



Ernst Weiss

Georg Letham

PHYSICIAN AND MURDERER

Translated from the German by Joel Rotenberg

archipelago books

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Originally published as *Georg Letham, Arzt und Mörder*,
by Paul Zsolnay Verlag, 1931 Wien
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First Archipelago Books Editions, 2008

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Weiss, Ernst, 1882–1940.

[Georg Letham, Arzt und Mörder. English]
Georg Letham, physician and murderer / by Ernst Weiss ;
translated from the German by Joel Rotenberg.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-0-9800330-3-8

I. Rotenberg, Joel. II. Title.

PT2647.E52G413 2009 833'.912—dc22
2008048790

Archipelago Books
232 Third St. #A111
Brooklyn, NY 11215
www.archipelagobooks.org

Distributed by Consortium Book Sales and Distribution
www.cbsd.com

Printed in Canada

Jacket Art (TK)

This publication was made possible with support from Lannan Foundation,
The National Endowment for the Arts,
and the New York State Council for the Arts, a state agency.



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PHYSICIAN AND MURDERER

THREE

I

If I am to explain how, because of my father, I became the person I am, I must begin with the story of my father, with the man who had a determining influence on my youth. He too once found himself on a sea voyage that was long, full of privations, and, as I will soon relate, ultimately unsuccessful. This great journey, which entirely appeased his wanderlust, led him, not southward to the equatorial region, but northward. To the pole.

He was slender, muscular, with great endurance, had as a young man undertaken the most difficult and dangerous climbing expeditions, had reached summits never before scaled. He was scientifically well prepared, an outstanding geologist and a great botanist who, with other scholars, had helped lay the groundwork for the at that time new science of geobotany. Physical geography was his special interest, but he had written a doctoral dissertation on the terrestrial magnetic pole and the relationship between geomagnetism and variable air currents, proving himself a fertile meteorologist. All this before the age of thirty. Could anyone have believed that this versatile, promising scholar and

naturalist would one day become an administrative official in the Ministry of Agriculture and the “left hand” of successive ministers? And the one to bring up such a promising son as I? In his thirty-first year he was, with government assistance, put in a position to equip a large three-masted sailing ship, taking account of the most recent experiences of northern travelers, and to choose the necessary collaborators – geographers, navigators, meteorologists, zoologists, botanists, linguists, and ethnographers. Where possible, a scholar was to have a command of several disciplines. An academy in miniature. In addition a select crew and a small dog, Ruru.

As the leader of the expedition, he had his name in the headlines at the time he set sail. People had faith in him. They believed in his star. The officially supported science otherwise known to habitually resist any true advance lent its assistance. He had himself blessed, along with his companions, before setting out. He was as handsome as he was intelligent, an appealing person. He knew how to command, all were happy to follow him.

Later, after this voyage, those who made the acquaintance of a reserved, overly courteous man, hugely vain beneath a mask of modesty, morbidly stingy though generous to all appearances, secretly buffeted by sensual passions, an atheist through and through yet a pietist and a churchgoer, an anarchist in his own eyes and a worshipper of authority in those of the world, unsparing toward others yet excessively indulgent of his own frailties, despising people from the bottom of his heart and dominating them with supreme ease; those who knew how my father, Dr. Georg Letham the elder, beyond his career as a civil servant, his base passions, his instinct for power, and his psychological experiments, valued only his bank account and his second son – they would

not have recognized in him the Georg Letham who set out before the turn of the century, pure of will, highly gifted, seemingly under the most favorable stars, to conquer the geographic North Pole. He was away for almost two years – but what years! The result was a report to the Academy of Sciences just five pages long, unfortunately consisting more of impressions and general propositions than of rigorous scientific facts. It was a catastrophe. The voyage cost millions. The result was a few phrases.

And yet! What mastery he incontestably showed in managing people and turning circumstances to his own purposes when, beaten, returning after an atrocious odyssey, he was able to rescue himself even from this, to hold his own, indeed to prosper. He obtained a high post in the Ministry of Agriculture on the strength of his meteorological experience. He wedded the sister of a fellow traveler, marrying money, though not very happily; and I was his second son.

This career and this “meteorological experience” did his soul no good. He had been so disappointed that the primary tissue of his being had changed. Beyond recognition.

It was not the failure alone that brought him down, but the gulf, the unbridgeable gulf, between his task and its execution.

To know what one lives for, and to be equal to it, that was the main goal of his life, his faith, which was not inconsistent with the Catholicism of his childhood. And that later on he knew, but was not equal, was that his doing? Was he at fault? What a question! Only the facts were at fault, what is in the log. And what were these facts, what colossal catastrophes were recorded in this great log? If only it had been something of the kind! But the facts were just tragicomic ones, it was all the doing of little animals, of sweet beasts that are only too devoted, of

neighborly creatures that look upon people as kind, prosperous fathers and providers, of those children of God that even now are scurrying back and forth in the darkness between the ship's medicine locker and the ropes on the deck of the *Mimosa*, their long tails dragging behind them – have I not said enough, more than enough? – of rats.

From this voyage he knew them, and knew the world. He went from being a naturalist to being a connoisseur of human nature.

The North Pole lies beneath perpetual ice. It can be reached only on snowshoes, by dogsled expeditions, if at all. In summer, however, the broad expanse of ice is crisscrossed by fissures and crevasses that have emerged from the melting ice sheet under the weak rays of the sun. Yet in winter, when these breaks in the ice are frozen over, the rigors of the weather are too great. For four months, night is total. One must therefore make use of the short summer.

To best reach the pole by water, daring explorers had occasionally entrusted their lives to an enormous ice floe! But they did not find this method a happy one. For they moved northward on the ice floe (it was vast), the floe drifted southward, and all was in vain. But in those years, at the end of the nineteenth century, a world-renowned arctic explorer (it was not my father) came as close to that coveted piece of cold ground as was possible given the technical means of the time, that is, without the use of radiotelegraphic devices and without airplanes or airships. His method was the same as my father's; here, as in much else, there was only *one* practical way. For him it succeeded. Not for my father. Was the other more astute? Perhaps not. He merely had fewer rats on board.

Now what was the method? Many expeditions had undertaken the quixotic journey to the legendary pole without success. All had failed in different ways, at different places.

Years earlier one of these ships, the *Jeannette*, had arrived at a spot north of the New Siberian Islands where it could advance no farther in the pack ice. Captain and crew leave the ship. Save themselves. The three-master remains. Masses of ice pile up titanically. More and more icebergs approach, irresistibly propelled; the entire horizon, the broad steel blue expanse of sea is filled with them. Gleaming greenish blue, hung with long beards of melted ice, sparkling in the Northern Lights, they gradually sail up to the ship's walls from all sides. The day comes when they join, soundlessly pressed together by tremendous forces. The little ship is squashed like a bug between two smooth fingernails. It cracks. It is done for. The dense ice mass stands like a mountain range grown up over millions of years. Polar bears, arctic foxes, arctic hares, seals, occasional birds, and many other animals draw near and pass by. The timbers of the ruined, abandoned ship, the yards and chains, the planks and chests, the ropes and sails, all are frozen into the masses of ice. Snow covers them. All is silent. The moon, a glassy ball, then a half moon, then a delicate crescent, then back again – it never vanishes from the sky, except when snowstorms obscure it. Then the sky lightens: the stars come out and shine. The polar foxes pursue their scents. Solitary birds hang in the misty, somber air, their pearly wings outstretched.

The hulk is not released until spring, when the ice breaks up under the oblique rays of the sun and the warmer breezes. The sea is open now.

Does it follow that years later one would necessarily find all the wreckage of the ship in the same area? No. It is discovered at a great distance from these New Siberian Islands. On the east coast of Greenland – that is, *beyond* the North Pole. A journey of thousands of

miles. Blind, pilotless, the wreckage of the ship found the one practical route. Men with all their scientific knowledge and experience were unable to find it. A slow but steady current must thus lead from North Siberia over the North Pole to Greenland. What was the conclusion? A ship must be so solidly built, the sides, ribs, and keel reinforced in such a way as to be able to withstand even the tremendous pressure of the masses of ice bearing down upon them. If the pole is not reached on the first approach during the short summer, one must allow oneself to be frozen in at the spot where the *Jeannette* went down. At the next thaw, the drift will then wash the ship into the region of the pole, close enough that it can perhaps be reached with dogsleds obtained from the natives.

The world-renowned arctic explorer Fridtjof Nansen succeeded in this. My father would have succeeded before Nansen, if not for the rats.

No ship of any size without rats. Even the smaller ones have plenty of splendid specimens. New ships like my father's are not spared them any more than old, run-down crates marinated in all sorts of harbor filth like my ship, the *Mimosa*. No sure method of ridding the old tubs of rats is known, and the new ships are tenanted by these boldest of seafarers immediately, the moment they take on their first cargo. On long voyages their numbers increase in geometric progression, provided they have enough to eat. On sailing ships like my father's, which are provisioned for periods of years, they find colossal stores.

II

But an optimist expects only a slight loss from parasites; and my father, Dr. Georg Letham the elder, was one. An arrant optimist, though he

became the darkest, most poisonous pessimist after his return from the north. Out of nature, into the office.

Such an optimist figures on a certain loss, but he imagines some rightful equilibrium between human dominion and the destructiveness and voracity of pests.

He had borne difficulties in mind, he was not a fool, and he had great responsibilities. He was not a coward or a weakling and believed himself equal to his task.

A night four months long did not frighten him. All on hand were males; as far as any sort of intellectual cultivation was concerned, it was a desolate, dry company, which did not become much more diverting when it was joined in a Nordic port by a volunteer passenger, a Norwegian Protestant missionary, for whom no space had been provided and who declared himself willing to replace the purser, the latter having fallen ill (or having decided to return home to his “loving hearts”). This was the company. In addition the crew, my father’s dog, the parrots belonging to the geographer, later to be my uncle.

The same things are said over and over in response to the same cues, phrases, questions and answers mechanically reeled off. The same reminiscences are rehearsed at random, the same remarks made. The same hopes and fears fill the hearts of all members of the expedition. Terrible boredom. Cards played for hours for no stakes of any possible value. No contact with the outside world, other than scientific observations and the hunting, which becomes more and more infrequent at higher latitudes. No blue sky for so very long, scanty artificial light day and night. No flowers. Close quarters in gloomy cabins, not properly ventilated because of the cold. Fresh water only in minimal quantities: the fuel required to melt snow must be conserved. Even the petroleum

for the lamps has frozen solid and must be laboriously thawed. A warm bath in a wooden tub is a rare privilege, over which jealous fights soon break out; baths are taken in the most uncomfortable position, hunched down, knees to beard-swathed chin. No fresh vegetables, no fruit (a ripe, yellow, aromatic butter pear, the “Prince of Wales,” is the voluptuous dream of many nights), no green other than the pale green of the blotting paper in the herbarium folios brought with utter superfluity into these inhospitable climes. For what plants are there to be dried and pressed? Whatever still sparsely grows up here, algae, lichens, mosses, is already dry and hard as straw. The pages of the herbarium therefore find “other use,” much to the annoyance of the scholar, who finally brings the volumes into his bunk with him and sleeps on them.

Outside, just a few meters away from the sailing ship, deathly quiet or the grating crackle of the ice plates, the grinding and creaking of the floes, the hollow roar of the frigid, knife-sharp wind, the explosion-like bangs of the icebergs breaking, and the wrenching, sucking groans of the ship’s walls writhing under the pressure of the ice.

The groaning of the men (I am speaking of the time of waiting, of being locked in at the prescribed latitude) – the groaning of the men is not like sighing, it is like the groaning of a board clamped in a vise by a carpenter and put under pressure. They forget surprisingly quickly how to listen, they forget how to speak sensibly. Lethargy, enervation, apathy. Tired, tired. They growl and snarl inarticulately, touchy from the moment they wake up, mute, grim, ironic, sullen to the depths of their uncooperative bowels. Only the Norwegian and my father are still in good spirits, the former with the aid of alcohol. One of the other men is always on the brink, a gun has to be taken from him by force. Three days later he then takes it from someone else, and thus

the same revolver makes the circuit of much of the crew. No one takes this seriously, it is just “playacting,” an idea they are toying with, and it is even suspected that they are using this “playacting” to obtain the better rations that have been designated only for the ill and debilitated. Eventually my father is able to mend matters. At bottom they all still believe in a successful outcome. They just had not thought it would be so difficult. The cold is paralyzing. Dreadful, heart-gripping frost. The ship finally becomes quite firmly frozen in at the eightieth parallel during the night. It no longer tosses, does not rock, it stands like a house, it is like solid ground. Good.

These were the predictable difficulties. They could have been overcome. But the rats! They were starting to breed with some rapidity. At the beginning no one had given them a second thought. One of the scholars had even experimented with taming two young ones and reared them in a small, woven straw basket, often laughing with child-like pleasure at the way they would bite at his fingers and scrape with their long front teeth at his hand when he held it out to them. But rats were not playthings, they were unpleasant surprises.

There they were when one least expected it, sticking out their pointy, sparsely furred snouts and blinking their intelligent, sharp, malicious eyes, their drab heads adorned with long mustaches, their ears naked, hairless like those of bats. They made their presence known. They communicated with each other. *They* had not forgotten how to communicate. They raced hither and thither, purposefully. They were not apathetic. They did not miss blue and green, they did not sweat and did not freeze. They lived boldly and were bold. But at this time they appeared no more than very annoying, not dangerous, to the leader of the expedition.

These were the first months in the pack ice, of what might be a lengthy sojourn.

Even this region had not been entirely forsaken by men. Eskimos appeared, young and old, drawn from far away by the light in the cabins, courageous fur hunters who approached the ship in their kayaks or with dog teams, depending on climatic conditions. The missionary was as though electrified. The Eskimos too showed much liveliness. They knew already or learned very quickly what tobacco and schnapps were, and also knew the way to these delights: conversion. They kissed the Bible, drank the schnapps, and chewed or ate the tobacco. And laughed uproariously.

These were people clothed in luxurious furs, stinking of putrescent whale oil, with magnificent teeth in dingy faces; uncultivated, indifferent to danger and death, possessed by superstitions. Christianity was preached to them, and they related wonderful folktales and myths. The same men gave clear, scientifically precise reports of the weather conditions, the currents, the routes taken by the icebergs, of the periodicity of the polar light phenomena. They could recount their hunting adventures, they knew much about the habits of the arctic animals that they and their ancestors had come to know on their expeditions. Only about hunting shipboard rats did they know nothing, they were not even acquainted with the use of mousetraps, and to lure rats with bacon seemed to them wanton waste.

It was possible to communicate with them indirectly. The linguist and the Norwegian first learned their dialect, and their lively sign language did the rest. Everyone listened with pleasure to their stories and enticed them with all sorts of delicacies, with harmonica playing, and especially with alcohol, which they prized in all forms and quantities,

by the tablespoon and by the liter – and by the barrel. One evening they were particularly merry, and two of them performed the famous drum dance. One imitated a seal at play, the other an enraged polar bear. They were paid once more in alcohol. After a time they vanished, without good-byes, leaving no trace.

At length another band appeared (mostly older men), who spoke a somewhat different dialect, were not as garrulous and childlike as the first, but with whom it was soon again possible to communicate in a friendly manner. One old man in this group made mysterious mention of a white man who wished to go to the northernmost north. A European? Surely not a European, a man like these scholars here, who, suddenly pale, gathered in a circle around the speaker? But yes. All fell silent in consternation. It was not a fur hunter. Not a seal trapper, not a whaler, not a skipper, not a missionary. It could only be another polar explorer.

My father was gripped by terrible impatience. He wished to consult with his comrades. He had to command, even the ship's captain had to obey him, but in this ship's council all had the same voting rights, officers and crew, scholars and nonscholars.

But he could obtain no advice, and he could give no orders. They had to wait.

My father changed, he became irritable, often insisted upon his authority, successfully played the men against one another, became excessively courteous and moody.

Now all were suffering from living together so unnaturally, more and more with every hour that passed. The quarreling increased, my father had to adjudicate and perhaps often made partisan decisions. From time to time he wished to avoid making these judgments, have a bit of

peace, not be burdened – but then something would happen without his knowledge, he became sensitive and withdrew, personally offended. The open, comradely atmosphere was gone.

III

It was at this moment that the plague of rats began to get out of hand, it truly stank to high heaven. The heavily constructed ship was unable to move from the spot. The greatest cleanliness was required, the latrine rules had to be precisely observed by officers and crew, which often led to ship's hearings until there was a resolution. Only the rats paid no attention, filling everything with their filth and their pungent, foul-smelling urine.

They set about tucking into not only the ship's provisions but also the ship itself, cool as you please they gnawed on the stout timbers, ate large holes in the strong, ice-stiffened, reefed sails, they set to work energetically on the foodstuffs, neither barrels nor chests were secure. Only the preserved foods soldered into tin cans, the wine bottles and rum barrels, and the ship's pharmacy were secure. Weapons, ammunition, and the many scientific instruments were also secure. What help was all of that?

The entire crew began to sleep poorly. During sleeping hours they rose, wandered through the ship's passageways, hunted for rats, fired carbines in the dark, and it was fortunate that none of their comrades was wounded.

Soon after this intelligence was received from the Eskimos, the missionary, his face grave, appeared before my father. He took a conscientious view of his duty as purser and feared that the rats might have broken into a large portion of the provisions. At his urgent request,

another ship's council was called. Some of the gentlemen could not be roused from their bunks, many at this time were already leading a passive, entirely mindless and will-less existence, wishing only to be warm and well fed. At length an allusion to the brig succeeded in startling them and bringing them to the ship's council. The discussion went on for ten solid hours. The passions were finally awakened. The will to live had been rekindled. It was decided to smother the rats. My father undertook to prepare a particularly poisonous gas mixture. Poison gas warfare had been invented long before the Great War. Plenty of arsenic poison in solid form had been brought for the purposes of preserving valuable mammal and bird pelts. There was also sulfur in great quantities for sterilizing drinking-water vessels.

Every effort was to be made to snuff out the rats. Only two were excepted in response to the geographer's earnest appeal, the two tame males he kept, sharing with them his meager, monotonous rations.

He is to be permitted to keep the two rats provided they really are tame, which is doubted by all. But he maintains there are no animals that cannot be tamed through kindness, people included. Fine, as long as the two males do nothing wrong. The geographer is pleased. If my father can have Ruru, his dog, and the missionary the two small, ocean blue parrots that he brought from port, then he can have his tame rats. But all the others are in for pitched battle. The poison mixture (arsenic plus sulfur) is going to be volatilized on old leather, the remnants of snow boots and such. The yellowish white powder is spread here on a little tray of leather under the steps, laid there in the magazine near one of the rats' breeding areas. This is known to be near a rat's nest because the young rat pups can be heard twittering; they just cannot be located. But the poison fumes will reach all those places where men's

eyes cannot. All the hatches are methodically sealed. Not the tiniest opening to the outside may remain. My father, the strategic leader of the operation, gives the rallying cries, all work with great zeal, things are brighter, everyone sets to, sleeping hours are now punctually observed, people get along. Appetites are better, health improves, and there are some men whose teeth, which have been threatening to fall out from the bland, monotonous diet and the associated scurvy, now decide to stand by their old owners, which gladdens the poor devils. Everything produces joy, hope of hope, true faith – in faith. Nights are calmer, the rats are seen and heard and smelled less, they are not as bold as before, perhaps they fear the fate in store for them. The two “tame” rats are a notable exception. The stronger male injures the weaker by biting his throat, and as if that were not enough, he comes to grief when he craftily goes after the missionary’s two parrots by squeezing his sharp-clawed feet through the bars of their cage. The little parrots summon help with their excited screeching. The rat is caught and sentenced to death by shooting along with his innocent companion. The geographer is heart-broken, his eyes fill with tears, but, crouching in a corner of the ship’s mess, he gives his silent consent to the death warrant for his two foul-smelling darlings, disappears from the ship before the execution, and roams about with his lantern in the darkness out on the snow-covered floes, where the Eskimos have pitched their tents.

Two shots. Done.

While he is gone, the poison bombs are set off with fuses, a bell hanging from a yardarm is rung, the alarm, the agreed signal; the entire crew, all officers on deck. The crew creep out, heavily laden. The arctic night is frigid, they have all their possessions with them, as though it

were good-bye forever. The gentlemen have just blankets and furs, the missionary also his two parrots, whose cage he has thoughtfully covered with a heavy fur coat. The birds chirp softly, barely audibly; they are freezing, this is their first time on deck in the cold. Earlier, before the assassination attempt by the recently executed rats, they were very loud, often fluttered screeching to and fro in their spacious cage. They have not yet recovered from the shock.

The crew sit on sea chests gnawed by rats, on nibbled-at coils of rope beneath the tattered sails hanging from the yardarms. The Eskimos, drawn by the unusual drama, are also on board with their strong, woolly, intelligent dogs, which sit together quietly, only growling softly now and then, straining at their leads, until a kick from an Eskimo quickly shuts them up.

It is not totally dark, this night, although the moon is new. The northern lights are especially splendid, spreading in gentle arcs over the entire eastern sky. A multiply pleated, shredded band of greenish, magical, unreal light. It seems to be loose at the edges, hanging down in many layers. A blue star of particular lambency seems to shine through the seething fog of the aurora. The cold fire undulates in the stiff, icy air and gradually subsides.

My father feels a compulsion to photograph the lights. He ventures down into his cabin, subverting his own order, finds it still free of poison gas, and soon sets up a tripod on the motionless ship with the lens of the apparatus aimed at the phenomenon, requesting complete quiet from everyone present in order to avoid vibration. No one dares to light a lantern, a cigar. I still remember the photograph my uncle often showed us as children. All you could see was a washed-out band of light, a kind

of diffuse halo; the rest had to be added by a child's imagination. But it was one of the first photographs of the northern lights, requiring a quarter hour of exposure with the shutter wide open.

The ice, mounting in terraces on the floes, eroded and fissured down on the level of the ship, boldly jagged higher up, can also be seen emitting a pale light. Nothing moves. Not the Eskimo dogs, not my father's collie. Not the northern lights. Not the ship. Not the men.

IV

While all is still locked in a strange somnolence, a small object suddenly falls somewhere down below with a faint, hollow sound. Ruru, my father's dog, leaps up, turns her beautiful, elongated head this way and that and will not be soothed. My father too is startled, hastens to close the plate cover in order to save the precious exposure. At that moment the same hollow fall to earth occurs once more. One of those cork shuttlecocks with colored feathers attached, with which children play a kind of tennis across a table using small rackets, makes such a sound when it strikes the tabletop.

But these are not children at play, these are adults, who are controlling themselves only with effort, whose hearts are heavy, whose eyes are beginning to tear, who are listening warily to the boiling and scurrying and stewing in the interior of the rat ship and now all long for light. The Eskimo dogs have suddenly broken free, they have pulled their masters along amid mad barking, snarling, and howling, and the dogs with their masters behind them are already charging off over the gangplank onto the open snowfield.

The ship's crew stays behind. Then someone begins to breathe with difficulty, to groan, he vomits, someone else croaks, racked with terrible

throat irritation, tears gush from his eyes, his nose, his oral mucosa begin to be awash, twenty men complain of headaches, burning in their throats, choking, nausea, anxiety, fear of death, fear of darkness, fear of the northern lights, all throng to the gangplank, but it is not a smooth dash like that of the children of nature, the Eskimos and their animals; instead the civilized men stumble in the darkness, the steel hawsers slice the palms of their hands, they bump into each other, two of the scholars suddenly slide sideways off the icy gangplank beneath one of the slippery steel hawsers and lie whimpering on the ice at the foot of the ship, all are as though gripped by madness. Only my father is not, he and the geographer, my future uncle, who had gone out for a walk on the snowfield with his lantern while this was happening on board. Now he lights the lantern, which had gone out as he rushed to lend a hand, he helps the two men of science writhing in the snow onto their feet, they have only bruised their tailbones, assists the others in leaving the ship. Keep calm, don't panic! There's nothing to worry about! But only a few follow his orders, many more surge on deck in a confused mass, their fists pressed against their bellies, they are wading through their own vomit, and no one can see for streams of tears. The suffering becomes ever greater, the lantern illuminates a dreadful scene. The birdcage is also knocking about among the agonized men. Two small ocean blue balls of feathers are rolling lifeless on the bottom, on the bare metal (for there has long been no bird sand in the frozen waste), frozen or poisoned – the parrots are no longer alive.

The dog Ruru circles my father tirelessly, snaps at his high boots as he tries to kick her away, a hundred times she runs ahead over the gangplank and back again, is so to speak asking him to follow. My father, as the leader of the expedition, has to be the last one to leave the ship.

What has happened? The poisonous vapors, arsenic mixed with sulfur, stewing slowly on damp leather, must have risen invisibly up through tiny chinks. The smell of the leather burning would have been a warning, but no one noticed anything. The men lie there groaning softly. Poison gas. The northern lights glow above them, traversed by silent flashes. Not a breath of wind.

All ashore. The most delirious ones first. They are in a kind of frenzy, stamp their feet, turn on their rescuers, hit their heads on things. Men of science weep and sob and – pray! The missionary, ordinarily a jolly fellow, always joking, reaches into my father's face, his own twisted with pain, pulls on his long beard, tears off his gold-rimmed spectacles, but my father and the geographer energetically take hold of the man between them, one seizes his arms, the other grips his legs, and quickly off with the heavy man, out of the atmosphere invisibly laden with poison. Then the others follow, and in ten minutes the ship is finally empty of men. Let the poison do its worst, let the rats suffocate, perish to the last rat.

All now crowd into the Eskimo tents out on the ice, but the Eskimos are making ready for departure, they claim their provisions are exhausted, they say one thing and another. They have to be threatened with a good going over. The members of the expedition endure two days and two nights in the tents, fed extremely meagerly, freezing, plagued by the filth of the men and dogs, delirious from the effects of the arsenic poisoning, ill, either extraordinarily apathetic or extraordinarily irritable and foul-tempered. They hate my father because he has remained healthy. But he breathed the same poison fumes. Is he to blame for his good fortune?

They have to make an effort to restrain themselves, but they do it,

gradually becoming calmer, hoping to find the ship free of rats upon their return.

Fifty hours later my father is the first to enter the ship. The planks echo hollowly under his high, heavy leather boots. In one hand he has a pike like those the Eskimos use to goad their dogs, in the other a lantern, he thumps on the deck, nothing seems to answer him. So the beasts are dead, thank heavens. His joy, his satisfaction cannot be described, he takes a white handkerchief out of his pocket, waves to his comrades on the ice: all is well. He lifts a hatch with the pike, its barb in the iron ring, he climbs down the main entrance to the provisions store. No sooner has he descended a few steps, shining the lantern about, than a second light appears behind him. The geographer could not let my father go down alone and has disobeyed his orders. While the two are arguing over which is more important, discipline or comradeship, a big fat rat darts boldly past my father's legs and up on deck, runs nimbly, whirring like a top, around the main mast and back again, leaping over my father's back in one colossal bound. My father and my uncle shine their lanterns into the depths. Good God! They are everywhere, sitting and slithering and darting about, the indestructible rats. My father's feet encounter a carcass, half torn to pieces, only four or five times. The beasts are there as always on the provision lockers and barrels, they are nibbling at things with their white protruding teeth, or they are cleaning themselves, staring insolently into the light from the lantern. And the birdlike cheeping of the young rats is heard not just from one spot, but from many, indeed from all corners of the storerooms. The older generation has not cashed in its chips and the younger one is well on the way! What is going to happen? How will they fill their bellies? The shameless rats have even consumed the fuses that did not burn.

Live, eat, procreate. Shamelessly! No, modestly. Equal to life, on the increase, a worthy adversary. How can they be eradicated without also eradicating the people to whom they have adapted themselves?

So this was the result: only thirty-two animals had met their maker, they had to be buried in the ice at some distance from the ship so that the dogs would not poison themselves on them. But most importantly: thousands upon thousands of rats are alive and flourishing. The ship is stuck in the ice. The renowned, venerable shipyard delivered prime work. The heavy ship withstands, groaning and creaking but intact, the masses of pack ice continually bearing down upon it.

The ship does not withstand the rodents in its belly. They merrily go on living. They are not looking for any pole. They are not interested in meteorology, not in dialects, not in Eskimo folktales, not in Christianity. Not facts to be taken down, but food to be taken in is all that exists for them. If a weaker, good-tasting creature is alive and they can catch it, then they kill it. And if it is dead, then they do not dissect it but gobble it up. They do not live lives without mates, full of privation, in the service of nothing but the lofty purposes and noble ends of theoretical science, like my father and his companions, but simply behave naturally. Male and female, father, children, mother, and grandmother, unto the fourth and fifth and seventh generation, all one family, huge and still not big enough. With their flesh and blood, their filth, and their scent, they overrun the artful structure built by men. Their uniform is everywhere one looks, that grayish brown body with its bottlelike swell, along the spine more darkly variegated, in front the sharp head and in back the wormlike, lighter, hairless tail with its two hundred transverse rings. They are happy to be able to gorge themselves. They rigorously obey the

stubborn instinct to survive. They stake everything on their existence and know nothing else. Brown rats are known as *Wanderratten*, migratory rats, but they can also keep faith with a place as long as the place and the foraging there keep faith with *them*.

Here was where my father made his study of the animals that later lived as guests in his house.

But when a community grows beyond measure, what amount of food will be enough in the long run? No amount. Sharp, passionate battles over food are already breaking out among the animals, infrequently at first, but nevertheless. And yet there are vast provisions on the ship, vast in the eyes of a single, comparatively small rat. But their greed is not small. Nothing is safe from them.

They no longer content themselves with the storerooms belowdecks. Having become a more courageous, virile race under the new living conditions, they advance up to the cabins of the scholars and the captain, they creep into the common ship's mess, first during sleeping hours, then even when men are present, for there it is always warm, it is heated. They find their way into the lockers, shredding even the thickest fur, mother, child, and grandchild move into warm winter quarters between the lining and the pelt of beaver hats with long earflaps. They have to be beaten with sticks, cut with knives, or they do not budge. They occupy provision lockers of all kinds as though they were houses and villages. Anything they can chew, gnaw, gulp down will do fine. Flour, grease, dried fruit, dried fish, sugar, tea, rice, tobacco, spices, but also wood, wool, leather, sailcloth – everything except iron, and rum and other alcohol. They have gotten into more than one cask of rum, but they did not drink, rather they drowned or were poisoned,

much to the overjoyed satisfaction of the missionary. Alas – “joy”? Joy has long been unknown in the colony of men, the atmosphere is never peaceful, and yet the men remain in each other’s company for hours, for days on end.

My father goes about mutely in sheer fury. He is emaciated, his cheeks are gaunt, his eyes hollow like those of the others. He has very courteously asked not to be addressed unbidden, but his companions will not accept this order as legitimate, instead pestering him with every conceivable question, requests, reproaches, complaints. It emerges that they (all of them in an entirely abnormal state of mind) hold him responsible for the “impossible conditions” aboard the ship. He should have taken more precautions – but what? Others confide in him their darkest family secrets, still others their scientific plans and ideas, some, more fortunate, return to the realms of childhood, they play childish games, run races on deck, but stumbling backward, not forward – or on all fours, as though they wanted to compete with the nimble beasts – and these are grown, bearded men, with wife and child at home, who are doing this! My father does not dare order them categorically to stop, since he expects only opposition. What can he threaten with, how is he to punish anyone, how can he enforce anything? Others have taken up baby talk, converse like three-year-old girls, weave colored ribbons into each other’s beards, kiss each other, progress to false, unnatural caresses, but also to grim, jealous battles.

And above all the rats. It’s no good pretending that their numbers will diminish of their own accord or that they will necessarily destroy each other in their wild battles and vanish from the face of the earth. They are there. Everywhere. All the time.

V

And to know all the while that the important moment will come when the ship is once again afloat and one must endeavor to reach the pole by exertions that can only be imagined – and that then one will be trapped here on the accursed ship, which is home only to rodents, not to men! To be facing the prospect of hunger – for stores a hundred times greater would not hold out against the constant depredations of the armies of rats.

In this state of mind – this torment, this gnawing impatience, this awareness that someone else has gotten to the pole ahead of you and all is in vain – now anything goes. The last barriers fall among the crew and the scholars and the officers. From this point the scuffles, the thrashings, the cuffs and the kisses, the angry outbursts, the practical jokes, the fruitless and therefore forbidden mad rat hunts do not cease, and order, inward or outward, is now just an empty word, at which one can only laugh.

Among these men condemned to idleness and waiting and tortured by their boredom in both mind and body, compulsive weeping, compulsive laughter, compulsive praying begin to be heard. Nothing comes naturally. No one now resembles who he was when he set sail some months before, expecting quite different dangers and difficulties.

In all their battles for their daily bread, the rats remain cheerful and full of the joys of life. They have what they need, and if they do not have it, they get it.

But how does man get what he needs? Bibles in every conceivable language had been brought along in three large trunks, they too have fallen victim to the rats, down to the steel staples holding the pages

together. But the hard-drinking missionary still had his private Bible, his confirmation gift, a personal memento – until it suddenly vanished. Who has it? Has one of his comrades simply hidden it as a childish practical joke, or has someone stolen it? Yet whoever took it would be able to read the word of God only at “Mass,” that is the only place with enough light and warmth, and there he cannot bring the stolen item. A note requesting its return is attached to the main mast, but it too disappears after a few hours, either torn down or eaten by the rats. Still no trace of the Bible.

My father is silent. His face beneath his heavy beard can become no paler. What does he care about the Gospel *now*? It is easier for the others. The missionary solaces himself with alcohol, he throws the empty wine bottles at the rats in the magazine, but they misunderstand and play with them trustingly.

A new Eskimo band has come. They too have heard about the other arctic explorer, indeed seem to know something more, but will not come out with it. They are insatiable in their demands, behave greedily and calculatingly, watch their words, shut themselves off. Only the oldest has anything to say for himself, the others follow his lead.

Has the pole already been discovered? Have the *others* reached the mark? The gentlemen look at each other, but again learn nothing definitive. The expedition is no longer rich enough to buy an accurate report from the Eskimos.

A new mental illness has appeared among the scholars. They have finally devised the cruelest punishment possible under the circumstances. They are punishing each other with silence. Particularly artful practitioners move their lips as though to speak, but make no sound. They will not speak. Others have not produced a properly constructed

sentence for months now, they are mentally at the level of one-year-olds and just as tearful. They cannot speak.

Purely physical health too deteriorates from day to day during this period. The cold is tremendous, the wind rages through the freezing darkness, no one has any wish to leave the ship. But an effort must be made to hunt fresh meat, there are ducks and eiders, polar bears, seals, arctic hares, arctic foxes in the area, their tracks can be seen in the snow on the ice sheet. The eye has adjusted to the murky twilight, the hunt could be successful. But who can be ordered to shoot if no one will leave the ship, even those in the most robust health? Only one possibility remains: to hunt the rats and consume their fresh, fatty flesh in order to guard against scurvy. But as gladly as the men fall to the forbidden chase, bang away like mad in the dark with pistols and carbines, they do all they can to shirk the official one. Why? Only the forbidden excites them. Kill – yes. Eat – no. They shun the repulsive animals like the plague, a plague of rats, they do not want to sully themselves with them, never mind ingest their loathsome flesh. But when hemorrhage after hemorrhage from the gums is weakening the men terribly, when gentle pressure leaves broad stigmata on their pale skin, when tooth after tooth silently falls out, when a foul stench emanates from the sick, miserable men who nevertheless mingle with the healthy, indeed have less intention than ever of leaving them – what then? What else? And on top of it all the silence of the arctic sky, the silence of the men among themselves.

The purser conducts a new inventory in the storerooms, white as a sheet he climbs up from the depths, kicking at fierce rats even on the ship's ladder. Something has to happen, the best, most important provisions are dwindling; if it goes on this way, they can last just a few weeks,

and the ship's cook will have nothing to make into meals. Starvation will take anyone who has been spared by cold, scurvy, and hardship. But if the beasts could be eaten, an amount of provisions essential for keeping the expedition afloat for at least a half year could be saved. And after this half year, what good things might not come to pass? Might not heaven allow the ship to reach the pole (six weeks), and might the ship not then be carried back to the coastlines of populated lands by a current flowing southward from the pole?!! It might! It might! Anything could happen. There is always hope – hope of hope – if only the rats would vanish from the ship. My father thinks it over. He is the one responsible, it is his decision. He must make it.

VI

My father has so far remained healthy, his teeth are all there, strong and white; his skin pale, if you like, but not brownish, earth-colored, like the skin of those suffering from scurvy, nor mottled with livid hematomas. How is he to bring his comrades around to the heroism necessary to eat rat meat, or, better yet, drink warm rat blood? That is one danger. The other is the inexorable proliferation of the disgusting animals. Neither is anything new, just the same old thing to a degree every day harder to bear. They must stop it, they must at least try to stop it.

My father has one last friend. He talks to this friend. He can no longer talk to his comrades. They would regard it as weakness, would hold him in contempt for no longer being able to bear the silence.

This friend is the dog Ruru. She is an intelligent animal, full of optimism and unbroken in body and spirit. This beautiful, gray-eyed, tall, slender dog, covered with long golden fur in gentle waves, is not only magnificent to look at, but she still has her old fire, her pluck. When

the men are boring each other to tears in the mess and a bold rat comes along, she wastes not a moment in thought. The men are already too apathetic to go after the creature. They are not true men. On the white patch on the map representing the unexplored area around the pole, the geographer draws made-up islands, mountains, glaciers, volcanoes, names a bay after himself and thus makes fun of himself. Or is he already so mentally enfeebled that he believes it? Other gentlemen carve toys out of nutshells for imaginary children or put dominoes end to end, playing games against themselves with the dominoes divided into two piles.

Another writes letter after letter home, letters that can never arrive, another takes the discarded dominoes and builds a little house with them, another prays ceaselessly and tabulates the number of hasty Our Fathers and so forth, timing them with a stopwatch as though trying to break a record. And the terrible, sharp, rancid odor of the rats is driven away by thick clouds of tobacco smoke and the penetrating smell of the arrack and rum that the gentlemen and crew polish off in enormous quantities without getting a proper glow. It remains a grim delirium, a chortling, an idiotic grinning, an awkward, tense embrace of an equally delirious comrade, it is unclear if this is unnatural love or if the intoxicated man is confusing his neighbor with his beloved bride, his beloved father at home.

What does reality mean to these men now in the terrible arctic night, nearly four months long! They do not wash, they do not comb their hair, and they are becoming animals to such a degree that they can no longer muster true hate for the rats. The healthy are becoming ill, the ill remain ill, traces of blood are seen everywhere on board, it becomes a torment to sit at the table where the men chew with toothless, dirty

mouths in an agonizing torpor. Only a very few are still on their feet, my father, the geographer, the missionary.

But the dog is still the same as she was at the start. If a bold rat approaches and sniffs at the fur-lined, whale-oil-smearred boots of one of the stuporous gentlemen, Ruru dashes intrepidly after the rat, which is really too cocky. She soon has it by its darkly variegated, grayish brown, smoothly furred neck, a brief squeak, then she whacks its head three or four times on the deck, then waits, growling faintly, tail wagging fiercely, to see if it has anything else to say, if it is still kicking, then picks it up neatly with her shining white teeth and flings the carcass over the side onto the pack ice. After my father has seen this I don't know how many times, he comes to a great decision. He will set a moral example. First he will prove to the slovenly men what a sacrifice he is ready and willing to make for the group, second he wants to teach the rats in the ship's belly a lesson so these disgusting animals know there is still something that is their equal. And through this moral demonstration he will inoculate his comrades with a new resolve; they will bravely drink rat's blood to get rid of the scurvy, and perhaps it will be possible to really bring the rats under control, to save the provisions at the last minute thanks to Ruru, and thus also to rescue the fortunes of the heroic expedition.

VII

What a foolish experiment! To part with one's last secure possession in the world with so little prospect of success! Can man triumph over nature? Never. He, man, is only an experiment on the part of nature, the terrible.

The dog is sent below, into the underworld. But first she is to fast for one day, in order to spread fear and consternation that much better among the beasts below. Most of the men are quite apathetic.

The only one upon whom this experiment makes an impression is the geographer. He gives my father his hand. If he is silent, that is not because he is punishing him but because he is so moved that he is actually at a loss for words. The geographer strokes the fur on the animal's back. Ruru is so obedient to her master that she does not eat the scraps of food thrown to her by the other scholars from the table in the mess, but only sniffs at them. Hunger, fine! Ruru presses her flank against my father's boots, shakes her head so that her collar jingles, and determinedly lies down. But the dog resists being taken down into the magazine. Rats? No. She does not snap at her master's hand as he leads her by the collar down the steps, she only twists and pulls her neck away. So strongly that it chokes her, that she cannot draw breath. This is how much the dog must dread the world of rats down there. No use. The hatch slammed shut from above. Stamped on by heavy boots. A few words shouted down to the dog now madly charging about and barking: "Tally ho! All the best!" And then ashore, shotgun on shoulder and off to the hunt.

My father returns an hour later. Even from far off, the piteous, almost sobbing, soul-lost howling of the dog comes to him from the recesses of the ship, horrifically amplified by the echo, like the voice of Hamlet's father from the bowels of the earth, his bad conscience.

The others are unmoved. Hell could open up beneath them and they, the scholars, would go on with their hours of cards and eventually craps, playing for bonbons, which they have found in a jar and have

escaped the teeth of the rats. If Satan himself were howling below, the crew would not leave their bunks, where they have spent almost the whole day drunk and half asleep.

What is she in the greater scheme of things, what is she to the progress of the scientific expedition, this dog Ruru? Only one more victim, a needless one. She wails in fear and great suffering, accusing the man in whom she believed and who at his own cost has conducted a would-be moral experiment.

No one dares to go down into the hold. My father least of all. The geographer and the missionary argue over who will do it, finally they throw for it, the winner has to pay two bonbons and the loser has to go down into the hold, but is allowed to make his bitter task a little sweeter with the two sugary mounds.

The geographer climbs down the steps, he calls Ruru, he coaxes her with a voice now truly affectionate. Ruru was barking furiously just now, it must be possible to find her?! Yes, he finds her, stretched out unconscious from pain and loss of blood, the rats have taken up positions at the head and legs of the poor creature, and even this vigorous man is barely able to drive them off with the most savage kicks, tear the victim away from them, and bring her on deck.

He carries the animal in his arms, she is streaming with blood and wheezing heavily. She opens her gummed-up eyes, blinks through the bloody bits, extends her long, narrow tongue, and whimpers heart-breakingly. He lets her down. Ruru cannot walk. Head, belly, and tail pressed to the planking of the deck, bleeding from the mouth, bleeding from the paws, Ruru crawls about on the upper deck and howls her misery to the icebergs and the polar sky, now tinged with a mild blue, no longer sternly wintry. Hints of spring are in the air. There is light

again, and the time of the “midnight sun” is coming closer and closer. The icebergs are shinier than they were, the dirt has been washed off the ice floes.

What good is this to the wailing Ruru? The rats have nibbled at her heels, a bit of flesh between lip and nose is gone forever. Ruru howls and extends her tongue as far as possible to lick the wound. Ruru will not eat. Or cannot. She has to have food poured down her throat with a wooden spoon. During sleeping hours she disturbs everyone with her belling, sobbing howls. Ruru is mean, scratches and bites all the men, including my father. She has willfully cracked the wooden spoon between her teeth, she refuses food, but lives on. No one wants to deal with her now, only my father comes every day, heart pounding rapidly, to the place where his pet sleeps, but does not dare to come too close, speaks from a distance. The comrades laugh, a drunken sailor takes out a glove and throws it at the animal’s head. Ruru looks up and growls, bares her teeth, the sailor does not dare to retrieve the glove, which Ruru sits on and then tears apart in a frenzied rage.

The weather improves, the storms have abated. At night green-lit clouds in formations never before seen rush by under a soft twilight. Ruru barks to the sky, eyes closed. Her wounds glitter under the ship’s lanterns, and when she moves across the deck, she leaves a trail of blood. But she is alive.

The gentlemen and the sailors have recovered. All who embarked are there. The symptoms of scurvy are almost entirely gone. Perhaps everyone has secretly shot a rat and gulped the blood as medicine. They are silent about that.

But the dog is in their way, they cannot get near her without being snapped at. They would like to snap at her, too, they hate her and scorn

her because she has been defeated (for their benefit!). My father is very friendly, very gentle, and very unloved. The rations have become skimpier lately. It is not so easy to go into the magazine and bring up the provisions guarded by the rats. So the gentlemen would at least like an undisturbed night's sleep. This is not possible as long as Ruru is alive.

A ship's council meets. Now, since my father is the opposition, the gentlemen have found their voices, the silence is broken, they greet one another with gravity and solemnity, their full beards quivering, like men who have endured hardship *together* and survived. They stop being childish – or have they become childish in earnest? They charge my father in his absence with cruelty to animals and resolve, with two votes against (reduced to one once the missionary has been softened up with alcohol and bonbons), “Ruru shall be shot.” Ruru is beyond cure and a burden on the expedition, a nocturnal disturber of the peace and a useless mouth. My father, summoned, eyes downcast, his mouth beneath his heavy beard twisted into an embarrassed smile, revealing his magnificent teeth, listens to the majority verdict that his dog be sentenced to a painless death on humanitarian grounds. He bows with the greatest respect, but he replies as the respondent that he will not fire the shot, and woe to him who lays hands on Ruru. They believe him capable of anything and give up. Ruru lives.

My father sneaks out to Ruru at night in the cloudless moonlight and tells her, keeping at an appropriate distance from her sharp teeth, that the bad men have sentenced her to death. But that he will not hand her over. The wounds would heal and they would heal much faster if Ruru would just be sensible, if she would have the brains to let him near so that he could take care of her. Her only response is to growl, her

sharp teeth are fearsome, fur gloves can protect the hands, but Ruru could tear a person's face to pieces about the nose and mouth. She hates everyone, my father especially. She looks at him, her eyes burn, the once silky, now shaggy coat stands on end, particularly around the throat, and – most horrifyingly, Ruru wants to attack her former idol despite her wounded paws. Master and idol before, enemy now. And never has my father loved this animal more, never has he preferred her company to that of his companions as much as he does *now*. Now he has a suspicion what man is. But he and the dog do not make up. Day after day my poor father comes away, his eyes distant, letting the somewhat unkempt mustache soak up the flowing tears, attempting to whistle a cheerful tune to deceive the derisively smirking sailors about his frame of mind. The dog has gotten up on her wounded paws and, eyes glittering evilly, growling softly but almost without pause, continues to watch my father until he has vanished into the galley, where he discusses with the cook how to snatch the provisions away from the rats and how to prepare the food for the gentlemen and the crew and the freeloading, but now particularly indispensable Eskimos and their dogs. They all eat the same thing, it is bad and not much, but the lot of them are happy as long as their hunger is satisfied.

VIII

Meanwhile the weather has been improving steadily. Suddenly it is here, the midnight sun. The indescribable joy of the men, previously so depressed, is a sight to see, for example when one sailor takes off another's fur hat and holds his hand between the sun and the man's flaxen-haired head so as to admire for the first time after so long a *shadow* thrown by an object onto a surface, and then the *shine* magically

produced by the sun's rays on his comrade's tousled blond hair. And among the scholars, what faith in good fortune, what confidence in success! Who will dare to enlighten them! The animals in the underworld are now nearly masters of the ship – if they become its absolute masters, then all is lost.

Now everyone is savoring the lukewarm air in their lungs. Every so often clothes and furs are put aside, aired out, cushions and covers spread out in the sun, under close watch.

The pack ice is moving. Vibrations have been passing through the now translucent masses of ice from time to time. A jagged fissure rips through. The ice formation, sparkling in the sun, is traversed by a dark blue flash, the pack splits with a thunderous crash, great shards of ice send foam into the air as they plunge into the cobalt blue water covered with slabs of ice like fish scales. The ship is suddenly free – the sleeping passengers awaken, having felt it rocking beneath them. The ship? It is no longer a ship – everyone knows it, no one will admit while momentarily sun-drunk that it has become a traveling rattery. The warm weather has enticed the animals out of its belly, they are literally ubiquitous, they are underfoot everywhere. They gleam in the sun, well fed and plump, their fur is smooth, and they actually have a kind of beauty, such as is produced even in ugly individuals by proper nourishment and a feeling of being at one with the world.

They hiss and snarl indignantly when stepped on. When wounded by carbine shots, they squeal bloodcurdlingly, others remove the wounded creatures, whether to save them or eat them no one knows. The purser (unemployed missionary) and the ship's cook discuss the situation with my father, not revealing much to their companions. The rats allow no one to approach the casks and barrels, sacks and chests in which the

last provisions are stored, except by force of arms. They are defending *their* property.

No more ship's council. There is only *one* solution. To temporarily take the food by force onto the immeasurably vast ice sheet, which stretches off to the east in front of the ship and which will break up in a few months – with luck. But without the ship, the lot of them are lost, only *on* the ship can they attempt to drift poleward – or southward, toward their native soil, toward their “loving hearts,” toward home. Once the provisions are temporarily on the ice, then up and at the horrible beasts with a vengeance. They will use carbon monoxide against them. It *must* be possible to save the ship.

Carbon monoxide is reliable. It should have been used long ago. There are still some sacks of good coal. Now, in the warmer season, they are dispensable. They will char belowdecks on ironware basins, on copper pans from the galley. Carbon monoxide is absolutely lethal to all rodents. The gas will collect from the outset down in the rattery, in the deepest area of the ship, because it is heavier than air. It will not escape upward, like the disastrous arsenic.

So first, ashore with the provisions. The ship's watch, chosen from scholars and crew in equal numbers, enters the hold, some remove chests and barrels while others fire into the horde of rats. And if a bullet hits two or three or four rats at once – some hours later, when it is all over and the provisions have been removed as completely as possible in one of the two lifeboats and the missionary shines the lantern about belowdecks, there seem to be just as many animals as before. The coal basins are kindled in the deepest corner of the hold, and now: away from the ship in the second lifeboat.

Three groups are on the ice some three hundred meters from the

ship: first the expedition's officers, crew, and scholars, second the Eskimos with their dogs, third Ruru, who was the last to drag herself off the ship, limping on three legs, leaving a moist trail behind her, and who has now settled down on the edge of the ice on an old, partly frayed blanket, rolling onto her back to protect her paws and licking her wounded muzzle with her tongue.

The ship stands there brightly, the sails, riddled with holes, are tightly reefed, the icicles have melted off the rigging everywhere. A gentle breeze is blowing.

A tiny puff of smoke rises from the deck. Soon a dark fog from below is smoldering around the mast, dispersing into the air.

Ruru howls. She groans out her pain, mouth wide. The crew have brought a great deal of rum and arrack. They make punch in kettles under the Eskimo tents. The scholars have recognized the seriousness of the situation, they walk back and forth at the edge of the ice, there is a somber silence among them.

The geographer, the missionary, and my father meet at Ruru's bed of pain. They pity the animal. They do not pity the thousands upon thousands of rats slowly stewing and suffocating in the ship's hold. Nor would they pity the rats if they were all incinerated. And the ship along with them? Is it burning? Is it burning? Is the fire going out? The cloud becomes heavier and heavier, darker, sparks flash through it. Quarter hour after quarter hour goes by in the steady pale light of the arctic day, until with a cannonlike crack an incandescent flame shoots out of the dense, slate-colored cloud of smoke.

For the first time since human history began, and since the world as we know it came into being, and since snow and ice armor-plated the

topsoil and the rock beneath it here below the eighty-seventh parallel, this wasteland of ice and water is seeing fire.

The scholars do not want to see it. The last kettle of arrack punch is heated by the crew using the last wood from the chests. This time the gentlemen drink too. Beneath their high, dirty fur caps, which come down over the bridges of their noses, an abstracted expression appears on their dark or pale, emaciated faces, which might be a look of stunned horror or equally a dull-witted merriment induced by the hot alcohol. Many are toothless. Drops of the strong spirits hang from the unkempt beards. It is only despair behind it all. Mute despair as, one silently signaled by another, they turn their gazes once more to the ship shaken by flames: they see the rats so densely packed together that they are fighting for room in the water and one almost ejects its neighbor, a smooth-furred, shiny, darkly variegated back, onto *its* neighbor, and so on – the sharp heads stretched far out in front, the black rat eyes wide open – they see the rat community appear, without prelude, in one movement, as though the ten thousand animals were a single body, in the gap created by the spring thaw between the western side of the ship and the eastern edge of the ice. Hordes and hordes of rats follow, hurling themselves out of every hatchway, first onto the deck and from there into the ice blue and golden water, on which the reflections of the flames undulate.

The animals have a single goal, a single will, they swim with calm, measured strength. They push the little ice cakes forcibly ahead of them. They are heading for land. For the men.

IX

My father stands at the edge of the ice. He touches his chest. He is feeling for a case that holds an excellent cigar, the last of a large supply. The rats have demolished the rest. My father has promised himself that he will smoke this Havana cigar at the “critical moment.” That moment has arrived.

The Eskimos plunge into feverish activity, harness the dogs, strike the tents. They look up at the reddish glare of the sky in which, as their superstition has it, the angry gods dwell. They have not a glance to spare the burning ship, the columns of rats approaching ever nearer.

The sailors, who have been drinking under the tents, stand under the open arctic sky, suddenly sober and freezing. Their raucous songs are suddenly stilled.

They surround my father, but at a certain distance. Between my father and his companions (the scholars and the ship’s captain) and the sailors is a space of some thirty meters. In this space of thirty meters is the dog’s bed.

Everything, the men’s faces flushed with drink, the rolled-up leather walls and wooden pegs of the tents, the harnesses of the Eskimo dogs already standing in formation, the boats loaded onto the sledges, everything is burnished with the glow of the fire.

A crashing comes from the fiery ship. The murmuring of the sailors can be heard.

The two lifeboats are at the edge of the ice, in a kind of inlet. One is loaded with the last provisions and the weapons, the ammunition, and the blankets. The other, which brought the men not long ago, is now empty. Whoever has the first boat still has a chance of saving his

life – if he can protect himself from the rats, if the provisions can be protected from their teeth.

The other boat is worthless.

The division of the camp has taken shape in an instant. The crew have huddled together. There is not room and food enough for everyone. There is space only for a small number under good leadership, only for those with the strongest collective self-interest.

The first rats try to land. They attempt to cling to the edge of the ice with their clawed feet, to climb up. Unsuccessfully at first.

My father is going to light the cigar. Before he can strike the match, he becomes aware of someone approaching behind him. A small, warm, square object with something that rattles attached to it is carefully placed in his left hand, between whose index and middle fingers the cigar hangs loosely. In surprise he brings his hand up to look. It is the long-lost Gospels. The man who stole the book felt pangs of conscience at the critical moment. He wanted to give up the booty. He brought it out from under his shirt. I never found out who it was, the geographer or the captain. Between the pages of the little book is a rosary.

My father has to pull himself together. Reflect. Resolve is everything. His thoughts elsewhere, he opens the book at the place marked by the rosary. It is the Sermon on the Mount. His eyes scan the beginning of the fifth chapter of Matthew: Jesus's Sermon on the Mount. The first rats scurry over his feet. Their landing has been successful.

My father reads, but does not go on reading. He does not give himself up. He does not pray. He spits out the cigar, kicks at the rats, reaches for his revolver, gathers his closest comrades around him with a brief order. The social question has been broached, class warfare has

begun. Here the officers, the scholars, and the captain. The leaders. There the sailors. The masses. Before them the object of dispute, the boats. The burning ship unattainable and useless. At their feet the rats. Above them the arctic sky and otherwise nothing.

The Eskimos are in wild flight, prod their dogs with long, sharp-pointed sticks, beat their flanks raw, they stand on the low sledges, legs wide apart. With a scraping sound the sledges move off on their runners. And with the cracks of their whips coming again and again, but more softly, dying away, the children of nature race from the scene of the final battle among the members of the ill-fated expedition. Across the ice they came, across the ice they have gone.

My father flings the little book to the ground. Rats will eat it, as they have eaten the last cigar. Leaves of tobacco, leaves of paper, to them it is all the same in the struggle for survival. They escaped the carbon monoxide, death by fire too. Nor did they drown.

There is not a moment for sentimentality.

Something strange happens. The dog has risen from her bed, has limped to my father with neck outstretched, ears laid back, tail between her legs, has, for the first time since her return from the underworld of the rats, snuggled against him. What has taken place in the animal's soul (an animal too has a soul, if quite different from that of a person) cannot be remotely guessed.

What took place in my father's soul (my father too had a soul, if quite different from that of most people) cannot be guessed.

His narrative has remained in my memory as I have recounted it to this point. His words were precise and he never contradicted himself no matter how many times I heard the story. My mother, who knew about it from her brother, confirmed the facts for me too.

About the final battle between men and beasts, everyone kept silence, for as long as they lived. It must have been more terrible than any hunt in the heart of the wild in which men have faced dangerous animals and died glorious deaths. There must have been a truly indescribable contest as four-footed and two-footed creatures fought for the last chance to survive. My father won it.

He came to know man as he is. As I am.

Not only did he not shrink from the most extreme violence, he also certainly made exhaustive use of every psychological method of dealing with the men whose help he had to have in order for him to save *himself*. It speaks for my father's savage, boundless energy as well as for his virtuosity in playing the keyboard of the heart, working out every type of human behavior in advance with the utmost precision, like a surgeon with a knife or an experimental bacteriologist with a toxin test weighed out to a millionth of a milligram, it speaks for him that he . . . that he, as one of those with collective self-interest . . .

X

Now there is a hissing over Surgeon General Carolus's wobbly little table. For a second his face, his salmon pink, rubber-gloved hands, and the thin hunched back of the prisoner whom he has just painstakingly examined are bathed in chalky light. Then a tongue of flame spurts from the old acetylene lamp's calcium carbide tank, which has cracked into jagged pieces. Fireworks, then everything is cloaked in darkness. All the prisoners have spontaneously seized the critical moment. The charlatan general, rigid with fright, watches from behind his spectacles as they dash in one movement down the open ship's ladder, upsetting the basin of sublimate solution in the darkness, into the sleeping

quarters, two facing halls or stables with strong bulkheads toward the middle, each with a veteran petroleum lamp swinging from its ceiling and peacefully smoldering.

I am no match for the elbows of the others in the fight for the best spots, those in the corners. But my companion is. He pulls me through the crowd with irresistible energy, he pushes us both through while squeezing against me so tightly that I feel the warmth of his body, half with pleasure, half reluctantly. He swivels back and forth to present his back or the sack he is carrying, thumps and blows rain down, but he captures a corner spot, and once he has it, no one will be able to wrest it away. As he looks at me silently, but breathing deeply, I have a rare feeling of ease. Home. Calm. Here? Now? With him? And yet! Or is it only fatigue? I am unable to think clearly, and yet the image of my father will not leave my consciousness. Do I still love him so deeply? I do not know. But I want to finish telling his story.

It speaks for my father's boundless energy and for his knowledge of human nature, which henceforth would take as its foundation nothing but the basest human motives, greed and vanity, cruelty and stupidity, that he was among the three survivors of the expedition who were picked up by a whaler off Skovby. He, the geographer, and the missionary, the missionary troubled in mind, perhaps in an alcoholic delirium. My father was not in a delirium. He was only too lucid. A different man. He hated and hates people, except me and himself. Then again, he may not have received the best treatment from people. Fortune had not exactly smiled on him.

When I asked him to tell me the happier part of his story too, his rescue, he said he was too tired. He did not say no, in fact rarely did.

The bard also passed in respectful silence over his dog Ruru's end.

An oval scar on the back of his left hand where the veins from the fingers snake under the skin in a soft ridge might possibly have been the traces of a severe dog bite; but I never found out whether this bite dated from before or after the reconciliation at the critical moment. It may be that the rats ate human flesh and the humans canine flesh, he did not say yes, did not say no, but ran his heavy left hand through my blond hair, at that time very thick, soft or rough, flat or somewhat wavy, depending on the weather. It is no longer so thick now and its pale blond has given way to a muted nut brown, but it may be tempting my companion to run his fingers through it. I look at him in astonishment, but do not speak, do not say yes, do not say no.

I must have been a beautiful child. Not a happy one.

My father became an incorrigible misanthrope. Even the brother of my mother, whom he married six months after his return without fanfare from the far north, even he was not his friend. He did nothing to stop him from leaving and never tried to find him. My mother grieved a good deal. He did not. *I* was supposed to be his friend.

When I was seven he wished he had a youth of fourteen, he did not want to wait, he needed me. When I was fourteen I was supposed to be like a twenty-year-old, know what free trade, baseness, and victory over rats by cunning are, I was supposed to provide comradeship for him. I was his favorite son. Was? Am I that only now, perhaps? He experimented on me – and what notion can the experimental subject have of *when* the experiment is over? That is known only to the experimenter, and the good Lord.

He spared nothing so that I, his son, would be hardened to life, futile and merciless as it is.

I would like to continue recalling my youth, but my eyes are drooping

now. I have a pillow that my neighbor has made ready for me, it is the children's gramophone wrapped in a coat. The inscrutable man has also covered my knees with a blanket. I am too weak to do anything, even eat. I see and smell the food, I perceive the flavor of the seasoned, nourishing soup on the papillae of my tongue, but I cannot. To sleep, sleep, and never wake up. Never wake up again as the son of my father, now he is standing by me, indistinct in the flickering light of the swinging petroleum lamp, never again as the widower of my wife, never again as the brother of my brother, now he has reached me at last and whispers to me everything about what has prevented him from coming since that last meeting . . . he caught yellow fever, he is saved, but not yet better, he shows me his wasted hands, though they gradually dissolve into nothing under the strengthening light of the petroleum lamp. He shakes my shoulder, lifts my head, lets it fall like a piece of lead, and, turning to look over his shoulder toward a large number of onlookers or students, he pronounces my name, he, the Institute's founder whom I never saw, names me Dr. Georg Letham the younger . . . Georg Letham, Doctor of Philosophy, was my father, he was . . .