

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



On the Road to Babadag

Andrzej Stasiuk

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About the Book

Andrzej Stasiuk is a restless and indefatigable traveller. His journeys - by car, train, bus, ferry - take him from his native Poland to small towns and villages with unfamiliar yet evocative names in Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, Slovenia, Albania, Moldova and Ukraine.

'The heart of my Europe,' he writes 'beats in Sokołów, Podlaskie and in Huși, not in Vienna.' 'Where did Moldova end and Transylvania begin,' he wonders, as he is being driven at breakneck speed in a hundred-year-old Audi - loose wires hanging from the dashboard - by a driver in shorts and bare feet, a cross swinging on his chest. In Comrat, a funeral procession moves slowly down the main street, the open coffin on a pick-up truck, an old woman dressed in black brushing away the flies above the face of the deceased. On to Soroca, a baroque-Byzantine-Tatar-Turkish encampment, to meet gypsies. And all the way to Babadag, near the shore of the Black Sea, where Stasiuk sees his first minaret, 'simple and severe, a pencil pointed at the sky'.

Here is an unfamiliar Europe, grappling with the remnants of the Communist era and the arrival of capitalism and globalisation. Original, precisely observed and lushly written meditations on travel and memory.

About the Author

Born in Warsaw in 1960, Andrzej Stasiuk has risen to become one of the most important and interesting writers at work in Eastern Europe today. Author of over a dozen books and winner of many prizes, he came to writing in an unusual way: in the early 1980s, he deserted the army and spent a year and a half in prison for it. Afterwards he wrote a collection of short stories about his experience, which became a huge success. He and his wife, Monika Sznajderman, run a small publishing house, Czarne.

ALSO BY ANDRZEJ STASIUK
in English translation

WHITE RAVEN

NINE

FADO





For M.

ON THE ROAD TO BABADAG

Travels in the Other Europe

Andrzej Stasiuk

Translated from the Polish by Michael Kandel



Harvill Secker
LONDON

That Fear

YES, IT'S ONLY that fear, those searchings, tracings, tellings whose purpose is to hide the unreachable horizon. It's night again, and everything departs, disappears, shrouded in black sky. I am alone and must remember events, because the terror of the unending is upon me. The soul dissolves in space like a drop in the sea, and I am too much a coward to have faith in it, too old to accept its loss; I believe it is only through the visible that we can know relief, only in the body of the world that my body can find shelter. I would like to be buried in all those places where I've been before and will be again. My head among the green hills of Zemplén, my heart somewhere in Transylvania, my right hand in Chornohora, my left in Spišská Belá, my sight in Bukovina, my sense of smell in Răşinari, my thoughts perhaps in this neighbourhood ... This is how I imagine the night when the current roars in the dark and the thaw wipes away the white stains of snow. I recall those days when I took to the road so often, pronouncing the names of far cities like spells: Paris, London, Berlin, New York, Sydney ... places on the map for me, red or black points lost in the expanse of green and sky blue. I never asked for a pure sound. The histories that went with the cities, they were all fictions. They filled the hours and alleviated the boredom. In those distant times, every trip resembled flight. Stank of panic, desperation.

One day in the summer of '83 or '84, I reached Słubice by foot and saw Frankfurt across the river. It was late

afternoon. Humid blue-grey air hung over the water. East German high-rises and factory stacks looked dismal and unreal. The sun was a dull smudge, a flame about to gutter. The other side — completely dead, still, as if after a great fire. Only the river had something human about it — decay, fish slime — but I was sure that over there the smell would be stopped. In any case I turned, and that same evening I headed back, east. Like a dog, I had sniffed an unfamiliar locale, then moved on.

I had no passport then, of course, but it never entered my head to try to get one. The connection between those two words, *freedom* and *passport*, sounded grand enough but was completely unconvincing. The nuts and bolts of *passport* didn't fit *freedom* at all. It's possible that there, outside Gorzów, my mind had fixed on the formula: There's freedom or there isn't, period. My country suited me fine, because its borders didn't concern me. I lived inside it, in the centre, and that centre went where I went. I made no demands on space and expected nothing from it. I left before dawn to catch the yellow-and-blue train to Żyrardów. It pulled out of East Station, crossed downtown, gold and silver ribbons of light unfurling in the windows. The train filled with men in worn coats. Most got off at the Ursus factory and walked towards its frozen light. Dozens, hundreds, barely visible in the dark; only at the gate did the mercury light hit them, as if they were entering a huge cathedral. I was practically alone. The next passengers got on somewhere in Milanówek, in Grodzisk, more women in the group, because Żyrardów was textiles, fabrics, tailoring, that sort of thing. Black tobacco, the sour smell of plastic lunch bags mixed with the reek of cheap perfume and soap. The night came free of the ground, and in the growing crack of the day you could see the huts of the crossing guards, who held orange caution flags; cows standing belly-deep in mist; the last, forgotten lights in houses. Żyrardów was red, all brick. I got off with everyone else. I was

shiftless here, but whatever I did was in tribute to those who had to get up before the sun, for without them the world would have been no more than a play of colour or a meteorological drama. I drank strong tea in a station bar and took the train back, to go north in a day or two, or east, without apparent purpose.

One summer I was on the road seventy-two hours nonstop. I spoke with truck drivers. As they drove, their words flowed in ponderous monologue from a vast place — the result of fatigue and lack of sleep. The landscape outside the cabin window drew close, pulled away, to freeze at last, as if time had given up. Dawn at a roadside somewhere in Puck, thin clouds stretching over the gulf. Out from under the clouds slipped the bright knife edge of the rising day, and the cold smell of the sea came woven with the screech of gulls. It's entirely possible I reached the beach itself then, it's entirely possible that after a couple of hours of sleep somewhere by the road a delivery van stopped and a guy said he was driving through the country, north to south, which was far more appealing than the tedium of tide in, tide out, so I jumped on the crate and, wrapped in a blanket, dozed beneath the fluttering tarp, and my doze was visited by landscapes of the past mixed with fantasy, as if I were looking at things as an outsider. Warsaw went by as a foreign city, and I felt no tug at my heart. Grit in my teeth: the dust raised from the floorboards. I crossed the country as one crosses an unmapped continent. Between Radom and Sandomierz, terra incognita. The sky, trees, houses, earth — all could be elsewhere. I moved through a space that had no history, nothing worth preserving. I was the first man to reach the foot of the Góry Pieprzowe, Pepper Hills, and with my presence everything began. Time began. Objects and landscapes started their aging only from the moment my eye fell on them. At Tarnobrzeg I rapped on the sheet metal of the driver's cabin; impressed by the size of a sulphur

outcrop, I wanted him to stop. Giant power shovels stood at the bottom of a pit. It didn't matter where they came from. From the sky, if you like, to bite into the land, to chew their way into and through the planet and let an ocean surge up the shaft to drown everything here and turn the other side to desert. The stink of inferno rose, and I could not tear my gaze from the monstrous hole that spoke of the grave, piled corpses, the chill of hell. Nothing moved, so this could have been Sunday, assuming there was a calendar in such a place.

This sequence of images was not Poland, not a country; it was a pretext. Perhaps we become aware of our existence only when we feel on our skin the touch of a place that has no name, that connects us to the earliest time, to all the dead, to prehistory, when the mind first stood apart from the world, still unaware that it was orphaned. A hand stretches from the window of a truck, and through its fingers flows the earliest time. No, this was not Poland; it was the original loneliness. I could have been in Timbuktu or on Cape Cod. On my right, Baranów, "the pearl of the Renaissance", I must have passed it a dozen times in those days, but it never occurred to me to stop and have a look at it. Any place was good, because I could leave it without regret. It didn't even need a name. Constant expense, constant loss, waste such as the world has never seen, prodigality, shortage, no gain, no profit. The morning on the coast, Wybrzeże, the evening in a forest by the San River; men over their steins like ghosts in a village bar, apparitions frozen in mid-gesture as I watched. I remember them that way, but it could have been near Legnica, or forty kilometres north-east of Siedlec, and a year before or after in some village or other. We lit an evening fire, and in the flickering light, young guys from the village emerged; probably the first time in their lives they were seeing a stranger. We were not real to them, or they to us. They stood and stared, their enormous belt buckles gleaming in

the dark: a bull's head, or crossed Colt revolvers. Finally they sat near, but the conversation smacked of hallucination. Even the wine they brought couldn't bring us down to earth. At dawn they got up and left. It's possible that a day or two later I stood for ten hours in Złoczów, Zolochiv, and no one gave me a lift. I remember a hedgerow and the stone balustrade of a little bridge, but I'm not sure about the hedgerow, it could have been elsewhere, like most of what lies in memory, things I pluck from their landscape, making my own map of them, my own fantastic geography.

One day I went to Poznań in a pickup truck. The driver shouted, "Hop on. Just watch out for the fish!" I lay among enormous plastic bags filled with water. Inside swam fish, no larger than a fingernail. Hundreds, thousands of fish. The water was ice-cold, so I had to wrap myself in a blanket. In Września the fish turned towards Gniezno, so at dawn I was alone again on the empty road. The sun had not risen yet, and it was cold. It's possible that from Poznań I went on to Wrocław. Most likely heading for Wybrzeże a day or two later, or Bieszczady. If towards Bieszczady, around Osława, in the middle of a forest, I saw a naked man. He was standing in a river and washing himself. Seeing me, he simply turned his back. But if it was Wybrzeże, then I was at Jastrzębia Góra, and it was evening, and I walked barefoot on a forsaken beach in the direction of Karwia and saw, against the red sky, the black megaliths of Stonehenge. I had nowhere to sleep and it was as if those ruins had fallen out of the sky. Fashioned from planks, plywood, burlap. Such things happened in those days. Someone built it and left it, no doubt a television crew. I crawled through a hole into one of the vertical pillars of rock and lay down.

The Slovak Two Hundred

THE BEST MAP I have is the Slovak two hundred. It's so detailed that once it helped me out of an endless cornfield somewhere at the foot of the Zemplén Mountains. On this huge sheet, which contains the entire country, even footpaths are shown. The map is frayed and torn. On the flat image of land and little water, the void peeks through in places. I always take it with me, inconvenient as it is, requiring so much room. The thing is like a talisman, because after all I know the way to Košice, then on to Sátoraljaújhely, without it. But I take the map, interested precisely in its deterioration. It wore out first at the folds. The breaks and cracks have made a new grid, one clearer than the cartographic crosshatching in light blue. Cities and villages gradually faded from existence as the map was folded and unfolded, stuffed into the glove compartment of a car or into a backpack. Michalovce is gone, Stropkov too, and a hole of nonbeing encroaches on Uzhhorod. Soon Humenné will disappear, Vranov nad Topľou wear away, Cigánd on the Tisa crumble.

It was only a couple of years ago that I began to pay this kind of attention to maps. I used to treat them as ornaments or, maybe, anachronistic symbols that had survived in our era of hard information and full disclosure from every corner of the earth. It started with the war in the Balkans. For us, everything starts or ends with a war, so there's no surprise there. I simply wanted to know what the artillery was aiming at, what the pilots were seeing

from their planes. The newspaper maps were too neat, too sterile: the name of a region and, next to the name, the stylized flash of an explosion. No rivers, terrain, topography, no indication of land or culture, just a bare name and a boom. I searched for Vojvodina, because it was nearest. War always rouses men, even when it frightens them. Red flame along the Danube — Belgrade, Batajnica, Novi Sad, Vukovar, Sombor — twenty kilometres from the Hungarian border and maybe four hundred and fifty from my house. Only a real map could tell us when to start listening for the thunder. Neither television nor newspaper can chart such a concrete thing as distance.

That may have been why the destruction in my map of Slovakia represented, for me, destruction in general. The red flames along the Danube begin to eat the paper, travel from Vojvodina, from the Banat, take hold in the Hungarian Lowlands, claim Transylvania, to spill finally to the edge of the Carpathians.

All this will vanish, go out like a lightbulb, leaving only an empty sphere that must fill with new forms, but I have no interest in them, because they will be an even more pathetic version of the everyday pretending to be sacred, of poverty gussied up as wealth, of rubbish that parades and magnifies itself, plastic that breaks first thing yet lasts practically forever, like stuff in garbage dumps, until fire consumes it, because the other elements are helpless against it. These were my thoughts as we drove through Leordina, Vişeu de Jos, Vişeu de Sus, towards the mountain pass at Prislop. Almost no cars on the road, but people had come out in the hundreds. They stood, sat, strolled, all in the dignity of their Sunday best. They emerged from their homes of wood with roof shingles like fish scales. They joined as drops join to make a rivulet, and finally spread in a broad wave to the shoulders of the road, spread across the asphalt and down to the valley. White shirts, dark skirts

and jackets, hats and kerchiefs. Through the open window, the smell of mothballs, holiday, and cheap perfume. In Vişeu de Sus, there were so many people we had to come to a complete stop and wait for the crowd to part. We stopped, but our journey did not. The festive gathering enveloped us, took us against the current of time. No one sold anything or bought anything. Or at least we didn't see it. In the distance rose the dun massif of Pietrosul. Snow at the top. This was the third day of Orthodox Easter, and the occasion marked the pleasant inertia of matter. Human bodies surrendered to gravity, as if to return to the primal condition in which the spirit was not yet imprisoned, and did not struggle, did not attempt to take on any kind of feeble likeness.

After Moisei we stopped. In the desolation by the road sat four old villagers. They pointed far ahead, at something on the opposite forested slope. We understood: a monastery there. Among the trees we could make out the top of a tower. The people simply sat and looked in that direction, as if their sitting served as participation in the solemn liturgy. They urged us to go there. But we were in a hurry. We left them half reclining, motionless, watching, listening. They may have been waiting for a bell to toll, for something to move in the frozen holiday.

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All this would vanish. At night on the main street in Gura Humorului, fifteen-year-old boys wanted to sell us German licence plates. They assured us that the plates were from a BMW. All this would be gone, it would become part of the rest of the world. Yes, that first day in Romania the whole sorrow of the continent weighed on me. I saw decline everywhere and could not imagine renaissance. The attendant at the petrol station in Cimpulung carried a gun in a holster. He appeared out of the dusk and told us in

mime that he had nothing for us. But a kilometre farther, another station was lit up like a carnival in the ancient night. They had everything there, but the pour spouts were stuck in the necks of plastic cola bottles. Men came up with one or two bottles, then went into the darkness to find their dead vehicles.

Maramureş was behind us. So was the mountain gap covered with a hard crust of snow, and that swarthy man in the old Audi with German plates. He opened the boot and took out a child's motorcycle, a miniature Suzuki or Kawasaki, sat a two-year-old kid on it, and took picture after picture. An icy wind blew through the gap, and there was no one there but us. Nothing but a cold, beautiful waste, the sun rolling over the marsh between Carei and Satu Mare, and I heard the click of the camera, saw the boy's grave face, red cheeks, then the father put the toy away, and they continued down, west, no doubt to their home. We left also, because on that wind-whistling height, hands turned numb and cheeks hurt. We descended by switchbacks to the Bistriţa valley, into darkening air.

I see now how little I remember, how everything that happened could have happened elsewhere. No trip from the land of King Ubu to the land of Count Dracula will hold memories you can rely on later, as for example you can rely on Paris, Stonehenge, or Saint Mark's Square. Sighetu Marmatei, more than anything, ended up unreal. We drove through it quickly, without stopping, and I can say nothing about its shape, except that it looked like a sophisticated fiction. In any case we passed it in no time, and once again green mountains rose on the horizon, and I immediately felt regret and longing. Exactly as on awakening, when we are spurred by the desire to return to the world of dreams, which relieves us of our freedom of will and gives in its place the freedom, absolute, of the unexpected. This happens in places rarely touched by the traveller's eye.

Observation irons out objects and landscapes. Destruction and decline follow. The world gets used up, like an old abraded map, from being seen too much.

We drove to the Sinistra district. Everything here belonged to the mountain riflemen, to Colonel Puiu Borcan, and, when he died, to Izolda Mavrodin-Mahmudia, also holding the rank of colonel and called Coca for short. From the Baba Rotunda Pass we had a view of Pop Ivan; in the valley crawled narrow-gauge, wood-burning locomotives. The inhabitants of Sinistra wore military dog tags on their chests. Everyone who came here and stayed was given a new name. From time to time, Coca would organize an ambush atop Pop Ivan against Mustafa Mukkerman, who carried mutton by truck from somewhere in Ukraine to Thessaloniki or even Rhodos, but besides mutton in the refrigerator he sometimes carried people in heavy coats. Comrades from Poland kept Coca informed about Mukkerman's movements. He was half Turk, half German, and weighed three hundred kilograms.

Diluted denatured alcohol was used here to dry mushrooms, and it was drunk with the fermented juice of forest fruits. The frosted glass for the Sinistra prison was made by Gabriel Dunka in his workshop: he frosted a pane by putting it in a sandbox and walking on it with his bare feet for hours. He was thirty-seven and a dwarf. One rainy day he picked up a naked Elvira Spiridon in his delivery van and for the first time in his life smelled a woman's body, but loyalty triumphed over desire and he turned her in, because it was only by accident that she hadn't climbed into Mukkerman's truck.

All this supposedly took place near Sighetu Marmăției, but I learned about it only two years later, in Ádám Bodor's *Sinistra District*, and the story has pursued me since. Pursued me and replaced the flat space on the map. Once again, the visible pales before the narrated. Pales but does

not disappear. It only loses its force, its intolerable obviousness. This is a special quality of auxiliary countries, of second-order, second-tier peoples: the ephemeral tale in different versions, the distorted mirror, magic lantern, mirage, phantom that mercifully sneaks in between what is and what ought to be. The self-irony that allows you to play with your personal fate, to mock it, parrot it, turning a defeat into heroic-comic legend and a lie into something that has the shape of salvation.

There was no water where we finally turned in for the night. The manager took a flashlight and led us down cold corridors. He explained that the pump was broken and the mechanic was three weeks now en route from Suceava or Iași. He explained that the man who lived in this house was a foreigner, had come from far away, and drank the local cheap vodka to cope with his loneliness, so he didn't maintain the place, but the mechanic was certain to arrive soon.

It was cold. We lay down in our clothes and turned out the light. The Romanian night entered through the window. I tried to sleep but, instead of going with the flow of time and sleep, swam upstream in my thoughts, back through that long day after we crossed the border at Petea. Black watchtowers stood on the baking plain. Soon Satu Mare began, walls peeling from age and heat, the shade of huge trees along the streets, and church cupolas in extended green vistas. Hungary was behind us, the lowland sadness of Erdőhát was behind us, and although it was equally flat across the border, I felt a definite change, the air had a different smell, and, with each kilometre, the light of the sky grew more ruthless. The distant shadow of the Carpathians on the horizon marked the limit to that blaze, framed it, and we drove on through a thick suspension of sun. Horse-drawn carts on the highway, the animals covered with sweat. Vintage automobiles carrying on their

roofs pyramids of bags stuffed with wool. The dark gleaming bodies of people. A strong wind. Maybe that's why their houses looked so poor and impermanent on the great plain.

I lay in my unheated room and went over all this, just as now I am trying to remember that room and the morning when I rose and went outside to see that there had been a frost overnight and that its white was disappearing in patches of sun. People on the way to their wells with buckets looked at me, pretending that they weren't, that they were going about their business, that they were blinded by the light of the new day. Now, remembering, I see that a story could have begun exactly there. For example: "On that day, when I saw my father for the last time, because three men put him in a car and took him somewhere, on that day I touched the breast of Andrea Nopritz." Or: "On that day, Gizella Weisz set out, and everyone praised her. Even great Comrade Onaga looked deep into her eyes and said, I understand, our comrade has noble and lofty plans." On that day, that morning, the man who broke the pump might have appeared. He might have approached by the narrow village street between the wooden fences to ask what I was doing in front of his house. Swollen, with bloodshot eyes, with rumpled clothes, a kind of rustic Geoffrey Firmin leaning nonchalantly on a railing demanding to know what the hell brought me to this Pârteștii de Jos or Pârteștii de Sus, to the house where he lived, to observe him in this state at six thirty in the morning, as over their fences Germanized Poles were watching, and Romanianized Germans, and Polonized Ukrainians, the whole mongrel bunch from abroad, that golden dream of the followers of the cult of multiculturalism ... A cynical monologue might have ensued, or a neurotic monologue, as buckets clattered in wells among the various morning noises appropriate to that backwater locale, the cackling of hens, the hewing of

firewood, the shuffling and slapping of bovine backsides, and the 6:35 rusty passenger train to Suceava trundling through the valley. That would make a good beginning for the development of a tale, the unfolding of a fate, a trip back in time, when events shine brighter the more removed they are from today. But the man of the broken pump never approached me, and his life has remained in the realm of guesswork — that is to say, of complete freedom.

So I went up to an actual man, who was standing quietly by his fence and smoking. We started a conversation. The passenger train to Suceava was in fact trundling through the valley. The man, about sixty, stocky, in a faded twill suit, resembled most of the men I'd seen in my life. The smoke from his cigarette was blue, then grey, then gone. He talked. I listened and nodded. He said times were bad, had been better under Ceaușescu: there was justice then, equality, work, and order in the streets. I knew this tale but listened to it once again — avidly, because there is something beautiful in our travelling so far from home and seeing that so little changes. He told about the night visits of Securitate and, in the same breath, about the factories now shut. I asked him what he knew of the famous resettlement, in which seven thousand villages disappeared and their people were moved to concrete apartment blocks. Yes, he knew, had even seen the planes used to take the photographs that helped in the planning of that operation, but no price is too high to pay for justice and equality. I said nothing, for what could I say, seeing as I had come here, to this fence, as a visible sign of inequality, that I had come and would depart whenever I liked, leaving the old man in the wrecked suit holding a cheap cigarette on a rough road between two ancient houses made of wood, which had survived by some whim of history, though their inhabitants hadn't particularly wanted them to survive. I kept my mouth shut and listened to his pining for the dictatorship. Power must manifest itself in a concrete

figure, and once it achieves that embodiment, it abides beyond good and evil. We are all orphaned children of some emperor or despot. I gave the man a Sobieski Super Light. The sun had now climbed above the green line of the hills, and I felt that my freedom to come and go meant shit here, was worth nothing.

We said goodbye, and I went for a bucket to draw water from a well.

It's night, rain is falling, and I am remembering all this for the hundredth time. *Ádám Bodor* and the Sinistra district are a transparency superimposed over an actual Maramureş and Bukovina, and to both clings the flickering and vital substance of my thoughts, my love, my fear. Sinistra won't let me sleep. On the shelf, side by side, *A History of Ukraine*, *A History of Bulgaria*, *A History of Hungary*, with many smaller books and accounts, along with the *History of Slovakia* and Eliade's *The Romanians* — but to no effect. I read them all before bed and finally drift off, but not once have I dreamt of Jan Hunyadi or Czar Ferdinand, of Vasile Nicola Ursu, called Horea, or Vlad Ţepeş, of Father Hlinka or Taras Shevchenko. I dream, at most, of the enigmatic Sinistra district. Of the uniforms of non-existent armies. Of old wars in which no one truly perishes. I dream of white limestone ruins and moustached border guards, and when you cross those borders, everything changes and nothing changes. I dream of banknotes with the portraits of heroes on one side and romantic windswept crags on the other. I dream of coins too. And of cigarette packs for cigarettes I never smoked. And of petrol stations on plains, all of them like the one in that suburb of the Slovenské Nové Mesto, and of Red Bull with the inscription *špeciálne vyvinutý pre obdobie zvýšenej psychickej alebo fyzickej námahy*, “developed especially for periods of increased mental and physical exertion”. I dream of mouldering watchtowers in wastes

and cyclists taking their rusted bikes over hill after hill to places whose names can be said in at least three languages, and I dream of horse harnesses and people and food and hybrid landscapes and all the rest.

Yes, the rain falls on all these places, on Maramureş, on my dreams, on Sinistra, on Spišské Podhradie on that day, Friday, July 21, when we stopped at the muddy parking lot beside the Morgečanka. A one-floor building ran along the only street. We took a narrow pavement and came upon a yellow synagogue. Its facade was crowned by four spherical tin cupolas. The vaulted windows were all black and dead, as if they had been taken from a nineteenth-century factory. In the span between the place of worship and the houses you could see hills and the distant towers of Spišská Kapitula. On a slope above the town shone the white ruins of a castle, so large and bright they resembled a kind of atmospheric caprice, an angular stacking of cumuli or a mirage imported from the sky of a land that had long ceased to exist. A car went by, another, then stillness. The grey rear of a Škoda vanished in the green shade of trees, but it was really vanishing in time. Taking a tunnel dug into immobility. The road cut through the town as through a mountain, a foreign territory that graciously allowed such passage. From the low house at the turn, a dark, squat woman came out, tossed soapy water on the asphalt, and scrubbed away all trace of the vehicles.

A few steps on, I saw through a low open window the interior of a large room. Someone had begun work and stopped. A fresh brick wall across the centre. A TV on, somewhere in the back: blue flickering in the dimness. By the new wall, a billiard table. Several balls stopped in mid-play. It was too dark for me to see their colours. The smell of wet plaster and mildew. Beyond the wall, beyond the dark and the burble of the television, you could hear men's voices raised. Then I saw them, in a gap between the houses. They were arguing over an upturned wagon. One