Translations from Peter Handke's "Once Again For Thucydides"

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On March 23, 1987, under the evergreen ivy on the wall of a house on the Felsenberg, there was a leaf that seemed wilted. When a human shadow fell on it, the leaf lifted into the air and opened wings that were much more yellow on the inside and that gave off a distinct gleam, the most intense color since fall. Then a second brimstone butterfly flew from around the corner of the house, its shadow twitching on the wall. The butterflies, when they lit, revealed a dark pair of spots on their fruit-yellow, veined wings, one spot above the other; the heads of the creatures retained something of the former caterpillar. Over the winter they had hung unnoticed in bushes, rolled up like cigarettes. Next to one butterfly rested, suddenly, a first bee, and again as the butterfly took flight the deep gleam from its inside wings entered the world, transforming the observation, opening it to the surroundings. That was after the 10-o’clock radio news. The sun grew warmer and the two butterflies disappeared. About noon then, throughout the garden in front of the house, the old granulated snow began to stir. The snow grains toppled as if of their own volition, separated and rolled to the side, became translucent and more transparent with each glance. Across the entire blanket of snow, throughout the garden, a continual, unceasing stirring, rolling, incipient fluidity, flowing, and -- ear to the ground -- a rustling. The melting of the snow. Under the warm sun, some grains tilted themselves like tiny space telescopes, with a glistening in the focal point of the mirror. At the same time the snow covering sagged visibly and finally allowed the rocket of a first crocus blossom, still half sheathed, the tip aimed deep blue at a universe of the same color, to flare up between the few new grass blades rising through the snow. Seen through the magnifying glass, the crystalline corn snow was full of soot. These were the events of the morning of March 23, 1987.
The Shoeshiner of Split

After the traveler, on the first of December 1987, had observed at length the carved figures on the wooden doors of the cathedral of Split, including John who again leans his sad head on the shoulder of Jesus during the Last Supper, his one hand -- variant -- seeking solace in the sleeve of his master, he walked down to the sunny beach promenade where he saw a grizzled shoeshiner. Idle, perhaps, for quite some time, he began to shine his own shoes. And they needed it. He worked as thoroughly as if for someone else, his only option, slowly, thoughtfully, one piece of leather after another. And his shoes, caressed gently, began to gleam and glowed finally under the palm that held the brush. “I’ll go and have him shine my shoes too!” the traveler thought. And did so. The shoeshiner handled the curved cleaning brush with a gentleness and firmness that together relieved the traveler’s feet, his instep, the tips of his toes. In the shoeshiner’s can of polish there was only a fingernail-sized clump, but with it he was able to rub, dab by dab, gently, completely, deeply penetrating, the entire pair of more-than-ankle-high shoes; he was meticulous with each flake, no two on the same spot. Finally he even flipped over the top of the can, hoping to find a residue of polish there. Slowly, evenly, with an almost ceremonial gesture, he tied the traveler’s shoelaces tighter and tucked them, before he reached the leather around the ankles with the polish, between shoetops and socks. (The shoeshiner’s socks slumped, his long underwear was darkened where it showed above the waist of his pants, and similarly the completely blackened shirt collar above revealed an absolutely lonely or solitary man.) When he picked up the two polishing brushes and drew them alternately over the shoe, his activity became a work of art, and the stroking brushes cut through the tumult of the port promenade with a very soft, sibilant, thrilling music, the brushing of an especially concentrated, introspective jazz drummer, no, much more delicate, more gentle, more penetrating, the unheard echo of the call of the Muezzin from the minaret. In the
winter-rain puddles from the previous days, the dark berries fallen from the palm tree collected into a large, sun-drenched archipelago; above them, the round, swaying head of the shoeshiner with a wreath of white hair, tanned skin. When the traveler was to switch feet, the old man knocked a little brush sharply on his box. The shoes shone now as never before, but he still had his tiny black shining cloth for a finâle. First, he shook out the little cloth in a miniature ceremony and then drew it, as final act, over the shoes' toes -- only over these -- so that an additional shine emanated from them, from the tiny cracks and rills of the leather, visible for the first time. Then, finished with his work, he knocked on his box. Walking away, the traveler enjoyed more than he ever had the beaming shoes on his feet. In a restaurant, he drew his shoes under the table so that no one would bump and accidentally scuff them. And later, in the bus, he kept his feet close to the seat, avoided stretching out into the aisle, no new passenger would even get close to the shoes. While the shoeshiner had been working, he had had an image of him as his portraitist, far different from the actual tourist sketcher of the previous day, much more correct, more true to life, corresponding to the traveler. In short, he saw in the shoeshiner of Split a saint: the saint of meticulousness, or the “saint of the small weights.” On subsequent days, while it was raining, farther to the south, he left the shoes in his room. In the following weeks, however, he wore them in the snow of Macedonia, in the leafy dust of the mountains of Peloponnesos, in the yellow and gray sand of the Libyan and Arabic desert. And even months later, one day in Japan, it was enough to rub the leather with a cloth and the original shine from the promenade in Split reappeared, undamaged.
Head Coverings in Skopje

A possible minor epic: of the various head coverings of the passersby in large cities, as, for example, in Skopje in Macedonia/Yugoslavia on December 10, 1987. There were even, right in the metropolis, those “Passe-Montagne” or mountain-climbing caps, covering the nose below and the forehead above and leaving only the eyes uncovered, and among them the bicycle-cart drivers with black little Moslem caps glued to their skulls, while next to them at the edge of the street an old man said goodbye to his daughter or niece from Titograd/Montenegro or Vipava/Slovenia, multiple steep gables in his hood, an Islamic window and capital ornament (his daughter or niece cried). It was snowing in southernmost Yugoslavia and thawing at the same time. And then a man passed by with a white, crocheted forage cap shot through with oriental patterns under the dripping snow, followed by a blond girl with a thick bright stocking cap (topped by a tassel), followed immediately by a bespectacled man with a beret, a dark blue stem on top, followed by the beret of a long-legged soldier and by a pair of peaked police caps with concave surfaces. A man walked past then with a fur cap, earlaps turned up, in the midst of swarms of women wearing black cloths over their heads. After that a man with a checked fez -- slung over his ear, in magpie black and white, Parzival’s half-brother, piebald Feirefiz. His companion carried a leather-and-fur cap, and after them came a child with a black-and-white ear band. The child was followed by a man with a salt-and-pepper hat, a black-market magnate suavely making his way along the Macedonian bazaar street in the slushy snow. The troop of soldiers then, with the Tito-star on the prows of their caps. After them a man with a brown-wool Tyrolean hat, front brim turned down, the back brim turned straight up, a silver badge on the side. A little girl hopping by with a bright deerskin hood, lined. A man with a whitish-gray shepherd’s hat wound by a red band. A fat woman with a linen-white cook’s scarf, fringed in the back. A young man with a multi-layered
leather cap, each layer a different color. A man pushed a cart and had a plastic cap over his ears, his chin wrapped in a Palestinian scarf. One man walked along then with a rose-patterned cap, and gradually even the bareheaded passersby seemed to be equipped with head coverings -- hair itself a covering. Child, carried, with a night cap, intersected by woman with slanted, broadly sweeping movie hat: there was no keeping up with the variety. A beauty in glasses walked past with a pale violet Borsalino hat and sauntered around the corner, followed by a very small woman with a towering cable-knit hat she had knitted herself, followed by an infant with a sombrero on its still open fontanel, carried by a girl with an oversized beret *made in Hongkong*. A boy with a shawl around his neck and ears. An older boy with skier’s earmuffs, logo TRICOT. And so on. That beautiful And so on. That beautiful And so on.
Attempt to Exorcize One Story By Means of Another

It was a Sunday, the morning of the twenty-third of July 1989, in the “Hotel Terminus” near the train station in Lyon-Perrache, a room that looked out over the tracks. In the distance, between railway wires and apartment blocks, the waterbright green of trees hinted at a river, the Saône, shortly before its confluence with the Rhône; above, swallows turned against the white (shot through with sky blue) of the waning moon that then slowly drifted away, pitted like a cloud. Across the otherwise Sunday emptiness of the station yard the train personnel went their separate ways, each with his briefcase, descended the back steps, past an isolated house overgrown by wild grape vines, a graceful building from the turn of the century, windows rounded at the top, and walked toward their dormitory, a concrete block in most of whose windows the curtains were drawn. Overhead the swallows flew creases into the sky, and below -- flashes of light from the briefcase latches and the wristwatches of the *cheminots* who crossed the tracks episodically. Around a curve came the sawmill sound of a freight train. A few of the trainmen also carried plastic bags and all of them wore short-sleeved shirts, jacketless, and as a rule they walked in pairs, although there were several who walked alone, and their coming and going on the S-shaped path across the tracks had no end: Every time the man sitting at his window, the fellow traveler, looked up from his paper, another of them was swinging along below. For a few moments the path was empty, crossed solely by the sun-lit tracks, nor were there now any swallows in the sky. For the first time the observer realized that the “Hotel Terminus” in which he had spent the night had been Klaus Barbie’s torture house during the war. The corridors were very long and twisted and the doors were double. Only sparrows chirped outside now, unseen, and a white moth fluttered across the *chemin des cheminots*: Momentarily the Sunday stillness held sway over this gigantic train yard, not a train rolled, movement only between the curtains of an apartment, and that just to close them, and this great
stillness and peacefulness continued then over the yard while in front of the wild-vine house the foliage of a plane tree stirred, as if up from deep roots, and above the invisible Saône River, far beyond it, the white splinter of a gull flashed, and the summer Sunday breeze blew into the wide-open room of the “Hotel Terminus,” and finally another short-sleeved man swung onto the train-yard path, his black briefcase at knee level, certain of his destination -- and so his free arm swung wide, and a small blue moth landed on one of the tracks, reflecting the sun, and turned in a half circle as if touched by the heat, and the children of Izieux only now, nearly half a century after their removal, screamed bloody murder.
Returning again, slowly, straight through Europe, he stopped in Aix-en-Provence at the beginning of January 1990, planning to walk from there to Sainte-Victoire. While traveling he had stopped for some time in foreign, fruitful surroundings; daily he had been called into question, he had concentrated on a project; and now he was hungry, in a way, to repeat one of the proven and always new paths, his Jacob’s ladders, paths on which, with time, the earth lifted under his feet, he began to see green, and the blue returned to the sky in its old freshness. Having turned off the road outside the city, up to the well-known chemin de Bibémus from which the path over the plateau led finally to the white mountain, he sensed that longed-for silence gradually settling in -- or he could not have continued -- as the embodiment of his law. The steady walking again became a dance, setting a rhythm for what followed. And again the peak of the distant Sainte-Victoire seemed at first sight to be a solitary boulder in the nearby heather. Then, confusingly, the path led through an area burned by a forest fire. He had often come across such places while walking, each time as a more-or-less broad swath after which the green, the fir scent, and the birdcalls started up again. This time, however, the burned swath went on forever; each little row of seemingly untouched trees was followed by an even broader black-and-gray stretch of charcoal and ash. Only now did the walker remember that the previous summer he had heard about a forest fire on Sainte-Victoire, without having attributed any special meaning to the words: “Forest fires” were common in these latitudes in the summer and would be, in this immense area around the massif,
as rugged as it was, inconspicuous and episodic. To be sure, the one time he had seen with his own eyes a forest burn it had been horrible, with the firestorm roaring uphill and the flames that leaped repeatedly and precipitously into the sky from the smoke-veiled trees, so high that the air itself caught fire and seemed to explode in incessant balls of flame through the forest that was crashing to the ground. Now the crowns of the pines, in the utter stillness of the burned area, blasted far from their splintered trunks and some of them bored headfirst into the still-pungent ash layer, repeated in my imagination that moment when the storm, raging in advance of the conflagration, had decapitated them.

Walking on the path cluttered more and more by splintered trees and heaps of dead brush, the man came to a place where the mountain, up to the eternally shimmering flat peak and down over the stepped cliffs to the plain, finally became comprehensible in a single glance, and he saw that the fire had not simply cut a swath in the vegetation: It had -- as far as the eye could see, and from here it could see as far as in the old paintings of global landscapes --, burned everything that was flammable, from the foothills over the middle plateaus to the last, solitary, tortured bushes high in the cracks of the otherwise unvegetated cliff walls; the mountain itself, not only its plant life but the stone, the limestone, the dolomite, the marble, gave the impression of having been burned down, of having become smaller and formless. The lofty Sainte-Victoire, the mountain of blessings (by the light, the colors, and the stillness), stood demystified by the fire, denuded and stripped of even the last veil of colors; “defoliated”; exposed to ridicule along with a myriad of blackened, rabbit-shaped stumps at its base. And so it would remain for the foreseeable future; on this continent the sight of nakedness and of ash would be the rule for generations of observers; the few holm-oak shoots sprouting out of the rubble would be reburied by each new downpour; even now, a few months after the great catastrophe, the mar mass at the foot of the massif was shifting toward the plains, being carried away by water, separating itself from the mountain in avalanches of boulders; the
brooks had left their courses and seeped silently underground. This silence, like the familiar mild highland wind and the blue of the sky, no longer had an effect (“had an effect”? -- no longer granted presence); not a bird; the entire region, at least for him, for the man who walked there, for as often as he might return, would never again be part of that previously so enjoyable land of the cicada; a general deadness, with no specific corpse, not one of a deer nor of a bird nor of a cicada. The path alone remained, even if obstructed by the dead things, but it led nowhere; and besides, because even the last thornbush root had been charred, one now could have traversed the vast terrain, where underbrush had previously determined the way, without a path, back and forth, in all directions.

In spite of the impulse to turn around right there, back toward Aix, he continued into the burn, lacking willpower, as if hypnotized by the scorched earth, pathless now, on porous earth that gave way under each step, the remaining roots under his soles as evenly spaced as if they were from sunken lake dwellings. Storms after the fire had also washed many boulders out of the earth; the surface of the stones was distinctly dappled, between dark gray and near white: In the intense heat of the firestorm the tops of the stones had split away piece by piece and had left this rhythmic pattern everywhere; the exploded pieces of stone lay strewn far about, sprinkling, similarly, in the reverse pattern, the bright gray ash and the bright red mar; in an afterimage, the whole airspace was now swirled and shot through by this enormous battery of strange flint shrapnel. Then, in the silence round about -- no, not “round about,” there were no longer surroundings or environs -- a crackling and crashing broke out that became tumultuous and ended with an explosion: Unaided by wind a solitary, seemingly viable tree fell over and revealed, ripped in two, that the flames had consumed it from within, where the resin was perhaps most concentrated, and had left a blackened empty tube. Here and there someone had begun cautious clean-up efforts: Sawed off a couple of stumps, piled up a couple of heaps of brushwood: Out of slashes everywhere the last resin welled now from deep
within the remains of the pines, whitish, swollen bubbles that covered the dead wood with an arm-thick, opalescent, yielding, occasionally popping and sluggishly flowing layer, white, solidified vertical strings of pitch far denser and more uniform than ever on living trunks, also on the cylinders of dead bark far and near. Soot streaks punctuated the reservoir dam, built by Émile Zola’s father, across the fjord-like canyon between these inland mountains: The firestorm had been so intense that it had leapt over even this bushless emptiness, a considerable span, and storming through the air had spit and smoked these black marks onto the dam surfaces.

It then became clear to the man stumbling, wandering, and sometimes staggering dizzily through the destruction, that with the fire of Sainte-Victoire he had lost a path. A path: Until then his only permanence; the only thing that could be repeated reliably and in the repetition, in a new way each time, knowledge emerged that had always been present but was forgotten unless one walked on this path. And simultaneously it became clear to him that he had lost his other paths in the last years as well: The one in the Yugoslavian karst because he was no longer the nameless walker and guest in the garden but the man who . . ., the one through the fields in his home village because all the paths there had been plowed and dug away . . . It was odd that this apperception of disappearing paths was accompanied not only by disappointment (in himself as well), rage (at himself as well), and fear (of not having a way out, of non-continuity), but by an admixture of agreement.

Agreement? Resignation? If resignation, why then the word “admixture? And one more admixture: Always, walking his paths alone, he had imagined walking there, in the future, with another person. Future? End with questions.