

good for their bodies and, following that logic, have gone on spare diets, refusing all but the most gossamer food. At length, the populace have become thin like the air, bony, old before their time.

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One cannot walk down an avenue, converse with a friend, enter a building, browse beneath the sandstone arches of an old arcade without meeting an instrument of time. Time is visible in all places. Clock towers, wristwatches, church bells divide years into months, months into days, days into hours,

hours into seconds, each increment of time marching after the other in perfect succession. And beyond any particular clock, a vast scaffold of time, stretching across the universe, lays down the law of time equally for all. In this world, a second is a second is a second. Time paces forward with exquisite regularity, at precisely the same velocity in every corner of space. Time is an infinite ruler. Time is absolute.

Every afternoon, the townspeople of Berne convene at the west end of Kramgasse. There, at four minutes to three, the Zytgloggeturm pays tribute to time. High on the turret of the tower clowns dance, roosters crow, bears play fife and drum, their mechanical movements and sounds synchronized exactly by the turning of gears, which, in turn, are inspired by the perfection of time. At three o'clock precisely, a massive bell chimes three times, people verify their watches and then return to their offices on Speichergasse, their shops on

Marktgasse, their farms beyond the bridges on the Aare.

Those of religious faith see time as the evidence for God. For surely nothing could be created perfect without a Creator. Nothing could be universal and not be divine. All absolutes are part of the One Absolute. And wherever absolutes, so too time. Thus the philosophers of ethics have placed time at the center of their belief. Time is the reference against which all actions are judged. Time is the clarity for seeing right and wrong.

In a linen shop on Amthausgasse, a woman talks with her friend. She has just lost her job. For twenty years she worked as a clerk in the Bundeshaus, recording debates. She has supported her family. Now, with a daughter still in school and a husband who spends two hours each morning on the toilet, she has been fired. Her administrator, a heavily oiled and grotesque lady, came in one morning and told her to clear

out her desk by the following day. The friend in the shop listens quietly, neatly folds the tablecloth she has purchased, picks lint off the sweater of the woman who has just lost her job. The two friends agree to meet for tea at ten o'clock the next morning. Ten o'clock. Seventeen hours and fifty-three minutes from this moment. The woman who has just lost her job smiles for the first time in days. In her mind she imagines the clock on the wall in her kitchen, ticking off each second between now and tomorrow at ten, without interruption, without consultation. And a similar clock in the home of her friend, synchronized. At twenty minutes to ten tomorrow morning, the woman will put on her scarf and her gloves and her coat and walk down the Schiff-laube, past the Nydegg Bridge and on to the tea shop on Postgasse. Across town, at fifteen minutes before ten, her friend will leave her own house on Zeughausgasse and make her way to the same place. At ten

o'clock they will meet. They will meet at ten o'clock.

A world in which time is absolute is a world of consolation. For while the movements of people are unpredictable, the movement of time is predictable. While people can be doubted, time cannot be doubted. While people brood, time skips ahead without looking back. In the coffeehouses, in the government buildings, in boats on Lake Geneva, people look at their watches and take refuge in time. Each person knows that somewhere is recorded the moment she was born, the moment she took her first step, the moment of her first passion, the moment she said goodbye to her parents.