The Disappeared

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Fields
or
With His Back to the World

When I picked up my mail upon returning home, I immediately noticed Fields' handwriting on an envelope. There was something unmistakable about it. It was the handwriting of a child, the letters awkward and uncertain, the lines never quite straight. I was so curious that I tore the letter open while still in the stairwell.

Last summer it had been seven years since Fields had gone off to Cambridge. He'd completed his doctorate in philosophy and history in Vienna but then, shortly after taking his degree, his father had died. Fields had adored his father and he disappeared without a trace after his death. For weeks I heard and saw nothing of him. I called several times, but

he never picked up. I also drove to his apartment, rang the bell, and then waited on the street for an hour. I peered up at his window again and again, but could not make out a shadow behind the drawn curtains. Then, one day, he called me. He sounded just as casual as if we'd seen each other yesterday, and he suggested a meeting. We arranged to meet that evening in *Weidinger*, which had been our usual cafe since our schooldays. Over cheap brandy Fields told me that he would follow *the call to Cambridge*. There was a research project there, one tailor-made for him. Of its subject he could not yet speak, but the undertaking would require at least five years. Everything was already prepared for his move to England. He had given up his apartment and sold most of his possessions so that he needed nothing more than a suitcase for the move. No different than if he were just going on a trip. I assumed that Fields had been offered an assistant professorship at Cambridge because of his brilliant dissertation, which he'd written in English. In the more than four hundred pages that made up *The Dandies of the Revolution*, a double biography of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, Fields advanced the thesis that it was only hedonism and dandyish affectations that had made it possible for the two men to develop their social ideas. One did not think such thoughts with dirty fingernails, said Fields then. At some point he also claimed that after Marx's death, Engels had published the former's work because Marx himself had failed at the task.

In the letter, which I impatiently read in the dim light of the stairwell, Fields wrote that his research was at its end. Not because his magnum opus was actually complete, but rather because he lay dying. He wrote that he had terminal cancer; of the half-year prophesied by his doctor, not much remained. And then he wrote that he wanted to see me.

I had known Fields since I was ten. We went to high school together. For a long time we had had nothing to do with each other; only when we were fifteen or sixteen did we begin hanging around the cafe together. Nearly every day, after school, we went to *Weidinger*, where we played billiards, which Fields described as his *physical education*. And he did in fact refuse to pursue any other form of athletic activity, and regularly wriggled out of gym class with flimsy excuses and faked doctor's notes. When he did have to participate, one could be certain to see him limping out of the hall before the warm-up was even over, ankle seemingly injured, to spend the rest of the class in the locker room, reading. Fields always had a book with him: never in his schoolbag, always on his person. Either in his jacket or pants pocket or, logically, in his hands.

It was not easy to find a halfway affordable flight so quickly. In the end I booked a ticket on a plane departing at 9 AM the following day, from Bratislava to London Stanstead. From Stanstead there was, according to Fields, a train that would carry me directly to Cambridge in less than an hour. I wanted to spare myself an early rise the next morning and so drove to Bratislava that evening. I found an affordable pension halfway between the city and the airport, right by the last stop on the 204 trolley bus line. The only guests besides myself were two older Russians, both dressed in black and gray haired, who were sitting together over a beer when I entered the lounge next to the reception and who were staying in the room next to mine. They talked until midnight, not loudly, but the walls were thin and so I overheard their conversation without understanding a word of it. I noticed the long pauses, which for me were a sign of the familiar intimacy that reigned between them. Fields and I,

we would never be old men talking ourselves hoarse during endless nocturnal conversations in hotel rooms. Fields would die. In a few weeks.

The next morning I left the pension without eating breakfast. I wanted to stop for tea on the way, but I found myself in an industrial area where there was nothing besides gas stations, workshops and vast factory complexes. I wound up waiting for the bus to the airport on a four-lane arterial road. For a good quarter hour I sat on the metal bench of a bus shelter across from a workshop surrounded by poplars. A bit farther down the road, house-high billboards announced a supermarket and a shopping mall. The morning traffic moved past me; a young woman cast a nervous look in her review mirror, checking if she could change lanes. If you wanted to get ahead, you had to both look forward and look back. Not only would I be seeing Fields for the first time in seven years, I would also be witness to his final disappearance. I briefly wished that Fields were already dead and that I didn't have to fly to attend to him but instead only to attend his burial, for despite all my curiosity about Fields, our coming encounter also made me uneasy.

If Fields' misanthropy was an act, then it was well played. A blind man once dropped his wallet on the street in front of us; Fields walked on and watched from the sidewalk while I picked up the scattered coins, bills, and plastic cards. When the blind man asked me, more distrustfully than gratefully, if it was really all there, Fields made a face as though disappointment were the only possible result of initiating interpersonal contact.

With the receipt of his letter, it already seemed as though Fields were pulling me into his world, which had nothing to do with the lives of others. This feeling intensified when I descended from the arrivals hall in London Stanstead down to the train station. Nearly all the passengers were crowded around platforms one and two, from which trains departed for London every few minutes; I was the only one waiting off to the side at platform three. The train was already there, but it wouldn't leave for another fifty minutes and was therefore still locked. I studied the schedule. The trip to Cambridge would take an hour, just as Fields had said. The train would then head north over Peterborough and Leicester to Birmingham.

I placed my rolling luggage next to a lamppost and walked up and down the platform. Above me, planes climbed into the sky again and again, and on a patch of green beyond the rails there stood several wooden benches and a table at which the employees of a cargo company were taking their lunch break. The train was completely covered with an advertising foil. The whole side looked like the UI of a web browser; next to one of the still-locked carriage doors I found a button labeled SEARCH. Today, knowing how my journey developed, it seems like fate's cynical commentary.

I picked out a window seat on the nearly empty train and pulled out the newspaper I'd bought at the airport. I opened it but when the train departed I gazed out at the strangely timeless landscape instead. The sky was clad in gray and gave no indication at all of the time of day, and the fields were freshly plowed; it could just as easily have been early spring instead of mid-October. Then I discovered a wild hare right next to the tracks, and a partridge, and finally a whole flock of pheasants, which stared in my direction, completely

unbothered by the noise of the passing train, as though they were looking out at me from a fairy tale. Darkly I recalled stories from my childhood in which animals on the edge of the path warned the hero not to follow the direction he had chosen. He would choose a detour then, which would save his life. I felt the train begin to slow and shortly thereafter a voice on the loudspeaker announced the first stop. I started at the name of the town—what I heard was "oddly end", as though I were being told in broken English that I was stumbling toward an odd ending. As we pulled into the station, though, I read that the town bore the name Audley End, and I asked myself what it could be that Fields wanted from me. Surely he had not summoned me to him in order *to say goodbye*.

I remembered something Fields once said, something that has remained so clear in my memory over all the years that even today I can still hear his voice; indeed, I can still hear the exact tone in which Fields spoke the sentence. We were still in school, maybe sixteen or seventeen years old, and Fields said then that the most comfortable place in life is in the second row. Belonging to the best, whether now in school or later in working life, absolutely undoubtedly brought with it heavy and existentially corrupting constraints as a consequence. An orderly retreat was therefore the only sensible strategy—and indeed, it was his strategy. In all the eight years that we were classmates he never received a *very good* on an oral or written assignment, but in all those eight years he also never uttered or wrote an incorrect answer. Instead, each time he always answered the last question with a brief *I don't know*. This *I don't know* followed the teacher's question so seamlessly and unthinkingly that it was obvious to everyone that Fields simply refused to give the correct

answer. At the university, though, he gave up that habit. There, from the beginning, he belonged to the best.

I arrived in Cambridge shortly after noon. Fields had said that visiting hours at the hospital would only begin at 4 PM, so I still had time. I walked along the street on the lookout for a cheap place to stay and pulled my rolling luggage behind me, which rumbled uncomfortably loudly over the cobbled sidewalk. A residential area began directly behind the large parking lot by the train station. The brick row houses differed from each other only in the colors of their front doors, which were red, yellow, blue, and black. Through a window I could see into a living room in which a woman sat and played piano—soundlessly, as it seemed from outside. When I rounded the next corner I spotted a bed & breakfast on the other side of the street and I rang the bell. A woman, I estimated that she was seventy, opened the door for me. She had a room available, a single that looked out on the garden in the rear. I rented the room, but I only dropped my luggage there before walking deeper into the city. During one of his rare phone calls, Fields had sung the praises of the Wren Library at Trinity College. Not only was the room itself impressive, Fields had said then, but in a glass case there was also a special exhibit: two original notebooks belonging to Wittgenstein, who had held a position there as a professor of philosophy. At the front entrance to Trinity College there stood a man in a white shirt with a bowler hat on his head. The main entrance was reserved for the students, he said, visitors who wanted to see the library had to use the rear entrance near the river.

The Wren Library looked out on a courtyard with an English lawn. I remembered something Fields had written, that the English had rediscovered the garden as *the place of*

the mind. The perfectly trimmed lawn did indeed seem, so Fields said then, as though it were made for thinking on, for millimeter-precise thinking was doubtless a consequence of the millimeter-precise trim.

I followed the stone steps to the first floor, where a narrow, high wooden door led into the vast room that was the library. The walls were divided into bays, and before them were the display cases Fields had mentioned; to protect the original manuscripts from the sunlight they were covered in widths of red cloth. In the first one, next to a sketch by Alan Alexander Milne, the inventor of the bear Winnie the Pooh, I discovered Wittgenstein's notebooks. Wittgenstein's handwriting was anything but neat; with its blocky letters, which danced, disorderly, over the lines, it reminded me of Fields'. Halfway down the page Wittgenstein had written: *When one fears the truth (as I do now), one never anticipates the* full *truth.* Next to it: a cheekily laughing bear.

During our last telephone conversation, which must have been a good three years ago, Fields had told me that he lived like an immigrant. He enjoyed reducing his contact with his fellow man to a minimum. Of an acquaintance or a friendship, of an affair of any kind, to say nothing of a romantic relationship, he never spoke. It seemed as though he had realized his ideal of the totally withdrawn intellectual who lives only in his books. He once said, literally, that it is wonderful to know no one.

During his time in Vienna as well, Fields never had a fixed relationship, not that I knew of. The libido is strong, he once said, but it is not that strong. He granted his sexual drive no more rights than a full bladder. If he felt a *need*, as he put it, he spent the evening *out*. I accompanied him once and was amazed to see that, with the same assurance and

certainty that he as a historian memorized dates and names, he had also memorized the attitude, the body language and the gestures that were necessary to seduce someone. Indeed, on that night it wasn't more than five minutes before he'd made contact with a slim brunette. People may speak and think complexly, Fields once said, but they behave simply. So simply and so transparently that it is embarrassing, he added, and he said, moreover, that it was more difficult to keep plants in good sprits than people. In his case, despite devoted care, no houseplant had survived for more than a week; that one should *enter a person*, on the other hand, was possible only with gross negligence.

Fields had described the way to Bakersfield Hospital precisely. I followed Mill Road to the south, past rows of Indian and Chinese take-away shops; a bridge spanned the railroad tracks; later I crossed Madras Street, Cyprus Street and Suez Street. It was almost as though the way to Fields lead halfway around the globe. Bakersfield Hospital reminded me more of a resort than a hospital. A vast park strewn with several bungalows bearing various names. The Arthur House in which Fields lay was located at the very end of the area. From afar I had already noticed the three firs that, Fields had written, stood before his window.

I hardly knew anything about Fields' family; only that he never had much money. If we went out to eat together in our student days, he always chose the cheapest places. But no matter where we ended up, Fields always sat with his face to the wall. With my back to the world, Fields once said—otherwise the food doesn't taste good.

I started when I saw Fields. Not because the effect of his illness was so obvious, but because, on the contrary, it showed not the slightest trace. The thick brown hair, the completely unwrinkled face, the active, not at all glassy eyes, everything was just as I remembered it.

Schulz, said Fields, thank you for coming, and didn't seem surprised to see me at all.

You look good, I said spontaneously, and Fields nodded and told me that a gay nurse had nicknamed him *Dorian Gray*.

Because despite my dying, I do not change at all, said Fields. In front of the mirror I have the feeling that time is standing still, which, oddly enough, is hard to endure, even for a dying man.

Fields lay in a single room. It's quiet here, I said, and went to the window, pushed the curtain to the side and looked out. A light fog hung from the poplars over the lawn. A patient in a white bathrobe seemed, with her slow steps, to hover like a ghost on the mist. I sold my apartment so I could afford this single room, said Fields. After a life alone, I didn't want to lie down to die in a dormitory.

Fields sank, while he spoke, ever deeper into his cushion. Now he grasped for the strap over his bed with his fine-jointed fingers and pulled himself up. When he was nearly sitting upright he pointed to two supermarket bags that stood on the ground next to his closet.

My studies, said Fields, everything that I've collected in the last seven years. My impermanent thoughts, held together by imperishable polyethylene.

As Fields then explained, the notes he'd been making for the last seven years were comprised solely of very precisely selected quotations. While reading I always knew immediately what belonged in my work and what did not, said Fields, without, however having the faintest idea what the subject of my work might be or how it could all be arranged into chapters. At the same time I am certain that my work has a subject, that I have thus followed a concrete line of questioning, and that this line of questioning will be immediately apparent to someone else once they look through my notes.

Fields sank back in his bed. Even if there was no exhaustion whatsoever to be seen on his face, he had to struggle mightily just to sit up and speak.

I lack someone, someone who will give my notes a title and a structure. And after careful consideration I have come to the conclusion that you are the person who will complete that task, said Fields, as though I had no other choice but to fulfill his last wish.

Fields pressed the red button on the switch that hung over his bed; barely a minute later the nurse appeared and Fields asked me to wait outside briefly. While I stood in the hallway I noticed that the nameplate beside his door said *Ravenscraft*. When the nurse left Fields' room with the bedpan and I went back in, I spoke to him about it.

The wrong name is on your door, I said.

I know, said Fields, that's the name of the man who had lain in this room before me. I told them that they should leave the name there. It's easier to die as someone else.

The window was open. But I still smelled the mixture of feces and disinfectant. Fields now had the plastic bags with his notes sitting before him on the bed. The nurse must have carried them over.

That a life fits in two bags, indeed, two cheap plastic bags from the supermarket, said Fields, is comforting and crushing at once. If, when I was eighteen, I had known that in my life I would have nothing more to do than to fill two bags with notes, I would surely have relaxed. On the other hand, I ask myself now and then if I shouldn't have done something that doesn't fit in a bag.

Fields was silent now and looked out the window. I had sat down on the chair by his bed again and wanted to offer to let him relax and was about to say that it would be better to return tomorrow, when he turned to me and a familiar smile flitted over his face. While playing billiards in *Weidinger* we had the custom of telling dubious anecdotes that we'd read somewhere, and just like he had then, Fields smoothly began to tell me about Phineas Gage, who had worked as a construction foreman for an American railroad company at the end of the 19th century. In the course of a detonation he himself was responsible for, a three-centimeter-thick iron bar had struck him in the head from below, passing in through his left cheek and then out again through the frontal bone. Gage was alert through the entire incident; he did not lose consciousness for even a second. Later as well, he could remember the events of the accident in minute detail and readily—indeed, proudly—spoke of the details. Just as self-confidently he allowed himself to be photographed. Thus a photo has been passed down that shows him with a precise side part, the lid closed over his left eye socket, empty since the accident, and also with the iron bar itself, more than a meter long, which he holds like a scepter at his side.

Gage was considered a medical miracle, for despite massive injuries to the frontal brain his physical and also his intellectual abilities were completely intact again after only a brief period of recovery. On the other hand, noticeable changes to his personality appeared; after the accident, Gage, who previously had been considered extremely levelheaded and even-tempered, often behaved childishly and impulsively. His case was so remarkable that they did not make the usual death mask from his head but rather an actual *life mask*, which has been preserved to this day and which very clearly shows the scar of the entrance of the iron bar beneath his left cheekbone and the destroyed frontal bone nearly at the apex of his skull.

What's also interesting, continued Fields, is that Phineas Gage always carried the iron bar with him for the rest of his life. That reminded me of a similar case in my circle of friends. That man had nearly died of a burst appendix and from the day of the life-saving operation onward, he always carried the excised organ in a sealed and unbreakable plastic vial. It really seems, said Fields, that that which has nearly cost us our lives is viewed like a talisman that will protect us from death from then on. The happily recovered are obviously vulnerable to the irrational. In that respect I must be glad that my cancer is inoperable, otherwise I might now have a jar with my tumor on the nightstand and I would pray to it in the morning and at night.

We said nothing, and in the silence the air was thick enough to cut. A game of billiards at *Weidinger*, I said, that would be the thing just now. Fields nodded and turned his head to the window. A gust of wind rustled the white curtain and I saw that Fields was biting his lower lip. I had to think of Philip and Rafael, who were two classes ahead of us and who regularly came to *Weidinger* to play chess. Philip was considered a hidden genius

by the teachers and Rafael was never away from his side. My classmates often said to me that we were the spitting image of the two, where Fields was naturally the genius and I the lackey. To Fields, though, they never said a thing. Fields they left alone.

Do you know what *Schluckbildchen* are? I asked Fields now, because I also wanted contribute my own fantastical story. Fields shook his head and looked at me. He breathed heavily and I saw how his ribcage slowly rose and fell.

They're small scraps of paper, I said, printed with the picture of a saint. One took them against certain illnesses. The practice began in the Middle Ages in Germany; they still follow the custom out in the country. There used to be large sheets of paper with all the various saints so that you could cut out and swallow the right one for each complaint. Later they also took photos of famous preachers, put them in water and then drank the liquid. There were also *Esszettel*, little scraps that were covered with magical symbols, prayers or Bible verses, which were baked in bread and given to the sick.

I wanted to say more, that the farmers also mixed such *Esszettel* into their animals' feed to protect them from rabies and anthrax, when I suddenly noticed Fields' grin, a cynical grin that unnerved me.

What? I asked.

Nothing, said Fields, but let the cynical grin remain on his face until it was clear to me what he meant. In my story about the *Schluckbildchen* and *Esszettel* I had tried to sound just like Fields. I had spoken in approximately the same rhythm as him and had imitated his ironic tone of voice. That I had imitated Fields in our school years was clear to me, but that I might have never stopped—that realization struck me like a blow. In a nearly uncanny way Fields was stuck in my body and bones, and the only way to get free of him consisted of

outdoing him just once. I had to create something that he had not achieved, and to do that I had to fulfill his last wish. Fields knew that just as well as I did, and so he had me in his hands.

I didn't know where to go when I left the hospital. Without a destination in mind I wandered through the southern fringe of Cambridge and so came across a cemetery. There was a small park directly in front of the entrance, really not much more than a square surrounded by strips of grass with three benches and an open-air chess set, the pieces as big as gravestones. It seemed to me as though it had been set up by the devil himself, who gave the souls of the dead the chance to escape the impending Hell in one last, all-or-nothing game. The pieces, however, all stood in their starting positions, as though the last deceased had declined to play.

At his request, I also visited Fields the next day at 4 PM and stayed for exactly an hour. He had to submit to many examinations, and furthermore the doctor had advised him against longer visiting hours; hence, said Fields, the strict schedule. He told me that he had never left Cambridge in the whole seven years. He had everything here that he needed; there was no reason to leave. The endless rains in the fall and the weeks without sun did not bother him, which I believed without further protest; I had never met another person who cared as little about the weather as Fields. He missed neither the south nor the heat, said Fields; *his place in the sun was a windowless room*.

And then he told me that he had given his body to the anatomy department and that it gave him a great erotic pleasure to imagine how young, attractive medical students, who

would never have deigned to look at him while he was alive, would have to touch his dead body.

There will be, said Fields after a pause, no burial, and so also no reason for you to remain in Cambridge after my passing.

Fields looked at me determinedly and it seemed to me as though he were proud to be able to say these things without having to swallow and without his eyes growing moist.

Finally he began again to speak about his notes and sounded less demanding than yesterday as he did so. Almost sheepishly he asked me if, after the completion of the work, I could also see to the publication of the book, and I promised I would.

Fields nodded twice and then looked at the clock.

Unfortunately, he said.

I said goodbye to him and turned to the door.

The notes, said Fields, and pointed to the two plastic bags next to his bed.

I took both bags, which were exactly as heavy as I expected, and my hand was already on the doorknob when something occurred to me.

Does it bother you that I am completing your work? I asked.

Fields looked me resolutely in the eye.

Of course it bothers me, he said, but I don’t have to live with it.

That was the last time that I saw Fields. When I arrived at the Bakersfield Hospital the next day, the nurse told me that he had died the previous evening.

I left the hospital in a mixture of sadness and liberation, and I could not say which feeling was stronger. I took the same route as I had two days ago and passed by the small

cemetery again. Today as well, there were no chess players to be seen, but someone must have played in the meantime, because many pieces stood defeated next to the playing field. When I sat on one of the benches, I noticed that white had managed to win the game. The checkmated black king lay toppled on the ground and when a gust of wind came, it rolled slowly back and forth. I imagined how Fields had beaten the devil and how he now, having escaped from Hell, strolled invisibly through Cambridge. With all the time in the world. And then I turned around because I had the feeling I was being watched.

That evening I went, at Fields' prior suggestion, to the *Eagle* on Bene't Street, a pub that had been very popular during the Second World War. Before the pilots set out for their combat missions they drank their last ales here and left their names and brief messages on the ceiling, burning the letters into the red paint with their lighters. When I ordered a beer at the bar I discovered directly above me the signature *The Pressure Boy* and immediately thought of Fields—how, from his unusually worldly afterlife, he was pressuring me to make good on my promise.

My flight back was three days away. Rescheduling would be painfully expensive and I liked the city and, in the end, it didn't mater where I hunched over Fields' notes.

When I returned to my room late in the evening I just set both bags of Fields' notes on the ground. Only the next morning did I take my first look inside. It seemed like he had written on everything he had gotten his hands on. Often large format, linen-bound notebooks, like business people use for their accounts, but sometimes just simple school notebooks. In any event, they were ordered chronologically and labeled with a red felt-

tipped marker on the cover. I counted forty-nine in all. I pulled out the first three, then one from the middle, and then the very last one, a notebook that was only two-thirds full, and made my way into the city with them.

I found a quiet cafe on the King's Parade, cater-corner from the entrance to King's College, and began, at a table by the window, to look through the books. In the first one that I opened I found excerpts from the *Anachronistic Manifesto* written by a certain Edmund Cude in the year 2004.

1. In recent years the everyday has been gripped by an acceleration that renders life superficial and tedious.

2. Retreat into a previous epoch seems to be a logical means of escape.

3. In a preparatory phase one must first make oneself exhaustively acquainted with that epoch. What products were available then, what foods and drinks were consumed, and what clothing was worn?

4. These things must then be acquired. If they are no longer available, then one must manufacture them oneself.

5. Those goods and items that were not yet available in that epoch must be removed from the habitat and completely replaced by goods and items that were then in use.

I had never head of Cude or the *Manifesto*; the man seemed to have completely slipped away into the past—at least, the excerpts that followed described very precisely how he, for seven months, at least, had led his anachronistic life.

The experiment reminded me of the flight from civilization that Henry David Thoreau had described in *Walden*, but Cude had only locked the present away a few years ago in the middle of downtown New York.

Right after the excerpts from Cude's manifesto, Fields' notebook contained excerpts from a *Phenomenology of Coitus* by Robert Redhen. Redhen wrote that nearly every civilization has viewed the sexual act as holy. In the moment of orgasm he himself, wrote Redhen, regularly, and despite being a convinced agnostic, heard the hymn *My Life, Oh Lord, I Lay Upon Thy Hands* resounding in his ears.

Redhen presented the theory that every sexual act had a structure and a tempo like a piece of music, and strove therefore for a classification of the sex act according to musical criteria. He equated positions with eye contact to major keys and those without eye contact to minor ones. Redhen's other analogies between sex and music seemed to have been unfruitful; at least, they were not to be found in Fields' notes. Instead he cited yet another theory of Redhen's: sex, it said there, represented a psychic and physical state of emergency. The minutes after orgasm are therefore a precarious transitional period in which the couple must find its way from this *magical realm of coitus* back to normality. For this reason, in certain cultures it was forbidden to speak immediately after coitus, while in others they prayed for a successful return to the everyday; the enlightened West, however, had adopted the corresponding ritual of the *post-coital cigarette*.

Fields had meticulously recorded every quote with page numbers and it was apparent that Redhen's *Phenomenology of Coitus* must have been a tome of more than five hundred pages.

I found Cude as well as Redhen unusual in their manner of thinking, but I could not find a unifying thread running through their books. And this dilemma grew the more I read, because the theories that Fields had collected were as disparate as they were astonishing.

Fields' large and spidery handwriting was not pretty, but it was easily legible. After four hours I closed the last of the five books I'd taken with me. It was early afternoon and I was tired. Not only did my eyes hurt, the constant jumping from one topic to the next in Fields' notes had totally exhausted me. I had always assumed that a human life progressed from initial inner chaos to ever greater order, but the longer I read through Fields' notes, the more doubt crept into me. The thematic muddle inside took on ever more chaotic dimensions. In the last volume, on one and the same day, Fields had quoted from the biography of an American poet who had disappeared under mysterious circumstances, reported on the discovery that during masturbation the same areas of the brain were activated as while tying one's shoes, and mentioned the discovery of a heretofore unknown species of toad in the rainforests of Sumatra. It seemed as though the dying Fields had attempted to cling to the phenomena and to drag with him everything that came before his eyes. I paid and followed the King's Parade south. On the corner of Bene't Street there was a curious clock built into the wall of the Corpus Christi library. The gilded wheel was driven by a locust-like insect with a predator's eyes and fangs. The clock's designer, John C. Taylor, had christened this fairytale creature of his own invention the *Chronophage*, or *time eater*, and had written that his monster advanced the time in irregular jolts because time is never perceived in regular increments. The clock would thus also only tell the correct time every five minutes. There was a Latin sentence from the Gospel of John engraved in the granite block beneath it, *mundus transit et concupiscetia eius—the world passeth away, and the lust thereof*—and I had a great urge to throw Fields' notes to the Chronophage, that it might eat them as well.

The next morning, beaming sunlight reigned. The sky was blue and cloudless and it was unusually warm for mid-October. Fields had enthused several times about walking the path to Grantchester along the River Cam. Virginia Wolf and the poet Rupert Brooke had regularly taken the path. Far more meaningful for Fields, however, was the fact that his revered Ludwig Wittgenstein walked the nearly three kilometers to the idyllically situated teahouse *The Orchard* nearly daily, always with his large-format notebook under his arm and often in the company of a friend, to whom he presented his new ideas. These witnesses reported independently from one another, Fields once said, that Wittgenstein accentuated his little speeches by making little hops again and again.

The way to Grantchester was not difficult to find; it went along the river, first through a park, then through a garden colony, and finally the asphalt ended and a narrow path led onward in gentle curves over a marshy field. I imagined Fields with his notebook in hand on the path across the field. His much too long, almost stilt-like legs in his dark, tight trousers, his stalking steps and his body always bent slightly forward. And then I really did find traces that could have come from Fields. At large distances from each other heel prints were pressed deeply into the damp ground and I attempted to walk for a stretch in his footsteps, but fell out of balance after a few steps.

Several cows were grazing next to the path and in the middle of the fenced-in area there stood a single white lantern. On a notice board one could read that in Wittgenstein's day the meadow was submerged under water each winter and was used for ice skating and that the lantern was an original artifact from the time. A second tablet right next to it showed drawings of plants that grew there. One among them bore the name *Dropwort*,

though I mistook the *t* for a *d*; it made me think of words that had been let fall; and I made a note of it because it seemed like it would not be a bad title for Fields' book.

Twenty minutes later I reached *The Orchard*. The teahouse was located in a simple wooden house in a vast garden in which blue-white striped lawn chairs stood beneath countless apple trees. I went in and ordered tea with milk and while I waited I discovered a black and white photograph next to the door: Virginia Woolf together with other members of the Bloomsbury Group. Cup in hand, I went back out in the garden and looked for a sunny spot. I had just one of Fields' books with me, and I opened it and then closed it again immediately. Everything here seemed to be as it was then, when Virginia Woolf and her poet friends took turns reading their works aloud, and the thought of that time long before Fields relaxed me. I dozed and when I looked up again, a heron flew just over the water in the warm backlight.

Back in Cambridge I went up Trinity Street and when I passed by a large bookstore I ducked in without hesitation. I don't know what it was, just curiosity or perhaps instinct, but at any rate I asked after the authors Fields had cited, after Cude and Redhen and after some others who I had found interesting as well. I wanted to page through their books myself or possibly to find a biography of one or the other. The salesman was friendly and patiently entered the names I pronounced into his computer. After the third one he asked me from where I had my information, for neither the titles nor the authors were to be found in his database. I tried more and more names from Fields' notes, until I finally gave up after the thirteenth name. The computer had not turned up anything for even a single one of them, which permitted only one conclusion, as absurd as it at first seemed: Fields

must have invented the authors. And not only that. All of their works, the whole of their unusual theories, indeed, possibly even the unknown species of toad found in the Amazonian jungle—all of it thought up by Fields. I stepped out onto the street and stared through the display window back in at the long rows of shelves and suddenly had the uncanny thought that all the books on the shelves came from Fields and that the authors named on the covers, including the classics of world literature, from Cervantes to Kafka and from Dostoyevsky to Bernhard, were nothing but Fields' figments and fantasies.

At the entrance to King's College, a handful of freshly-baked baccalaureates had gathered for a group photo. Their square hats drew sharp shadows diagonally across their laughing faces. I observed their good mood and envied them that they had never met Fields. When I passed by a dustbin I briefly thought of throwing away Fields' large-format notebook that I carried with me, but at second glance I saw that the opening was not wide enough. I followed the King's Parade, which turned into Trumpington Road after a hundred meters, although the street changed neither direction nor width. According to the city map it was not far from here to the Fitzwilliam Museum. I had the desire to see an exhibition there, no matter what it was about. The important thing was real pictures by an artist who really existed. On my right I noticed a gentlemen's clothier, clearly a traditional establishment, for on the green marquee there stood in gold letters *Anthony and Ravenscraft, est. 1689*. Something about it seemed familiar to me—I wasn't immediately sure what—and then I realized that *Ravenscraft* was the name on Fields' hospital room. I cast a glance in the window. A faceless mannequin wore a black-shimmering tailcoat and on its head it bore a real top hat. Next to it hung a golden picture frame with a death notice inside. I caught my

breath. The photo on the obituary was without a doubt Fields; next to it, though, was the name *Ravenscraft* and beneath it one could read that his wife Elizabeth and his children George and Victoria would mourn their husband and father and that the employees of *Anthony and Ravenscraft* would mourn their employer.

In the morning, in a state of half-sleep, it sometimes takes a few moments until one's consciousness sifts over to the safe side and one sets foot in reality again. That means waiting it out until one can again trust the world beyond the bedcovers. On that bright day on Trumpington Road I didn't even have a bedcover that I could have pulled over my head, nor the hope that I might wake up and again see the world before my eyes as it once was.

Unable to move, I stood there and felt how tears filled my eyes. Out of anger or maybe out of sadness, though it seemed more to be a feeling that in that moment did not yet have a name and that would probably never be named. Unbelieving, I looked again and again at the obituary and then my gaze fell on the footer where, below the name of Fields' widow, there also stood her address and telephone number. I wrote it down and then sought out 44 Norwich Street.

The house in which Fields had lived was a former refectory, Norwich Street, corner of St. Eligius Street, nearly directly across from the Botanic Garden. It was an ocher-yellow brick house, and from the roof there still hung a small bell with a green patina from the passing of time. Through the wrought-iron gate I could see a garden with intensely-smelling lavender and yellow-blooming broom; the rest of the garden, however, hid itself behind a high palisade fence behind which the voices of playing children could be heard.

I wanted to ring right then; decided, however, to call Elizabeth Ravenscraft instead. It rang for an eternity. I expected that the voicemail would pick up, when I heard a brief

click in the line and then immediately afterwards the voice of a woman. She did not answer with her name but pressed out only a brief *Yes, please*. I apologized for the disturbance and said that I was a friend of Fields, from Vienna, and had heard of his grave illness and had unfortunately arrived too late. Elizabeth Ravenscraft seemed surprised, but was friendly and asked where I was.

At the hospital, I lied.

She didn't know where her head was, she said, but I could nevertheless come by briefly and then she described the way to me. I walked around the block slowly before I rang.

Elizabeth Ravenscraft had red eyes, but smiled at me when she opened the door for me. She was definitely ten years younger than me and so also ten years younger than Fields. She had chestnut brown hair and wore glasses with black frames that were very dominant but that suited her well. I followed her into the living room. Although one could see she was in mourning, she nevertheless moved with the certainty and sureness of a well-heeled woman.

My husband never mentioned anyone from Vienna, she said, as we sat on two dark brown leather armchairs. To be honest, she added, he didn't have much good to say about his former home. He had always said that it was his good fortune to have escaped in time. In all the years we never went back to Vienna, either.

I told her that Fields and I had gone to school together. She looked at me with curiosity and then asked if I wanted tea.

I nodded and she disappeared into the kitchen, and so I had a chance to look around the luxurious but absolutely conservatively furnished living room. There were heavy moss

green curtains and lace tablecloths, a vitrine with porcelain figurines, and the coffee table made of dark wood had elegantly curving legs and must have been a good hundred and fifty years old. My eyes were wandering over the flocked wallpaper when Elizabeth Ravenscraft returned with a silver tray bearing a teapot and two cups with red floral patterns.

What was he like in school? she wanted to know, and I began to tell her, but only innocuous things: his love of billiards, and that he always had a book in his hands. Nothing about his misanthropy and his solitariness that nearly bordered on autism. And then I asked Elizabeth Ravenscraft how she had met Fields.

He had applied for a job as a salesclerk in my father's store and from the first day had exhibited an incredible talent, said Fields' widow as she poured my tea. He not only had a good eye when it came to style and fit, but he also seemed to be able to read customer's minds. He knew what they wanted before they knew it themselves. We met for the first time at a company party and understood each other from the start, said Elizabeth Ravenscraft, and she laughed briefly, obviously sunken in the memory, which she did not want to share with me. Then she asked if I took milk in my tea, and I nodded.

From outside I heard the children yell something and turned toward the veranda door that led into the garden.

We married five years ago, said Elizabeth Ravenscraft. George and Victoria are four and a half and three.

Just then Victoria came running into the room. When she saw me, she briefly greeted me. Then she asked her mother for a glass of water and asked if her father would come home today.

Not today, my dear, said Elizabeth Ravenscraft.

I felt my eyes grow moist and I had to swallow. But Elizabeth Ravenscraft just looked towards the window for a moment before she turned to her daughter and smiled at her. Then she sent the little one back into the garden. She waited until Victoria had shut the door behind her before continuing the story.

Her father had taken ill two years ago, seriously ill, so ill that he could no longer manage the business. He handed it over to my husband and lived to see *Anthony and Ravenscraft* achieve a record year under his leadership.

I looked around the room. There were family photos hanging all over the place. The family on the beach somewhere in the south, or skiing in the Alps, or between the stone slabs of Stonehenge. Fields in the garden, playing with his children, Fields splashing in the sea with the two of them, Fields and his family beneath the Christmas Tree.

Now it was also clear to me why he only let me come to him in the hospital for an hour each day. His family must have been with him the rest of the time.

The burial is on this coming Monday, said Elizabeth Ravenscroft. It's a small cemetery in the north of the city. It was his last wish to be buried there.

I picked up my cup, raised it to my lips and then, before I took a sip, over the rim, I asked if Fields had taught at a college before his time at *Anthony and Ravenscraft*.

Elizabeth Ravenscraft looked at me questioningly.

What would he have taught?

Philosophy, I said, or history.

No, said Elizabeth Ravenscraft, he wouldn't have known where to begin. He was a businessman, body and soul. He sold cars in Vienna, and was successful there; here, it was clothing.

I knew with certainty that Fields had never sold cars, but said nothing.

Why do you think that he might have taught philosophy or history? asked Elizabeth Ravenscraft. Was he interested in them in school?

I nodded. They were his favorite subjects back then.

That must have been a long time ago, she said. The only thing that he was interested in, besides business, was plants. The Botanic Garden is right across the street. He went there regularly. It relaxed him, he always said. The plants and his family.

And now Elizabeth Ravenscraft's voice really did fail her; she took a handkerchief out of her pants pocket, but only to quickly dab her eyes dry. Then she put the handkerchief away again as though nothing had happened and stood up.

Come with me, I'll show you something, she said, and led me up a narrow staircase to the first floor. It was Fields' study. There were hardly any books on the shelves, but everything was full of file folders, of business documents from *Anthony and Ravenscraft*. On the walls there hung numerous historical botanical illustrations, probably original watercolors from the 19th century. Elizabeth Ravenscraft went to a secretary and pulled a photo album out of one of the drawers.

He had his favorite spot in the Botanic Garden, she said. The greenhouse with plants from tropical rainforests. And this was his favorite of them all.

She handed me the album. The cover said *Catharanthus Roseus or Madagascar Periwinkle*; I flipped through the pages. The album contained nothing but photos of that one plant, all annotated with the exact date. The pictures all seemed to be taken from the same place and could hardly be distinguished from each other. At least, I as a layman could not do so.

And that album is just one of many, said Elizabeth Ravenscraft, and pointed back to the open drawer in the secretary.

I imagined how Fields crossed over every day to the Botanic Garden, how in the humid, hot greenhouse he slipped out of his (probably bespoke) jacket and carefully laid it next to him on the bench and then sat there with a view of the Madagascar periwinkle and dreamed up *curricula vitae* and books and filled his notebooks with them. And then, shortly before it was time for dinner with his family, he took out his camera and snapped an alibi photo of *his* plant, proof that they and botany where his greatest passions.

While looking through the album, however, I noticed how carefully and lovingly it had been put together, so that this passion seemed less and less staged. It now seemed more like his notebooks were the alibi project, staged for me alone and for his reputation as a great scholar. Probably both were false, though, and what was true was only the false bottom that Fields had outfitted his entire existence with.

One of the citations from Fields' notes came to me, one that he attributed to a Welsh philosopher named Neil Felder. *Perfection is a lie. And thus it is not true, but possible*, was to be found, according to Fields' bibliography, on page 27 of Felder's magnum opus *Buildings of Lies—Architecture, Ethics and Aesthetics*.

They always say it is torturous; indeed, that eventually one can no longer endure it—living with a lie. Yet for Fields it seemed that exactly the opposite was the case. Without lies life, for him, was unbearable. And not only life, but apparently death as well.

Soon thereafter I said goodbye to Elizabeth Ravenscraft. She saw me to the door but only briefly pressed my hand in farewell, and when, after a few steps, I turned back to her, she

had already disappeared into the house. I crossed the street and walked the few steps down to the entrance to the Botanic Garden. The man in the ticket booth informed me amiably that I'd only have an hour to look around.

That's enough for me. I only need to see one plant, I said.

The Botanic Garden was not very large, and the greenhouse was directly behind the pond with its table-sized water lilies. The building was divided into several rooms with different climate zones and the door to the rainforest area was outfitted with an old-fashioned wooden doorknob. The windowpanes were already steamed up, and so were my glasses almost as soon as I'd entered the room. The mulch-covered ground was also soft; it smelled earthy like peat and sweet like fruit and mildew, and I took off my sweater. I passed by a *titan arum* that, as it said, developed only a single inflorescence which was, however, as wide as a human thigh. On the other side of the path, a coffee bush and cacao tree grew side by side. Rather hidden, yet near a stone bench, I found Fields' *Catharanthus roseus*. The unspectacular shrub, barely a meter high, had dark green, firm, nearly rubbery leaves. I skimmed the beginning of the plaque where the plant's common name, its scientific name, its origins and the plant family were listed. And it also said that the roots contained two alkaloids, vinblastine and vincristine, which prevent the growth and spread of cancer cells and which were thus part of every chemotherapy treatment. For months, as the tumor grew in him unnoticed, Fields had sat across from *the* plant that could have cured his cancer, had it been detected in time. It was as though the world had taken revenge on Fields because he wanted to reinvent it instead of just accepting what was there. And it did so with a cynicism that truly overshadowed Fields' own.

On the next day I had time before my flight departed and so I rode out to the north of the city on the number 6 bus. The *Ascension Parish Burial Ground* was located off of Huntington Road, a broad arterial road leading to Suffolk and Norwich. A tiny alley named *All Souls Lane* leads from there to an old stone wall that surrounds the cemetery. At the entrance there were several dustbins labeled *All Souls*, as though the bothersome souls were separated from their bodies here so that the latter could finally find peace in their graves. The gate to the cemetery was open and the gravel path led past a small chapel of unhewn natural stone and a stand of pine trees. Gardeners were trimming the trees and it smelled like sap. The cemetery was so small that I soon found the freshly dug grave. I went to the edge of the hole, so close that the earth beneath my shoes began to crumble loose. If I'd had the two plastic bags with Fields' notes, I think I might have thrown them in and covered them with dirt.

Just as I was resolved to leave, my gaze fell upon one of the neighboring graves. On the simple granite tablet set in the ground I discovered the name *Ludwig Wittgenstein*. Fields must have used his father-in-law's influence to ensure he'd be buried here in close proximity to the philosopher.

Everyone who visited Wittgenstein's last resting place in the future would now stand on Fields' grave as well. And at the same time Fields' head would, until the end of time, be no more than half a meter from Wittgenstein's feet, with which the philosopher had performed his wild leaps while cogitating on the river Cam.

On the way home I looked down at the sea, where dozens of white windmills stood in the water just off the English canal coast. I had to think of Don Quixote, and how Fields, just like

the knight, had had his fun tilting at armies of his own invention. And I had to think of the fact that there was also a far too obliging Sancho Panza who had his hands full sweeping up the pile of shards that his master had left behind.

When I returned home that evening I left both plastic bags with Fields' notes at the entrance to my apartment. Then I turned off the light in the hallway and went into the bathroom. I showered, made tea, thought about eating a small meal, didn't find anything in the fridge, and let it be. I went over to the living room, turned the television on, lay down on the couch and drank my tea. From where I lay I could not see the bags with Fields' notes, but they were there, and the thought of them remained. In order to enter the bedroom I would have had to pass them in the hallway, and so I just slept on the couch.

In the middle of the night I was awoken by a noise. I turned the light on, went out in the hallway and saw that one of the bags had fallen over and the majority of Fields' notebooks now lay strewn on the floor. I left everything as it was and lay back down on the couch. Half an hour later, when I had not yet fallen asleep again, I went back into the hallway and gathered up Fields' notes. Because I didn't want to have them in the living room, I sat down on the floor and read them right there, leaning against the wall. I began again with volume number one.

It went like that for the entire week. I fell asleep in the evenings dead tired, usually by nine or ten, woke up at three in the morning and then sat in the hallway again and read there until it was time to go to work. I had begun to make a list of possible titles for Fields' book. But whenever I thought that I had found a common thread, a citation would soon appear that knocked my concept out of balance again. It was Friday, five in the morning, when I clapped the last of Fields' notebooks shut.

I spent the next six weeks typing up Fields' notes. I woke up each night at three in the morning, but always took only one of Fields' books from the hallway with me into the living room, where I had spread out an old newspaper on the dining table. I lay the notebook on it, opened my laptop next to it and began to write. Already during the first book, Fields' scent rose in my nostrils: the smell from the hospital room, stale sweat full of evil cells, disinfectant and body lotion. It was so intense that I was nauseous and I was amazed that I had not noticed it in the preceding weeks. I got my deodorant from the bathroom, let the pages of the book flutter past like a flipbook, and sprayed it over them. I repeated that with each book, before I even took it into my living room. Additionally, while I worked I always had a plate of strawberries next to my computer. Fields was allergic to strawberries and with the fruit there I had the feeling that I could keep him at a safe distance. The further away he was, the better it was for my progress.

As I had during the first reading, I made a note of all the possible titles for Fields' book that occurred to me, but I had to reject all of them sooner of later. There was simply no comprehensive term that could hold this sprawling convolution of text together.

Fields had covered 4,367 pages. Because his handwriting was very large, though, the final document contained no more than 647 pages, consisting of a total of 427 entries.

The idea for the book's title came to me one afternoon while listening to the radio. It was the 40th anniversary of Jim Morrison's death and the broadcaster was doing a portrait of The Doors. He emphasized in particular the significance of their legendary debut album,

which, like the band, was called *The Doors*. I thought it was as simple as it was fitting. Fields' book would also bear his name as its title. With his name, it all made sense.

Then I took all my previous ideas for titles and checked if they might serve as chapter headings. Since there were eleven songs on The Doors' first album, I wanted to limit myself to eleven chapters for Fields' final book.

I printed out the entire document, each entry individually. I spread the pages out across the whole living room floor and tried to organize them in eleven chapters. Over weeks and then months I shifted the citations back and forth among the chapter headings. I began to live with the pages on my living room floor. Since a single puff of wind would have destroyed the current order, I left the window shut, and since I didn't want anyone to see how I crouched on the floor and manically shoved pages here and there, I kept the curtains closed. I got used to the stale air and the dusky light. When I came home, my path lead me first to the living room. During the day I would have several ideas that I had to try out right away, and so I read, moved and arranged, creaking on all fours across the floor; often forgetting the time and dinner in the process, and sometimes I even fell asleep on the pages.

It took half a year before every entry was assigned to a chapter. To be honest, there were seven left over that didn't fit in anywhere and that I also did not think were all that original. I ripped up those pages, first into strips and then into ever-smaller scraps, and imagined Fields' first shocked and then increasingly angry expression. Then I climbed up on the roof of the house and threw the white confetti into the wind. I watched them, how they first spiraled up and then slowly sank down, while on the street below Fields' ghost, invisible to everyone else, ran back and forth trying to gather up the scraps.

When I climbed back down to my apartment, I considered whether I should write a foreword for the book in which I would reveal Fields' double life and the fact that the authors he quoted did not exist. Then I decided against it. And I didn't want to have my name in the book either. Not beneath some foreword and also not on the cover as the editor. No "Schulz". Nowhere. Instead, I placed a epigraph at the beginning of the book.

> Ideas are like unknown illnesses. Indeed, a person says, "I have an idea," just as they say, "I have a virus," yet it is actually the reverse. Like viruses, ideas also have us firmly in their grasp, and they make of us what they will.
> *Paul Schubart*

On the day that Fields' book was published, I went out in the evening to celebrate with Paul Schubart. We dined in a terribly expensive restaurant, drank a fortune in wine, and enjoyed ourselves immensely. I spent the night alone.