

THE GOLDFISH

I knew Van den Abeele was lying there with his shoulder torn open, but I still didn't look, I turned to the lieutenant of the 9th, who was standing there on the little cobbled road, arms open wide, railing at them: *saligauds, boches!* As if they could hear him on the other side of the Albert Canal. There was plenty of other noise anyway. Right next to us someone was emptying the belt of his machine gun, he was sitting on a chair he'd brought from the dairy and who knows maybe it all just looked like the national shooting range to him. Except for the dive-bombers, that is. And except that we were dying of thirst. Bah, said the radio operator, it's all down to fate, if it's your turn to die, you die. What's-his-name replied that more people were dying here in one goddamn hour than over the course of ten years back in his village. Whereupon the radio operator shrugged his shoulders

and started explaining to me that it was OUR FATE, no one died in your village because it was their fate to come and die here. And What's-his-name was about to reply when those fucking Stukas came screaming and rat-tat-tatting down on us again, it was unbearable. The two from the field hospital cursed and said that they couldn't be in every damn place at once. I'm bleeding myself, said the fattest of the two. No, it was unbearable, especially with those senseless orders. Get some more ammunition, said the lieutenant and there was no more ammunition to get, it had blown sky high half an hour ago. And try to bring me back a loaf of bread, Louis, he said. Yes, he'd joined us as a simple corporal out of basic training and every year when we had to go back to camp for more drilling he was a little higher in rank and he looked down on us a little more arrogantly, but when he was in trouble he'd still say Louis in that old friendly way. A loaf of bread, as though he didn't know that the field kitchen had gone the way of the ammunition. But we went anyway, if we could get away from that dike for a bit we couldn't hear them over there shouting *VORWÄRTS* so loud. I looked at What's-his-name to ask if he was coming too and at that very moment the radio operator passed the long-awaited message to the lieutenant: every man for himself. We started smashing everything up with axes like lunatics, the machine-gunner even made matchwood of his chair, and we tried to retreat along the cobbled road but it was already under fire. Bryske, who counted to 3 and then ran across as fast as he could, fell head over heels on the other side. So we had to go straight through the dairy and What's-his-name smashed the window open with the butt of his rifle, and there was a glass bowl behind it that rolled over. We crawled through the window in order to bash the front door

in, but all of a sudden What's-his-name stopped and started biting his fingernails. I saw him pick up the bowl that had gotten caught between the window frame and the curtains; he filled it with water and carefully put it back in its place. And because I was waiting for him, he gave me an infuriated look, as if I'd done something wrong, heaven knows what. A bit further on we had to throw ourselves flat on our faces since that bunch from the other side had now crossed the Canal, and I didn't really have the nerve to look back, because it was an inferno now. And in our ditch What's-his-name said: imagine you lived in that dairy, and got back after you'd had to run away, wouldn't you be glad to see that your goldfish were still alive? Well? . . . Why did you make that awful face at me?

And I had to laugh. It wasn't me making that awful face, I said, it was you.

Actually, I made those goldfish up, that's what stories are for. But this isn't made up: What's-his-name had to crawl through a gap in the hedge with his pistol over his shoulder, and he got caught. We shouted at him to cut the leather strap but he didn't hear us, he just stood there in the line of fire and shit himself.

Whereas What's-his-name, on the other hand—oh, a different What's-his-name of course—stood astride our ditch and emptied one magazine after another—he was completely berserk.

And me? Oh, I sat gnawing on my fingernails, observing everything and trying to keep my thoughts from running off to the insane asylum. Do you suppose they're already dropping bombs

BACK THERE? *I wondered—oh god, goddamn don't let them die, let them see me 1 more time—*WHAT'S THE USE OF HAVING A KID AND THEN DYING BEFORE YOU EVER GET TO SEE IT?

Prosper tells a story: a guy had one eye blown out and when he was taken to the military doctor's shelter, the doctor was just getting ready to leave—we had to drive him back into the shelter at bayonet-point to make him treat that eye first.

By the roadside: two stretcher-bearers with arms spread wide and an overturned stretcher with its 4 arms spread wide and its dying occupant lying next to it, BOMBED A SECOND TIME.

And two soldiers who'd made a run for it on the Albert Canal were picked up by gendarmes who'd also run for it and were brought before a court-martial on a church square chaired by a general who shouted the whole time and wore slippers—and suddenly the German planes were there and the general leaped into a car in his slippers and drove off, shouting THEY WOULD BE COURT-MARTIALED LATER.

And speaking of the general, my wife told me a while later that a whole bunch of those old men with red bands round their caps had driven past our house, that they were all too worn out to fight anymore but had big beautiful dogs with them and young girls of around sixteen or so.

THE BORDER

Since that bunch over there controlled the high ground, their fire swept the plateau we had to cross—and where we first, crawling on our hands and knees, had to cut through our own barbed wire. Seen from the ditch it looked like a stampeded herd jostling around the barbed wire tearing the clothes off their backs. Some shouted at them to get down. It's all because there's no officer around, shouted someone else. And that was true. All through the mobilization period you couldn't take one wrong step without one of them staring daggers. What's-his-name and I were once put up on charges for falling asleep on sentry duty by a pile of stupid turf. But here we hadn't seen any officers after the first shot was fired, except that poor lieutenant from the 9th, but what good was a lieutenant against that bunch over there? But since we'd started looking for food and ammunition, we

were getting to know the area better than our own kit bags; we moved in an arc round the barbed wire and reached the main road a little earlier—at least we would have got there earlier if we hadn't seen those gray-painted vehicles on their treads. A little brat of a soldier was leaning out of one, and funnily enough it looked like he was shaking his fist at us. And immediately thereafter, a few yards from us, that ghostly lieutenant from the 9th crawled out of our ditch, threw his revolver away, and put his hands up. And it's possible that What's-his-name said "come on," or equally possible that I said it, but we both threw our rifles away and stood up next to the lieutenant. And what about that little brat of a soldier in his black uniform? He laughed and said he was 18 and had fought in Poland and Spain. But Spain . . . that was probably a bluff. He got out his ersatz cigarettes and offered us one. He said that we had to keep going, *immer weiter*, and stretched out his arm towards the main road. His fist was still clenched, I looked at it and then understood why he'd pointed it at us, there was a little revolver hidden in it. Later What's-his-name asked me: did you see this and did you see that, but I think I walked along with my eyes shut, because I couldn't look at all those horses and people and children lying there in their own stench. And as kids they'd told us at school that the road to hell is a road of darkness, and I'd immediately recognized that road when I saw it. Do you have any idea where we are? asked What's-his-name. I looked and all I saw was a flat expanse covered with rubble. This may be where that café was the day before yesterday where they had that nice pickup truck. And this is where the baker's was with those three hot-blooded daughters. The day before yesterday it had been the village of Veltwezelt

and now it was nothing. One of the three daughters, the youngest and I think the prettiest, was lying there with . . . but I'd rather forget that as quickly as possible. And on the threshold of the ex-café lay two Germans. Just as though they'd drunk themselves stupid, said What's-his-name, but I couldn't make myself laugh. We followed the main road towards the border where there was a fencepost and beyond that pole a different country and a different people. A farmer came out with a bucket of water and he said that if we were thirsty we could drink. I looked at the farmer, and you'll laugh, but he looked just like the Flemish writer Stijn Streuvels.

So what if that farmer was the spitting image of Stijn Streuvels? You may think I'm trying to make the point that the people from Germany could just as well have been the people from Belgium, but really, I'm not—he looked like him, that's all—and I still don't know if the people there were the same as us, we didn't see anything but bits of meadow surrounded by barbed wire, and fat women who came from a long way off to look at us as we stood there naked to be checked for lice—apart from that we saw S.S. officers who did nothing but count and count and count again, and apart from that we were hungry, and apart from that we GOT lice but by then there were no more inspections.