wet. The buildings were dreary suburban apartment houses. There was a hill in the meadow with a wall on it for some kind of outdoor sport. One of the houses appeared to be a pension. With endless rows of mailboxes. A girl with short black braids. A woman kicked me out of the hallway where the mailboxes were. I felt cold. I was wearing summer clothes.

Then the streets woke up. Workmen on wooden scaffolding. A lab assistant from the Chemical Institute walked across Währinger Strasse, a red pack of Gauloises légères in the pocket of her white coat. I thought I would put on my dressing gown and read in bed. I would wait for the mail. I’d leave all the day’s decisions up to it. The tea from the red tin is cold. The door falls shut, and an old black-and-red horned beetle is hanging there. Random fragments from out of my past are going to overtake me. Words like, “When I was a child, I played with two Barbie dolls.” I give Max a call and tell him that I need to have my illusions because I just can’t go on living, that the only people I’ve ever found refuge with were always people in my imagination. And I tell Max, “I don’t want another story, not every single story has to have a meaning, unless it means so much that it kills you.” I say to Max, “I do not want to go on living this way.” And Max says, “I had nothing at the start and in the end I’ve got it all. With you it’s pretty much the other way round.”

Maguez, on Lanzarote. It seemed like Africa, Tangiers. I came by plane. Max picked me up. It was the color of heat there. I didn’t feel the heat. Max’s house was white. It was white on the inside too. Julia was sitting in the basement of the house. Max’s wife. Julia. A beautiful woman, but she’d lost a little something. She looked like a tourist. She glanced up for a second. We were separated, as if by a folding screen. All the curtains were white. It was cool inside. I kept looking at the house, for a long time. I walked up a lot of stairs, went through a lot of hallways. I was scared of Max. But in the way that anything can scare me, like the words “Moira’s blue garment” I found in a book, for instance. I knew his names, his letters, his rooms. I loved Max. I didn’t dare love him. Max went to the post office.
with me. Max bought me lots of envelopes with colored borders, all kinds of stamps. I'd always bought all kinds of stamps in Theresa Derdak's tobacco shop. España, correos. We went down to the sea. To the harbor. The sea was calm and blue, just like the sky.

Aristaios and Zeus Meilichios bear the shape of a serpent. A viper, so it is said, bit Eurydice in the ankle.

I ran after the days when Max and I used to talk by the Danube Canal. I'll never be able to walk along that quay again without thinking of them, and at the same time I'll not remember a thing about them. The story is sinking away, like Aquileia in the summertime. The Basilica Patriarcale, the mosaics, Jonah being spewed out on land by the sea monster. Jonah being swallowed up by the sea monster. The contest between the tortoise and the hare. The ancient ruins, the Roman forum, surrounded by cats and greenery, like the Malcontenta Gardens on the banks of the Brenta. People come and look at all this as if it were the Acropolis. Summertime, a long dusty path, and the sea, like a backdrop, silent, with three fishermen, blue, but black along the coast.

Eurydice, released, ascending, in accordance with Proserpine's instructions.

Cum subita incautum dementia cepit amantem ignoscenda quidem, scirent si ignoscere manes.

Passion, the sleep of the dead, nightingale.

And Orpheus flees to Tainaron, where the sea begins.

My body is calm and relaxed, tired and heavy, after all the pain my forgetfulness and these events have caused. It's summertime. The heat will come, and then I'm in Cividale. Heat: people understand it less and less as the years go by. And now, on the banks of the Natisone. I come here every day, to the riverbank. And I walk across the Devil's Bridge, like crossing the platform in a railway station. Everything looks just the way it looks anywhere else. Not one thing is different from any other thing. Doves coo every now and then. I stop in front of a chapel and try to see whether there's a red glow from a candle somewhere, flickering in a window.

I look for old photographs during the night.

Nobody's going to tell me a story ever again.

The Tempietto Longobardo lies on the banks of the Natisone. The
plaster reliefs. The Christos Logos, in between the Archangels Michael and Gabriel. The austerità, and the holy aura of the Syrian church, broken up by various shades of green. The art of Palmyra and the Sassanians, all thrown together, all mixed up. I’m sitting in the open air, and the colors of the frescos seem to dissolve. The Danube Canal that I had to run away from, and Max had said, “I’d hoped we could get along without us having to talk. You were guarding yourself against me back then.” I’m alone, in the rising heat that’s beginning to hurt. I’m happy here, at times. But I’m all confused, I dream about apothecaries. They give me some food to eat, it’s a shade of yellow, jaune tassili, even the apples are sort of yellowish. I’m out on the balcony in the darkness, wearing my nightclothes and a blue plaid dressing gown, something I do all the time now. The night is black. A large house with a garden, in the morning, birds, a carpet fluttering in the wind in front of it. I get up, drink the tea that has traded its aroma for the taste of the tin, hear the telephone bleep, go sit on the floor in front of the fax machine, look into the gray sky and at the foreign-language dictionary that’s the color of a blood orange. I write to Max, “Voulez-vous me mettre en mort?” And it’s definitely going to start raining. The fields in Carnia will be in bloom later on, poppies and cornflowers. They’ll each dissolve into their separate colors. Raw Umber, Raw Sienna, Verona Green, Red Lead. Violet-purple, a mixture of red and blue. St. John’s White.

Wherever it is that Orpheus lies buried, there the nightingales nesting on his grave sing their song, sweeter and stronger than anywhere else. There are two graves of Orpheus in Macedonia, at the foot of Mount Olympus. One in Libethra, the other near Dion, and there, once upon a time, a shepherd fell asleep in the midday sun, and in his dreams he sang, sweet and strong, the forgotten songs of Orpheus.

At night I dream that my room is crowded with people, and I’m lying on the floor, restless, asleep. The birds start calling at four, the night dissolves, and I’m still not asleep but thinking of Max. I need his letters. I’m caught in a never-ending tangle, and I write him, dropping the familiar form of address, “Beat me, kill me, piss on me.” I can’t go on. I cry. I’ve insulted everybody, nobody phones me. So here’s where I’ll stay, in this tight corset of a city, and its strings stretch only as far as the sea.

I’m standing on the Devil’s Bridge, where the Devil used to lie in wait for the soul of the first living creature to cross it. A cat was there. The
Natisone, which right here has come halfway on its journey to join the Isonzo. The houses, their blinds drawn. A man, hanging around somewhere, throws his fishing line into the water, a very long one. He can't fish here, really. A house on the bank has a high fence. The dog behind it is up on his hind legs and barking furiously. He's bursting with passion. The man's eyes, looking over at the dog. Dogs can't be hypnotized. The man and his eyes, trying to shoo him away. I'm walking off the bridge. A dead crow, its beak the color of an orange magic marker.

I am waiting for Max.

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