# Heading West

"Leave the movie camera alone. Look, look with your own eyes, and try to count them!"

Anna put down the machine and stared deep into the valley. It was a narrow, rocky valley that was connected to the interior only through a square pass, and it ended at the sea, in a broad, muddy beach. Finally, after weeks of stakeouts and chases, they had been successful; the army of lemmings, wave after wave, appeared at the top of the pass and descended headlong down the slope, stirring up a brown cloud of dust. Where the slope softened, the blue-gray waves merged again into a compact stream that moved in an orderly fashion toward the sea.

Within a few minutes the beach had been invaded. In the sizzling light of the sunset, individual rodents could be differentiated as they made their way forward through the muck, sinking up to their bellies. They proceeded with difficulty but without hesitation, entered the water, then continued on swimming. Their heads could be seen above water for about a hundred meters from the shoreline; a few lone heads could still be detected at two hundred meters, where the waves from the fjord were breaking, then nothing more. In the sky, another army darted about restlessly: a flotilla of birds of prey, many hawks, a few buzzards, along with sparrow hawks, kites, and others that the two naturalists couldn't identify. They circled screeching and tussling among themselves. Every so often one would throw himself down like a stone, attracted by some invisible target, stop with a sudden whirl of wings, then land, while the stream of lemmings parted around him as if he were an island.

"Well," Walter said, "now we've seen it, too. Now things are different—we've got no more excuses. This is something that exists, that exists in nature, that has always existed, and so it must have a cause, and that cause must be found."

"A challenge, right?" Anna said, in an almost maternal tone, but Walter felt that he had already entered into battle, and didn't respond.

"Let's go," he said. He grabbed his mesh bag and took off down the slope to where the lemmings rushed fearlessly between his legs. He had caught four of them, when it occurred to him that maybe the ones that were already halfway down the hill didn't represent an average specimen: they could be the strongest, or the youngest, or the most determined. He let three of them go, then advanced into the middle of the gray swarm and captured five more at various points along the valley. He went back up to the tent with the six small animals, who were squeaking feebly but not biting one another.

"Poor little things!" Anna said. "But I guess they would have died anyway."

On the radio, Walter was calling the Forest Rangers helicopter. "They'll come tomorrow morning," he said. "Now we can eat dinner."

Anna looked at him questioningly.

Walter said, "No, good gracious, not yet. Actually, why don't you give them something to eat, too, but not much, so we don't alter their conditions."

Three days later, they discussed the matter at length with Professor Osiasson, but without concluding much of anything. They went back to the hotel.

"What did you expect from him, finally? That he would criticize the theory that he himself came up with?"

"No," said Walter, "but that he would at least consider my objections. It's easy to repeat the same thing over an entire career, and with a clear conscience. All you have to do is shoot down new facts."

"Are you so sure of these new facts?"

"I'm sure today, and I'll be even more sure tomorrow. You saw it yourself: at the end of their march, the six that we captured were very well nourished: 28 percent fat, that's more than the average lemming caught on the mountain plateaus. But if that's not enough I'll go back—"

"We'll go back."

"We'll go back, and we'll get sixty, or six hundred, and then we'll see if Osiasson will dare to repeat for the umpteenth time that hunger is what causes them to move."

"Or overpopulation . . ."

"It's absurd. No animal would respond to overcrowding with even worse overcrowding. The ones we saw came from every recess of the plateau. And they weren't fleeing. In fact, they sought one another out, tribe joining tribe, individual joining individual. They marched for two months, always heading west, and every day their population became denser."

"And so?"

"And so . . . you see, I don't know yet, I can't yet precisely formulate my thinking, but I . . . I believe they actually want to die."

"Why should a living being want to die?"

"Why should he want to live? Why should he *always* want to live?"

"Because . . . well, I don't know, all of us want to live. We're alive because we want to live. It's a property of living matter. I want to live, no doubt about it. Life is better than death. It seems to me to be an axiom."

"You've never had any doubts? Be honest!"

"No, never." Anna thought for a while, then added: "Almost never."

"You said *almost*."

"Yes, you know what I mean. After Mary was born. It lasted only a little while, a few months, but it was very bad. I thought I'd never come out of it, that I would be like that forever."

"And what did you think during those months? How did you see the world?"

"I don't remember anymore. I've done everything I can to forget it."

"Forget what?"

"That hole. That emptiness. That feeling of . . . uselessness, with everything useless around me, drowned in a sea of uselessness. Alone, even in the middle of a crowd; walled up alive among everyone walled up alive. But stop it. Please, leave me alone. Stick to general questions."

"Let's see. . . . Listen, let's try this. Here's the rule: Each of us humans, but also animals, and . . . yes, and plants, everything that is alive, struggles to stay alive and doesn't know why. The why is written in each cell, but in a language that we don't know how to read with our minds. We do read it, though, with our beings, and we obey the message with our entire behavior. But the message can be more or less imperative. The species in which the message is imprinted deeply and clearly survive, the others are extinct. But even those in which the message is clear can have lacunae. Individuals can be born who have no love of life. Others can lose it, for a short or long time, maybe even for the rest of their lives. And finally . . . here, maybe this is it: groups of individuals, even families, nations, eras, can lose it. Such things have been seen. Human history is full of them."

"All right, there's a semblance of order now. You're getting close. But you have to explain to me—and to yourself—how this love can vanish in an entire group."

"I'll think about that later. Right now I still wanted to tell you that between those who have a love of life and those who have lost it no common language exists. The same event is described by the two in two totally different ways: one derives joy and the other torment, each extracting from it confirmation of its own worldview."

"Both of them can't be right."

"No. Generally speaking, as you know, and one must have the courage to say so, the others are right."

"The lemmings?"

"Sure, let's call them the lemmings."

"And us?"

"We're wrong, and we know it, but we find it more palatable to keep our eyes shut. Life does *not* have a purpose; pain always prevails over joy; we are all condemned to death, and the day of execution is not revealed; we are condemned to witness the death of those closest to us. There are compensations, but few. We know all this, and yet something protects us and sustains us and keeps us from devastation. What is this protection? Perhaps it is only habit: the habit of living, which we contract at birth."

"In my opinion, the protection is not the same for everyone. Some find shelter in religion, some in altruism, some in obtuseness, some in vice, some succeed in distracting themselves without interruption."

"It's all true," Walter said. "I might add that the most common defense—and the least ignoble—is the one that exploits our fundamental ignorance of the future. And, you see, even here there's symmetry: this uncertainty is the same one that makes life insupportable to . . . to the lemmings. For everyone else, the will to live is something profound and confusing, something within us and at the same time alongside us, separate from our consciousness, almost like an organ that normally functions quietly, self-regulated, and so is ignored. But it can become sick or atrophied, it can be wounded or amputated—and we continue to live, but badly, with difficulty, with pain, like someone who has lost his stomach or a lung."

"Yes," Anna said, "this is the main defense, the natural one, given to us together with life so that life can be tolerable. But I think there are others, like the ones I mentioned earlier."

"Right, there's got to be something that all the defenses have in common. If we only knew how to respond to the question that we have left hanging, that is: What it is that acts upon a whole group? Then we would also know what links the different defenses. We can make two suppositions: the first is that one 'lemming' infects all his neighbors; the second is that there is some sort of intoxication or deficiency."

Nothing is more invigorating than a hypothesis. The Forest Rangers Laboratory was mobilized in a few days, and results were forthcoming, but for a long time they were negative. The blood of the migrant lemmings was identical to that of the stationary lemmings. And the same was true for their urine, the quantity and composition of fat, everything. Walter thought and spoke of nothing else. He spoke about it one evening with Bruno, their glasses full before them, and they came up with the idea together.

"This, for example, is useful," Bruno said. "It's an old experience, and a common one."

"It's a very rudimentary drug. Alcohol isn't innocuous, its dosage is difficult to determine, and its effect is very brief."

"But we could work on it."

The next day they were in front of the lemming pen on the grounds of the Institute. It had been necessary to reinforce the fence on the side facing the sea by burying it a good two meters beneath the level of the soil, because those animals got no peace. There were now a hundred or so of them, and all day long, and half the night, they crammed themselves together against the fence, trampling one another, trying to climb over and push one another back. Some dug tunnels, which inevitably were blocked by the buried portion of the fence. They then crawled out backward, only to start over. The other three sides of the pen were deserted. Walter went in, caught four of them, tied an identification tag to their tiny legs, and, through a tube, administered to each a gram of alcohol. Returned to the pen, the four paused for a few minutes, their fur on end and their nostrils flared, then went off to graze calmly on heather. After an hour, however, they had, one by one, gone back to their place in the jumble of individuals intent on migrating west. Walter and Bruno agreed in concluding that it wasn't much, but it hinted at something.

A month later, the pharmacology department was fully operative. The idea proposed was simple and terrifying: to pinpoint or synthesize the hormone that inhibits existential emptiness. Anna was nonplussed and she didn't hide it.

"If we find it, will we have done a good thing or a bad thing?"

"A good thing for the individual, certainly. A good thing for the human race, doubtful. And it's a doubt without bounds: one can adapt to any medication, not only this one. Every drug—in fact, any medical intervention—makes the unadaptable adaptable. Would you want to question every drug and every doctor? For centuries the human race has chosen this path, the path of artificial survival, and it doesn't seem to me that the result has been detrimental. Humanity has had its back turned to nature for a while now; it's made up of individuals and puts all its efforts into the survival of the individual, into prolonging life, and into vanquishing death and pain."

"But there are other ways of defeating pain, this pain; other battles that each of us must wage by calling upon his own resources, without outside help. Those who win prove their strength, and in so doing become stronger, enriched, and improved."

"And those who don't win? Those who give up, suddenly or slowly, over time? What would you say, what would I say, if we, too, were to find ourselves . . . heading west? Would we be capable of rejoicing in the name of the species and of those others who find the strength within themselves to reverse their path?"

Another six months passed, and for Walter and Anna they were unusual months. The two went up the Amazon River on a passenger boat, then took a smaller boat up the Cinto River, and finally a dugout canoe up an unnamed tributary. The guide who accompanied them had promised a journey of four days, but only on the seventh day did they make it through the Sacayo rapids and see the village up ahead. From a distance they could distinguish the Spanish fort's crumbling buttresses, and they didn't feel the need to comment upon another, familiar aspect of the landscape: in the sky a thick tangle of birds of prey centered, it seemed, right over the fort.

The village of Arunde was home to what remained of the Arunde tribe. They had learned of its existence by chance from an article that appeared in an anthropology journal. The Arunde had once inhabited a territory the size of Belgium, but were confined within increasingly narrow boundaries as their numbers went into a steady decline. This population decrease was due not to disease, or to wars with neighboring tribes, or even to insufficient food. It was, instead, due exclusively to an inordinate number of suicides. This was the reason that Walter had decided to ask for funding for the expedition.

They were received by the village elder, who was only thirty-nine years old and spoke fluent Spanish. Walter, who hated lengthy introductions, got right to the point. He had expected from the other man restraint, modesty, perhaps suspicion or coolness in the face of the ruthless curiosity of a foreigner, but instead found himself before a serene man, alert and mature, as if he had spent years, perhaps even his entire life, preparing for this interview.

The elder confirmed that the Arunde had never held metaphysical convictions. They alone, among all their neighbors, had no churches or priests or witch doctors, and expected no help from the sky, or the earth, or the underworld. They didn't believe in rewards or punishments, their land was not poor, they devised just laws by means of a quick and humane administration, they didn't know hunger or discord, they had a popular culture that was rich and original, and they often celebrated with festivals and banquets. Asked by Walter about the constant numerical decline in population, the elder responded that he was aware of the fundamental difference between their beliefs and those of other peoples, both near and far.

The Arunde, he said, attributed little value to the survival of the individual, and none to national survival. Every one of them was taught from infancy to esteem life exclusively in terms of pleasure and pain, including in that evaluation, naturally, also the pleasures and pains each person's behavior caused his fellow man. When, in the estimation of each individual, the balance leaned consistently toward the negative, when a citizen claimed to give and get more pain than joy, he was invited to an open discussion before the council of elders, and if his judgment was substantiated, the conclusion was encouraged and facilitated. After his discharge, he was conducted to the zone of the *ktan* fields. *Ktan* is a grain that is very widespread in the area, and its seed, winnowed and ground, is used in making a kind of flatbread; if the *ktan* is not winnowed, it carries with it the very tiny seeds of a grass weed that has both toxic and narcotic effects.

The man was then entrusted to the *ktan* farmers, and fed on flatbread made with unsifted seeds. In a few days, or in a few weeks—it was up to him—he would reach a pleasant state of stupefaction, followed by terminal rest. A few changed their minds and returned from the *ktan* fields to the fortified city, where they were greeted with affectionate joy. Unwinnowed seeds were smuggled in, but not to any worrisome degree, and this was tolerated.

Anna and Walter arrived home to a big piece of news. The "missing substance" had been found: more precisely, it had first been created out of nothing, synthetically, through an exhaustive process of screening innumerable compounds suspected of acting in a specific way on the nervous system. Shortly thereafter, the substance had been identified in normal blood. Oddly, Bruno's intuition had hit the bull's-eye; the most effective compound was an alcohol, although it had a rather complex structure. The levels had been low, so low as to justify the failure of analysts to identify it as a normal component in the blood of all healthy animals, including man, and therefore to detect its absence in the blood of the migrant lemmings. Walter had his fifteen minutes of success and fame; the blood samples that he had drawn from the Arunde didn't contain even a trace of the active principle.

The substance, named Factor L, was soon produced on a pilot scale. It was administered orally, and proved miraculous in restoring the will to live in subjects who had been without it or who had lost it as a result of illness, misfortune, or trauma. In others, in normal doses, it didn't produce effects worth noting or signs of sensitivization or accumulation.

The opportunity for confirmation was soon evident to everyone: in fact, for a double confirmation—in migrant lemmings and in their human analogues. Walter sent the Arunde elder a package containing doses of Factor L sufficient for a hundred individuals for a year; he included a long letter in which he explained to him in minute detail the method by which the medication should be administered and implored him to extend the experiment also to the inhabitants of the *ktan* fields. There was no time, however, to wait for a response. The Forest Service informed him that a column of lemmings was rapidly approaching the mouth of the Mölde, at the end of the Penndal fjord.

It wasn't an easy job. In addition to Anna's enthusiastic help, Walter had to enlist four young assistants. Fortunately, Factor L was soluble in water and water was abundantly available there. Walter proposed that they spray the solution beyond the pass, where the heather grew thickly, and where the lemmings might be expected to stop and graze, but it was immediately apparent that the project was not achievable; the area was too extensive and the columns of lemmings were already approaching, heralded by dust eddies visible twenty kilometers away.

Walter then decided to nebulize the solution directly over the lemming columns on the obligatory path beneath the pass. It wouldn't reach the entire population, but he believed that the effect would nevertheless be demonstrative.

The first lemmings appeared at the pass around nine in the morning; by ten the valley was full of them and the flow seemed to be increasing. Walter went down into the valley with the nebulizer tied to his back; he leaned against a rock and opened the propellant valve. There was no wind; from the height of the ridge Anna distinctly saw the release of the white cloud, expanding in the direction of the valley. She saw the gray tide stop in a swirl, like the water in a river against the pylon of a bridge: the lemmings who had inhaled the solution seemed uncertain whether to continue, to stop, or to go back. But then she saw a vast wave of fretful bodies wash over the first, and then a third wave over the second, so that the rolling mass reached the height of Walter's belt. She saw Walter make rapid gestures with his free hand, gestures that were confused and convulsive and seemed to be a call for help; then she saw Walter stagger forward, wrenched away from the rock's protection, and fall, and he was dragged, buried, and dragged farther, visible periodically like a swelling beneath the torrent of those innumerable, small desperate creatures who were running toward death, their death and his death, toward the marshland and the sea just beyond.

That same day, the package that Walter had sent across the ocean was returned. It didn't come into Anna's possession until three days later, when Walter's body had been recovered. It contained a curt message addressed both to Walter *y a todos los sábios del mundo civil*.[1] It said: "The Arunde people, soon no longer a people, send their regards and thank you. We do not wish to offend, but we are returning your medicine, so that those among you who might want to can profit from it. We prefer freedom to drugs and death to illusion."

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[1] And to all the other wise men of the civilized world.

Versifier," "*Cladonia Rapida*," and "*Quaestio de Centauris*" appear for the first time in English.

## FLAW OF FORM

Levi wrote the twenty stories in *Flaw of Form* in a short period of time, between 1967 and 1970. For Italy these were years of upheaval in society, in the economy, in politics, in public morality. "Sessantotto"—a date, 1968, written in letters—was the year of the student protests, while 1969 was marked by the union struggles of the so-called hot autumn and, just a little later, on December 12, in Milan, by a neo-Fascist act of terrorism: a bomb went off in a bank, leaving seventeen dead and eighty-eight wounded. Fears of a reactionary coup were widespread, and a period of extreme political tension began: what came to be called the "years of lead." Politics was dominant, yet it doesn't seem to trouble the stories in *Flaw of Form*, where Levi gives voice to other preoccupations. Here is the jacket copy (anonymous but surely written by the author) of the first edition, published by Einaudi in February 1971:

> Will there be historians in the future—even, let's say, in the next century? It's not at all certain: mankind may have lost any interest in the past, preoccupied as it will surely be in sorting out the tangle of the future; or it may have lost the taste for works of the spirit in general, being focused uniquely on survival; or it may have ceased to exist. But, if there are historians, they will not devote much time to the Punic Wars, or the Crusades, or Waterloo, but will instead concentrate on this twentieth century, and, more specifically, the decade that has just begun.
>
> It will be a unique decade. In the space of a few years, almost overnight, we've realized that something conclusive has happened, or is about to happen: like someone who, navigating on a calm river, suddenly observes that the banks are retreating backward, the water teeming with whirlpools, and hears the thunder of waterfalls close by. There is no indicator that is not soaring upward: the world population, DDT in the fat of penguins, carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, lead in our veins. While half the world is still waiting for the benefits of technology, the other half has touched lunar soil and is poisoned by the garbage that has accumulated in a decade: but there is no choice, we cannot return to Arcadia; by technology, and by that alone, can the planetary order be restored, the "flaw of form" repaired. Before the urgency of these problems, the political questions pale. This is the climate in which, literally or in spirit, the twenty stories by Primo Levi presented here take place. Beyond the veil of irony, it is close to that of his preceding books: we breathe an air of sadness but not hopelessness, of distrust in the present and, at the same time, considerable confidence in the future: man the maker of himself, inventor and unique possessor of reason, will be able to stop in time on his path "heading west."

At an early point, the book was to be entitled *Anti-Humanism*. In a television interview in the spring of 1971, Levi explained the ultimate title, *Flaw of Form*, saying that, by using that bureaucratic formula, he wanted to allude to an "error of substance": to the failure, serious but perhaps not irremediable, of technology as a factor in progress. And he was careful to emphasize the importance of the science fiction model—visionary inventions based on technical-scientific knowledge—which turned out to be particularly well suited to confronting current sociological problems. Levi declared that he was opposed to despair, which "is surely irrational: it resolves no problems, creates new ones, and is by its nature painful." He continued, rather, to claim a "faith that I would call biological, that saturates every living fiber," but at the same time he said of the language of his new stories that it is "a language that I feel is ironic, and that I perceive as strident, awry, spiteful, deliberately anti-poetic."

Unlike *Natural Histories*, published under a pseudonym, *Flaw of Form* came out with the author's name on the cover. It's an unusually unified work. Only one of the stories, "Observed from a Distance," had appeared earlier, in an anthology, before being collected in the volume. Among the literary models for these stories Levi mentions Samuel Butler, Jules Verne, and H. G. Wells, and he dedicates to Calvino the story "His Own Maker"; Levi had in fact expressed the intention of asking Calvino whether he could borrow the protagonist of *Cosmicomics*, the petulant Ofwfq, to play a role in one of the stories. Although he gave up this idea, the story he alludes to is "His Own Maker," which, like the stories in *Cosmicomics*, has the structure of a monologue.

Twelve of the stories in *Flaw of Form* appeared in English in *The Sixth Day and Other Tales*, published by Summit Books in 1990, and two others in *A Tranquil Star* (Norton, 2007), while six stories appear here in English for the first time: "Protection," "The Synthetics," "Vilmy," "Creative Work," "Our Fine Specifications," and "Written on the Forehead."

## THE PERIODIC TABLE

"I tried to write some stories about my life in the factory. They're the worst. No, I'll never succeed," Levi made this gloomy confession to an interviewer in 1966, immediately adding, "It's the other world that is