

TABLE OF CONTENTS

- 2 Mantas Adomėnas. THE COIN AND THE LABYRINTH, PART I
- 9 Bernardas Gailius. SPY WOMAN
- 12 Gabija Grušaitė. THE MYCELIUM DREAM
- 22 Sigitas Parulskis. HOW I QUIT
- 27 Undinė Radzevičiūtė. DANGEROUS WORDS
- 37 Antanas Šileika. SOME UNFINISHED BUSINESS
- 41 Alvydas Šlepikas. THE HOUSE OVER THE RIVER
- 45 Kotryna Žylė. BELOVED BONES
- 49 Darius Žiūra. THESIS

Partner in translation

VILNIUS
| REVIEW

The Coin and the Labyrinth, Part I

Excerpt translated by *Jeremy Hill*

2. The First Chapter

Nizhnedvinsk, Northern Russia, 2018

He woke up not from the hum, crash and thunder of the construction crane outside the window, nor from the groans and curses of the hungover neighbour from behind the thin wall. For a few seconds, he couldn't work out what had woken him, or where he was, or how he'd got there, or even who he was. The walls painted chest-high with light green paint, the plastered ceiling stained with traces of damp, the rusty radiator pipe protruding from the wall, and the creaking of the metal bed, brought back memories of his childhood travels – nights spent in inhospitable hotels in provincial towns, long walks from the station through unfamiliar streets, shadowy menacing stares of passers-by, endless, often incomprehensible negotiations between parents and cashiers, hotel administrators and train managers, for a ticket, a room, or a seat on a train. No one was willing to concede anything. At every turn you faced obstacles that seemed insurmountable – every step opened up a new Zenonian paradox. It was always a surprise when, after lengthy wrangling and dispute, after jostling in the queue, you finally managed to achieve something: to buy the train ticket or book the hotel room. He had completely forgotten that world. Now he was struck by the full force of it – he felt as if he was trying vainly to run away in a nightmarish dream, or was engulfed in a fantasy from a Kafka novel.

But there was something more lingering in the air than the nightmare of childhood memories – there was a barely discernible anxiety, a feeling hovering at the margins of perception, that something was not as it should be. He sat up, put his feet down on the rough, not very clean linoleum floor and, when the bed creaked, he realised what had woken him up: the silence reigning in the corridor. His room was at one end of it, close to the landing, where a couple of intermittent lifts opened out. He remembered the sounds of the previous night: footsteps, raised voices of drunken people, an unexpectedly loud woman's laugh, and steps again – the heavy, masculine, slightly uneven footsteps of a person not quite sober, then the clatter of high heels, back and forth, – to the right, towards the stairs, and to the left, into the long gloomy tunnel of the corridor, marked at equal intervals by greyish-blue doors. Before he fell asleep, he was thinking how intense and lively the night life seemed in this hotel – when he checked in, everything appeared dead. But now the footsteps had stopped. Even the whirl of doors slamming from the neighbouring room had died away. If it wasn't for the humming of the crane, you might have called it a ringing silence. And he realised exactly what that meant: they had recognised him, they had tracked him down. That, of course, was to be expected.

Anyone who ventures into the depths of Russia cannot expect to stay unnoticed for long. No matter how hard you try to adapt and fit in, sooner or later foreigners give themselves away by their dress or their speech, and ultimately by their manners, by smiling at a passer-by or by thanking someone over-politely in a shop. He remembered how, many years earlier in St. Petersburg, he tried to buy tickets for the Hermitage – for himself and his hosts' daughter, a thick-haired beautiful Jewish girl called Lena, who was taking him around the city. Having mentally rehearsed his lines in order to hide his Baltic accent – he couldn't afford the rate for foreigners – he uttered what he thought were impeccable phrases. The cashier gave him a languid look and lethargically handed him the tickets, – but they were barely round the corner when he got a scolding from Lena: 'They can see straightaway you're not a local! We never say 'please'. Don't forget!' All the more so in a deserted, dying provincial town, where everyone watches and knows everything. It was only a matter of time before he'd be noticed and reported to the authorities. Besides, he didn't even try to hide too much, just enough to avoid being caught by a bullying policeman or a skinhead. He wasn't one of those trained to have a perfect cover, to be re-embodied as a local, to assume another person's carefully constructed identity. He was not a real secret agent.

Having peneed the bathroom door, so he could hear if anyone tried to lock the door from outside, he unhurriedly showered under an anaemic jet of water in the yellowed bath.

He shaved quickly and, in the grey plastic-framed mirror above the sink, as he did every morning, he critically assessed the image that appeared before his eyes: the flabby but still regular shape of the face, replicating the oval outline of the mirror, the muddy sand-coloured hair, thick, not yet grey, roughly cut, separated by a slightly untidy parting – it took a lot of effort and money to make it look so cheap – the resolute, cold, large eyes, the strong chin. His features looked fairly Slavic, but a trained eye could see the difference at once, and it wouldn't be easy to confuse or dissimulate: the nose was straighter, the cheekbones not so prominent, the whole impression of the face was softer, the slant of the blue eyes slightly different. The name which had grown up with these facial features was also not Russian: Tomas.

He wore tattered clothes, shabby, with vestigial damp: grey suit trousers, which the fateful goddesses of worn clothes had at some point separated from their jacket, a half-tailored striped shirt, a black leather jacket which had also seen better days, and thick-soled, shapeless shoes. The outfit had been carefully put together back in Vilnius. Now that bags of second-hand clothes from affluent countries were distributed throughout the world, inculcating the same worn-out fashions and dress standards everywhere, finding a suit for a secret mission to Russia had become much easier. 'Another form of globalisation', he thought. At least we don't have to scratch around for Russian-made clothes, or sew hard-to-come-by labels on the items, in the hope that no one will spot a fake – a headache in the Cold war era. Compared to clothing and household goods, it was easy to obtain a valid Russian Federation passport with the right photo – even when he wasn't in the Office's employ. Now, all you had to do was fill in an application ten working days in advance.

He quietly got dressed, then quickly opened the door onto the corridor and looked around. There was the sound of a door slamming somewhere, and footsteps clumping

off. Two young men were smoking on the elevator landing, almost pointedly ignoring him. That was to be expected. Another one would be waiting downstairs in the hotel lobby, probably reading a newspaper, and another one – a woman, perhaps? – outside. Somewhere nearby, on opposite sides of the street, two teams would be loitering in their cars – in case he took a taxi, which was unlikely in such a town. He locked the door – a meaningless gesture, they would still search his things as soon as he left, and find nothing, no elusive incriminating detail. Except, of course, his very presence here in this town incriminated him. But there would be nothing that might reveal the purpose of his trip – no notes, no letters, no photos, no media. It's impossible to betray what you don't know yourself. And Tomas didn't know the point of his journey.

* * *

He had arrived in Nizhnedvinsk from St. Petersburg when it was already evening, as dusk was falling, on a suburban train, changing twice on the way. He made sure no one was following. He went straight to the hotel; the lobby smelt of stale cigarette smoke – from whole generations of *Kosmos* and *Kazbek*, *Pamir* and *Prima*. At the reception desk, he took the key from a nonchalant hotel manager, who immediately returned to the small TV set on the corner of the desk, broadcasting some local talk show on half-volume. He put his meagre belongings away and went outside. Turning to the right, he found a phone booth two blocks away, the location of which he'd noted in advance. He dialled a Moscow number, uttered a terse phrase and, hanging up the receiver, walked briskly back to the hotel via a roundabout route. He didn't feel like walking in this city for long after dark. Although he wasn't afraid of a gang of drunken teenagers or knife-wielding thugs – a common threat in such Russian provincial towns – he didn't want to draw unnecessary attention to himself.

As he made his way back along the dark streets and broken pavements, he finally saw what he hoped to see – a grocery store on the ground floor of an apartment block, created by knocking together two adjacent flats. He went inside, looked over the humdrum products and pointing with his finger, indicated to the middle-aged saleswoman the items he wanted: bread, Greek yoghurt, sausages, cheese, green tea. He paid with a few banknotes and pocketed the change.

Back in the hotel, he emptied his trouser pockets on the table and poured out the coins. He got a thicker, heavier ten-rouble coin in change at the store. He remembered the feeling when he first picked up a pound coin – small, thick, weighty, with archaic formulas on the edge. He observed how the coins were decorated with different coats of arms: the English coat-of-arms, the Scottish thistle, the Welsh – what was Welsh? Maybe leopards? He established that the distinct coins with the different coats of arms were a legacy of the British Empire, over whose territory the sun never set. Just like in the Roman Empire, a variety of coins circulated side by side at the same time.

He looked at the ten-rouble coin, and examined it carefully, as if hoping to read something in it. For some reason, he remembered Borges' short story about Zahir, a mystical object: once you see it, you can't forget it, and eventually it obsessively captures all your thoughts. Zahir's reincarnation was a coin that Borges' character received as change in the suburbs of Buenos Aires. He smiled – one could hardly imagine a less

memorable object than a ten-rouble coin. He took it, thinking idly to himself that even such an insignificant artefact was a fairly accurate expression of the state that had created it, its ideology or mentality – whatever you call it.

The reverse side was reminiscent of the 1990s – a supposedly classical acanthus envelopping a centred number of supposedly modern design surrounded by vertical strokes. Inside the zero sign were secret spatial markings that become visible when the coin was tilted at an angle: this was very advanced for the time, almost cutting edge. The obverse was, of course, more important. The crownless double-headed eagle of the last decade – resembling a plump hen – had been replaced two years previously by a new eagle with the trappings of monarchy: three crowns, a sceptre and a globe, although formally Russia was a republic. The coin was surprisingly heavy for money of this value. And, like Russia, it was contradictory: on the reverse it depicted a modern state, on the obverse a historical tradition that no longer existed. A double-headed eagle attesting a claim to the succession of the Third Rome. The three crowns were not an attempt to return nostalgically to Romanov Russia – no, it was an assertion of Moscow’s status as the Third – and last – Rome. That was where it really all began.

Absorbed in these thoughts, Tomas smeared yoghurt on the bread he’d bought, laid on pieces of spicy sausage like tiles and had his dinner, washed down with green tea. After dinner, he carefully locked the room, put a millimetre-sized piece of toilet paper in the keyhole – the paper would be displaced if you tried to turn the lock, and it was hard for the uninitiated to see it – and went down to reception. He needed to find out where the man whose footsteps he was following had stayed in Nizhnedvinsk a year ago. Perhaps this would help to reconstruct the man’s route and the last days of his life.

He went downstairs in the lift and caught the eye of the receptionist, a grizzled middle-aged man in a dark brown suit and cherry-red tie over a shirt of the same colour. The tie stuck out above a bulging beer belly: his prominent roundness launched the broad end of the stiff synthetic tie into space, as if it represented the trajectory of a rocket lifting off from the globe. Looking into the receptionist’s puckered, sly-eyed face, Tomas unceremoniously explained what he wanted and immediately reinforced his request with a fifty-dollar bill, which he placed on the counter and pressed with his thumb.

The note quickly moved to the hotel clerk’s inside pocket. The man sat Tomas down at a desk in a cramped office, accessed by a door behind reception, and piled the registration books on it: thick, oblong, bound in brown wrinkled leather – old-fashioned items – and returned to his post. Tomas was happy – it seemed that the matter would be resolved quickly and easily.

He rejoiced too soon. He started flipping through the books and immediately discovered there were no entries at all for April 2017. One volume ended at the end of March and the other began on 1 May, and on that day, judging by the records, an unusually large number of people had checked in. At first, Tomas didn’t believe his eyes, and combed the books from cover to cover, flipping through the pages in the cramped, stuffy room. He couldn’t find the missing month.

Apart from that fact, both volumes looked authentic, they could hardly have been hastily falsified: the pages were numbered, filled in with different handwriting, there were seemingly different signatures, different pens, faded pages, tears, random stains...

The whole series of attributes and consequences of natural life that you could and should expect.

Turning the first volume over, he began to examine the spine, and pressing on the page, he carefully examined the binding. The pages were uncut and untorn, but the last sheet was incomplete. Someone had unpicked the binding, removed the April pages and painstakingly re-bound the book in the same leather. He compared the number of pages – yes, the second volume had seven more pages. This meant the pages were removed before the beginning of May, because the May entries had already begun in the new volume.

– Very strange, – the hotel clerk expressed surprise when Tomas pointed out the deficiency to him, but he couldn't get anything more out of him. The only reply was an indifferent – I don't know anything; the offer of an extra fifty dollars didn't help either: – Don't offer it, it's not necessary, I can't tell you anything else anyway.

– Is the absence of proof, proof of absence – or concealment? – Tomas asked himself ironically. And does the man's *не могу* – 'I cannot' – mean I cannot, or I may not?

Only much later would Tomas reflect on what he hadn't immediately appreciated: such concealment was absurd, it showed more than it concealed. After all, it would have been possible to falsify the page he needed, simply without the registration record of the person sought – unless...

Unless the people who tampered with it didn't know under what name and on what date the person had checked into the hotel – and assumed that he would have left a message in his check-in record for those who would follow in his footsteps.

But Tomas didn't think of it then – he wasn't thinking straight, he was tired after his trip – and shrugged his shoulders and went to bed, after taking all the precautions he could: he locked the door of the room as securely as possible, he stuck a chair under the handle, and placed a tin rubbish bin on the chair – any attempt to open it would cause a huge noise. He woke up from the awkward silence only when it was completely light.

Now, in the morning brightness, the town didn't seem to have changed. The same monotony of shabby architecture of a dormitory district, the same amorphous space of a town without a centre, extending in all directions in an equally senseless way. There were more passers-by – they were moving as if they were cowering, lost in their own thoughts and affairs, hurrying, but seemingly without a purpose. The concrete sky matched the greyness of apartment blocks whose colours had faded – or maybe they never had any. Even the vegetation – leafless birch trees, and bushes scattered unevenly between the pavement and the street – didn't add any life, but rather only accentuated the sense of disorder.

He glanced across the street – there weren't many people, so it wouldn't be hard to spot anyone tailing him – and turned left with a businesslike stride, dodging potholes in the pavement slabs and stagnant puddles with one or two patches of ice.

First, he had to get rid of those tracking him. Tomas knew what the textbooks and experienced teachers said in such cases: don't let on that you've noticed you're being followed, and don't try to shake off the trackers – unless you're at risk of falling into the clutches of an adversary with compromising documents or evidence. But now he simply had no choice. His very presence here was evidence.

He walked down one of the central streets, looking round, until his eyes, closely focused on the changing landscape of people, buildings and traffic, spotted an opportunity. Now he could see clearly who was following him. A man in his 40s and a woman of a similar age, acting as a married couple out shopping: the man was holding a plastic bag with their purchases. From time to time, they stopped at shop windows and pointed out something to each other, as if they were chatting – but they were too wooden, too synchronised, with movements that resembled parade ground exercises. And there was a young man in jeans and a leather jacket on the other side of the street, walking in parallel, occasionally forging ahead, keeping an eye out in case Tomas thought to make an unexpected turn into a side street. The tracking was unprofessional, textbook. Tomas already knew how he would get rid of them – he just needed the right opportunity.

Finally, after walking ten minutes down a long monotonous street, he saw what he was looking for – two identical shops in a typical Soviet-era building, separated from the street by a wide stretch of trampled land – the architects had planned to put a flower-bed here. One shop sold food, the other, on the right, curtains. Both in a long building that stretched along the street, the ground floor of which was occupied by offices, shops, dilapidated, musty premises, and the other floors by small apartments, old balconies with rusty railings piled high with household junk, and taut lines which were used in summer to hang laundry. A Khrushchyovka*. The entrances to the courtyard, which ran along the other side of the building, were a few hundred metres away – that was the critical thing.

Two shops side by side, like mirror reflections of each other. After a moment's consideration, Tomas turned left, towards a grocery store: at this time of day, goods would be delivered through the back entrance, which meant there was a better chance that the key would be left in the door to the yard. The shop was small, the trackers wouldn't dare to follow him within, and the windows were covered with adverts affixed from inside – it was impossible to see from the street what was going on within.

Tomas entered slowly, nodding silently to the shop assistant, a fifty-year-old lady with red chestnut hair, who, without taking much interest in him, continued to flip through a horoscope magazine with colourful covers. He stopped at the drinks shelf, as if pondering what to choose, waited, and looked around the premises. As he had expected, the agents following him didn't enter the shop, they were probably waiting outside, perhaps trying to peer through the cracks in the advertisement posters.

He couldn't stay choosing for very long, pretending to read the descriptions of the flattened brandy bottles. Those waiting outside would soon wonder where he'd got to. Fortunately, the door of the shop soon opened, and in walked a pensioner with a lively face and bushy black eyebrows contrasting with his completely grey hair. He had no sooner entered when he shouted cheerfully to the shop assistant, who beamed and put away the horoscopes.

– Great – there will be some conversation, – Tomas thought, and went to the counter to pay for a quart of brandy. While she was still handing him his change, the shop assistant turned away and started talking to the old man. Taking advantage of her dis-

* A Khrushchyovka was a large apartment building built in the Soviet Union when Nikita Khrushchev was party leader.

traction, Tomas made an unhurried but confident turn into the passageway leading to the warehouse and the service quarters. In the door to the courtyard, as he had guessed, a key was inserted from the inside. Turning it quietly, Tomas slipped out, noiselessly closed the door behind him, and looked around.

The yard was empty. The agents hadn't thought to go around the other side of the building. When, in a few minutes or so, the trackers realised he'd been spending a suspicious amount of time in the shop and entered to check, he would already be far away. A quick step, but not a run – why draw attention to yourself unnecessarily? – Tomas headed further in between the apartment blocks. After a while, he came out onto another street, perpendicular to the first, he crossed that one too, and passing through the courtyards, reached a further parallel street. Finding there a second-hand clothes shop, he bought a black half-length coat – it would change his silhouette, he would be more difficult to recognise. He changed his clothes on the spot in the yard of the apartment block, left his jacket folded by the rubbish bin, and put the recently purchased brandy quart on top.

– Some homeless person will be happy, – he thought. – Or not necessarily homeless. In this country it's not just homeless people and beggars who rummage for goodies in rubbish bins.

He walked out into the main street, and looked which way to turn – left or right? He felt like the detective in the Chesterton story, puzzling over where to go and where to start, because he doesn't know what he's looking for. So, just like the detective, he simply walked down the endless street, hoping that his gait, his posture, his gestures wouldn't betray his inner uncertainty. He waited for something to catch his eye, for an unexpected building, signboard or face to touch the edge of his consciousness and give direction to his thoughts and steps.

It was hard to believe that this whole odyssey of searching, discovery and hard-earned insights had led him here, to an amorphous, aimless city among the northern plains and marshes. He didn't come here of his own free will – would anyone come here of their own free will? He was following someone's steps – completely cold, year-old footprints. He still couldn't forgive himself for the fact that, a year ago, when it happened, he had left, disappearing to the other end of the continent, without a trace and out of contact. As if by staying behind he could have made a difference.

Spy Woman

Excerpt translated by *Kotryna Garanašvili*

Chapter 1

Autumn 1937, Moscow

The pit was deep, dark and cold. It both pushed and pulled at the same time – in a way that a deadly height and other lethal things are both repulsive and attractive. Objectively speaking, there was nothing lethal about the pit. But it gave off the same sense of danger, because it looked like a grave. Around two metres long, one metre wide, and about three metres deep – a very deep grave.

Their group stood right at the edge of the pit. They were lined up along the long side and the short side, pressed together so that everyone could see clearly. Bulging out on the other side of the pit in front of them, a massive pile of earth was heaped up. It allowed them to assess the volume of the pit as well as its depth. The scene was perfectly staged; the instructors who had prepared it had thought of every detail.

The instructors knew how to make an impression. The whole group was clearly stunned, even though they had been through the wringer. Shuffling in their thin-soled shoes on the frost-cooled ground of early October, they tried to grasp the meaning of the performance. But the students of the International Lenin School, almost graduates by now, knew better than to ask questions. If they were loaded onto a bus after breakfast, all dressed up and ready for their graduation ceremony, and brought to a remote pine forest outside of Moscow instead of the school building on Gogol Boulevard, it must have been for a reason. So they stood there and lingered, suppressing their nervous shudders and hiding their unease. As they took deep breaths of the fresh pine air, they hoped that the still-warming autumn sun would finally break through the tall trees, easing their cold, tense bodies.

‘What you’re about to see will probably seem pointless,’ said the instructor of sabotage and subversive activities. He started speaking without so much as a welcome as the students watched him approach the short side of the pit, the only one not yet crowded with people. ‘And yet, it has a significant pedagogical value. Our aim is to give you a final lesson which you are bound to remember. This lesson is special – it will always remain personal. If you try to tell anyone what you saw here, they won’t believe you; they’ll even mock you. They’ll mock you precisely because it has no point, and no one will believe it could actually happen. At best, they’ll think you’re exaggerating or distorting the facts, they’ll try to convince you of that until you almost believe it yourselves. At worst, they’ll say you’re mad, and refuse to deal with you. Even among yourselves, you’ll avoid talking about this morning – over time, you’ll start to doubt your own memory. But deep in your heart, you’ll know that it all really happened, and these visions will haunt you for the rest

of your life, keeping you away from reckless decisions. You won't want to cross us, much less betray us, because you'll know that we can do anything.'

The instructor turned around and gestured to the sturdy Chekists standing by the official car behind him, dressed in the ominously black leather trench coats typical of their profession. At this signal, they roughly dragged out a barely-walking young man from the emka, dressed in filthy rags that had only recently been a decent dark grey suit. Grabbing him by the arms, the guards hauled the victim to the edge of the pit. As the trio approached, the students were horrified to recognize their fellow student, the American.

'Your classmate Nicholas,' the instructor continued his speech, 'was not honest from the very start.'

Turning, he reached out his gloved hand, grabbed the poor man's hair, lifted his drooping head, and asked:

'Isn't that right, Nicholas? You've had other friends in America from the very start, haven't you? Better friends than us?'

The young man only managed a gurgling sound in response, as bloody froth appeared between his parted lips. The instructor kept holding Nicholas' head up so the students could get a good look at what was left of their friend, with whom, as they all now realized, the NKVD had been intensively conferring for the past couple of weeks.

The sight was gruesome and unforgettable. There was a bloody patch almost right above his forehead – the skin was missing, likely torn off along with his hair. Even now, as the instructor pulled his hair again, the edges of the patch continued to tear. Nicholas' once handsome and familiar face was swollen, filthy, and bloody. His eyeballs were nearly blood-red, and his bruised lips were swollen like a monkey's. Some of his teeth were missing, and his several fingers, reduced to a mangled mince of flesh, were twisted unnaturally – probably broken. No one wanted to even think of what the Chekists had done to other parts of Nicholas' body, mercifully hidden by his suit.

At first, the students had been shivering in the cool air of the Russian October morning, but now they were all chilled by an entirely different kind of cold. The instructor nodded, pleased with the reaction of his audience, and continued:

'Back when Nicholas was still in America, we discovered that he was spying for the Federal Bureau of Investigation and that servant of bourgeois imperialists, Edgar Hoover. We knew that Hoover and his henchmen were eager to uncover how the Lenin School operates and what is taught here. So we allowed Nicholas to come, knowing in advance that he would never leave. We wanted to strike a blow against the enemies of the revolution while giving a lesson to you, the banner-bearers of the revolution. We deliberately let Nicholas become one of you, to live among you, get acquainted, and make friends. You needed to see how close you are to danger, how betrayal can come from the most unexpected places. Now you will learn what happens to traitors.'

At these words, the instructor let go of Nicholas' hair, and the Chekist standing behind him gave him a hard shove toward the pit. The American's body immediately lost balance and helplessly tumbled into the pit. A sickening crack and a scream indicated that Nicholas had probably broken a leg. Whatever had broken, he could no longer move. He could only scream – and scream he did, with all his remaining strength. The quiet pine forest outside Moscow was filled with the unmistakable and terrifying sound

of a man confronting a nightmarish death, a cry that froze the students to their core. Petrified, they stood at the edge of the pit, unable to resist, understand, or look away.

Without delay, both Chekists threw their trench coats onto the grass, grabbed the nearby shovels, and began dumping dirt into the pit. At first, this didn't stop Nicholas from screaming—if anything, his scream became even more horrific. But soon, a large stone thudded against his head, muffling his voice. Within minutes, Nicholas' body was covered by a suffocating layer of dirt, though his limbs could still be seen twitching involuntarily. Soon after, all that remained was the steadily rising rectangle of sandy soil. The well-trained Chekists were quick to finish the job. After levelling and stomping down the earth over the pit, they laid turf over it. Nicholas' grave was meant to be hidden without a single trace.

'Class, left turn!' the instructor commanded once the task was done. 'To the bus – quick march!'

The students obeyed and marched, though the formation was far from orderly. Dragging her leaden feet from the ground, Angelè Treigytè understood one thing: her life would never be the same. The instructor had been right – these visions would haunt them forever. It seemed everyone else felt the same. Some shook their heads, some sighed, and others patted each other on the back. Just as they reached the bus doors, the lofty Hans – if that really was his name – muttered in his indelible German accent:

'As if he knew...'

As she was getting into the bus after him, Angelè gave a cheerless smile. She too remembered the moment when a slightly drunk Nicholas had blurted out: "The revolution devours its children."

The Mycelium Dream

Excerpt translated by *Jeremy Hill*

Fungal Dream Part 1

2051

Survive.

The most important thing is to survive.

It's the morning now, and I need to get up. To push on. To work. To do things.

Another day to be endured.

– Good morning. It's six forty-five. Seventeen degrees outside.

– Shut up, Anna.

– Shall I wake you in fifteen minutes?

– Go to hell! – I pull the pillow over my head.

– I can't.

Silence. Her voice is so sweet it makes me nauseous, but for some reason I never change the settings. Maybe I'm used to it. A virtual assistant is like a snake which doesn't drink the milk we offer it. – When do you want to get up?

I roll onto my back and finally open my eyes.

– Draw the curtains.

I hear the folds of cloth rustling along the rail like a model train riding to a better tomorrow.

The fact that my survival instinct was stronger than all my other senses or needs, I realized at the age of eight. My mother and I were watching an old film about a couple of lovers on a sinking ship. I was eating crisps and got genuinely angry at the main character who, instead of sitting safely in a dry, cozy lifeboat, rushed headlong into the flooded depths of the ship to rescue a man she'd only recently met, who later drowned anyway.

With that childish acuity that adults later lose, I realized there's no way I would have rescued any man. I am a person who doesn't care about love, duty, morality, or principles. The survival code written into my DNA is stronger than anything else. Even than life itself.

I asked my mum why the film character was acting so stupidly.

She looked at the screen thoughtfully, probably silently cursing her unfortunate choice of film. I'd asked her to show me something from her youth. I don't even know whether she'd already seen *Titanic* or had blindly stabbed her finger at the first film on the recommended list. – Maybe it's love, – she replied uncertainly, and I could detect from the sound of her voice that she'd have let him drown too.

How to stop? How to switch off survival mode? It's summer.

The summer house.

Before I let the remnants of the last dream go, before I look up at the sky and decide whether today will be sunny or overcast, I stretch my hand towards the bedside table and grab the screen.

Hmm, maybe I shouldn't read it.

All I will find is a series of problems that have to be solved – some important components stuck in production or a new war in the Congo, meaning a crisis of raw materials or another marketing executive has run off to the Chinese.

I sigh.

It's vacation now. I shouldn't be working. I should switch off completely and enjoy the peace and quiet, the pine trees, and the endless fucking rain.

But I don't know how not to work, and periods of unscheduled time frighten me more than the constant rise in eco-tax – someone has to pay for the genetically modified wolves, after all.

What do people do on vacation?

They sit on the beach like toads, eyes bulging with boredom, staring at the corpse of the Baltic Sea.

I shake off the thought and look through the messages.

Today there's no bad news, and that alone should inspire a fine start to the day, but my neck, which hurts when I lie down, reminds me that I'm getting older, and outside the window there's a thick gray haze.

Cold, wet, rainy summers.

– Why do I need this summer house if I don't know how to relax? – I groan, writhing in bed like a smart worm in the recycling bin.

I must get up.

– Anna, make some coffee.

– The nutritionist recommends you don't drink coffee.

– For God's sake, Anna, who cares what you think? – The guardian of morality has turned up. It's easy to talk when you can't smell fresh espresso yourself, and at least for an instant fill your inner void.

The VA is so vacuous, it's overflowing with information of no use to anyone. Yet over time they become our closest friend. What does this say about modern society? I bury my face in my pillow, trying to pretend I'm not here.

– It's my duty to remind you of the principles of healthy living. – I'm not sure how a VA can be offended, but Anna often seems pissed off with me.

I get out of bed and flinch unpleasantly when I feel the cold touch of the stone floor. Today I desperately need coffee. To hell with Anna and a healthy diet.

I go down to the ground floor and make a double espresso because Anna has turned on the machine all the same.

I'm strictly forbidden to drink black coffee on an empty stomach because it upsets my digestion for the entire day and is often followed by terrible bouts of diarrhea. But there's nothing I can do – it's simply impossible to resist the morning call of an espresso. And a second and a third.

As my therapist says, I just like to torture myself. All the trillion little me's, which

scream and yell when I pour a thick, bitter, sticky dose of caffeine over them. Fucking fungi and bacteria, why can't you make me happy?

Though I'm not sure I want to be happy. Maybe just surviving is enough for me.

On the rare mornings when I'm not stressed and allow myself to believe that the world can be good, on those mornings, I drink a vitamin shake specially balanced for my inner society, which is supposed to make the tiny me's feel good at the start of the day, to calm them down and persuade them not to cause any stress.

But it simply doesn't work. Sadly, I and my inner society are not a harmonious whole.

Ever since existential human theory proved that we are symbiotic beings between our inner society in the gut and the mammalian body, a new field of health has emerged to help us establish a deeper relationship with our fungus. But I and my self have been angry with each other since childhood, and no vitamin shake will help us.

A healthy fungus is a healthy person, so the consultants say who create nutritional plans to keep the gut's inhabitants happy.

Every month I send a piece of my shit for testing, and always the same encouraging reply comes back – there's not much you need to get along with each other, you just need to eat more healthily, not to drink coffee, not to forget your vitamin shakes, and avoid rehydrated food and alcohol.

I start the first week of every month full of hope, but my patience quickly runs out and I can't resist the temptation to drown those disgusting, angry, and disloyal animals in coffee and wine.

I go out onto the balcony and see a porpoise sunbathing on the shore. They have bred uncontrollably. They appear in huge numbers everywhere, and they're still multiplying. The National Park's Clean-up Program isn't even halfway through, but it seems to me that it's getting too crowded here – dolphins, langoustines, bison, creatures of all sizes, and hair, feathers, and scales, which have no intention of respecting the set boundaries of private property. In the evenings, wolves howl. You have to carry ultrasonic whistles, even though environmentalists say that all wolves have had their D423T gene suppressed and they don't pose a danger to humans. But somehow, it's uncomfortable to see green eyes in the dark when you're walking back from the beach in the evening.

It's uncomfortable, but what are you going to do? We all live together now – wolves, foxes, moose, bears, and us. Only the cows and sheep are gone. Maybe they're living on the islands? My friends' kids have never seen a chicken in their lives, and I never saw a wolf in the woods when I was growing up. Aaah! Today I feel so old.

In the distance, a glimpse of sun peeks through the clouds, caressing the skin with its slanting ray and igniting a barely perceptible will to live. I feel a little better.

Suddenly, the lagoon is lit by the sun and becomes so blue that I have to squint.

I start to think what kind of day today will be, what I will do. I can't help but plan. My life coach advises me to let time flow by itself, but every time I yield to spontaneity, it has a tragic end.

At nine o'clock, my workout.

At ten, I'll take a bath, laser my facial skin, put on a red clay mask, and read the news while soaking in hot water. Does that count as time off?

Between eleven and one, I'll answer my priority messages and look through documents.

Lunch at one. I always order it by cormorant-drone from a restaurant in Klaipėda, so now I need to decide what I'm going to eat and dispatch the order. I spend a long time staring at the menu on the screen and can't decide between what is healthy and what I want.

The wind is picking up.

A flock of birds flies over the horizon. I look closely to see if they are birds or cargo drones. They're birds after all.

And then... I almost choke when I suddenly remember why, since the first moment, an invisible but heavy leaden fog has been hanging over me – my mother is coming today.

How could I forget? I promised to pick her up from the boat station on Pervalka Pier. She's due to arrive on the three o'clock run.

Panic sets in. I need to go and check if the Beetle is charged because I keep parking it carelessly in the yard and forgetting to connect it to the wireless platform. When I get in to go somewhere, it starts beeping like a hysterical chicken and refuses to budge.

I need to check the fridge – do I have any food for breakfast? My mother still believes that breakfast is the most important meal of the day and, for as long as I can remember, has religiously eaten the same breakfast at seven each morning: a hundred grams of Greek yoghurt with berries or fruit and buttered banana toast. Eight o'clock on weekends.

It makes my stomach churn to think how pathetic and old-fashioned this ritual of hers is. No matter how much I convince her of the achievements of modern science, she flatly refuses to try balanced breakfast shakes designed for the kings of the gut. She even refuses to be tested, although I have offered to pay.

I don't even need to ask Anna or go to the fridge. I know for a fact that I have no yoghurt or banana bread.

I look up. The wind has blown away all the clouds, and now clear blue sky stretches over the lagoon, and the water is rippling idyllically in the sun.

But that will no longer rescue the day, so I make some more coffee and listen contentedly to the gurgling and grumbling in my stomach.

With trembling hands, I click on the food order on the screen, and in my panic, I buy too much. Strawberries. Peaches. Kimchi. Pickled vegetables. A loaf of banana bread and almost a liter of yoghurt. By the time the drone arrives, I'll have to get out the right size dishes and containers. I don't even know if I have that many.

Damn. When Mum leaves, I'll have to put everything in the compost bins. I hope I don't get fined for dumping too much waste for a one-person household.

It's so lazy of me to fill out this order. Sometimes I miss physical supermarkets, when, without a thought, you could automatically buy as much food as you wanted, and no one punished you if you threw something away. But there are no more shopping malls like those in my childhood. After the war, when disposable packaging was banned, we were all too lazy to go to the shops carrying bags with containers, so the big supermarkets became mere ghosts on the streets for a while and then naturally disappeared. All that's left are small neighborhood shops where you can borrow a box if you fancy a cake.

My mother's arrival plunges me into childhood memories.

Pull yourself together, Upé.

I sigh. I have to put my jars and bottles in a box, which a drone will come to pick up in ten minutes and then use to bring my purchases. No spontaneity. Every bit of food shopping has to be planned in advance, especially in Pervalka. But I don't like spontaneity, so why am I complaining like an old slipper about there being no more cows, which used to stink to high heaven, and no more shopping malls, which were the most boring thing in the world? I still wouldn't go to one even if it were round the corner.

What am I going to cook for dinner?

Maybe fish on the grill? I've never used the charcoal grill left by the previous owners. It shouldn't be difficult.

Will I be in time to order fresh fish and have it flown in from the nearest platform? The nearest one that produces class A is near Skuodas. It's not far at all. They have sturgeon, trout, and even those strange fish from the Amazon River.

Hmm.

I don't even notice how time is passing.

I go out onto the terrace and look around the grounds – the gardener tidied them up yesterday. The grass is cut, the flower beds watered, the gazebo free of cobwebs. I hope Mum likes it. It's a simple but large garden with pine trees.

We haven't seen each other for almost a year.

I go back into the kitchen, wondering which of the guest bedrooms to put her in. Suddenly I realize that I haven't set foot there since I bought the summer house, and my heart is stabbed by a sharp feeling of guilt. Four bedrooms, of which I use only one. And that rarely.

In fact, I've only spent three weekends in Neringa in the last year and a half, and this is the first vacation I've resided here for two whole weeks.

Not because I haven't wanted to. It's just that I've been very busy.

At least, that's what I try to tell myself. I only have two gears. Either I'm working, or I'm tired from working and dream of quiet time for myself – no running, no rushing. No noise. Just me and my thoughts.

The problem is that my thoughts and feelings are always conspiring against me, and whenever I'm resting, they keep reminding me that I'm wasting my time, so that, instead of lying in the bath, I could be doing something useful – replying to emails, sorting out the business or at least learning something new.

And when I follow these voices and immerse myself in work, when I allow myself to forget everything in the world and just work, work, work, work and even plan strategy sessions in my dreams, then my guilty conscience screams that I have this summer house, whose potential I'm not exploiting.

The guilty conscience is the snake that always has something to say.

Often, before I go to sleep, it whispers that I'm a monster who never finds time to visit my mother.

But the truth is that Mum doesn't really press to be visited. She never writes first or offers to meet. Sometimes I think that if I didn't call to interrupt whole months of silence, she would just forget I existed.

I am used to being forgotten. To being invisible. I don't expect anything more than to survive. To endure the days, to endure the loneliness. To close my eyes to such luxuries as dreams, happiness, emotional security, or inner peace. All this is for other, privileged inhabitants of Earth – all that's left for me is to stand stoically in the face of suffering and not show how much it hurts.

When I first saw the thatched roof of the summer house, its spacious terrace and sunlit kitchen, I had a vision of a peaceful life – Mum and I drinking real wine in front of the fire, smiling and having a good time, as if we were really alive. Warm-blooded. Full of hope and tenderness.

This villa is designed for the life I want, not the one I have.

Last week, I finally plucked up the courage to invite Mum to visit me for the weekend while I'm on vacation. I expected her to say no, but she agreed. Probably wanting more to see this much vaunted architectural masterpiece than to see me.

And what if she doesn't find the summer house as wonderful and stunning as I've made it out to be?

She'll nod politely when I show her all the floors, but I'll read the carefully concealed mockery in her eyes: my daughter knows nothing about architecture or beauty. A moronic, boorish daughter.

Sometimes she surprises me, like at Christmas two years ago when we met for dinner in town because neither of us wanted to cook. Before saying goodbye, my mother kissed me on the forehead, and I carried that tenderness with me for at least two months like a silk shawl enveloping my dreams.

She spent the night in a hotel, even though I invited her to stay with me. She said she didn't want to trouble me.

Mum likes Neringa. She liked it even when the lagoon was as yet uncleaned – brown and smelly.

I look at the clock – it's almost eleven. I haven't even noticed where the time has gone. The plan for the day has gone to hell. My stomach's churning. My head aches.

Sometimes I wonder why the hell I bought this villa. I'm not prone to spontaneous stupidity, but when I got an email from an estate agent friend who'd heard from mutual friends that I was interested in Carter and Ina, I couldn't resist. The pull was too strong.

I don't even know how my childhood love for the now deceased Nobel Prize winner, who discovered the human link with fungus, began. He wasn't very handsome or glamorous, but at a time when Carter's theory was still controversial with the general public, when I was still a skinny and misfit adolescent, I could identify much better with a scientist mocked by the press than with social media stars or influencers. A few years later, his theory of human existence became the official paradigm, and journalists who had previously ridiculed Carter suddenly became his biggest fans. Inspired by Carter, I thought I would also become a scientist, discover something significant, and then everyone, at least my mother, would recognize that I'm important and intelligent.

I didn't become a scientist because, when I graduated, I got such a good job offer that my survival instinct didn't allow me to say no.

But at least I can afford to buy the house that belonged to the woman Carter was unrequitedly in love with.

I like the fact that he was unlucky with women. Rumor has it that he spent several summers in this villa, but Ina never reciprocated his feelings. Poor guy.

Carter became a lode star for the unhappy child I was and perhaps still am, demonstrating that it's possible to be a walking failure and a genius who changed the world at the same time.

All I had to do was to find that genius. Somewhere deep inside, hidden under the survival instinct.

The plan was to build a secure, financially stable life and then... then start living. To create.

I'm thirty-five and still haven't started.

The theory of human existence has at least reassured me that we're all screwed up and this vicious circle doesn't mean there's something wrong with me – there's something wrong with the whole of humanity.

– Anna, run the bath.

– What temperature do you want it?

– Forty, – I answer automatically.

– That's not too hot?

– Who asked you? – I raise my voice.

– As you wish. – That digital naivety where the VA has no response to simple life situations and plays on emotion. But people play on emotion too. So maybe there's no difference.

The villa was incredibly expensive because it's the most important work of the architect Anupilas, who reconstructed it twice: once in 2012, when Ina was the client, and again in 2040, when the new owners asked for the villa to be adapted to a plastic-free world without destroying its spirit.

When I found out it was for sale, I was overcome by a force stronger than my will, as if all the gods and demons of the universe were whispering that I had to be at Pervalka 31. Perhaps it was stupidity, perhaps it was providence, but I signed the papers with my mind shrouded in the fog of an August evening, my heart quivering with happiness.

At that moment, it seemed that this villa was the key to a new life, but as soon as I became the official owner, I became frightened and started to avoid any thought of new beginnings or changes.

– Maybe now I don't want a new life that badly, – I say out loud.

– If you wanted a new life, you would change something. – Ah, the digital wisdom of a creature who doesn't need to live and make its own decisions.

One part of me is longing for a fresh start, while the other still dreams of impressing my mother.

My therapist says I should stop seeking Mum's approval, but I still can't help but imagine her stepping with dignity from one floor to the next, with mute admiration for me and my life – for the fact that I have enough money to buy the most expensive villa in Pervalka, featured in the national list of protected architectural monuments, the iconic opus of the world-famous architect Mykolas Anupilas. The villa on whose terraces Carter once drank wine.

Probably the only thing I have enough of is money. When you've worked so hard for so many years, you want success to have material expression. And then you have to spend it somewhere, so that you can hold the result in your hand, to have something at least that you can show to your friends.

A successful woman.

I would like my mother to see me like that, though even I don't believe it.

I watch the spray pouring into the graceful curves of the stone.

A square of sunlight slips through the toes of my feet.

I haven't visited Neringa because I've been busy, I remind myself. I won the Woman of the Year Award. And the President's Order of Merit.

You don't have to feel guilty for living your life, says the angry, shrill voice that just wants me to melt into a dirty puddle on the floor in shame.

I stand rigid as I watch the bathtub fill.

I slowly slip in, watching my skin turn red. It's too hot, but it's so good to feel the burning pain as the water embraces my skin and quickens my breathing.

It's only when I start to boil in the water that I finally dare to articulate to myself what I feel. Even when I'm successfully managing a department of a hundred people and dealing brilliantly with wars in the Congo, the intricacies of Chinese business, and treacherous marketing executives, even if I look at first blush like a solid, exemplary being, I'm actually afraid of Mum.

It's hard even to explain to myself what I'm afraid of. She will never say out loud that the decision to acquire Anupil's masterpiece is simply pathetic or that my life is a futile sprint to nowhere. She will only smile with gentle restraint and be kind to me, but in that kindness, somewhere behind it, lie her real thoughts and the cold damp cellar where my mother's moldy heart lives.

That fucking phony nobility.

She brought me up on her own. The official story is that my dad left us when I was three. I always suspected it was a lie, perhaps some perverse arrangement between them to preserve some shred of my dad's shattered self-esteem. After the divorce, at least he could tell everyone he was sick of that bitch, so he slammed the door and left. But even as a child, I realized that the decision to live on her own had been hers, and my dad was left with no choice but to pack his things and move out of our fine spacious house into a rented flat of fifty square meters. If he could have, he would have stayed and spent his whole life trying in vain to win her heart or solicit a slice of her attention.

It's the same with Mum – the more she withdraws and puts up barriers, the more we all want to get closer and bathe in the light of her grey eyes.

You creep up closer until you're pushed away, and then you lick your wounds for several years. You forget how much it hurts, and you sneak up again.

A vicious circle.

I'm finding it hard to breathe. Sweat starts dripping from my face and my skin turns the color of boiled beetroot juice.

I still don't get out of the bath.

Just a little longer.

Endure.

I'm developing my survival skills.

It's hot.

She's never cruel. At least not at first sight. Everything is concealed. Masked.

My mother has never once said a bad word about my father, although he openly called her a rat in my earshot, and I happily relayed it to her – she just smiled: your dad is having a hard time right now, so we can be a little more forgiving, even though it's not nice to talk about your child's mother like that.

My father was heartbroken and therefore acted like a complete idiot, but at least he was real and alive. With his good sides and all his ugliness, but she never opened the door.

The heat is raising the pulse to hysterical – tick, tick, tick.

My heart is racing out of my chest like a doe that's seen a wolf.

I feel like I'm about to pass out but decide to hold on for another thirty seconds and then get out.

To survive is to endure.

To endure the pain. The anxiety. The horror. And never to show how badly you've been hurt.

You can only survive if no one suspects how weak you are. How angry you are. How full of spite.

My eyes follow the second hand of the clock on the wall, which is turning impossibly slowly. My heart is playing like a low bass, filling the whole bathroom with its panicky vibration.

Thirty.

I try to stand up.

I can't.

I'm so weak that my eyes turn blank. I fall, but I manage to grab the edge of the bath, climb to the other side and, without hitting my head, slip gently onto the marble floor, which burns my heated skin.

I press my cheek against the green-white-grey swirls of stone and run my finger along a crack, watching as it dampens like dew from my heated body.

I gradually catch my breath.

I stretch out my hand and stroke the edge of the tub. This travertine will breathe longer than the blue of the freshly cleaned lagoon.

Mum.

I wonder if she will like it.

Mum and Dad's divorce. Only people who have never loved can be noble and gentle after a life together because for them loneliness doesn't open any wounds. If nothing hurts, you can be polite and civilized. You can say whatever you want, darling.

Because it's doesn't matter to you.

I understand that very well now because I behave the same way myself.

Like Mum.

All my relationships have followed the same script – he tries to charm me, until finally, more out of boredom and sympathy for the other person's suffering, I give in and get drawn into an affair. After a few years, I get so fed up with everything that I start

deliberately torturing him. Innocently at first – pretending you've forgotten his birthday, when you know it's very important to him, and he's hoping for a surprise. You keep asking why he's so tired even though he's beaming with happiness. You don't rejoice in his successes at work. You refuse to have a glass of champagne together to celebrate, excusing yourself with a stomach ache.

This goes on for several months until he finally gets it. He cries. He begs. He then swallows his tears and disappears to wherever he came from.

Perhaps my and my mum's fungi are the kind that want to be alone.

And so, at the age of thirty-three, I decided that enough was enough. Enough of this farce. I'm destined to be alone. It will be better for everyone.

I'm still lying on the floor without the strength to stand up.

I have to get up.

Mum had children, or rather, a child – me – but I refuse to procreate myself. Or my fungus.

It's the only form of protest I can offer.

My dear fungus, you will die with me, you will never swathe a new consciousness with your filaments. You and I are the end of the road. One of the many dead ends of history.

After every separation, I was gentle and noble in the same calculated way that I was cruel, irrational, and stubborn before. The official story is always the same – men keep leaving me. But in reality, my fungus and I just don't have time for other people's feelings and hopes.

Carter is a great lover because he's long dead. And as part of the legend, you get Ina and her mysterious fate, as a free gift. Much better than any real people.

I try to stand up – I need to get dressed and prepare a room for Mum – but my body refuses to obey.

– Are you alright? – Anna asks.

– What do you think? – I hiss.

– Is that a rhetorical question? – She checks. – Because I can answer if you want.

This always happens when I slip out of my scheduled rhythm. Everything would have been fine if I had exercised, worked a bit, and eaten my lunch. Any time that's not clearly defined triggers a panic button in me, and before I know it, I start destroying myself. Automatically.

Mum is a much worse person than I am – that's at least one comfort.

Like the cold stone under my back that penetrates deep into my skin and muscles, locking my joints with waves of cold.

But what if I am a monster after all?

How I Quit

Excerpts translated by *Jayde Will*

9

When it all started, when I started to smoke and why, and why I smoked for twenty years, was it because that others smoked, that during my entire childhood I saw the fuming chimneys of factories, plants, and neighboring buildings, I saw men smoking (women didn't smoke, because back then it wasn't proper for women to smoke in public, and I didn't see women smoking clandestinely), or did I smoke because others smoked, so I'd have something to say, when people don't have anything to say, which is why they pull out cigarettes and have a smoke, or was it so that I'd be more manly, because real men smoked and then reeked of smoke, because that kind of smell suits real men, the smell of war and death, because what do all soldiers ask for before death – to smoke, which is allowed to the condemned before death – to smoke their last cigarette, or maybe I smoked so I would have something to do during breaks at the university, or so I would experience the pleasure imparted by the tobacco smoke, when you pull out a cigarette after having had a few sips of coffee or the first gulp of beer, or stronger drinks, habits can be harmful and beneficial, but the harmful ones are most often pleasant, because they are deadly, while the beneficial ones are boring, because they are oriented towards eternity – eat broccoli and you'll live forever, of course it's a lie, a ruse, and a scam on a grand scale, those useful habits are simply bourgeois and not connected to any sort of eternity at all, but people's mechanisms for fooling themselves are very creative, and the arsenal of those mechanisms is endless, but when it started, the billowing smoke, the hissing stone knuckles, the fired-up stove spewing out columns of steam, the silhouettes of naked bodies, they are sitting in clouds of steam, they are sitting on a platform, which takes one to heaven, which disappears into the clouds, they sit, as if it were the Mount Olympus of Greek gods, naked gods, every one of them sitting on their own platform according to a hierarchy, and the rows of those naked bodies rise higher and higher, who's sitting above on the last platform, it's hard to make out, when the steam dissipates, Zeus appears, the old Russian Safron with his winter hat, the ears of the hat are folded upwards, they look like the wings of Hermes, every time that Zeus moves, they flutter in the air, and Zeus is always moving, always searching, for a Europe to screw, Safron flails his birch branch, whipping his back and yelling something in Ancient Greek: "*Blat', kak chorosho!*"* Zeus whips himself like a medieval Byzantine monk with big black olives in the place of eyes, punishing himself for his sins, but the suffering in the face of the Lord is so pleasant, that Zeus-cum-Byzantine monk-cum Safron shouts at the top of his lungs: "*Kurva, kak chorosho, davai, iesho paru!*"**

* Goddamn, that's so good! (*Russian trans.*)

** Fuck, that's so good, alright, more steam! (*Russian trans.*)

“When I think about smoking, I remember the sauna,” says Sigitas.

“What sauna?” Sara asks.

“The town sauna, back in the day in the towns, there were public saunas, women bathed on Fridays, men on Saturdays, or maybe it was the other way around, Mother used to take me to the women’s sauna when I was little, until one day after I got back from there, I said: the sauna’s not nice, and then mother didn’t take me along anymore to the sauna, my father did, the saunas of the time were such that whether you wanted to or not, you’d start smoking after visiting them a few times.

“I don’t see the connection,” Sara said.

“No one knows what ties connect us to the past, with our subconscious, with our instincts, fears, and preconceived notions, everything sinks deeper and deeper into a mythological fog, which we nonchalantly call the past or memory, but in reality no one knows for sure what sort of ties connect us to the past, memory, with our subconscious, instincts, fears and preconceived notions, or if the information is kept in the catalogues of the brain as intricately constructed cases, or if a spider of the imagination creates a web of associations, which we ourselves ultimately find ourselves in and get tangled up in until the end of our life, I don’t know, the sauna was a big space, along the walls of which benches were placed and there was also one bench in the middle, no one wanted to sit there, because then the entire sauna looked at you washing yourself, whereas near the wall you felt safer and looked at those who sat in the middle on the bench and felt uncomfortable, the water ran from two faucets, hot and cold, you needed to stay with a tin wash basin in your hands in a line near the water, the line never ended, because the first wash basin was for washing with soap, the second for washing the soap off, the third to rinse off, people at the time were frightening, unshaven, with huge toenails, when you stood in line for the water, it looked like you were in line for a gas chamber, there was another area, called the steam area, everybody went there at first, occupying a place in the main area – they poured water into the bowl, put it on the bench, and next to it put the soap, shampoo, and if you had one, a loofah, and you went to the steam area so you could sweat it all out, there was a system of levels, perhaps seven levels, there was always a local Russian hanging out on the top, there were quite a few of them in our town, they had moved there from Slabada, Russians like to beat themselves, they would whip themselves with birch whisks and cry out in satisfaction, occasionally one of the men would open up the upper door of the stove and throw half a bowl of water on the heated stones, and the stove would spit out a hot burst of thick white steam, and everyone sitting on the levels, would grab their ears, just the Russian wouldn’t, because he had a hat with earflaps, he would just whip himself with his whisk and yell out in Ancient Greek: “*Blat’, kak chorosho!*”

One guy’s feet had gotten frostbite and walked poking those stumps into the floor tiles, and that was a horrible image, and how would you not start smoking after seeing such images...

“I still don’t see a connection,” Sara said, stubborn as a goat. “You didn’t start smoking as a teenager.”

“I never told you when I started to smoke.”

“When did you start to smoke?” Sara asked unphased.

“Most likely after I got into university. Though I really started more in the army.”

Sara once again resumed her unsavory business.

“So,” she said, “the sauna isn’t connected with your smoking at all.”

“In my childhood, well, in May at least, and wasn’t every year, there were a lot of cockchafers, giant brown beetles, I would catch one, tie a piece of thread to its leg, and let it go.”

“There’s some sort of Freudian pigsty in your head,” Sara said. “You need a lot of water from a psychotherapist’s jabbering in order to wash shit off it.”

“No one knows what thread connect us to the past, what where and when it started, why it suddenly pops up, why suddenly a morsel in one’s mouth becomes bitter after seeing something...” Sigitas can’t figure out anymore what one would need to see for a morsel in one’s mouth to become bitter, and falls silent.

“I’m telling you – you have shit in your head.” Sara laughs and pulls out a cigarette. He also sticks a cigarette in his mouth.

“I can smoke, because I already quit,” I said. Sara nodded.

“Many of those people, those naked figures, I saw in church, that was a different sort of purification ritual, everyone has clothes on in church, Rome and Constantinople slowly dressed people up, they dressed up the saints, slaughtered the gods of Olympus, and in the church, the Christian Catholic Church, the priest was like a pearl diver, who pulled the shell of the soul from Man’s depths and, waiving the blades of the bloody cross, tries to extract the pearl of repentance from it.

“Maybe that’s the main difference, maybe it’s an old conflict, that torments us, and that conflict is reflected in my conscious – the ancient Greeks, who didn’t think that one needs to separate the body and the soul, and Christianity, which rammed the burning sense of guilt into our heart valves because of the grace of primordial holiness that was lost by Adam and Eve, ordered us to feel ashamed of our filthy body and care only about the salvation of our immortal soul, maybe all of that isn’t about smoking at all, but about an irrational sense of guilt, which I feel since childhood. I thought that priests were like pearl divers, but...”

“As far as I’ve had the chance to see priests,” Sara said, “they certainly aren’t anything like pearl divers, a Catholic priest is your typical obese cook with a greasy and bloody apron...”

Sigitas laughed.

“He pulls out screaming souls from their filthy bodies and throws them into the enormous cauldron of eternity.”

“You told that story so deliciously, I want to eat,” Sara said.

“Ok, let’s go to the center, we’ll grab a bite to eat.”

Sara shook her head

“What is it?” Sigitas asked.

“Did anyone ever tell you that you’re a horribly dull guy?”

“What kind of dull? Like a habit of biting your nails?”

“And there it is.”

It's hard to create distance, it's as if you're looking at yourself dead or you're dead and looking at yourself. You have to abandon that peel, which means being a Lithuanian, tradition, family, culture, and the like, and look at it from the outside, it's very difficult, almost impossible, you'll start to lie, because the truth about yourself is unbearable, or you'll start to hate yourself, because you will always be lying.

There are stages in life when you live and don't see, don't feel, that you're living, and then something happens when you suddenly see, that you have been living for a few years, that your fingers are yellow from nicotine, that you gained a ton of weight, that you almost don't recognize yourself in photos made ten years ago.

"You need to quit smoking," the doctor said. She's almost a different person, she seems older, perhaps because of that she looks wiser, it could be that it really is another person, but the point is the same – we go to the same doctor our whole life. It's not important that the doctors' age, sex, or specialization changes, the doctor is the same the whole time – it's a person who holds the threads of your life in their hands. Sigitas looked at her, he's still thinking how he could look at himself from the outside, though he doesn't need it anymore, he has already seen himself from the outside, smoking two packs a day, gaining more than ten kilograms, going bald, with his graying face. Who changed me, Sigitas thought, where did they put the real me, where did they hide me, why did they stick this horrid person here instead of me...

"Over a long period of time, having high blood pressure, the heart muscle strengthens in such a way that now the high blood pressure has become the norm, and it can only be regulated with medication," the heart specialist said, "but the feeling that you can't breathe, that you're gasping is not because of your heart, but because of a disruption of the sympathetic nervous system." Sigitas listened to her, but heard her as if through a wall that was being pounded by his heart, his proud, absurdly muscle-laden, self-tan lotion-doused, white-toothed grinning moron of a heart, a fucking bodybuilder.

"And it's not connected with the Italian word *simpatico*...I mean, it's nothing pleasant and *sympathetic*, like the meaning in Lithuanian..."

"No," said the doctor.

"Maybe that suffocating isn't even a physiological or neurological problem, maybe I am just being suffocated by cliches, which a person till the age of forty becomes overgrown with in a way that he becomes a fucking loser – someone convinced, someone having experienced something, someone reliable, though in reality all of that is just complacent cliches?"

The doctor didn't say anything, just picked her pen up from the table. The fucking pen.

"That old hag, that old woman, that I told you about," Sigitas said, "That elderly lady – that's that same old lady that Raskolnikov killed with an axe, Kharm's wrote about that, just in Kharm's case the old woman went into the house herself and dies, in other words, if you don't look for fate, fate will find you itself, and that old hag in the mountains, that I struck down, actually she struck me down, she climbed on my chest, she started to choke me..."

Suddenly something changed in the doctor's office, as if a black cloud had descend-

ed, or perhaps the blinds were lowered, but Sigitas had a difficult time making out the doctor sitting across from him, it wasn't a doctor sitting there anymore, but a monk, the Great Fucking Inquisitor, or perhaps an old woman, or perhaps the hag from the mountains, but certainly not the doctor, because when she spoke, Sigitas was paralyzed by a deathly cold, the sort of cold that seems where your back turns into ice and will shatter right then and there, and Sigitas will collapse like a wet rag on the floor...

"You control your body, feel like its master, eat this, don't eat that, do sports, get drunk, procreate, enjoy, torture yourself, pamper yourself, take your body from the trough of one pleasure to another and think that you're different from an animal because you control it after all, you think, you analyze, you choose, you have secrets, your body has many secrets, sometimes those secrets of yours seem like a flaw and shame, you hide them, you hide them even from yourself, and sometimes you think that those secrets, those flaws, that shame are advantages of your body, but at the same time they are your advantages, and you reveal them, you publicize them, you speak about the dark secrets of your body, about the most disgusting parts of your body like a victory, like it's your victory, your body is an altar for you, where sacrifices are offered up to you, your body is a scaffolding on which all that displeases you is condemned and tortured, a world that has wronged you, your body seems like a private territory for you, into which only preferred people and instruments are allowed into, and that is just in the worst case, when you need to fix up the body a little, but precisely when the problem is bigger, you suddenly understand that you are not its owner at all, when the problem is serious, you can't trade it in, give it back and ask for another newer, better one, you dream about that, but in reality you can't do anything, this vessel is disposable and can't be returned, when the time comes, when you'll be powerless, when you won't be able to clean up your own shit, when you can't even wipe off your own saliva anymore, then they will pull you out of your body like a snail, rip the pearl of your soul from that smashed shell and throw it to the pigs, and your body, that feeble casing, will have become a pile of wet paper, only the worms will care about it.

Sigitas is unable to utter a word out of surprise, he looks at that creature, at a shadow, sitting across the table, he understands that it can't be like that, but it is, and what is horrible, so horrible, that an iceberg is already sitting in his intestines, with the Great Inquisitor squatting on its tip.

"You need to quit smoking," the doctor says and writes something down without raising her head, through the window one can see a tree, a bit further, behind the hill – a cemetery, and his chest is flooded with a good feeling, it appears that it's some sort of defensive trick of the psyche, when we are really afraid of something, are extremely disappointed, when we have totally lost hope, when we think, that the world is a fucking shithole and that there is *darkness there and nothing more*, suddenly the most trivial idea crosses his mind, that hey, the silhouette of that tree is very beautiful, that the sun's rays, dripping through the yellowish maple leaves, create an extraordinary ornament, and – which is totally stupid and shameful – a thought turns up from the depths of his consciousness somewhere, that everything will be fine. And you know that all of that is a trick, a lie, that the instinct of self-preservation somehow organized a circular defense, and afterwards, having fashioned an arc of hope, penetrated the Troy of skepticism, looming on the hills of the conscious...and then it starts all over again.

Dangerous Words

Excerpt translated by *Romas Kinka*

1.

It seemed to many at the theatre that Odin the director had not died of a heart attack. Even though that was the official version.

It seemed to many at the theatre that he had died because he chose the wrong Word. As the Bible says, in the beginning was the Word. And it was not the right one.

And then a vacancy came up at the theatre and a chance for director Safyrov to rise from the dead.

It was from Odin, the old director, that Safyrov inherited his office and the Verdi opera on which work had already begun.

Not a popular Verdi opera but one rarely put on. And besides that – one with a superstition!

Its whole name could not be uttered out loud: that would bring misfortune on the troupe, the performance of the opera, and the whole theatre.

The title had just two words. Director Odin had chosen *La forza*, the name by which it was always called in Europe. He had chosen *La forza* and died. He had done everything correctly and look what happened!

In a word, words had to be chosen carefully.

After Odin's death a heresy arose, namely that the name of the Opera had initially to be translated. After all, the name of the Opera would be written in our language and not in Italian. And with the translation of the name everything was turned around – the second word became the first!

'All that's left is to give in to Destiny,' said director Safyrov on making his acquaintance with the troupe.

He said the word and did not die.

* * *

It seemed to Director Safyrov they were all looking at him coldly and that is why he had climbed through the window.

He did this three times so that those singing wooden horses would understand without words what improvisational art is.

Unlike director Odin, Safyrov was not an opera director but a theatre director and looked for quite different things on the stage. To tell the truth, he hated opera but after all of life's vicissitudes he was prepared to carry whatever cross he came across.

'Not like a robber! Not like a robber!' shouted director Safyrov while he crawled through the window for the last time. 'But proudly. With your head held high! After all,

it's a lady you're going to see! You can't do that on your side or your bottom! Even if that's more comfortable.'

It was only the young Don Alvaro he was teaching how to get in through the window, but everyone was listening to him. It would've been better if Safyrov hadn't shouted anything about 'the lady' because the cold eyes looking at him with suspicion instantly glazed over with frost.

'Proudly,' repeated Safyrov. 'With head held high!' trying to make everyone looking at him forget about 'that' lady. Both 'that' lady and all the other ladies who had carried away his life and his fantasies. Who had pushed him for all eternity into a non-existence with piquant memories of twenty, ten and six years ago. And if Odin had not suddenly died, Safyrov might never have returned from that non-existence.

At least that is how the first two years full of emptiness had seemed to him.

Tenor Don Alvaro the horse seemed to Safyrov not to be wooden and even reminded him of himself in his youth, and that is why Safyrov from the very beginning started with him, as if trying to rewrite himself and his own past.

'One shouldn't look back,' said Safyrov.

Don Alvaro, now climbing through the window with pride, did not look back.

That phrase 'one shouldn't look back' was not aimed at him or more precisely – not at him alone but at all of them.

'One shouldn't look back,' repeated Safyrov.

That 'one shouldn't look back' could also have meant everything would be different from now.

Both generally speaking at the theatre and specifically on the stage. That could've meant one should forget director Odin's classic old-fashioned method: to create a character exclusively with one's voice.

That 'one shouldn't look back' could also have meant one should forget everything anyone had ever heard about Safyrov, his adventures and failures.

And not to look with eyes of ice. Because now everything would be different.

'And what if I were to jump through the window?' asked Don Alvaro.

He was one of those who wanted to best his teacher straight away and that is why he immediately showed his talent as a jumper by knocking into the temporary set, and, out of inertia taking several steps up to Curra the maid, who was standing in the wrong place, knocking her over as well.

'Idiot,' Curra the grey-haired maid said loudly while lying on the floor.

She lay there thinking of how to best to get back up on her feet from her position lying in the dust looking like a star fish. It was clear that the wisest thing for her would be to make a joke of it all while at the same time not look like a joke. Especially when you're fifty plus. And Curra was a lady of fifty plus, who had kept her figure and her looks and who was Odin's lover, as her colleagues at the theatre said behind her back. The very Last One.

As director Odin's lover she wanted a lot and wanted everything and so she sang everything that came along, all the major roles, ones that were often not suitable for her, lost her voice and sank to the level of maids. And there was no one to give her a helping hand in that situation.

However, only one person - the Marquis of Calatrava - laughed openly as he looked down at the star lying there. Coughing in a deep bass and snorting. Maybe that was the effect of treatment of alcohol abuse with coding or perhaps, when you are over sixty, the opera theatre's honoured bass and your wife is the theatre's chief accountant, caution is reduced to a dangerous minimum.

'Next time you think of jumping rehearse a bit,' said Curra through her teeth to Don Alvaro, but getting up on her feet and smiling at everyone artificially.

One had to act carefully with Curra. It was only now in this production that she was a maid but at the theatre she belonged to the most dangerous clan best avoided at all costs: one could be eaten alive.

But even she should have seen that it had not been done on purpose, that Don Alvaro had a completely different motive: to show off to the new director and make an impression on the Gypsy.

'Another incident like this and you're going to be singing like a mezzosoprano or, in the best-case scenario, like a contralto,' commented the Marquis of Calatrava, pushing Don Alvaro as he was getting up.

His sense of humour was most often limited to castrati, their sympathisers, and other bodily things. And, generally speaking, in art it was physiology he liked most.

The general emotional temperature in the hall rose by at least ten degrees, and that meant that Safyrov's climbing through the window was not in vain, a live conflict developed on stage and now what also developed was the possibility to begin work.

With Don Alvaro, of course, it was easiest. He was young, obviously seeking attention and recognition at any cost, and he could easily accept any instruction or advice from such a famous director as fatherly love.

But what could one do with someone like the Marquis of Calatrava? This was not the first time that Safyrov had had to contend with him. Even though Safyrov's memory had completely erased his first name and surname. The first time was twenty years ago in the same theatre when Safyrov was trying to prove he was a director.

And if, drawing on his memories of the Marquis of Calatrava, he had to sum up or introduce this colossal embodiment of contempt in one word to anyone, that word would be 'schemer'.

Fortunately, young Don Alvaro accidentally shoots the Marquis of Calatrava in the first act and no one has to work with the Marquis of Calatrava after that. He can go straight home.

What can one do with someone like the Marquis of Calatrava?

Safyrov had a lot of experience of working in the theatre and was easily able to identify who had the deadliest saliva and the sharpest teeth in any troupe.

Safyrov decided the only right approach in a duel with the Marquis of Calatrava was to constantly praise him.

'Forget the past. In everything you do, there cannot be anything superfluous,' explained Safyrov to Don Alvaro. 'Less theatre, more life.'

It seemed to Safyrov that Don Alvaro was like him not just in profile and en face but also in his thinking and perhaps he even had the same goals as Safyrov did when he was his age. Intuitively, Safyrov felt it was with Don Alvaro that it would be easiest

to find a common language. After all, finding a common language with people is not easy, especially with women. They were a species of primates particularly gifted with fantasy. You say something to a woman, putting her hand on your shoulder or somewhere else, and she will see something completely different behind those words and that hand. Twenty or ten years pass... but they don't want to forget that 'something completely different' because they even take medicine to boost their memory. And what then? And then, suddenly, they decide to remember some facts publicly and tell them to others. And what facts can one remember after twenty years? As neuroscientists say, it's no longer possible to remember anything, it's only possible to reinvent things. And then because of those fantasies and memories of 'facts' worthy people are thrown out of their jobs.

Safyrov was treading a new path, but the past did not want to let go of him.

'I want you to show the audience how you love and how you die not only through gestures. I want you to love and die on the stage,' said Safyrov.

It was as difficult to find a common language with theatre actors as it was with women. They neither wanted to love nor die on the stage. It seemed that all the time they were only thinking about their voices and not thinking at all about their hands and feet, well, unless it was the women.

Safyrov tried not to return to the subject of women.

* * *

On his first day director Safyrov hung an engraving on the wall of his new office, in the engraving was a dandy, his face contorted with anguish, on his knees praying to Heaven, and around him only swine or, one might say, boars with bristles.

It was on the second day that someone at the theatre identified the engraving as being by Dürer.

What did the picture with the swine symbolise?

Director Safyrov's repentance and his attitude, as a person, to the troupe?

Some inevitable questions arose.

'He regards all women as swine. Even though, if one gives the matter more thought, he used to regard them as sheep,' summed up the one-eyed and only hairdresser at the theatre after weighing up the available information,

And how was one to take what the theatre's one-eyed only hairdresser had to say? After all, she was tone deaf. Even though she hears everything, even the things she shouldn't.

There weren't many at the theatre who knew that the Dürer engraving, stuck with scotch tape on the white wall of Safyrov's new office, was called the *Prodigal Son*. And that he, Safyrov, was the prodigal son but without the swine.

The swine were not the cause of everything but the result of everything.

The swine were the Punishment in the biblical sense of the word. For going astray.

For everything.

'There is good luck in all of that suffering... in the crucifixion of oneself... on Golgotha,' said Safyrov loudly to himself and to everyone, trying to die and love and sing and not look wooden on the stage.

‘I understand that to sing and proudly climb through a window is difficult. But that – that is your good fortune. Your good fortune at every agonising step you take: both when you experience a crisis and when you’re so frightened that your body trembles before you go on the stage. Without all of that you will never experience what it is to serve the theatre,’ said Safyrov to himself and to the world.

He wanted everyone to think about their personal suffering, their personal crucifixion, and their personal Golgotha, but, after catching the occasional glances of the others, the thought kept coming to him that they were not looking at themselves but at him and were seeing his Golgotha and not feeling in the least sorry for him.

There wasn’t a person on the stage who hadn’t heard of the theory of good luck in suffering. It would reach the future stars of the stage and backstage when they were still at the Theatre Academy. Good luck in suffering – that was the basic truth on which the theatre stood. However, each director could apply new colours or, to be more exact, new forms to suffering.

On this occasion, Safyrov went further than others had done in clarifying and explaining to others the meaning of good luck in suffering.

‘Our suffering,’ said Safyrov. ‘Our suffering is the salvation of those who come to see us. Looking at us, at the suffering we show, they slowly heal their own suffering. You – you are missionaries. That is the mission of all of us. Even though we haven’t taken the Hippocratic Oath. And how will you show great suffering, if you are not the embodiment of it in all its poses ... no, not in its poses,’ said Safyrov hesitating. ‘Not in its poses ...’

The young Gypsy standing in the shadows sniggered loudly, but Safyrov did not turn around. He hadn’t looked a woman in the eyes these two years past. He had had enough of women. It would be best if all the roles could be performed by men, but this was musical theatre, and you couldn’t replace sopranos with tenors or baritones.

‘And how can you show great suffering if you yourself haven’t experienced it in all its forms?’ asked Safyrov, correcting himself.

The fact that Odin in dying had left him an opera and not an operetta to finish, made Safyrov, it must be said, happy.

There is no morality in operettas and never had there been.

In an operetta everyone engages in something only to the extent that they are pretending to be someone else than in the official libretto and are trying to seduce someone amorally while howling songs of questionable merit. Generally speaking, operetta as a genre can be ascribed to one of the minor forms of amorality.

Only opera, only tragic opera with a curse attached could raise Safyrov above all earthly tragedies and return to him everything that he had lost because of the fabrications and grievances of women and show his true power.

But let us return to Dürer’s engraving.

Apart from the swine, there was another interesting nuance.

Dürer transferred that biblical story of the son, who had gone astray and found himself amongst swine, to a 15th century West European architectural landscape. Setting it in amongst Bavarian houses. He had done something no one else around him was doing.

For this innovation Dürer was especially praised after his death by art historians and pseudobiographers from different centuries.

Probably that was what was most important to Safyrov. No, not the praise, or to be more exact, not just the praise - that came second. The most important thing to Safyrov was that Dürer had transposed an old story to a new environment, one very well known to the inhabitants of Bavaria. In short: he took that more than one-thousand-year-old biblical story and made it relevant to the environment and time he was living in.

And Relevance was Safyrov's basic creative principle and, as the critics wrote, what he did was simply magical.

'Sorry!' Patria called out from the darkened hall. 'I have an urgent question.'

Safyrov turned around to make sure that was really Patria.

Patria was not a role but the shortened form of the name Patricia, even though, if one were to go deeper into things, Patria was both a name and a role. Or a role fitting Patria's name.

Patria did not serve the theatre but higher ideas. She was simply in charge of the theatre and for that reason not to listen to her would have been both unwise and perhaps even dangerous.

Patria stood in the darkened hall, she always stood in the darkened hall or in a darkened corridor and therefore there was nothing to write about her apart from the fact that Patria always observed the world from the anonymity of darkness.

'What's the question?' Safyrov asked the darkness.

'It's regarding Curra, the Gypsy and the Mayor of the Town of Hornachuelos,' Patria answered from the darkness of the hall.

'And what about them?' asked Safyrov not understanding the question.

At first glance it was really hard to understand what the connection between Curra, the Gypsy and the Mayor of the town of Hornachuelos was and why they were asking any questions.

'We can't include these characters in the libretto,' Patria explained from the darkness.

'Why can't we?' asked Safyrov. 'If they're already included in the libretto?'

'First of all, we can't in this day and age use the name Curra' for women,' explained Patria.

'Why can't we?' asked Safyrov.

'Because one can find unnecessary subtexts in that word and cause a scandal,' explained Patria.

'Perhaps that would be good thing?' asked Safyrov.

Safyrov found Patria standing behind his back tiring.

'That could cost us, and the opera might have to be completely cancelled almost as soon as it's been put on,' explained Patria.

That was how things seemed to her standing in the darkness.

'Nowadays we have to be very careful,' explained Patria. 'Couldn't we call the maid, for example, Cu-ra-ra?'

'We couldn't call her Curara,' said Safyrov. 'Curra is a good-hearted maid, and not a maid who's a poisoner. That would be the wrong con-no-tation.'

* 1. Translator's notes (here and below). The Russian word *кура* [kura], meaning 'hen' or 'chicken', is used colloquially in a derogatory way of women.

‘But perhaps we could call her Curie?’ asked Patria.

As far as I’m concerned, we could call them all Curie, thought Safyrov, but didn’t say it. Patria was precisely the person in talking to whom one had to think about words.

About what you were saying.

‘It could be Curie,’ Safyrov agreed without any further discussion.

‘Very good,’ said Patria. ‘And now about the Gypsy.’

‘But I want to be a Gypsy!’ the young Gypsy cried out unhappy.

She really did have the talents of a fortune-teller/psychic to understand people without any words being spoken, to quickly sense and assess danger and had no inner conflicts with the character she was going play. She even looked like her character – with her long black curly hair and black eyes, as if nature itself had destined her for that role.

‘No one’s asking what you want, complex matters are being decided here,’ said Patria.

It became clear to everyone on the stage what Patria wanted from the Gypsy, but no one interfered. In matters like this everyone was out only for themselves.

‘This is 18th century Seville!’ the Gypsy shouted from the stage into the darkness. ‘When Gypsies were gypsies.’

‘But outside these walls it’s the 21st century,’ said Patria from the darkness. ‘We might all have to answer for those sorts of names for the characters.’

‘So, call me Gitana,’ said the Gypsy. ‘If it’s that bad.’

‘Curie, Gitana ...’ Patria affirmed in the darkness. ‘What’s left is the Mayor of Hornachuelos.’

‘And what about Hornachuelos?’ asked Safyrov. ‘It’s the name of a Spanish town.’

‘But it sounds like a Russian swear word,’ explained Patria.*

‘You can change it to whatever you want,’ said the Mayor of Hornachuelos. ‘I’m very happy to agree. My wife also agrees.’

The Gypsy sniggered behind his back, even though she didn’t know the wife of the Mayor of Hornachuelos and couldn’t imagine what she looked like or even if he really had a wife.

‘It’s all very simple,’ said Patria. ‘We’ll change the Mayor of the Town of Hornachuelos to the Mayor of the Town of Hornačuelos. That’ll be fine and even the State Language Control Inspectorate won’t get at us.’

‘Anything else?’ asked Safyrov in mild irritation.

So far, nothing serious had been sacrificed, but he found Patria’s interference and involvement in the processes irritating.

The theatre is a kind of closed Zone and as a normal closed Zone it has its principles.

If in a normal Zone the basic principles are not to collaborate with the administration and not have any debts, then the basic principles of this theatrical Zone are not to collaborate with Patria and not take part in filmed advertisements. In short, not to tarnish one’s good reputation and try one’s hardest not to lose face.

But to completely pay no attention to Patria, to ignore her and tell her to mind her own business would be very unwise.

* The Russian slang word хуйло [khuylo] – with the root хуй meaning ‘penis’ – is used as an insult.

That could destroy one's whole theatrical career.

'According to the libretto Don Alvaro is a proud descendant of the Incas of West India,' said Patria.

Both Don Alvaro and Safyrov completely agreed with that. With him being a proud descendant of the Incas of West India.

'And a natural question arises for me, why do we see him like that?' Patria asked from the darkness.

'As a proud descendant of the Incas of West India?' asked Safyrov.

'As a robber or a violent person,' explained Patria.

'That's not how we're portraying him,' replied Safyrov, 'It's just that after he climbs in through the window it seems to him that his beloved no longer loves him and as a proud descendant of the Incas of West India, he reacts temperamentally to that.'

'If he were to really strangle her, we'd have a full theatre,' the Marquis of Calatrava mumbled in a low voice several times.

He liked various kinds of physiology and violence on the stage.

Wouldn't it be possible to somehow change or somehow get across that Donna Leonora is not torn between her love for her Father the Marquis of Calatrava and Don Alvaro, the proud descendant of the Incas of West India, but between her love for her Homeland and the new European values,' asked Patria.

'She's not a Ph.D.,' said Safyrov through his gritted teeth. She's not even a university laboratory technician.'

He didn't want to talk about Donna Leonora at all.

'Another natural question has occurred to me: what's the Marquis of Calatrava doing in his daughter's room at midnight? Isn't it possible to discern some dangerous aspect in that?' Patria, standing in the darkness, continued to get at Safyrov and now the Marquis of Calatrava.

'What dangerous aspect?' asked Safyrov.

'Paedophilia,' answered Patria from the darkness.

'She's over eighteen years old, and the first time the Marquis of Calatrava goes into his daughter's bedroom is to wish her goodnight and to say he won't agree to allow her to marry Don Alvaro, and the second time is when he runs into her room when he hears a noise,' explains Safyrov.

It seemed to Safyrov that after she'd heard his logical explanation Patria had disappeared in the darkness and now it would again be possible to work. He raised his arms and opened his mouth to speak...

'And that's not everything,' one could hear Patria's voice again coming from the darkness. 'Couldn't we change the proud descendant of the Incas of West India to someone more relevant to these times?'

The words 'more relevant' acted as a catalyst in Safyrov's brain.

'To what exactly?' asked Safyrov.

'To a Turkish, Kurdish or Senegalese refugee.

'We'll give that some thought,' said Safyrov most probably having himself and the world in mind. Patria was most probably satisfied with that answer and melted into the darkness.

The Marquis of Calatrava mischievously hummed a short *Destiny* motif from the not short overture to *Destiny*.

‘And now we’re going to learn to throw things,’ said Safyrov.

After Patria, he needed to calm himself down and to calm down the others. And to think about the cost of his new cross.

Drama actors learn how to throw things in their first course, but no one teaches opera soloists things like that. And that’s why they don’t know how to. How to throw things, how to fall down, how to show their emotions, how to show what they want. They just stand there like singing scenery and think about their melismas.

Their heads are simply formatted differently, thought Safyrov.

‘One can throw anything in a multitude of different ways,’ said Safyrov. ‘One has to choose the most efficacious way.’

‘The most effective?’ enquired the Gypsy.

Her view of the world was very pragmatic.

‘The most efficacious,’ explained Safyrov. ‘So that the audience can see things from the balcony and remember things for a long time. You have to learn how to throw things even when not actually holding anything. For example, we throw a pen in one way and a laptop in a completely different way,’ said Safyrov. ‘To throw something is an art.’

‘To throw something and not to get at all hurt,’ murmured the Marquis of Calatrava using veiled metaphors.

The Gypsy, sorry, now Gitana, sniggered.

The thing that had to be thrown was a pistol. And that’s not just funiculi, funiculà.

The pistol had to be thrown by the proud descendant of the Incas of West India and that’s why he was irritated. And everyone else was just looking at Don Alvaro to see how he was going to throw it, and only wanting to throw something themselves.

‘Each of you think what your character can throw in order to reveal themselves in that role,’ said Safyrov. ‘Your body will tell you how you should act. Listen not just to your voice, as you’ve all been doing up till now, but to your body as well. First, learn to listen to your body, and then – while you’re listening to your body – sing.’

The pistol was a prop, so there was nothing to be afraid of.

Don Alvaro tried to throw the prop pistol holding it by the handle and holding it by the barrel, and in such a way as to make the handle spin in the air, as well as from the top to the bottom, and then simply let go of it raising his arms.

The plot of this scene is simple: Don Alvaro, the Proud descendant of the Incas of West India, wants to marry the Noble Donna Leonora, the daughter of the Marquis of Calatrava. In short, a terrible mésalliance.

The Marquis of Calatrava, the father of Donna Leonora, comes to visit her at night and strictly orders her, his daughter, to forever forget about Don Alvaro! Whereas Donna Leonora had already promised Don Alvaro to secretly elope with him that very night. And she had already told her maid Curra about her promise. Sorry, Curie.

Donna Leonora is torn between her father and her beloved, in short, she is wavering. And when Don Alvaro, all worked up after his ride and from love, proudly enters through the window, it initially seems to him that Donna Leonora no longer loves him.

Whereas she is simply wavering. But even though she is wavering she immediately

starts singing with him 'I am yours, I am yours, with all my heart and all my life,' and at this point, on hearing the noise, her Father the Marquis of Calatrava, rushes into the room and believes that Donna Leonora has lost her honour. That she has lost both her honour and the honour of the house.

Whereas she is only wavering.

Don Alvaro swears in song to Donna Leonora's father the Marquis of Calatrava that she had not lost any honour. Not her own and moreover not of this honourable house.

She is only wavering.

And in order to prove that the proud descendant of the Incas of West India is ready to accept an honourable death at the *épée* of the Marquis. Ready to accept death and is not even getting ready to defend himself with his pistol. Unfortunately, the pistol falls to the floor and fires unexpectedly from the impact, the bullet hitting the Marquis.

Donna Leonora just staggers.

The Marquis of Calatrava collapses epically and in dying curses his daughter Donna Leonora. Curses her and that will now be her Fate.

The Marquis of Calatrava goes home immediately after collapsing. Everyone breathes a sigh of relief.

'Has Patria left?' enquires Safyrov speaking into the darkness. 'Perhaps Don Alvaro, the proud descendant of the Incas of West India, shouldn't have a pistol? Never mind shooting someone by accident. Perhaps it's politically incorrect in this day and age? What could one substitute for the pistol?

'A mobile phone,' says the Marquis of Calatrava.

Everyone was already getting ready to go home, some of them maliciously humming a fragment from *Destiny* from the overture to *Destiny*, some of them thinking what they could throw at somebody.

Donna Leonora was standing in the middle of the stage, but Safyrov didn't glance at her neither during the entirety of the rehearsal nor when everyone was leaving and saying their goodbyes.

And even when he was speaking about her to others, he spoke about her unwillingly and in the third person.

Some Unfinished Business

Originally written in English

1

Pažaislis Monastery Asylum Soviet Socialist Republic of Lithuania, 1959

Martin Gingerly set his knapsack on the stone floor and winced at the clinking it made despite his care. He listened for a moment, but there was no other sound or movement in the gloom of the church. He looked up.

High in the cupola's frescoes, the Virgin Mary was being crowned and an orchestra of angels played lutes, harps, and cymbals. Other angels, from seraphim to cherubim, spilled across the heavens and the many martyrs displayed their wounds. But the light was poor and the heavens were very far above. It was hard to make out finer details.

This milling crowd of saints and sinners peering down from the frescoes in the dome of the church tended to frighten any patients who appeared below. Even a healthy mind might have trouble with this kind of divine display and scrutiny. If the uneasy souls below had demons in them, those devils became uneasy and began to squirm, precipitating tremors in some and shrieks of fear and rage in others.

Even simple depressives and neurotics could not resist looking and suffering the kind of moral vertigo an inexperienced alpinist suffered by looking down. As a result, none of the troubled internees could be allowed into the old baroque church of the former monastery. Far better to close that door and use the old church only for storage.

In any case, these days the heavenly hosts didn't pay much attention to what went on below. Those on the ground had to settle their own affairs now, to determine what was a sin and what was not, and to apportion reward or punishment on a scale with variable weights.

Martin had stumbled into the place while searching for a certain patient. Obviously, he wasn't in here. The rest of the former monastery complex was a useful sanatorium for its dozens of cells among several wings. The massive wooden doors and high walls contained the troubled and murmuring invalids, each assigned to a particular wing for those with a particular affliction.

Martin stood in the dim light of the church and surveyed the storage boxes, old beds, broken chairs, and stacks of manila folders bulging with histories of psychosis and tied up with black ribbons. Outside, it was a spring evening, and up at this northern latitude it would still be light for very long. Not inside the church, though. Here came only cycles of perpetual dusk followed by darkness.

Martin wore sturdy working men's clothes and a short-billed cap on his head because he had lost his hair in a fever in the gulag. He was only twenty-six. Some of the

years had been difficult and made him look older, but he had borne a great deal and come out stronger for it. Others had broken, but he refused to break.

The Pažaislis Monastery was a convent no more, its nuns evicted and scattered in 1948. The Soviets went about their activities: closing the monasteries, confiscating the farms, taking away the businesses and shipping off streams of men, women, and children in a river of humanity to the far reaches of the massive prison state. The Komi Republic, Krasnoyarsk, Irkutsk, and other locations were very far away from the newly-annexed, formerly independent state of Lithuania.

Now Pažaislis was a crumbling asylum near Kaunas, a place where the mentally unstable were kept in the cells of former nuns who were making their precarious way as unmarried women in the Soviet world. Where once there was prayer, now there was madness. The grounds were walled to contain it, albeit imperfectly, and the madness pooled here and there and bled out everywhere, and after a while, it didn't even feel like madness any longer, just the way of life in this country.

Such an unhappy place in such an unlucky country! First came the Soviets in 1940, arresting and deporting and leaving a trail of murdered bodies as they fled before the Nazis in 1941. Then came the many tens of thousands of deaths, mostly of Jews, killed by the Germans and their local collaborators. In 1944, the Soviets returned. Those who could, those with a little education, fled west. Those caught behind had to adapt or resist. Resisters were doomed to die eventually, but those who chose to adapt were sometimes lucky. Many times not.

The asylum was not all that far from Vilnius, but it had taken Martin a day of hitchhiking rides and then walking out to the countryside near Kaunas under light rain. He was wet, but as a former farm boy and prisoner was not greatly inconvenienced by a little bad weather. His backpack was heavy and its contents were fragile, but he had once returned across all of Russia with more weight than this.

It had not been easy to find the man he was looking for, but the gentle library director back in Vilnius seemed to know just about everything there was to know about everyone in the small country.

"No one likes to talk about Kostas much," said Director Stonkus, studying the spine of a Polish volume bound in leather. Many subjects were too risky to talk about. Silence was safest. The Lithuanians even had a saying, about the virtues of silence. *Tyla gera byla* – silence is the best defence. Maybe the idea was never to be noticed at all, to behave like a mouse and to lose the squeak.

It was a sign of the director's regard for Martin that he spoke at all about the private life of the esteemed Kostas.

"His drinking was completely out of hand. You saw him here that day when you were married, but that was nothing compared to what came later. He couldn't go out to children's events any more. He sat at the bar in the commissary in the basement of the Writers' Union all day long. Even his wife couldn't lure him home. His skin turned yellow. I expected his liver to explode at any moment. It still might, with what he put it through. And worst of all, he started to talk all sorts of nonsense after he'd been drinking for a while."

Director Stonkus stopped there like a man who decided he had said too much. Like Kostas, he had violated the rule of silence and now seemed to regret it. One must never

talk too much in the Soviet Union, unless on certain subjects. Stonkus opened the book and began to read it silently, but Martin could not let it go at that.

“So Kostas is still down there at the Writers’ Union Bar?”

Stonkus looked up at him, exasperated. “Mr. Kostas is recovering in a rest home near Kaunas and I am sure the whole nation wishes him quick recovery from his illness so he can return to his valuable work.”

Pažaislis was not an ordinary drunk tank. A man of Kostas’s stature received the best treatment, and the Pažaislis rehabilitation facility was intended for party members. But even the best rehab centre in the Soviet Union had only a mouldering former nun’s cell where the man was locked in a room between injections and cleanings in order to shout, tremble, and weep his way through his withdrawal.

The asylum was imperfectly restricted territory. There were walls, but they were in poor repair and easily breached in several places. There was a doorman at the front gate, but he went for walks and napped right in his chair. It took a while for Martin to get his bearings once he was inside.

The night shift orderlies in the lunchroom didn’t care who Martin was. They told him the cell doors were locked for the night. These men were thuggish but corruptible, and one bottle of vodka was all it took to find out where Kostas was and that the windows on the ground floor of his wing were barred with hinges and clasps on the outside. After all, no one expected anyone to break *into* one of those rooms.

“Lights out” was more an aspiration than a reality in this northern climate, where the summer sky was barely willing to darken at ten in the evening. Only a skeleton crew stayed behind for the evening and night, and part of that crew could be counted upon to be sitting at the night station with a bottle of vodka. Given Martin’s donation, they now had a second one, and besides, it was Saturday night and no important administrators would be showing up the next morning. The orderlies saw no relationship between their own drinking and that of the recovering alcoholics in their cells.

The evening was still bright, but it didn’t really matter because there were no guards patrolling the property. Martin made his way through the yard past broken farm machinery unused for a very long time, a rusted-out Studebaker truck, one of the many given to the Soviets by the Americans during the war.

He made his way across the unkempt yard and peered through the window into the cell. The walls had not been painted in a long time and what paint there was came flaking off. Kostas lay on his narrow cot with his eyes closed. He twitched like someone in a dream remembering a blow or an insult. Martin smeared a little grease to loosen the pin that held the bars shut and a little more on the hinges. The metal still squeaked as he opened the bars. He pushed open the window, set his heavy bag inside, and then climbed in.

Kostas had turned on his side, and his eyes were open as he watched Martin reach back outside to pull the bars shut. Kostas’s greying hair had been cut short in the hospital, but the widow’s peak was still there. His skin was a ghastly shade of yellow that showed the damage to his liver, and his eyes were watery. He wore a stained, grey smock over underclothes.

“Close the window too,” said Kostas. “The place is drafty.”

The room contained a chair and a small table with a pitcher of water on it and a glass. There were two buckets at the end of the bed, but thankfully, these were both empty.

“You don’t seem surprised to see me,” said Martin. “Do you know who I am?”

“I have no idea.”

“But I remember you all too well,” said Martin.

The House Over the River

Short story translated by Jayde Will

PAVLOV'S DOGS

Excerpts from an assistant's diary

February 5th, 1926

That wind and darkness are so oppressive – I loathe winter. But how wonderful it is to come to the laboratory and see that marvelous man, his smile, his eyes – so good and just. When Ivan Petrovich appears, it's like everything becomes brighter. I still most likely don't quite realize what an honor and joy it is to work with this genius. What's most important is how warm and polite he is, but his glance is enough for any brewing quarrels to settle down – his authority is so all-encompassing that even the soldiers that are guarding our institute, it appears, grow pale at the sight of him. Even the bourgeoisies respect him. And there most certainly is respect – it's no accident that Ivan Petrovich received the Nobel Prize in 1904. To be honest, I don't exactly understand why he accepted it, but perhaps it's simply human error. On the other hand, in that horrid tsarist regime, one had to find an opportunity to advance proletarian science. And Ivan Petrovich Pavlov is an example of how proletarian science breaks the ice of the bourgeoisie. Because Ivan Petrovich is a true proletarian (despite the fact that he tells abhorrent anecdotes).

February 15th, 1926

How farsighted comrade Vladimir Ilyich Lenin was. When hunger raged and poverty was rife everywhere, he was able to tend to science. And that is always critical. Proletarian science is the future of our country and a necessity. And how much pain and suffering our great scientists had to bear. A case in point – all the dogs that were in Koltushi died after the revolution. Because of improper feeding. When Ivan Petrovich talked about this, he even got upset. He had thought that all was lost, that all was for naught. Then he asked comrade Lenin to release him from his beloved homeland. He saw no other solution than to leave (though it seems to me that Ivan Petrovich was bluffing). But he did not leave, because comrade Lenin did everything so that Academic Pavlov had the conditions for work and experiments. Because they were not just experiments, but ones of utter importance, which our proletarian health will depend on in the future. But there are still unenlightened and ignorant people that do not understand this. For example, Nikifor, our building caretaker, mutters and waves his hand dismissively: “Science, science, what sort of science is that of yours, you wretched people. All you do is chop up dogs.” It's horrible that there are such blind and stupid people. Now I am thinking that perhaps it's my duty as a Communist Youth to report such words by that swine of a building caretaker?

February 16th, 1926

I read Sechenov's book for the third time already. A fantastic work. A genius book, just not supported by experiments – that's what comrade Pavlov said about it. It seems I am already understanding why he is so enamored by this work.

February 17th, 1926

Comrade Pavlov trusts me more and more. For example, today – we drove to visit his old acquaintance Nikolai Yuryevich Obolensky. That Obolensky lives with his missus in the middle of the city, in pain and emptiness. He is gray, just like the walls there. Ivan Petrovich sat on his gray bed and took that gray hand of his, not bothered one bit by either the smell or the atmosphere. All the lady of the house did was blow her nose. “My condolences, Marya Alexandrova,” Ivan Petrovich said. And you felt how saddened he was. When we left that gray house, when we drove to Koltushi, Comrade Pavlov sighed and said, “De La Mettrie was right – man is a machine – only a machine made out of flesh and bones.”

February 26th, 1926

The anatomy of the human mouth is almost the same as that of a dog's mouth. To be honest, I wasn't very surprised by that. Evolution affects us all the same, people and dogs.

March 5th, 1926

That can't be true, can it? I found out that Serafima Vasilyevna believes in God. I couldn't believe it, I couldn't believe it, I couldn't believe, though I heard all sorts of rumors. How could she be the wife of Academic Pavlov and believe in God? After all, the bourgeoisie poison can bury itself into us very deeply. I saw with my own eyes how Serafima Vasilyevna made the sign of the cross. Now I can justify comrade Pavlov and his deep proletarian friendship with Marina Kapitonovna. After all, how difficult it must be as a scientist, a dyed-in-the-wool atheist, who communicates every day with a person who means something to you, but who is under the spell of the darkest of superstitions! “Serafima Vasilyevna is the mother of comrade Pavlov's children, but I am the mother of Academic Ivan Petrovich Pavlov's thoughts and dreams” – those are the words of Marina Kapitonovna, which I now believe in.

March 16th, 1926

Comrade Pavlov is not only a great scientist, but also a great humanist. How good it is to be close to him – a full chest of refreshing and remarkably light air. Today Kolya N. was once again fed chocolate. How unfortunate that around us are so many unenlightened people – the Cheka does not understand the importance of our experiments. Lieutenant Misha, whom I liked earlier, now I hardly like at all – I see how he doesn't understand why we are feeding some orphan called Kolya chocolate, cabbage cores, and wonderful bread. And I certainly won't jump to explain to him what conditional and unconditional reflexes are and how they relate to our everyday life. To be honest, Kolya has very sad eyes. I don't know why.

March 23rd, 1926

I continue to promise myself that I will write you, diary, every day, but I'm not. What's most important is that it's not because of laziness, but because of diligence. Comrade Academic Ivan Petrovich Pavlov said, "I am already an old man. Although I will live thirty years more, the operations should be done by the young." Professor N. I. Krasnogosky fastened a skin irritant to Kolya's hand. We press the little pump, and Kolya feels the irritation – it evokes salivating in him. Kolya is just like a dog. On professor Pavlov's instruction, N. I. Krasnogorsky ran a metal fistula from the salivary gland duct through the mouth cavity, which now protrudes out his cheek. And the saliva runs through that fistula into a special pouch. You show Kolya something tasty, for example cabbage, and saliva starts to drip. This kind of reaction from an organism is called a conditional reflex. Academic Pavlov does such pure experiments that he begins to do the experiment only when, after the operation, a child or dog, or for example a monkey, has fully recovered, so no inflammation remains, and when their temperature has returned to normal. Oh, how much we struggled with Kolya, as he needed to be calm and not become agitated, not touch the metal tube coming out of his mouth cavity. But of course, he became agitated, tossed and turned, and scratched. With dogs it's a bit easier. They are simply placed in a metal frame, where it can feel rather free (the frame doesn't constrict it) and at the same time be immobilized. With Kolya, we didn't know at all what to do with him, which is why in the end we were forced to tie his hands together. Kolya looks at us angrily, but the little dimwit doesn't understand that he's a participant in a scientific experiment, that he should feel happiness and honor, that he is serving proletarian science. All the more that now he receives fantastic nourishment – meanwhile, the entire country is starving. It's said that even Comrade Stalin is going without food. But Kolya is not starving – he is shown chocolate or a turnip, and it's observed what causes more salivation. We are planning on running a tube from Kolya's stomach so we can see how the conditional reflex works there too – we will separate out Kolya's pure gastric juice. We've been doing that with dogs for a long time already. The wound will heal, and the little fistula won't bother him at all – the little boy will just have to move a little less so he doesn't ruin the experiment. It is of extreme importance to our country and proletarian medicine because it is science, though sometimes it seems that Kolya couldn't care in the least.

And the Cheka soldier Misha is jealous of Kolya.

I see that he's jealous.

I am afraid to write this, but as a scientist I am obliged to – when I think of Misha, my vulva becomes wet. And yet another incident: Misha kneeled in front of me and kissed my knees. I am afraid that the proletariat would not think highly of such bourgeois sentiments. But Misha is a Chekist – a defender of the working class. I don't know what to do.

March 26th, 1926

How wonderful academic Ivan Petrovich Pavlov's family is. Today a large part of the laboratory workers was invited to the academic's home. Whoever wanted could even sip on wine. Serafima Vasilyevna played the piano. Everyone tried to persuade Ivan Petrovich to as well, but he refused. In the end, he did sit down at the instrument and while smiling

performed “March of the Dogs” with great enthusiasm. We all laughed when our adored academic talked about how he learned to play it and how he was unable to do it, but that he was determined to learn this march and he learned it. It would be unbecoming, he said, if I experimented with dogs and did not know their march. Afterwards, this luminary of science spoke (oh, I still can’t, it seems, fully understand what joy befell me in life, and I thank my destiny every day that I am here in the very heart of proletarian science), and Ivan Petrovich shared his thoughts and plans, and what experiments awaited in the near future. He decided to become acquainted with research and open the activity of the human brain to the proletarian reality through the experimental path of a physiologist. After all, it’s the same as the stomach, the eyes, the spleen – the brain is also a human organ, just like the others, but thought appears and is born in the brain because physiological laws are at work. We were brought another fourteen young teenagers, such scared, undernourished peasants with oddly enormous eyes from orphanages because their parents were long ago accused of running afoul of the laws of the communist fatherland or died, or perhaps disappeared without a trace. Hungry, some of them sickly – Academic Pavlov ordered us to take good care of them, to attend to them, give them porridge and turnips. And later, when the organisms of these young participants of proletarian science become stronger, we will implant catheters in their stomachs and other organs. The hardest thing will be, of course, with the brains, but N. I. Krasnogorsky is wonderful at performing trepanations, I trust that everything will be fine. Oh, how I am waiting for the beginning of these fascinating experiments.

When we returned from the hospitable home of academic Pavlov, the wonderful French wine that we had drunk made us a little tipsy. Perhaps I acted unwisely, but Misha was so persistent... He really is wonderful, just a little headstrong, but a true soldier of the proletariat’s dictatorship – severe and merciless. And it is me that he loves. Which is why I am not afraid of him at all. Today I even laughed, because it really was funny, that post-coital he stood in the laboratory’s dressing room with a jacket, but without his gallifet, tangled up in his footwraps.

Afterwards, before locking up the laboratory for the night, we checked everything, and I became very angry with Kolya’s behavior – so many orphans want to be in Kolya’s place, serve their Soviet fatherland, proletarian science, and the future. All the more than for the importance of the experiment, Kolya is always well-fed, kept warm, his sheets are changed, and he, thankless, does not appreciate it.

He looks at us with such spiteful eyes. As if he detested us, as if he was an animal. That, by the way, only confirms that a person evolutionarily is no different at all from a dog or other mammal. The only difference is that dogs don’t articulate words. And Kolya sometimes speaks. And who teaches him such language?

“God will curse you,” Kolya tells me.

So small and yet... enemies of the people come from such people.

Beloved Bones

Excerpts translated by *Dalia Cidzikaitė*

Motė. The Birth of Ona. September

I was born in the fall, on a Thursday evening, in the basement sauna of a five-floor apartment building, like all the children of Pašilai. For this, in the stairwell by the mailboxes, Vanda killed a black hen with a ladle and right there, heated a pot of broth on the stove. Father had already returned from his shift, the neighbors had come home from work, everybody knew, and everybody felt restless, because they didn't get to take a bath as usual, and nobody left soap and hot water for the laumės, the fairy spirits, that night, for there were more important things to attend to.

Motė is combing my hair and recounts the story, she goes through it again, always from the beginning. I listen, I imagine my mother, white as cheesecloth, and ask what her skin is like, what she smells like, but Motė strokes my head and smiles, look at you, she says, it's all inside you, and it has stayed. And my father says the same. Day and night, mocked by the other geezers, he carries me on his shoulders wherever he goes, he drives me on the trolleybus, perched next to the driver's seat. He says he'll never let go of me, he says that he dreams of my mother, and that they then rejoice, dance and sing together about their little cone—me. You're a miracle, my father tells me.

Motė is throwing strand upon strand, pulling my hair and braiding it. I listen, make no peep. Tell me more, please. Then she continues about how my mother began turning white and passed out, how Vanda, still a little lassie then, lamented the hen, and how Motė hurried her and forebode—there was no other way to honor goddess Laima, only this. Maybe she didn't kill the hen at the right time, maybe not the way she was taught, maybe not with a ladle, maybe she got scared and mixed things up, it didn't save my mother, and I ask, did she really do everything right? Motė says it doesn't matter now. Vanda cooked that soup the first time, after that she knew how to cook it, she cooked it for all the mothers, for everyone who gave birth after my mother. Every time on the same stove, on the first floor, just when you walk in from outside. We crouch down there in the winter, when the women bake bread, but then, the neighbors came down and went up, and someone wandered in with a towel, in a shirt-sleeve, not having heard that it was a special evening, that they weren't allowed to go to the sauna. They trampled the hops and grass lined from the door of our apartment through the four floors, all the way to the sauna. I keep thinking that if I hadn't been born on Thursday, and instead, the next day, during working hours, when everyone had gone out, if they hadn't trampled and annoyed Laima, maybe my mother would still be alive.

Motė gets up, walks with difficulty to the stove, like a loaf of bread herself, you can't tell where the soft, engorged breasts end and the belly begins under the light clothing. Only in the sauna can one see how many layers of skin and flesh blanket each other, how

many folds. It's hard to imagine that there's still a skeleton deep inside, bones, maybe tiny bones, who knows, but they would have to be made of iron to support such a body. The other women praise her when they wash her, admire her. Her breasts are eternally, endlessly full of milk, the little ones suck on them, drawn by their smell in the sauna.

Motè pulls her hair again, the braid must be tight, you're such a happy child, she says, don't think anymore, wear your mother's memory and just live.

A Saint. Ona Is Nine. July

I'm squatting in the landing, lurking to see what kind of people have moved in, whether there will be livestock, maybe even children. A boy, when he sees me, smiles, dimples surface on his cheeks, I'm Lukas, he says. Lukas and his mother, no one else. He's cute, tanned in the sun, with thin legs, like a grasshopper.

In the evening, we meet in the basement sauna. I'm ashamed, Lukas should go with the men, but his mother is alone, so she takes him with her. Later, she'll let him go alone, when she gets acquainted, when she gets used to a new place, but now she pulls him by the hand, soaps him, tells him not to stare and to look at the floor.

I am sitting on the lower level, hugging my knees, my legs are squeezed, so that nothing reveals, I catch Lukas' gaze. Who would stare at the floor as breasts sway and buttocks swing around. He's soaping up in the corner, peeking. His mother tugs on his ear, yells and pushes him out, wrapped in a towel. Wash yourself from the well in the backyard. Then they both will go up to the second floor, to their new home, the things are still unpacked, so many bundles are left in the landing. I'm standing on my toes, looking out of the small basement window into the backyard. The boy dives between the cars, by the well, he climbs into the water trough for animals and, throwing off his towel, splashes himself with icy water. I'm convinced that the neighbors of the other apartments are also standing at the windows, on the balconies, curiously gaping at the newcomers. Lukas doesn't care, the towel stays in his hand, and he passes right by my nose in the window, naked as a newborn. At the entrance, he says hello to the neighbors bringing in the cow and disappears into the building.

Father. Ona's Childhood

My nest is in my father's trolleybus. For as long as I can remember myself, I'm always there. The names of the stops mark my summer holidays, the unpleasant rainstorms after school, the rush on Christmas Eve, with the snow blinding the side mirrors. My mother's sodas, a straw decoration, is swaying from the ceiling of the cabin, my father's fur vest reeking of a wild beast is spread in my den. He didn't drive before I was born, he worked as a conductor. Left alone with me, still a little worm, he consulted Motè, or perhaps she told him sternly to keep the child close. Then he thought of driving. I got my nest where the ticket collector or the driver waiting for his shift usually sits. The other drivers looked askance at my father's idea, a snotty little sprog might push buttons that don't need to be pushed, distract, but Motè's word was the final word, but even without it, my father would carry me on his hump to the end of the world. For him, raising a daughter

at the wheel was all fun and joy. I was squatting peacefully and was growing up, Moté had told him that I'd be like that. And why not, I'm counting the stops, the scenery is changing under my nose, I'm not bored. My memory is full of pavements, meadows with a power line running along them, factories, solitary apartment buildings districts, sad five-floor buildings in the fields.

We both know the passengers by heart. We laugh, we discuss, we say hello to each other. Everybody likes my father's trolleybus no. 7 and me, the big-eyed little dumpling next to the driver. I always get sweets or bacon to chew, to drool on, someone's always shoving baskets of carrots and potatoes to me and my father, cheese, freshly made, the matrons say, it's very tasty, and if you add goat milk, it's not only food, it's a real medicine for a growing little daughter, just give it to her. The bundles of outgrown clothes never end—I'm growing, and they're growing too—whether we asked for them or not, they always turn up at some bus stop.

My father coordinates his shifts with my lunchtime nap, later with my school schedule, and has even changed the route, so that the lines of the trolleybus would always run along my path. Everybody likes him, because he's the only one who allows to take an animal for a few stops if they need to, even though this is strictly forbidden. Little shepherds must graze only in the surrounding meadows where the owners of the livestock live, and old men and women with one goat must also graze only around their balconies and playgrounds, no further. But things happen. If the rain starts unexpectedly on one's way home, or if one walks further afield and doesn't have the strength to return, or if the shepherds run late, my father stops and whistles to them, making sure they get in quickly and don't attract attention too much, calms down the passengers if they start to grumble or bleat louder than the animals.

Once we had a cow traveling with us, late in the evening, with no one to witness it. I curled out of my nest and stroked its wet snout. The shepherdess squeezed some milk into my cup, warm, reeking of udder. I don't really like this kind of milk, but then, settling down on the back seat, I drank it to the bottom and fell asleep right away, stretched out across the entire back.

A Saint. Ona Is Twelve.

I only have Lukas on our landing—it's the old people's house, the younger ones built a twelve-floor apartment building with an elevator next door, and everyone who were with the little ones moved out. My father decided against it, and Lukas' mother took that small two-room apartment when the building became less crowded.

We always tease the animals of the new twelve-floor apartment building, we make them to bellow under the balconies, after they're brought back in the evening. There are still some who have not got used to it, they look frightened around, crawl back into their rooms even in the summer, and come to our water trough after grazing. Although as time goes, the number of calm younglings, having already been bred in the new building, has increased.

I love Lukas, it's impossible not to love him and he loves me, but we don't talk about it, we both dream about the couple to be, we discuss what they could be, what they will

be, but for now we've lent ourselves to each other. Sometimes he says, Ona, you're not angry, aren't you, and smiles, and those little pits in his cheeks, those dimples, I'm telling you, it seems, I could love him for the rest of my life.

Lukas is special, that much is already clear, but also because of the pancakes, the salty Lukas' waffles. His mother bakes these pancakes, but she says they are her son's cure, but she won't say how or why. There are those who think his mother is a witch, others say that she casts a spell on them, or maybe it's Lukas himself, but who cares, what matters is that they instantly bring down fever and headache, clean out parasites in the stomach, and they help when nobody knows what to do, all one has to do is eat them. There's always a queue of people begging, asking for them, after work, Lukas' mother spends all evenings in the kitchen, mixing dough, baking away. I haven't seen Lukas stirring or casting a spell, but his mother says that all that remedy is her son's doing. That's what she says, but I've never asked Lukas.

Thesis

Excerpt translated by *Erika Lastovskytė*

The Crisis of Representation

Just a moment before the impact, I realized that I no longer had a face.

I writhe in pain, gripping the air in front of me with my hands, terrified to touch the gaping chunks of wet flesh falling through my fingers in a thick red mush. I hold my hands over the remains of my face, as if hiding from the world's all-seeing eye. My hands are like my face – one seems to be broken, the palm without skin.

The absurdity of the moment crashes down on me with all its emptiness, its searing pain, and its desperate desire to turn back time. Something is still playing through the earbud stuck in my left ear.

I can't deal with it. I'm looking for a better place to curl up. There's a ditch a couple of meters away – it's sloped and softer there. I kneel in the ditch until the pain subsides, spit gravel out of my mouth, and count my teeth with my tongue. I can't feel my teeth, but it seems they're all still in place. Then I have to get up, put my bloody, broken glasses into my pocket, get on my bike – ah, yes, the chain has fallen off – put the chain back on, and pedal back through the calm autumn evening that has suddenly turned into hell. It's getting dark. I hear the barking of a rabid dog (where did that dog come from?). Rough asphalt turns into a forest path, with dark dots of blood darting along. It's a loose gravel path, and my wheels sink deeper into it. I'm dragging my bike almost at a run. The barking of the dog is getting closer. A girl stops in front of me, struck dumb, and her raging young Rottweiler immediately sinks his teeth into my calf. I try to shake him off, but she, as if turned to stone, doesn't even try to pull on the leash.

"Hold your dog, you fucking bitch!!!" I yell at her as loud as I can. Before she comes to her senses, I manage to get rid of the Rottweiler, run to my car, and throw the bike in the boot. As I make a turn, I see an old lady holding a small girl's hand, trying to drill through my car window with her glare, as if the information waiting for her on the other side of the glass could grant her eternal life in heaven. I disappear, a bloody ghost in her eyes on the eve of the Day of the Dead.

I'm driving like the Terminator without a face was flying a helicopter. I have no feelings, only my mission, which at the moment seems absurd to me. Everything seems absurd. I am pulling paper towels from behind the seat, scraping blood clots from my eyebrows, trying to put the remains of my glasses on my crushed nose. In spite of everything, life goes on as it should, and traffic flows smoothly and orderly. The traffic lights turn yellow, then green. I successfully pass all the junctions and exit Antakalnis Street. Courtyard, dark staircase, keys. My two sons, glued to their screens, don't even raise their heads. I'm sitting on the doorstep of my home and I have no idea what to do next.

Augustas walks to the bathroom and stops when he sees me, astonished.

“Dad, what happened to you?”

Kristupas raises his head and asks the same question.

“Halloween,” I say and wink with my good eye.

“Ohh,” says Kristupas and dives back into his screen.

Ambulance. The driver repeatedly asks me not to stain the seats with blood. Hospital. They ask for my ID, and I hesitantly hand over my driver’s license. I am told to take off my jacket and sit in the operating chair, where my eyes are flooded with pink light, and I’m surrounded by angel-like creatures that I can no longer see. I can only feel their touches puncturing the flesh of my face and the light flirting around my head.

“Mmhm, yes, a mosaic...” says a voice about what’s left of my identity.

Needles piercing my forehead, a young doctor is flirting with a resident who asks him, “How should I do it here?”

“Yes, like this,” says the doctor’s voice.

“But it’s not like it’s very...”

“It will be fine... In six months, he can make it look better if he wants to...”

I feel an almost blissful surrender to the hands of the angels. The angels work slowly. They work down my face for an eternity until they reach under my nose. It’s impossible to endure the needles jabbing into my upper lip and the inside of my nostrils.

“Hang on a bit longer. We need to get a stitch in here. There’s not much left,” says the angel in a gentle voice.

The devil enters the ward, points his finger at me and says, “Hhhh, oh wow...”

I remember the story of John Fare, an artist who, with an audience watching, had a device he had constructed amputate his body parts “at its own discretion,” ultimately ending with the amputation of his head. The story is so absurd that it might almost be true.

Then the ambulance takes me to another hospital to fix my hand. It turns out that I no longer have a driver’s license, and the place I’m coming from doesn’t have it either. Clearly, the devil stole it from the doctor’s desk while the angels were fluttering around my head. I manage to find out that the devil was a patient named Gediminas Skeivyvs, along with his identity number, address, and a phone number that is no longer in use.

My glasses remind me of John Lennon’s bloodied glasses, photographed by Yoko Ono. When I get back to the studio, I try to take a picture of them. Stressed out, I fail to realize that there is no film in the back of my Hasselblad camera. I take a picture of myself “on blank film” too.

I wonder: in what information field media, or in which parallel coordinates, are the images taken by a mechanical camera without film?

My last text ends with my not knowing. What features and strokes should make up my self-portrait? I don’t know yet. Two months have passed since then, and now there is even less knowing than there was then. The situation once again resembles a detective story that developed dynamically and then reached a dead end.

Detective stories are sustained by illusions and false assumptions. If we knew the answer from the beginning, there would be no point in reading them. One could say that the only meaning of a detective story is the story itself. Its purpose is to manipulate the reader’s curiosity and keep their attention on the plot, presenting a denouement at the end. When the reader learns the ending, the story concludes.

But why should I care about my self-portrait now?

Gediminas Skeivys. I type it into Google.

“Drunk driver involved in near-miss with police, court hears,” Google says.*

“TWO women police officers were startled when a car came swerving towards them just after midnight in Redditch town, a court was told...

“Skeivys, aged 33, of Mount Pleasant, Redditch, was jailed for 12 months after he pleaded guilty at Worcester Crown Court to dangerous driving and driving with excess alcohol. He was disqualified for three years.”**

The number 33 and the number 79 in his personal identification both match. Now I know where my driver’s license has gone. I’m going to the police.

They take me to a room with an old computer and a CRT monitor and tell me to write a statement. I can’t write because I can’t use my right hand. Vaida writes for me. With my bandaged face, I look like a character from the movie *The Invisible Man*. The policemen are calm and accept my statement with indifference. “We’ll investigate,” they say.

“And what about my driver’s license?”

“You no longer have it. If you want to get a new one, you can contact Regitra.”

When you order a driver’s license from Regitra, you need to have your photo taken right there, at the office. Maybe I really should get a document with my bandaged face? I understand that entrusting your affairs to the police is a messed-up and hopelessly futile business. By the time they start sorting things out, Skeivys will have his teeth fixed and will be in the UK with my driver’s license. The next day I go to Taikos Street in Justiniškės. Perhaps his parents live there, or someone else who could give me a better idea of his whereabouts?

Artistic practice, like detective stories, is based on various illusions. From the very beginning of your conscious life, illusions act as its driving force. Art is an illusion. Culture is an illusion. Every art project is created on the basis of illusions you have at a particular stage of your life. They keep hold of your attention over what you do, over the things you live through. Perhaps, if there were no illusions, we would die much sooner. The fact that the detective story of life ends in death is self-evident. But you are always surprised when you feel the proximity of death. It’s as if you didn’t know it was imminent. Death is the only real thing. A long-worn and ever-new topic.

What illusions am I living now?

A nine-story building with a door code. Apartment number, I come to Gediminas’s. A hesitant female voice wavers for a moment but lets me in. I find apartment 22 on one of the upper floors. The doorbell. A character from an unidentifiable cartoon opens the door and makes a surprised face.

“You accidentally took my driver’s license at the hospital yesterday,” I say.

“A license? What license?” The guy hesitates for a moment then instantly understands everything.

* “Drunk driver involved in near miss with police, court hears,” Redditch & Alcester Advertiser, 22 September 2012, <http://www.redditchadvertiser.co.uk/>

** Ibid.

“Oh, yeah, I found it, I was thinking of reporting it to the police. I have no idea how it ended up with me. I have my own,” he says, flipping his ID card in his hand demonstratively.

“Happens,” I say.

“So you got messed up, huh? Fuck me...” He hands me my driver’s license.

My exhibition is coming up, and it’s getting harder and harder to concentrate on writing. It feels like I can only focus on one thing at a time. When the situation demands multitasking, I start to get flustered. I’m entirely a monotasking person.

I also can’t resist the idea that words deceive and confuse everything.

Even Marshall McLuhan, who seems to have been able to tirelessly broadcast a stream of words saturated with different ideas, emphasizes the limitations of language in several chapters in his seminal work and compares language to the primitive tools of Stone Age people. Language, according to McLuhan, is only a temporary medium in the development of humanity:

The condition of “weightlessness,” that biologists say promises a physical immortality, may be paralleled by the condition of speechlessness that could confer a perpetuity of collective harmony and peace.*

Or:

Languages are stuttering extensions of our five senses, in varying ratios and wavelengths. An immediate simulation of consciousness would by-pass speech in a kind of massive extrasensory perception, just as global thermostats could by-pass those extensions of skin and body that we call houses. Such an extension of the process of consciousness by electric simulation may easily occur in the 1960s.**

Be that as it may, the processes of progress unfold much more slowly than the prophet of the media world had anticipated. More than half a century has passed since the sixties, but there is no sign of global thermostats or mass extrasensory perception. Instead, it smells like global warming, a global economy, and a global language that, before it even has the chance to become truly global, is starting to fracture into dialects typical of elite and peripheral consumption spheres. Aldous Huxley’s vision of the future, while created much earlier, seems much more convincing. The time of *Brave New World* is upon us.

I deliberately arrive late to Sverdiolas’s seminar so I don’t have to explain the scars and the stitches sticking out of my face. I stay silent throughout the entire seminar. Things happening here feel strangely distant. The theoretical discussions seem meaningless and pointless, almost absurd. I leave as quickly as possible after the seminar so I don’t have to interact with anyone. Nearly a week has gone by. At night, I pull the stitches out of my forehead, nose, and upper lip. I look hideous. But it’s slightly better now. I look at myself in the mirror. For an hour, maybe two. I don’t think about anything. Just look. *Žiūra*.***

* Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), 92.

** *Ibid.*, 146.

*** Play of words: author’s surname Žiūra in Lithuanian means “looking.”