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Month of the reed

Yevhen Pashkovsky

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YEVHEN PASHKOVSKY

Month of the reed

Proesia: an excerpt from the novel No Autumn for an Angel

Weariness, the echo of hooves behind the walls, a hurricane throwing sand and sucking the little window out, and when it eases rippled pools of sunlight murmur down in the valley and die away on the dry sand bank like curled up hedgehogs sipping misty milk behind the ferry; the only joy is here, at the table, where a loaf cut in half grows stale and cracked in a wire basket, cigarettes drying on the hearth embitter the air, out of the window the mountains overshadow your haven from the drizzle, the great gales the family once upon a time stood up to now smell of treason to the aspen firewood, the hut covered in dog-roses, wild vines on the small hills, coldly aloof above the cliffs, where a look is rewarded by a sight that warms the heart in the way that the purple light of a gas fire warms one's palms at home; winter's slavery is distinct from summer's by that extra convulsive disorder of the body before Christmas's new birth, the expansiveness of the wormwood steppes, of sand and stone behind the worn-out subterranean sturdy black men from the coal mine settlement in the foreground fringed by bright red berries, the future of the world so lacking grace, the greatest of the promised land will be compulsorily-purchased for the huge rubbish dump of eternity, digging up what's left of earthly treasure, so that the vaults thunder, from the abandoned pits, from the ventilation shafts, from the galleries, like a great military bugle of yellow copper, as time grows hoarse when its end approaches.

An Egyptian wind blew among herds of sinners who crushed the grain of stones along the road, in the rotting shady places, you, being weary, searched out the flat, you poured wine, you stood in the other queue for sweets, you decorated the pine Christmas tree given to you by the Christmas tree market security man, with tin stars from the spirit bottle tops, with cotton wool from the head of the mattress, you drank in cellars, you slept twenty hours a day, you could hardly recognise yourself in the glass of the underground doors, you wandered sleep-walking through rutted frozen lawns and flower beds, you ran away from the militia from habit, you tripped up, you lost the worthless watch with the tight strap on the



Yevhen Pashkovsky

German silver case, you were numbed by the breezes, you groped for the key in the lining of your jacket, you blew into the keyhole packed with snow, you lit a fire with newspaper in the darkness and fried the bugs on the ceiling, you slept enveloped in four sewn-together sacks as if they were a duvet, without a basin to wash in you walked awkwardly to the toilet behind the cinema to shave, you didn't drink *eau-de-cologne* with the fanfarists, you adopted a dog for company and fed him crusts of bread and margarine, you lived, you palpitated, you hardly ever went to the library, among the last people at the station where the girls get off, you saw the one with the distorted face agree to visit a basement shop to get a battery, you held on firmly to a quarter of cognac and a partly broken piece of haemogen, you lost faith, you became stupid, you read old newspapers deliberately so you could stay closer to the past, you were too lazy to go to the toilet, to the cinema, to visit old friends, lying down you put out the light on the radio receiver, you spun a web-thought, you wouldn't speak, you tried to divine dreams till the middle of the day, you touched the bristly lower part of your chin, folk, mood and life grew earthly, you felt helpless when naked, a small uncovered bulb on a shortish wire overheard

your thoughts, a confession made to an angel, you gnawed the pain by silencing the heart that was biting off the earthly wolf-cub with chitinous jaws and, by this, forced the recollection of a person tied to a bed before murder with insulin, and you're right here again as well as there, wound up tight in a deadly way, you thought of a woollen scarf, it was even painful to dream of the fisherman, about the light-bearing time by the water that's not added on at the end of life, but is a gift from God along with what was lived through, you made an effort to make a snowman for the children, you lent some money to the estate labourer for cucumber cream, sometimes you yourself would clear the ice on the pavement with a broken-off branch just to avoid meeting someone, once you dug out a small purse in blood stained rags blown up as if it were a dead toad, you started waking up slowly without any itch to make sour cream, or to reach for the lintel above the door, to clean your teeth with chalk rubbed off the wall on your finger and spit on the place where someone had been murdered, to shake off the icicles from the fallen tree in the park, to bite the thinnest of them with the savour of youth among bushes and moss, to eat five portions of cabbage in the refectory, to want smoked cheese, to salt the cheese moulds thoroughly impregnated with smoke, to feel sorry about the sparkling wine for the first time, to stand like a post in front of the weighing kiosk for ten good fat fish dried in the steppe sun, to get off at Vokzal'na station for no reason at all, to memorise the changes in the train timetable, to hang around the buffets with a dog's enthusiasm, cheerfully, to overhear the logic of a conversation between militiamen, to pinch the fifteen kopek pieces left in the intermunicipal phone, to light a cigarette from a tramp who, leaning on his fist, is dozing on a tin-numbered state wheelbarrow, to be amazed at the peacefulness of the small birds, endowed with grey-blue wisdom through spending their lives below the sky, to turn the pages of the old hunter's journal covered with the mould of readers' marks at a secondhand portable book table, to pity the cleaning ladies with their beetroot red hands who scatter wet sawdust from their buckets like they were sowers of acorn bread, it's their way of prophesying starvation to you and it smells of wood, and weakening under blinded dynamics, you liberated the flesh, you fainted as the sheep moved, thou

Yevhen Pashkovsky was born in 1962. Since 1989 he has published three novels in Ukraine. This extract comes from his most recent, unpublished novel.

art alive, a car returns from the square, giants become imbued with blood through their tears and the whole train station screams above the cavernous rocks of the city — to return having been calmed down, a note from the district inspector fades on the steel wire coiled upon the catch of the door and on a ragged piece of gauze, the estate labourer apologises as he rakes the mallow into the rubbish bin, forgetting to offer the half-bottle.

The site of the holy church attracted such fervoured prayers in ancient times, a — *Lord, the promised dew is a miracle before Thee, Thou shalt be here and everywhere, and wherever Thou wishest to consecrate, yes there will be dry land* — time. He found his way to Thee so directly he hardly had a chance to consider the soul, and somehow it was too hurried, time stuck to the heart in love, and weren't there others somewhere around? time, speeded up a hundredfold, became resentful and turned away from the escape — *there was a heavy storm upon the river*; on waking up the following day he landed somewhere near Trypillya,¹ and people were climbing the hill that no power glorifies — time, burned by the sight of the centuries, was healed by the words of an elderly man — yes, you will be everywhere on the earth, and the dew will remain on the sacred place — while there was wilderness everywhere, he would be saved by the dew ringing the bells for the dead at Lavra,² your underground library, empress of despair, is the governor of temptation, to think that we have never been to the caves together though we crossed the gate in various ways, times when I would see you with a daughter from the small bench as the cupolas shone eternally their gold, November-like, nobody is sinless and that's why the remains of saints were kept in shadow among us, so: in order to believe, I return to remain alone, to lick up the dew of the stony old church site full of ruins.

Till the fogs of April bitter become as acrid as wormwood *tisane* the city invites you to winter: somebody had suggested a flat on the third floor, the green walls of the entrance were reminiscent of a slimy place full of frogs, I paid the rent weekly, the room was cramped, bare, but to compensate I used a large suitcase for both wardrobe and table, the cinema around the corner was continually lit and seemed somehow to stand in the queue for spirit — after a showing I'd think in Russian for a while — the cinema director approached, everything about him revealing the un-Christian appearance of a film artiste, the worthless company uniform, the cap on his head, the scarf dangling to his

knees, the eyes made sleepy by smoking, a two-day-old grey beard on his face, he glanced over his shoulder and took a step backwards so as not to be burnt by the heating, then called excitedly: An utterance full of spirit, my brother, you're a born actor! Then he invited me to somebody else's première, while he himself thought about emptying glasses, being annoyed at the script-writers, the operators, the whole company, he'd get bright red and foam with rage behind the lamp so that everybody ended up betraying him; I really rather enjoyed his circle of friends and his free opinions, but later I came to regret that I'd brought this casual acquaintance to the flat, he was the kind of one who'd drop in unexpectedly, always with a giant hangover, always repentant, always with a get-rich-quick scheme: Let's take our time eating, let's sell an idea abroad, we'll get a proposal, dollars, brother, not a foolish word, clients are needed for a restaurant, the table is ordered, so come on, let's get moving! He knew how to ignore through blandishment, how to flatter, how to proposition a young woman, which stunned the landlady, who tried to get him to be quiet as the baby had just fallen asleep, would you like me to make you a coffee? She had been brought up in an environment of praise, you could tell that by the black man's child, may God help me remember, Kateryna, that was the landlady's name I think, anyway, let's call her that, her boyfriend's friends, that you should have seen: every Saturday three Ethiopian university students would materialise at the door with pink carnations and rum, and all the time they were there, the child didn't cry at all — they would wander into the main room with their shoes on, they'd touch, they'd shake sharp-sounding coral rattles above the cradle, they'd murmur, and relate the story of how their friend had sent a postcard telling them about the problems with the wedding, how the family has forbidden it, and that a child abroad is not binding for them, they'd gulp down the rum very quickly without *zakusky*³ and flatten out a tiny bit of grain silently, explaining in broken speech that she was the one who'd have to take care of it, it was her job to worry about milk, as the tall wine glasses were being filled, laughingly; they'd ask about the lodger, nodding quietly, tired of ironing clothes, polishing blacks, serious because the funeral director was there, having tightened their lips, they'd scrutinise me with a vindictive look like they had stubbornly decided to thank the whole world for the white man's slavery, and salute Saturday: the child toddled about, the building filled again with the sound of crying, like the children were immersed in sobs till dusk, worn out by the humidity, around the skirting boards, the box containing two matches on the gas stove, the mother's

ordinary saucepan with the broken wing-handle, the rush chair with a bundle of wet washing on its back, the book without a cover on the table, the small fabric bag of dried mushrooms in the ceiling, the salt spilled on the floor, the odour of gas, the sweet smell of milk gone sour, the spiky ruffled man's haircut of the grass widow, the baby crying so much that it seemed to be begging a gift from its distant father; while washing out a beer bottle in the kitchen, washing out dead spiders from inside it, I realised: that the suspicions of the supposed husband-to-be's devious friends will increase daily, till they manage to persuade the silly woman to get rid of the lodger and add this to the account of loyalty due; so, I thought, whether it's a brothel or not doesn't matter, but it's a sign that just by being a nuisance arousing a hundred arrogant suspicions, and a hundred humiliations, you are needed right here, on the third floor of a house of sorrow in the centre of the city, where you came to shake off the sorrow of imagined returns and all those universal insomnia, of the dead pre-Chernobyl era, on the Lavra's dews where you and my dear daughter sparkled, Aryan power lover, oh Nina; the city was strangely able to turn back the flow of time, or more truly, capable of sucking out an enormous well, right to its bottom, where all that can be righted is washed up, where the purgatory of doubt is confined, where a vague limit exists for blessings, thanks to fate; it's hopeless, it is no use pitying oneself there, you're far too vitally destitute of soul, there total exhaustion lies hungover, with bad luck and false friends behind a glass, and all of this strengthens the sense of loss, the madness that lurks in the subterranean passage, in the straying smiles of the flower gardeners, there with camomile shyness and the dullness of burned coffee, of eternal Buddhist priests, crooners, gypsies on the staircase, of an accordion player sitting on an upturned bucket whom newspapermen full of gossip ask to play 'Has not died yet', while they listen with half shut eyes, wondering where they could find a county policeman, and one of them actually drops a sticky nicotine-yellow folded rouble and rushes to catch up with his colleagues while the blind man gropes, and covers the little box with his hand — a sepulchral light rises up to a world unconfessed, by way of four pillars from the four winds.

I remember that I bought a bouquet of chrysanthemums for the landlady's birthday, understanding the quickly forgotten banality of the mistake, she explained that the boyfriend's refusal was due to a curse on their flat, which is why the baby cries so much, and why I begged you to be quiet, because I had a neighbour in and was worried she would hear you, she might tell Jack, and they're always going on about illegal subletting, but she's religious, well-meaning despite being wicked and cunning, she

¹ Trypillya: the ancient culture — more than three thousand years old — which flourished where Kiev is today.

² Lavra: monastery known for its caves containing relics of the saints — Lavra's dew is a reference to a very old Ukrainian myth, of the dew on the ruins of the destroyed Dessimatynna Church.

³ Zakusky: savoury foods served with drinks in order to make them 'digestible', such as pickled vegetables or fish. It is considered improper to drink without zakusky.

charmed the sins out of my family, you see, I never told you, my mother, granny and dad all died under this very ceiling within six months, I kept it quiet, I thought you'd go away, you're so good-natured, you lull the baby to sleep when I'm at the shops, I was hopeless with toddlers, baby's food, till you began to do it, I have to confess — I used to sit at a neighbour's drinking coffee till lunchtime, the coffee grounds revealed a prediction for a black lover; I would hear their conversations in the corridor — padded out with clumsiness, she had the habit of scratching her left foot with the other dirty bare foot and repeatedly pulling at the belt of her long housecoat turned leathery by smeared manna-porridge, as if a very demon would tear the clothes from her body, she liked to light her cigarette on the gas fire the way a man does, to take a long time straightening up, lit by a grey city passion, thinking that it lights up paths of prudence at night and bites off the tip of a red moustache too; why did she keep the kid instead of leaving him at the nursery? All her men disapproved: the shippers from a spirit store, the sanitary workers, electricians, ex-cons, taxi-drivers, builders' labourers, hefty hostel lads with strong hands who smelled of sour beer and drink, taciturn candidates for LPT hardened by rape of the suburbs, curly men, cement-eyed, indescribable, all of them who hurt her with a flying street word — as a young girl, she'd met him on the preparatory courses and agreed to a date just to shock her colleagues, a group of postgrads full of pride, he was like an Ethiopian prince, he promised he would take her away and marry her in his home country, a Christian, he carried a sandalwood cross, so cultured, our dimwits are no match for him, he gave her a lipstick as a present, he came to classes by

taxi, he brought flowers every day, he kissed her hand on the stairs — this she tells me gently and her voice trips over tender notes, subconsciously she feared upsetting fate, she would never show anyone the photo of this husband in case she bedevilled his return, she'd threaten the slipper at the baby's convoluted balancing acts, she would rock him though he never slept till the early hours of the morning, and explain this by the claim that the biorhythms of a child are the same gender as the father's clock; a sickeningly sweet smell like an old pumpkin circulated through the room and no smile touched that turned-up little nose of the wee boy with the molasses-coloured face, his lips only relished crying, a dry word and the despair of being abandoned — a package full of games with an English script was visible in one corner and nappies dried on the radiator, it was enough just to guess at how the father's absence punished the child — on the day that she recalled all this, she put the flowers in a vase and a vitamin tablet in the water, invited me to watch television: the multi-coloured reflections on the walls, her invitation mixed with pleas to knock back the rum, and suddenly I was struck down by this life — why was I here among a stranger's crying, finishing off the drink left by her patrons? — empress, your residence is less than half an hour's journey from a place where you can watch the ghosts of the fallen ones meet: a charming young man and two girl friends wait for the predictions to unfold, the forecasts had been spicy: it was a holiday, that day the student-trainee was helping them carry books to the deposit, when the family friend called them in, sat heavily, silently, with cigarette-yellow finger tips, a salad on a plate soaked with mayonnaise, bread gone stale, and a grey mixture of lipstick and

ashes stuck to the rims of tall wine-glasses, the conversation was gossip, openly immoral, a pale little boy unnerved by the allure scratched the pimple on the side of his nose with his nail, he tried to stop a hiccup, thinking it strange that two beauties should be intimate with the one young man, as they sharpened their tongues on the mystery of when who first met him, how long ago was it he appeared on the threshold like a vision, walking over to the bed, overwhelming me, I swear by God, he sang a lullaby to me, you will be mine, and then, after all that, he imagines, rivers rushed out, a moth ate the wedding bouquet instalment receipt, and mine was reduced to ashes by jealousy, but he often returns, and you begin to tremble, the night's no problem to an invisible being, it is true enough when the child's at home, not my parents' home, my historian disappears, the family-friend advises, you must act wisely, with a resigned nod over your shoulder: call the guard here, and you may be able to tell them if it was him or not, and if this thing really happened? Nina gesticulates: you're stupid, stupid, you've gone mad, I'd recognise him by his touch, by his gentle cautious embraces, by the tight clasped fear of loss, it is only my beloved who embraces like that, only he holds me the way a brother holds a sister, my historian of sadness, see the holy cross there, believe me, I'm not lying; the family friend holds the young man's embattled stare, then he becomes bolder, he rubs his knee; he looks as if he's eaten nightshade berries when she says, be brave, call me mother, you can watch, and he smiles, the girl's teeth are tiny, listen, then, please think straight, take the few roubles over there and get on the trolleybus, cigarettes are on sale just behind the university, get a small bottle of *horylka*⁴ as well, or better still if you could find some good wine, we'll drink, after the sinful days at the hostel, we're too old to split everything into two, come on, I whisper, come darling, come my beauty, come here, kiss my cheek, and end up thinking that big old drunken women hang from a thread, like an omen, and the tiredness of having thought so much about abortions, about getting bargains, listen, they're charging three times the price thanks to the fatherland's contraceptives, hurry up, it's half past two, listen to what I'm saying — no way of escaping the prison, the door slams, Nina reveals to the family friend that it seems to her this student limps; mischievous, the old protectress of shame soothes her, they overexcited the baby, may God bless it, and now he'll be rushing back in a taxi so he can eavesdrop on the women's talk, so we'll lay this little lamb to sleep and we'll send him away, is this the first time, by any chance? A while later, the student, wanting to show off



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⁴ Horylka: traditional Ukrainian spirit of which there are many varieties. Usually very strong, it is a mixture of pure wine alcohol and water.

and remembering the laughter of the past, uncorks the bottle of dry wine, sour like a hundred-year-old whey, it intoxicates immediately, the good family friends drag him by his arms onto a stretched-out foam mattress, they ruffle his tufty hair and then, glancing at the guest from the table, they nudge each other with sorrowful, pitiful frankness; you came here to drink the holy Lavra dew, but you've fallen lower than the black man that's expected, you've lost faith and wasted your days, you enjoyed the visits of the film director, you trimmed the scarf, you've told of the omen as you went, you got gloomier still — and your soul flew off to the restaurants.

And as for tomorrow, while the little black baby sleeps muted by a fragment of its black pain, the landlady will go to the shops, the delivery man with a hook will drag a line of clinking metal containers to the delivery point in the rag-trade corporation's small cellar: a girl with an oilcloth round her neck smiles at the inspector's girlfriend resting a thick file on her knee, she chats about something and is heard throughout the flat, the green wall draws in splashed sunny water like moss on a well, pointlessly and freely without any promises, without any desires, without a genetic fear of latecoming, in the same way as the power of will used to wake you at a quarter to seven when you were young; poking your nose from under the quilt, it's still early, ten minutes yet for washing, drunk from the sleep, wake up, wake up, it's mama's voice, bending toes on the floor, a small hare-fur coat crackles near the bed and, while putting it on, you recall dear grandad who would reload after a shot or two and a dead rabbit, and how gratefully you'd go hunting with him right away, tracking footprints, a great misfortune when I carved the year of my grandfather's death on the ash tree, then finally getting dressed, shoes dried on the hearth had become hard like setters, to draw water by the haystacks from a block of ice-glass, it takes dad a while to get the feeble scorched cat away from the hot ashes of the stove, it puts ash pawprints on the small table, the jacket drips on the oven door after skating, the smell of orange leather and the tall collar wavy from the drying tickles your neck, you're breakfasting fully clothed, going out to wake up properly and then freezing on the doorstep: such a pile of snow in the orchard! once the snow has lain and hardened, we'll start digging hideouts, fortresses of war, living in the snow, we'll imagine ourselves walled inside a slate cave forever, we may even grind our way to school, meet the bulldozer beyond the next ravine, its snowplough will hardly touch the ground at all, leaving half a tunnel behind it, we'll wait and wait with schoolbags under our arms on the streetcorners, blowing on our fingers, in snow up to our waists till the snow pile ends and the lid of the tractor's exhaust-pipe resounds as though hit by sparks, then I'll

feel like running, skating, echoing, wanting to line a hay-nest with cards made of cut-up notebooks but the others think that's it for the day, the smoke's black and inside the snow walls they're so uneasy they begin to cheer when the first imitation leather hat goes rolling off because it's windy on the hilltops, the sparrows chatter at the frozen berries, holding the schoolbag up to your face, you suggest, to hell with school then, you'd rather be frozen on the hills, you'd rather jump onto the sleighs, but they'll be checking up whose one that is, they'll bend over the books, they'll be able to recognise the handwriting, someone will say you shouldn't be in the hayrack, I'll take the little one home quickly, I think they live up past the second turn-off; these old men are from another village, they agree something in a gentlemanly manner each unwinding the reins on the handle, clapping as they go, waving before striking on the knees of their cotton trousers, yes, on the way back the side road is on the left, you remember because you used to take vegetables there last year, well the house is the one with the red tiles, with the big backyard where the vats used to stand, oh now you're forgetting, they invited you in and gave you a bottle to take away and tried to make you take a jar of fried liver as well, oh now remember how they'd attack the fresh things with such relish, the rye *horylka* in particular was good, remember that right after the snow, before even taking the boy into the house, they rubbed him and gave him wine to drink, and please take some yourself, with a bit of *horylka*, tell them we'll deliver the silos soon: having slept enough, put a coin in the window and watch for the boys, they'll be there to see you, it's time to dig caves in the orchard, pure pleasure and no school at all, a delicate thin crust of ice coats the apples bitten by the hares, there's nobody else but grandad to dig-in for the winter, the snow sizzles under the wooden spade like it was a hot iron hatchet in a fountain, the snow seems so familiar when you recover your breath, it's only the snow that saves you from people and roads, especially if you manage to dig yourself a cave, you can spend the day sitting in an ice-built shelter, on a floor sprinkled with water from the broom at the bottom of the cave, you can even dig your way to the ground and reach juicy fragrant apples, protected from frostbite under the leaves, you can install a little window made of ice-crust, you can even search for the hedgehog that hid under the chestnut tree without finding it, and in place of a seat you can fit a reed mat and lock the door with a threshed sheaf; now the hermitage is ready, I've hidden from my parents, I've run away from school, I'm just lying imagining a treasure island, and then because pockets are full of wheat you can go after partridges, warming your hands in your sleeves, and near the stack of grain

where they gather, spill out the wheat in lines, spread it out on small wooden pegs and prop up a thinly woven sinewy net with a thread around your finger, and hide in the hay till they come, a perfect catch, with reddish streaks on their grey wings, they cackle like hens, peck the grain and call the rest of the flock to land on the snow crisscrossed by the shadow of the net, at that moment you see the clear chestnut feathers on their necks and around their beaks, and then legs feathered in the first joint jump over the hidden thread, and zap, the whole flock of birds is making merry hell, stuck with their heads in the net; what a treat it is to roast one on a spindle, what a pleasure to carry a bunch of them tied across your shoulder, your parents may even let you live in the cave from then on, once upon a time folk lived in clay pits, it's about time that you, my darling, got used to loneliness, such a little grandfather keeping himself warm, so much happiness that no one owes anything to anybody, and the village lights up, the wind blows through the beetroot growers' unsheltered hut, darkness has decided to spend the day in there, maybe for the blazing flame of the smouldering wood we left behind in the autumn, front teeth chatter in the freezing temperature, a new hill has appeared over there, a row of poplars near the graveyard, an old weeping willow with a thick bark worn away by the ritual of tying up on the way home, a pair of owl's eyes shine in a hollow tree, and over here the low cherry-scented smoke sweeps the young corn stalks in the vegetable garden, a dog unleashed for the night scrapes out mice nests in the bushes to ease its hunger, the ice cracks resoundingly in the pond, the dog's hair stands up, its ears are lowered, it sneezes out wet snow, digs against a slope, runs away to the backyard as though it had heard a shot and all's so quiet you can hear the dog panting, hear the frozen steel tress on the lease ring against the rivets, sleighs are approaching from somewhere, it's painful even to look at the poor horses whitened by hoarfrost with their manes sticking up on thin necks, the rime on their eyelashes closing their plum-dark eyes, as if they're asleep and their heavy iron hooves are stamping so as not to fall when the wagons arrive, tiredness is everywhere, reaching the track established by the trudging of the villagers beyond the crossroads, no bulldozer here but it doesn't really matter as your shoes are already full of snow, the lanterns have gone out in front of the shop and the hospital, only one small lamp like a stork on a little house behind the stadium, you spy in the verandah of the studio: a saw frame is visible, thin veneer, wooden hammers, small electric engines for small fine ships, all treasured things, little brushes for cleaning sawdust from the spindle, a dry linden timber piece on the metal plate,

mislaid pipes of lilac wood, safety precaution placards fixed by small balls of plasticine: an old man with a bandaged finger, a man in overalls balancing a fire-extinguisher, a superabundance of jolly advice entitled 'Relating to Physical Labour', a broken eraser on the cement floor, the good quality copper wire used as a connection for the radio that echoed when a good shot sounded, obviously two wires must have touched that time when the teacher jumped sideways onto the table, like he'd had a bone chopped off, him showing his white underpants and rousing a frenzy of laughter, he was balding, self-indulgent, wore an overcoat with strip 'order of merit' medals and worn out cuffs, whenever he was explaining anything he'd hint that 'this may be one of the exam questions', poor man, he was intimidated as any village teacher was, he saved himself not by his ferocity but by displaying a frightened attitude that stopped the pupils from grinding his fingers on the stone or screwing his eyes out, he treated each as an equal, and called the students in after break so calmly, like an old army officer: *children, children!* at dawn his small house was a chest of dreams for every schoolboy thief, one time, robbers broke in by a small window fitted in a disused chimney, knocked out the frame and carried off the millstone beam, the carpenter's plane, the oil cloth off the fretsaw, and the electric engines, the most serious things to go missing, which might have cost him his job at least, last year they took many things, they're definitely lying when they deny it, because they begged bullets from the soldiers so they could fill their greatest trophy, a fire-extinguisher, assuming they could find it of course, with gunpowder to stun the fish — newly fitted traffic lights glare with an enviable flame glow; the white frost-numbed wormwood tunnel sucks us in, as the snow deepens the alleyway gets narrower; rushing ahead of the gang you strike at the roots with a bow so that burning feather grass is sown all over the girls and boys, as the hoar-frost of courting is sown with profligacy and laughter, then a headstand competition, and the frost sticks to your collar, tickles your back with thawing streams, steams cold up to your ankles, a happy way of making you dizzy, all equals under the treacherous silver of winter, betrayed by the same necessary road, the ancestry of the traitors of Christ; we would rush into the school cloakroom where coathangers look like sacks covering heads, where the empty classrooms smell of apple cores, to unscrew the globe, to roll up the geography map under an arm and step into a battlefield for an ill-fated war, your entire destiny tied to the sharp edge of your weapon, three times the wooden cowbell rings, yellow like brass, there's nobody anywhere and the guard's asleep, is your rage futile, maybe? if so, what about trying the confusion of open classrooms in the

east wing, supposedly used as darkrooms to develop photographs or to prepare the documents of restriction; passports, driving licences, official warnings, call-up papers, so necessary and numerous in a long life when it's possible to gather up enough silver for a single large burial portrait; and, until the day comes, attack the invisible enemy, the spear's not heavy yet, the echo reverberates like a fortress bell to frighten folk off and the darkness becomes navy-blue in the corners, dare you say it, you were victorious today, slurp the fountain water from an aluminium bucket, the tiny stream smells of chlorine, nobody has the right to meddle in your affairs, this is invincible enmity, but the tight ends of the tourniquet will break under the weight of certain bodies, the sports mats smell of light bay horses, somebody fixes a net on the table-tennis table, and a ping-pong ball which was returned rolls across the floor, sounding like a tiny horse hoof crushing.

This evening patrol around the classrooms was a recurrent dream I used to have at the flat with the crying black baby, together with another in which I failed to pass the algebra certificate exam, a confirmed blockhead, an old school-leaver, whenever I apply for a course that grade is missing, they tell me to come in once a week — and I go to a dark building like a deposit, photos of bygone years hang on the walls, the teachers are recognisable, the surnames of unfamiliar youthful students appear as sickles under the photographs, and once again I rush to the buffet at breaktime, helpless and anxious; a tallish clumsy nervous young man with eyes upraised, like a leveret's behind its ears, skips down the three doorsteps, crosses the yard, then returns to pick up an old unripe pear which he rubs against the shiny kneecaps of his tracksuit bottoms and on the worn brick wall of the buffet, where promises of love and nicknames, reinvented every morning, are greying beside a small window cavity, explorations beyond prophesy and bible texts, read to make sure there's nothing written about them, and if there is, to blot out the horror with a *kopek* in the ear, to buy a small mouldy cheese, to get a coupon for a cup of tea, to listen beside the little window to strange squeals from the plump girl in a knitted jumper who grabs queue-jumping boys by the collar as they push through sideways with their shoulders, some children from the better-off villages take coupons for *kotlety*⁵ and porridge with honey, they sit swinging their feet against the nickel bar of the kitchen niche, a trailing group of the parallel class of sorry-looking, knocked-about silent pupils who peel tiny potatoes over a pot, knowing that they help prepare the food and so are the cooks' equals,

twice the spoon of mashed potato hits the plate and spreads the portion right across it, the smell of *kotlety* fat, and even tastier the onion frying golden crispy in the pan, as they make their own meal while the dining hall's half empty, the poster of the bread basket on the wall makes you even hungrier, you want to drink the tea and if there's time to run around the *kolhos* to the stadium orchard to pick plums, there should be enough time for me, I'm in front of everyone else and rushing, passing them with their torn jacket sleeves flapping, the five of them sharing the same cigarette end leaving their saliva all over it and rubbing their hands on the dry wormwood: jump over a mound of earth into the orchard, and bloody hell! the shock of stumbling, knees bent from a blow on the back by a sweet apple that knocked the wind out of me, as they wait for you to shout back so they can mess you about, those eighth year boys are blood-thirsty, with a streak of bandit ferocity, my granny used to tell me that in the famine their



village filled the sausage skins with human meat, it's best not to say anything, I'm right behind the clearing where the honey-sweet green plums are but I won't have time to gather them all, it takes too long to shake them off the tree, to charm the guard's young dog by tickling it behind the ear, I'd better pick *antonivkas*,⁶ I'll pinch the plums after school, fill up my bag and drag it home, a bit scary on your own, I'd have to enlist some company, I'll do it afterwards, right now: slow down a bit, I'm getting a stitch and when I'm in the alleyway, start walking, nobody'll find me here and rob the apples out of my shirt, a dewy chill tickles the navel, one apple rolls away and falls in a ditch, I go and pick it up again, rub my stomach with my hands, oh-ho a juicy one, no idleness here, as the labourer says, then, tired of playing games among the young pines, there's no one else behind the botanical gardens, they're all too idle, afraid of being late afraid in case they miss lessons, but just as this thought occurs to me, my classmates jump out from behind the bushes, a whole field full of them, smelling of *kotlety*, begging like orphans as we swear at each other for ages. That was how it was, long ago, tame as a pussy cat — come on, small fry, he pulls out his shirt, there's enough time before the bell goes, the wall smells of holiday vanilla, of egg yolks and cobwebs, stubble in the small

⁵ Kotlety: minced beef and breadcrumbs soaked in a mixture of herbs, onions and tomato, then fried.

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⁶ Antonivka: yellow sour-sweet apple.

dry yard, a bumble bee hovers above a dry cold blue aster, the Indian summer smells of fire raised at night, columns of fiery sparks sweeping through steep ravines, flying over the streams and throwing their light on the little thief with a sack of beetrots on his back, on the corn trampled into the ground, on the rusty water, on the roots of the tall grasses that dad dug out of the mound, on the hooting owls gathered for the smell of scorched mice nests, while the morning bitterness of the burnt is covered with the traces of rotting clover dumped after mowing, with meadow grass, with snails in the mud, with the last fisherman behind the windmill, the river loaches in his sling, with the fish slime on his palms, a linnet's nest in the reeds, with the sorrowful blue of the fisherman's sails on the dyke, the boards of the tied-up boat swollen and filled with poplar leaves, with potatoes loose from their roots in the trodden places, with the wind and the splashes from the wooden mill wheels, while wearing a waterproof jacket and dad's wellingtons stuffed with four layers of insole, I stand on a slippery rock a distance from the waterfall, trying to catch a fish among the algae, others are already springing, then twitching, on the bank, covered with straw and coarsely ground flour, the possibility of a landing in among the bone-white roots adding to their misfortune, the water drying off their backs that wanted only the warmth in the flood that was holding the winter off for a morning — looking at the wind-blown cobweb, eyes full of tears, a little bell jangled, the floor in the corridor rumbled loudly as petrified ninth year boys who'd been caught were lined up before the military inspector, they straightened the toes of their shoes against the cracks in the floorboards — I woke up and realised this nightmare would come again to teach me, the day after tomorrow's nightmare, throughout the summer and my waking life, I asked myself what had I really learned if I kept on dreaming about school, about the snowy smoke through the tunnel, about geography rolled up and tucked under my arm, aimed at the dark homelessness of a future the size of a map of the world, an invisible enemy halfway there and remembrance of one's willpower now gone: getting up on a frosty morning deeply worried that the first bus might be late, getting up to support a world in a crisis of doubt with my own web of responsibilities: who really needs it? Once free of desire, how can you take pleasure in your thoughts? Confess, you weak man, you wished for a neverending relationship with days of love, you went boozing, you drank the hemlock of memory, you expected to hear the brothers of Christ in tears and envied having a chance to talk to the Heavenly Father yourself — that's why the thought of meeting with the fallen ones fills you with unease, sucks away your energy.

The child would scream, I'd sit on the long bench and rock the cradle, I'd read the

old hunting book without a cover, containing drawings of heathcocks, bustards in the steppe grass, with descriptions of the habits of birds, the hazardous happiness of migratory flight, with sleek geese in the field and woodcocks among the young trees — it was the only thing I could read while I harboured the suspicion that: your own child is crying somewhere, your own child is playing with a rake in the nursery playground behind a prison-like wall — I'd remember the kind of mistlethrush that came to peck the rowan berries around Christmas, while she'd get annoyed over the slightest thing, she'd negate everything, raise herself by stubborn argument to unreachable heights, as if she was comparing herself to someone more accomplished, in order to recognise her own misfortune and upset herself beyond comfort; the holy day was coming but there was no Christmas tree, our daughter would be smelling the pine branches at my in-laws, and when I suggested we should take a walk there, she disagreed, registering her own innuendo, with that acute facility of the solitary sleeper to see only their own viewpoint when visualising another person; I'd wanted to explode the space of that perfect family, old and not so old, she understood that too well, so, no, that's right, no; the road was frosty and the half-covered rails slid through frozen sands, carrying the bike, snows, snows filled every corner of the steep hollows, the rowan tree boughs and the yellow-beaked thrushes with little white mirrors flecked on their wings whistled in harmony then dropped their heads down on the tree stumps, ceasing momentarily, deafened by the echo of a shot from the alders muffled by the snowfall: I wanted to take a present, so I parked the bike under the snow hanging from a tree and quietly made my way towards the station, both the windless slumbering cold and the birds on the smaller branches rendered the whole painful depression stupid, then exactly in the middle of that muddy spot among the greenery in the rusty part of the mire, I found the pine tree and cut into it with my axe, the snow spilled onto my face, it melted, sowing the joy of blessed water as from a sprinkler, reminding me of the heavenly memory of what had been lost, next I chopped the roots away and the tree seemed too tall for the room so, holding the trunk, I cut the lower branches, lopped off the top, and wiped the resin from the bottom on the blade of my axe; I sat down to smoke by a ruined abandoned anthill, I made a fire at my feet, watching everything around me, detached, ailing, wondering what forgiveness meant, what would cure pain, a meek paralysis of the spirit, while all that was said and agreed about bravery, here before the ant's home, seemed higher than myself and alien to me, higher than the whole forest, higher than some man; he it was who burned an armful of rotting twigs and thought the holy day was coming, and pitied everything, even the

shooting which had silenced the pine forest; he it was who tied the little tree to the saddlebag with a cord, checked if it was tight, hid the axe between the pine branches, took off his boots and emptied the snow out of them; while he was shaking the smelly sock, his foot steamed in the frost, he put on the old boot again, glanced around, smelled the thorns, as an intolerable half-mad tenderness brought a tear to his eyelashes; the thrushes with their peculiar crests whistled sharply picking up the last fallen berries from the snows, he knocked the slippery handlebars with the back of his hand, broke off the damaged spoke, checked if he hadn't lost the pump, he'd best get going; the saddle squeaked but it could hardly be heard in the snow, the ice cracked below the wheels, the front one drew a figure of eight, he crossed into the track established by the forest travellers and found it easier to make headway: when he turned around he saw: behind the bonfire warmed up the side of the anthill, and at just that moment it flared up like an animal on hind legs to lure the people back, till a howling gust blew it back down, and the flames devoured the warm moss, licked the icicles on the logpile, and collided with a freezing badger, whose burrow he had trapped with smouldering wood; he travelled slowly reading the tracks and saw a growing number of strangers who had been in the clearings, here and there he saw frozen mushrooms like beeswax on the treetrunks, a hawk hovering over bitten-off shoots, small birds hiding in a hazel tree, an empty thimble on a bough above the road; he remembered the broken glass of the small lantern, wanted to live in the forester's house forever, so that the two of them could be like foxes in the night and dig lakes in the ice on the night of the full moon, they'd listen for the dogs carefully, while bravely mousing in the tall grasses; he stopped to fix the tree up on the saddle bag on the way, and was amazed by the thrushes that warmed themselves in the long plume of smoke, he caught up with an army on the roads running in different directions towards the city, a flock of birds appeared from over there and poachers tried to beat each other in who could curse the loudest, the crest of the five bloody pieces on the oilcloth flashed, and that too was whitened, it shook like an animal in a convulsion, the icy wind warmed the face with courage on the seeded field, and once again he found himself hiding a tear; he thought it would be nice to meet some wolves so he could tell his daughter about it afterwards; on the slope down to the main road he put his foot down, cracking the frozen surface on the edge of the street, he crossed the asphalt diagonally, through dusky opaque swirling light a festive nostalgia for the harmonica came over him, the orange leather shone like gold under the lantern, there was no one in the lanes, smoke rose from the apple wood as did the aroma of

venison from the farmer's yard, soot from the chimney blew out when the wind came down on the raspberry-coloured coals and flames leapt from underneath, he noticed partly burnt logs under the slate cover of the barrel-stove, the bar on the snow that had been used to put out the rest of the fire, logs on a small timber wagon, the lady of the house standing on the threshold with pink meat in hollowed out bowls opening the door with her free hand, while the cat was dragging a grease-covered saw under a stack of tempered spades; he tried to brake but the wheel bumped against the iron gate; dusting the snow from his collar, he hauled the pine tree through the small gate, undid the tie, thrust the axe into a tree stump covered with feathers, stood the bike against the cellar, knocked on the crisscrossed door frame and, as his daughter ran to the window and was helped onto the table by her grandmother, he had a sudden vision of himself skating through the clearing in the twilight, as if he was travelling to see his family at ease for the last time, while the snow swept away an unrepeatable moment.

Because he would go there afterwards in vain; the black baby was crying and estrangement peeped between the sobs, like his soul had flown away to his father's burning hot land, and now only his mother could deal with him: she would boil the milk, lick the bottle, feed him, while telling him through torrents of tears about the family that was struck down by different illnesses under the same ceiling, inside those walls with their swollen wallpaper which looked as if it were an enveloped body; I'd stretch out on the hammock, I'd lay the hunting book under my head, I'd pull myself towards the table and slurp the brew from the teapot so I wouldn't fall asleep and could continue wrestling with the eternal question of how to go on existing? and Saturday afternoon moved away from the boozy sessions and the misery scared away the visitors, no dram to be had around here; the film director saw a bearded colleague to the door, still spreading his tiny lies, flattering the landlady, promising to make me a fairytale hero, against my will; the other guest stooped by the light, he got drunk quickly and started speaking in bad Ukrainian, mispronouncing it and hesitating over using English words; the director poured another drink, explaining about scenarios, successes, golden beaches, I'll get a Winchester rifle for you, how'd you like that? he drove his fingers into my chest to get me into the kitchen: lend me a little till Tuesday, I'll give you it back, that whore has so much hard currency even devils can't match her, I have to flatter him, you understand, or then a gem of a film will be lost, just a quarter till Tuesday or I'll be a beast, where does a man or genius get his hands on some roubles? If you hide away the money purse, think of how much more

hunchbacked you'd become picking up coins in hotels, how long you'd have to sleep on someone's floor, how long you'd be pushing through the queues at the bus station, how long you'd spend convincing people about insurance, how long you'd wait for the cement-grey Zil,⁷ how long you'd take to forget the names of the villages forgotten by Providence, ah-ha! at least these people are interesting, listen carefully, maybe in the course of a conversation, you might pick up a snippet or two of interest, how to book an aeroplane ticket, or work out a contract, really, is that a waste of money or what? Please understand me, the most important thing is to flatter the bastard, he knows about as much about art as a pig knows about a Karelian birch but he's quite well informed about Ukrainian history and the liberation movement, it's time to forge the iron, ahead and no queuing! In the bedroom, the benefactor woke up with the door creaking, and the one who had offered a visiting card with a London telephone number moaned about the bohemian life and the lack of good beer, he offered round the mandatory packet of Marlboro, his whole appearance showed a satisfied person with a taste for the exotic, a smartly dressed foreign correspondent who knew about our existence better than we did, and looked as though he was a firmly raised forefinger: I only beg you, don't teach me to live! It was the landlady who gave notice in soft pronunciation — he had brought some chewing gum as a gift — she showed him her husband's address, the young man smiled and shrugged his shoulders, as indifferent as the one who'd just left, but the landlady didn't let that get her down: the baby's fallen asleep, please keep him happy if he wakes up, I'm just off to the neighbour's, I'll be reading my fortune in the coffee grounds, what else? my left shoulder was so painful, I wanted to lie down, I was angry: what am I doing here, a dull-brained animal, a useless enslaved creature? the conversation was ranging over psychiatry — the director babbled and spoke a lot of hell about it, while opening the buckles on his boots, the foreigner asked about benefits for the unemployed; laughter ensued and I felt guilty, I wanted to shut off like an automaton, to not exist, to disappear, to make my consciousness rot away, to burn my daughter's non-existent bankbook, to vomit everything I'd drunk, to forget these ugly mugs in the corners, one restless face, one sated and slippery with fat, he cleans his small glasses with a handkerchief, I want to puke on his visas, they've found one now who's suffered, but then here everyone is tortured, I'm grateful for the possibility of a second opinion from the West, thank you for the favour, for the mention in the press, for the two-fingered

salute called rehabilitation, but health is extinguished in every cell, the brain is burned by the insult of such ECT, it's crushed, it's drying up, an unripe walnut, but please, stay a bit longer, I'm about to kick the bucket — and it seemed that the thought of death had a liberating power, at least I thought so when I was connected to the drip in that large room, considering what two nurses had to say about two dead people; maybe the film director, saving himself from a hangover, gave me some neat alcohol when I was half-asleep, maybe a glue surrogate used to stick iron together, the kind those miserable wretches sell, both of them crossed me out of their book after the interviews, the clarifications, the signatures on the statements, the landlady wasted no time in putting my suitcase outside the door, and the stink of the hallway left me with few regrets, she said the boyfriend's friends had told her she must live on her own, so don't curse me, you'll find somewhere else, you're a single man after all — and bending over the bannister, she gently pointed to the way out.

A few years later, warmed by a new departure and a fine old wine, I've been ringing all my friends from the station when I find a forgotten number on the last page of my notebook, I dial the number and it's her voice, the landlady: she wanted to hang up, the neighbour watched everything she did, every single step, one night the child had taken a fit of coughing and she called in the doctor, the doctor said it was bronchitis, prescribed a course of tablets, and I rushed to the pharmacy but when I got back he was cold, I thought I'd go mad, they took him into a specialist for an examination, but they couldn't tell, some tropical disease, he'd never been to mass, he was buried without being baptised, my boyfriend's friends, they finished their courses, collected their diplomas and disappeared into thin air, no regards as they say, I'm on my own now, at the weekends I stand in for a labourer on the estate, have you come to the city for a while? please, don't get me wrong, I'm afraid of lodgers, but I'd take you even without payment, provided you bought the milk and bread, oh that's the signal, put in another two *kopeks*, I'm broke, absolutely broke, I was in the mental hospital for a whole year, nobody will give me a job, nobody wants me on the pension list, did you put in two *kopeks*? do come, stay as long as you like, do you hear, two *kopeks*, ring me back please — the short telephone signals clearly echoed on the steps of those stairs; Lord, look down upon me, give me the strength to forgive, to help out with at least a half-a-hundred deposit, with a good word at least — everything is always late in these cities that have neglected me in turn; such is the will of fate. ■

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⁷ Zil: motor vehicle produced at Likhachev.

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