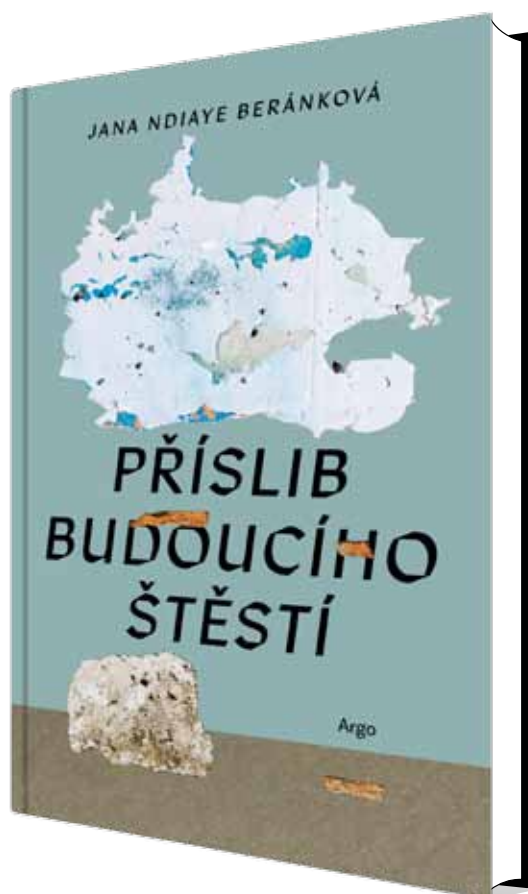




The Promise of Future Happiness

by **Jana Ndiaye Beránková**



A deeply human novel about a fading world of books, memories, and grand ideals

In contemporary Prague, a city suspended between memory and amnesia, the narrator is trying to find meaning again after the collapse of a relationship and of her own certainties — in writing, in love, and in the world around her. Her life is disrupted by an encounter with Nino, an ageing revolutionary living in a kind of inner exile, a man who embodies vanished ideals and dreams of a different future. Their walks through the city gradually turn into an intimate and intellectual dialogue about the past, memory, and a world that seems to have lost its capacity to believe in change. Prague emerges as a city of paradoxes, where high culture mingles with kitsch, history with tourism, ruins of love with ruins of communism, and grand ideas with the banality of everyday life. *The Promise of Future Happiness* is a subtle, dreamlike novel about the meeting of two lonely people, the fragile boundary between reality and imagination, and whether it is still possible to believe in love, radical political transformation, and the future in an age that seems to have come after the end of history.

Jana Ndiaye Beránková currently works at the Institute of Philosophy of the Czech Academy of Sciences, studied and lived abroad for many years, including at the École Normale Supérieure in Paris and Columbia University in New York. In her debut novel, she develops a distinctive mode of writing that remains relatively unusual in Czech literature, drawing on her knowledge of French philosophy, the history of Western left-wing movements, the theory and history of architecture, the work of Walter Benjamin, Central European avant-garde movements, and French prose.

Combining dreams, memories, reflections on particular places, and an all-encompassing perspective unbound by conventional coordinates of time and space, the novel *The Promise of Future Happiness* turns prose into an experimental instrument of thought.



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THE INTERNATIONAL PITCH

The Promise of Future Happiness

Jana Ndiaye Beránková

A stalled book. A broken marriage.
An old revolutionary who will not let the past go.

After a painful separation, a Prague lecturer approaching forty cannot begin her book. A friendship with Nino, an elderly Italian exile whose home overflows with books and political relics, brings her writing back to life. Their walks and arguments connect her private losses to Europe's defeated revolutionary hopes. But when she turns their conversations into fiction, Nino objects: does her newly found voice entitle her to possess his story?

LITERARY FICTION / FRIENDSHIP, MEMORY AND LOST UTOPIAS

An essayistic, dreamlike debut in which a woman's search for a new life becomes a conversation with the twentieth century. Architecture, political theory, grief and grotesque humour mingle in a restless first-person voice that steadily unsettles the border between lived experience and imagination.

WHY THIS BOOK TRAVELS

At its centre are two vulnerable people trying to recover a sense of possibility. Their multilingual friendship opens questions of political disappointment, personal loss and the ethics of turning a friend into a character. Prague's books, buildings and tourist spectacles give these questions a physical setting. Its blend of intimate narrative and ideas will appeal to readers of contemporary literary fiction, philosophical novels and writing about the lives we imagine for ourselves.

EDITION AND READING MATERIAL

Original title: Přebití budoucího štěstí. Forthcoming Czech edition: Argo, March 2027; 150 pages. The complete English synopsis follows. An English sample is available on request.

A friendship that reopens the past

A Prague university lecturer approaching forty sits before a blank page, unable to begin the book she envisions. Separated from Louis, her French husband, and trapped in a painful divorce, she is haunted by the memory of her father, an architect whose final years were consumed by Alzheimer's disease. On solitary walks through Prague, she moves through grief, digital distraction, and a mounting sense that both her life and the wider world have reached an impasse. Then she meets Nino, an elderly Italian exile whose unusual elegance and inexhaustible conversation disrupt her isolation.

Nino has lived in Prague for almost forty years. His home in an Art Nouveau villa overflows with books, artwork, photographs, and relics of political struggle and private life. Erudite, irascible, and suspicious of the post-socialist world, he carries within him the defeated revolutionary hopes of the 1960s and 1970s. Their first conversation shifts among Czech, French, and English, with translation never quite conveying everything they mean. Yet the narrator feels that she has somehow known him before. He becomes her friend, interlocutor, awakening her fascination with a revolutionary past she knows only indirectly.

Over the following months, they wander through Prague's streets, gardens, housing developments, libraries, and bars. Their conversations make history speak through the city's stones, buildings, and antique books, connecting Prague to revolution, exile, fascism, and the European left. In Nino's company, the narrator's stalled imagination begins moving again, and the words that had refused to come finally pour onto the page. But their friendship is never simple. His frailty, insomnia, and obsession with his archive cast a shadow over their closeness, while she realizes that she may like the figure he awakens in her imagination more than the difficult, aging man himself.

The narrator's encounters with Nino continually draw her back into her own past. She recalls the mixture of suffering and tenderness in her past relationship, which made the divorce so difficult. Her father's memory loss is set against Nino's compulsive preservation of books, papers, and objects: one man forgets the twentieth century, while the other is almost buried beneath it. Around them, monuments are demolished, histories repackaged, and ruins polished into spectacles. News of war, climate crisis, and migration press in upon their intimate conversations, placing two vulnerable lives against the upheavals of twentieth-century Europe and an increasingly unstable global present.

The risk of turning life into literature

The fragile balance breaks when the narrator reads Nino an excerpt that quotes their conversations and transforms him into a literary character. Nino refuses to be the subject of her anthropological research, arguing that everyone has a right to their own image and that she cannot exploit another person's life for the purposes of fiction. The quarrel raises an unsettling possibility at the heart of her art: after describing how she felt as an object in her marriage, she may have done something analogous to her friend by turning him into material for her book.

At that moment, the real man and the character separate. A luminous fictional double, Nino's "light-body", accompanies her home but soon grows cold and silent. Dreams, recollections, and immediate experience overlap ever more completely. When she returns to Nino's villa, the windows are dark, his name has disappeared from the doorbell, and no one answers. His fate is left unexplained and it is unclear whether he was a real person or a specter of a long-forgotten past. Fleeing through Prague, the narrator senses the dead and the absent walking behind her. She opens a damp notebook and begins to write before she forgets.

The Promise of Future Happiness is an essayistic, associative novel about friendship, political disillusionment, the possibility of radical social transformation of the present, and the dangerous intimacy of turning life into art. Its restless first-person voice moves from architecture and revolutionary theory to bad food, bodily frailty, and grotesque humor, making Prague a place where the past continually intrudes upon the present and high culture mixes with the commodified low-culture of the post-communist city. At its center is a woman recovering her voice after a painful marriage and confronting both literature's power to preserve what has been lost and the ethical danger of turning another person into material for writing. The glance of a stranger and the closing vision of imagination coating a rose in crystals after it is submerged in a mineral spring leave her poised between what she cannot recover and the promise of future happiness evoking Stendhal's theories.

The Promise of Future Happiness

Translated by Bruce Bybee

All characters are fictional; only Prague is real.

I.

The sea is a sheet of silver cellophane, spread wide and fluttering in the wind. At the first glint of fish scales, a cormorant tears through the slack canvas of the surface, plunges its long neck beneath the water, and darts after its prey in nimble pursuit. Several tankers loom in the distance, but my boat remains stranded, its engine dead, while the hot summer sun scorches my bare back. I send out signals, launching flares faint in the glare of day; although the vessels around me seem to know I am here, no one responds. I stagnate, shouting into the terrifying silence of the empty expanse, unable to set out in any direction. The earth keeps turning while I alone harden in place, bound by my own indecision, unable to cast the dice in this incomplete shipwreck, running out of food and drinking water.

The glowing computer screen strains my eyes. As in last night's dream, I cannot decide which sentence to begin with, drowning in the sea of the white page, where gleaming, scaly bodies of words leap to the surface, along with scraps of memory, nostalgia for a world that never existed, and a suffocating, endless indecision. I try to concentrate my thoughts into a single point, to attain a state of ordinary, authentic life that was once the daily bread of people undistracted by digital visions. It is so hard to remain attentive, to write and follow my own thoughts when they are constantly interrupted by images of more beautiful, more elegant people and by the glow of the little phone in my pocket: *the United States has approved another arms shipment; faith saved a family from communism; rodents are appearing in Náchod, even in places that never had problems before.* Intellectual work is an act of resistance to the impotence of a world in which small human sorrows, which poetry might absorb, instead pour together into a never-ending stream of news and banalities. The flood of information makes me feel that I am nowhere fully myself, that my all-embracing self hovers above the wide earth, discovering unexpected connections among disparate facts and worrying about events at opposite ends of the world. Through compassion for a Bangladeshi garment worker, debt-ridden American students, or an early-rising French model, I can escape the deadening routine of solitude and the cycle of obligations. I am always the other person too; my mind swims in the hallucination of a strange daydream, dictated from outside and devoid of imagination.

I return to work, light another cigarette, although I promised long ago that I would quit smoking and grow beautiful, and I listen to the lingering notes of the piano as my neighbor's son practices for his conservatory entrance exams. Neither strong coffee nor the odor of tobacco wakes me; the gray autumn weather suffocates me, leaving me with the impression that Prague's mystique is merely an advertising trick for selling an otherwise inhospitable landscape. In truth, I would fare better in southern climes, if only I knew how to make a living where sunshine, the sea, and fine weather have recently been privatized and restructured by technocratic governments. Perhaps that mystique lies hidden somewhere in the narrow streets of the Old Town, but my neighborhood instead exudes a precise, matter-of-fact spirit, one that is gradually filling the site of a former tack factory with cube-shaped houses ringed by low trees and devoid of terraces or cafés. The recently closed post office is

for sale, and the neighborhood's sole amenity is a self-service grocery store where one can buy plastic-wrapped, industrially processed meat and where, among the shelves, more precisely somewhere between mandarins sprayed with chemicals, an endless mound of potatoes, and a shriveled pepper, the full weight of reality always falls upon me.

A mechanical sound wrenches me out of my daydream. I wrap a woolen scarf around my neck and go out onto the balcony to see what is happening. Two slender female silhouettes hold up the bay window of the Art Nouveau building opposite; above its red roof, a gigantic concrete torso sways in the air, suspended from cables attached to a slowly approaching helicopter. I cannot see the statue's face, but I can make out the contours of a shirt across its chest; the sickle in its right hand hovers above me as if I were an ear of grain waiting to be reaped. The helicopter draws closer: in the opening scene of *La Dolce Vita*, ladies on the terrace of a new building greet the flying statue of Christ, while Mastroianni, his face like a cheetah's, shouts back, asking for their telephone number. I too wave and send out signals, but no one returns my greeting, the old, bored pilots simply going about their work. In the film, they were installing the statue to kindle faith and bolster church propaganda, yet all faith in a better life has drained from this place. At the other end of the city, workers without helmets, ropes, or basic safety equipment now work overtime in violation of the steadily eroding provisions of the labor code and smash the statue of another proud worker that once symbolized progress and the beginning of a better era. They do not whistle, march home puffed up with revolutionary pride, or play at being party bosses; hunched over, they creep along the walls to trade their wages for a little oblivion at the Pod Jezerkou pub. Under the cardinal law of individualism in this happy new age without illusions or false ideals, we each dig our own grave. This city, though it might otherwise be full of mystery, often strikes me as so stupidly matter-of-fact, so unbelievably *sachlich*. Darkness gradually fills the void left by the loss of faith in the future, and I would not be surprised if, in place of the sculptural group representing the solidarity of the intelligentsia and the workers, they erected a pseudo-Baroque Marian column.

Black clouds are gathering in the sky, and I wish nature would show me at least a little solidarity by sending a bolt of lightning into that crescent in the male figure's right palm, a crackling electrical arc burning through my memories of the past, through those adolescent rendezvous beneath the monumental statue whose pedestal, or so my father used to say, was faced with imitation travertine donated to our young socialist republic by the Cuban government to settle its debts for economic assistance. Dad's scrawls in the final years of his life bore little resemblance to the precisely drafted lines of the successful Stavoprojekt architect he had once been; he could not remember the name of a single building, and his memory was disintegrating like the ruins in Piranesi's Roman etchings. Today, memories of first kisses reeking of cigarette smoke we had not yet learned to inhale properly fly away with the monumental statue; the whole thing will be dismantled and disposed of inside a great iron scaffold, together with the troubles of growing up in Prague. The proletarians of all countries are disunited, much like my embrace with the poseur and poet who wrote only a few diary entries in his entire life. The newspapers are full of paeans to the exorcism of the devil and the coming of age of a new generation that, at least according to our editors, will be truly modern and unsullied by the past. They apparently do not realize that this generation is in fact full of anxious, neurotic individuals consumed by social expectations, competition, and the supposedly inevitable end of the world as we know it. *The ocean is eating away at the*

Senegalese coast; dozens of houses have already vanished somewhere; the grapes ripened two weeks early; "No inheritance, no home"; things are getting worse for twenty-somethings; the retro pudding sundae is the star of the milk bars. I do not want to absorb any of it, yet I routinely succumb to the pressure of information; as I scan the daily press, I search for signs of hope that has not come and never will, because journalism is a means of confining my imagination to the realm of moderate progress within the bounds of the law.

I do not know what it is I lack here or why I do not leave, but I know that even distant lands would eventually become banally close to me, because even there I would have to set my heavy body in motion each morning, and perhaps in time those faraway places would succumb to the pedestrian factuality of my present neighborhood, that unwelcome combination of the grotesque and the matter-of-fact. Windowpanes covered in plastic film, the logos of mafia-run casinos, massage parlors in Renaissance buildings where small predatory fish nibble at the callused skin of tourists' tired feet, the last surviving junk shops filled with hidden treasures, matryoshka dolls displayed beside imitation diamonds from Swarovski: all of it is a mixture of beauty and bad taste, the commodity phantasmagoria of a ridiculous age.

A chill comes over me, so I go back inside and stretch out on the velvety red sofa Louis, known as "Luboš," bought back then; the empty apartment is both my remedy and my torment. Here he kept books he had scarcely read beyond the first two chapters, left cigarette butts scattered about, and pulled his headphones and cables from the drawers only two days after I had put them away, lending my orderly home an air of chaos. Today those objects look like moldy relics covered in layers of dust, and life is simpler now that I no longer have to rush out to shop in the morning, decide which wine to pair with what, or spend my meager income at grocery stores for foreigners. I even miss that evening jazz for retirees, the clothes strewn everywhere, the coffee stains on the sheets; my life today is far more straightforward and matter-of-fact. What a mess there'd be here today if his study had become a children's room! I would be an exhausted, perpetually overburdened woman struggling to remain human under the demands of Mother Nature, only to give up on beauty sometime between forty and fifty and live solely through that all-embracing maternal love; in winter, I would wait at the ear, nose, and throat clinic in a practical ski jacket and woolen cap, without a hint of rose in my cheeks, trying to entertain my perpetually distracted children. Mothers, society's overlooked idols, poised somewhere between blessed saints and the *Mater Dolorosa*, probably know more about life than I do today; perhaps they possess a recipe for happiness that helps them live fully rather than, like me, merely watch from a side box at the opera. "Too late to go chasing what-ifs," Grandma Josefina would say. "You wanted too much from life, and in the end you have nothing." But surely I have something, at least: the light of this screen, the keyboard of an old computer with some of the letters completely worn off its keys, and the fragmentation of my own mind, where dream mingles with reality and old memories with premonitions traveling backward from the future into the past. My mind is at once a swallow flying to warmer lands and a levitating concrete statue; it is a tightrope walker balancing on the line between euphoria and despair. I do not know how to continue my text; the words seem alienated and no longer self-evident, sounding like a foreign language. The sentences are awkward, the complex sentences unwieldy; the contours of my own thinking elude me, and I feel like capitulating and submerging myself in the comfort of reified, meticulously staged images of a better life, of beautifully dressed people in elegant

restaurants, expensive shops, and warm countries. My stomach growls. I did not feel like cooking and had only glass noodles for lunch, so I go to the kitchen in search of yesterday's leftovers. I lie down on the sofa, close my eyes, and the image of the monument flying above Prague is projected onto the backs of my eyelids: tourists photograph it as though it were a saint from a Baroque statue brought to life; I see the torso above the plain where Stalin once stood, the torso beside the cathedral whose tallest tower is positioned to catch the light at the summer solstice, and finally the torso flying across a precisely laid-out housing estate, only to end up shattered somewhere in a suburban recycling yard. The images in my head devour the words; I feel sleepy, though it is only a few minutes past noon.

II.

I walk down an avenue whose name evokes the Czech National Revival's longing to create a national home close at hand, where everything belongs to a single Slavic people bravely resisting assimilation into foreign cultural spheres. And yet I do not know what makes this broad boulevard national today: perhaps it is the theater that once burned down and rose again from its ashes, the inscriptions "Praha" and "pension and dowry insurance" on an Art Nouveau facade, lamps from the 1960s, dumplings resembling Japanese rice cakes served on paper trays in a colorful bistro, the characterless glass headquarters of a California company, a tiny Italian café, or the odor of burned grease wafting from an American fast-food chain. Perhaps a nation is merely a set on a Venn diagram, capable of containing all these disparate elements within a single concept. A concept that, year after year, drives people now in their sixties from their homes to jingle their keys here in a strange collective prayer, give thanks that they can, without saying what, exactly, sing plaintive Slavic songs, and congratulate themselves on living in the best of all possible worlds. Brussels-style trams glide past, their heated seats my favorite winter refuge. The newer, more comfortable trams resemble candies wrapped in colored foil bearing the logo of a chocolate factory; one can barely see out through the advertising wraps pasted over their windows. In the display window of a shopping arcade converted into the lobby of a corporate law firm hangs a poster of the first president of the latest republic, saint and theorist of all bad moods, who used to ride a scooter through those ancient Rudolfine lanes below the Castle, an expression of deferential contentment spreading across his face whenever the American president at the time clapped him on the back with easy familiarity, as if somewhere in childhood they had herded cows together on a ranch. Today this national hero gazes at me here on the avenue, smiling sweetly, while people light red cemetery candles beneath his portrait as if before a Madonna in a little chapel. I bear his expression on my back, much as Christ bore his cross to Golgotha, and turn into the narrow cobbled streets. In the window of an antiquarian bookstore, among volumes of the Greco-Roman classics, stands an LP featuring a pomaded Gott; past a battered stone wall, I enter a building with a little black cat figurine hanging above the door.

My eyes struggle to adjust to the gloom of the narrow stairwell, so I stop for a moment and wait for my vision to adapt to the darkness before venturing onto the worn-down steps. At last I make my way into a stuffy hall, where the only source of oxygen is a small window set at sidewalk level, through which only the shoes of passersby can be seen. The people in

the room wear cheap shirts, badly cut jackets, and sweatshirts. The men are bearded and unkempt, grown wild as trees in a forest, perhaps out of laziness or to show that they do not cling to worldly goods. I soon grow hot, so I lay my dark green wool coat and black sweater on one of the folding chairs and, dressed in nothing but jeans and a silk blouse, gasp for air. The hall gradually fills, but I know no one, so I ward off my social anxiety with a glass of sour red wine, which they fortunately serve for free. A gong sounds, and a short black-and-white experimental avant-garde film appears on the screen, while the speaker onstage says something about the avant-garde, Teige, and the death of Závěš Kalandra, attempting to place it all in a broader context, now citing Benjamin, now some other Western Marxist. The lecture is not very good: his knowledge of these theorists is decidedly superficial, and he pulls philosophical concepts from his hat like rabbits, then hurls them like a circus performer throwing knives; his delivery is ponderous and hard to understand, and red blotches appear on his neck as he speaks. Perhaps the evening is not really intended as a serious cultural event at all, but merely as an improvised gathering of a few people who have come here to drink a little cheap alcohol.

The dry-as-dust delivery tires me, and I stop paying attention, checking my phone screen every few moments and reading reports about the bombing of some post-Soviet republic with an obscure name, the emancipation of women in an African country I cannot even find on a map, and speculation about the next American presidential election, until at last my mind returns, *hallelujah*: the speaker has just finished his speech, and the audience can drink away its sorrow over such intellectual poverty at the makeshift bar, where Jiří waves to me through a narrow opening in the crowd.

This thoroughly decent man has struck me as somewhat embittered ever since he tried to found a left-wing party, which subsequently split over personal disagreements into four subparties of two members apiece. Though I do not believe in moderate progress within the bounds of the law, I respect his willingness to tilt at the windmills of indifference and attempt to resurrect something in a country where, thirty years ago, everyone came to believe that history had ended, fell into a deep and blissful sleep, and retreated into the burrows of small private universes, in whose tiny gardens ornamental plants now grow. Everything here flows slowly; social contradictions do not seem as naked as they do in a foreign metropolis, and even poverty tends to be veiled by a false air of beery contentment, the opium of the average Czech, a fog like the one that rises from the water beneath Charles Bridge every autumn morning. Society is divided into those who have settled all too comfortably into the role of the little Czech man and those who still strive for some kind of greatness but resemble dwarfs swimming in the baggy trousers of their own ancestors. It is divided into defenders of the best of all possible worlds, who savor its flavor several times a week, sip by little sip, over glasses of overpriced wine in gourmet bars, and those who try to open up the possibility of another world, only to run into a wall of optimism, break their last sound limbs, and end up dragging themselves forward on crutches like scarred war veterans. These limping pilgrims try to carry on the work even though their brittle bones, gnawed away by osteoporosis, no longer serve them very well.

I ask Jiří about his political work, and he tells me about his daughter, who has only recently taken her first tentative steps. I ask how his article on surplus value is coming along, and he replies that he now spends his weekends in the Vysočina region, at a country cottage he inherited from his wife's parents. He introduces me to a group of his friends sitting on

folding chairs in the corner of the room: a surrealist poet with a Russian name refuses to bury a long-dead artistic movement, a red-haired Englishwoman understands every third word, and the conversation keeps slipping into a foreign language that, in turn, the elderly gentleman in the hat cannot understand. His silhouette looks like a variation on a familiar Magritte painting.

I act as interpreter, leaning now toward the red-haired lady, now toward the older gentleman, with no time to enter the conversation myself, but this pendulum motion allows me to observe the man to my left more closely in the dim light. Beneath his old-fashioned hat are comically protruding bat ears, with white wisps pressed against them, the remnants of what must once have been a thick shock of dark hair. His eyes are framed by cheekbones that age has pushed too far forward, while his front teeth are coated with plaque and small stains from cigarettes and coffee. His face bears every mark of old age, none of them commonly associated with beauty, yet it seems familiar to me from somewhere. When he tells inane jokes and delivers provocative *bons mots*, a tiny flame flickers to life in his right eye, and a kind of sulfurous irony illuminates his faintly Jewish features. His clothes are a period costume from another age, and although this anachronism and old-world elegance seem slightly comic, together they are like a light in a dark forest. A black loden coat lies folded over the back of his chair, the creases in his trousers fall almost exactly over the centers of his leather shoes, and his shirt collar is perfectly aligned inside the neckline of his cashmere sweater; all he would have to do is twirl his bowler hat, and he could grant me a wish like Pan Tau.

There is something in this man that seems to exist outside time and space. At a certain age, clothing becomes an act of defiance against bodily decay, and his appearance reminds me of old films and photographs of my grandparents, from a time when clothes were a way of expressing one's relationship to others and one's existence in this world. His appearance also evokes the era before the post-revolutionary process of de-culturation, during which society was stripped of all its cultural norms and codes and flooded with cheap, poor-quality goods that no one in London or Paris would have bought. On our way back to Europe, we threw away our hand-knit sweaters and Prostějov suits and dressed ourselves in surplus goods, whose motley patterns, garish prints, and poisonous colors express enthusiasm rather than an understanding of unwritten social rules. The Western consumer is bored by an excess of things and faces; here, even after thirty years, many people still rejoice over every trinket with almost suspicious fervor. In fact, people out there might envy us the immaculate purity of our emotional response to the mere sight of the material substance of commodities. When I walk through the stores on Wenceslas Square hoping to replace an old sweater or a pair of faded jeans, the apparent abundance masks an absence of culture: amid all that excess, a thousand variations on the same cut are for sale everywhere I look. I examine the form and material of things, those noisy comrades: the cotton is often translucent, and my body would be displayed in it as though in a glass case; the pants are made of fabric that will pill within days; and the boxy coat would perhaps suit only Monsieur Hulot on holiday. I return home empty-handed and, on the escalators, observe middle-aged women in cheap floral dresses, each accessorized with a handbag worth five months of my salary, and men in outdoor jackets whom no one has told that a walk through the city is not a mountain hike.

I search for equivalents to the expressions put before me by this man whose face is both strange and familiar to me, a face that is a reminiscence of someone from my past or

subconscious life, a promise of possible worlds. He knows a few words of German, but tries to forget the language and refuses to use it on principle, much as my mother, who had won a language Olympiad, erased the declamatory cadences of Pushkin's verse from her memory in order to boycott Russian. We communicate in Italian-accented French, which I translate now into Czech, now into English. Our conversation is a muddle lost in translation, a little Prague Babel in which I try to translate the untranslatable and introduce a little order into all-too-general blather. Suddenly he rises, perhaps because it has all proved too tiring for him or the evening has passed its permissible hour. He thanks us, repeats a few polite phrases about what a lovely meeting it has been, and, at the Englishwoman's request, writes his name and telephone number on a scrap of paper and lets it circulate. He puts on his heavy black coat and walks out with the small, slow steps of an old man. Noise fills the room, and as the alcohol rises to people's heads, the volume of their conversation rises with it. Slavic gesticulation begins to surface, awakening in people only after several glasses, and my group launches into an argument over who should become the new head of the Department of Romance Studies with as much fervor as if they were building barricades. Freed from the need to translate, I finally exhale and listen with half an ear, but it all reaches me like the distant murmur of the sea, while the strange man's profile moves toward the exit. My soul had probably seen his silhouette before it drank from the river of forgetfulness, as in that myth of Plato's. He is a living reminiscence... Of what, I do not know.