

## The Seasons

*Volodymyr Drozd*

### Winter

He was an ordinary fiend of the domestic variety: a small and shaggy-haired goblin with wart-like horns and fiery eyes. He lived in the attic of an old five-story house, in a dark nook between the chimney of the boiler room and a rusty trough the janitor had lugged up here when the roof was leaking. He was as ancient as the world and knew that he would live as long as the world existed. This limitless life, in eternity, made the goblin taciturn and circumspect.

Nothing surprised him anymore, because in his lifetime everything had already happened and he had seen everything. He never hurried because he could foresee the future. The skein of the future weighed heavily upon his mind, as the threads of that skein were endlessly wound day after day by the rising and setting sun—the golden shuttle of the universal loom. Rolling himself into a small ball on the sawdust, he could think about nothing for days and nights on end. For him time had materialized to such an extent that he could touch it, like the water of a river in summer or a waft of warm air. He would submerge himself in this stream for a long time and feel happy.

In late afternoon, the goblin liked to sit on the roof near the steeple—the one topped by a weathercock that had rusted a long time ago and always showed only a southern wind—and gaze at the city enslaved by human bustling and restlessness. In that brick anthill there was a constant hubbub of people, cars, and even trees, feeble and stunted here among the stones. The people were always in a hurry, as if they were chasing one another, the cars obstructing their movement and pushing them onto the swarming sidewalks. Meantime, the sun would cool and turn purple, infusing the snow on the roofs with a deep red color reflected in a ruby-red blaze on the windowpanes, as if fires were roaring in stoves beyond the windows. Then the sun would disappear behind the high-rise buildings on the outskirts of town. The sky would turn greenish, the blue-gray mist of twilight, now noticeably shaggier and gloomier, would flood the brick canyons, and shortly afterwards an invisible hand would quickly lace the pale blue ribbons of streets with the thread of electric lights. And then, one after another, as if racing, the windows that had dimmed together with the sun would reappear, fiery eyes multiplying with every second, a fiery sea

spilling out beyond the horizon and spreading around as far as the eye could see, caressing the goblin in its scintillating glow.

Of course, at such times the goblin sensed her approach. He would shut his eyes and see her, a woman still young but weary—an islet of pensive composure and silence—in the rushing crowd on the sidewalk. Soon she was walking up the steps, catching her breath on every landing, and entering her apartment on the top floor.

Earlier Grandpa Iakym's son and his large and noisy family had lived in the apartment. When Iakym's wife died, the son brought his father, a hereditary buoy-keeper and fisherman, to the city from his lonely house on the Nevkla River. Grandpa Iakym had lured the goblin from the riverbank as well—they were fast friends. The goblin made his home in the spacious and warm attic of the brick building, while Grandpa Iakym made his bed in the kitchen. During the long autumn nights, when Iakym's grandchildren quieted down behind the wall, he and the goblin would converse softly about the old days. But Grandpa Iakym died unexpectedly. His body was placed in a dark coffin; a bus swallowed it and disappeared in the tangle of streets. Shortly thereafter Iakym's family moved to a new apartment, but the goblin did not join them. He could not forgive Iakym's son for having burned down his father's house by the river after drinking too much on a fishing trip there. The house had been standing boarded up for a long time—no one was eager to live in a place without any people around.

After the family left, the woman moved into the apartment on the top floor.

The goblin liked to while away his time in her company. Huddling quietly by the steeple with the weathercock, he watched as the air became lustrous, nipping, brittle and resonant with the advent of frosty nights; he watched as the ground turned to rock, as the walls and roof of the building grew cold and dead; as the trees in the streets shrank and people deserted the streets. Despite his wisdom, at times like these loneliness crept into his heart, gnawing and chilling his feelings. He slid down the ice-covered roof to the gutter and from the gutter he jumped onto the window ledge. Turning momentarily into a shaft of shadow or tuft of frosty mist, he stole into the room.

She would be dressed, as usual, in a dark-red satin robe embellished with black lace at the collar and sleeves, sitting in a deep armchair and covered with a checkered plaid throw. She'd be smoking a cigarette and listening to music. The goblin would sneak into a corner and climb onto an old mahogany sideboard with crystal panes in its doors, which somehow resembled the porch of the late Grandpa Iakym's house. He'd park himself there by a bronze candlestick that smelled pleasantly of wax. From this spot he had a good view of the room, illuminated by a candle flickering on an endtable by the armchair. The candle filled the room with wondrous, scintillating sparks that made the young woman's face look surprisingly

keen-featured and mysterious; it sprinkled goldish speckles on the bookshelves and the walls hung with framed pictures, drawings, ceramics and old icons. There was even a portrait of a distant relative, an infernal devil, in the dark corner of a icon painted on canvas. On a ceramic plaque a large-eyed and lithe water nymph squinted slyly at the candlelight, as if at the moon.

The music in the room had a life of its own. Originating from the red-eyed box of the record player, it gently yet insistently persuaded the walled-in world to yield to its rhythms, colors, and wisdoms. For a long time the music annoyed the goblin, because he did not want to bend to anyone's will. But gradually he got used to it and came to even like swaying to its teasingly playful and alternately peacefully pensive waves, their wise monotony reminding the goblin of the flow of time. Only the sharp painful chords of the grand piano were alien to him—they harbored an alarm that the goblin did not understand.

When the lady of the house fell asleep, the goblin would sneak up to the sofa as a gray dusky specter and place his soft hairy paw on her cool forehead. Then, looking at the frost-crisped windows, behind which the cold night was growing numb, he called up kindly colorful dreams for the woman.

In her dreams, too, she was quiet as winter.

## Spring

The goblin fell into a fit, as if from some wicked sorcery or exorcism. It seized him as water babbled in the gutters, as partly melted icicles fell off from the roof with a lilting tinkle and shattered against the concrete of the yard, as pigeons enfeebled by winter cooed discordantly under the garret, as damp southern winds blew in with a roar, the weathercock now predicting them with ever-growing frequency. The fit had attacked, bound, and enslaved him. He seemed like someone demented: all night long he tore across the roofs, restlessly whooping and jeering, thumping the tin roofing, ripping apart clotheslines on balconies and throwing rustling bed sheets stiffened by the March frost into the courtyards. He moaned in chimneys and banged against water pipes with all his might, the pipes responding with a dull, alarming rumble.

Come morning, exhausted, he would at last return to his nook between the chimney and the trough, in the hope that at least now he might remain aloof from the world and from his own self and feel in his heart his former coolness and silent wisdom—those attributes of eternity. But no sooner would he roll himself into a little ball and shut his eyes, yearning for the delight of oblivion, than the faint, half-forgotten, and rancid smell of tillage grown languid under the sun would penetrate into the dry sawdust, clay, and rust, followed by the tantalizing smell of bursting buds, of moist leaves, of the deep red shoots of peonies, and of the tender green lovage that would sprout from the ground every spring around the *pryzba*<sup>1</sup> of Iakym's cozy house. Then images from mundane and ordinary bygone days would crowd into the goblin's mind: the old cat with cataracts snoozing on the sunlit porch, a hen cackling in the tiny shed after laying an egg, and a spotted calf scampering around Iakym (or Iakym's grandfather, or great-grandfather, or great-great-grandfather—people were dying and being born before the goblin's eyes, though the world wasn't changing), who was tarring the hull of his boat, lying overturned on the bright-green meadow. And all this was happening against the background of a brilliant blue surging flood that had long since consumed the Nevkla River, the low bank with the willows and stands of aspen, and even the horizon and was now coveting the sky itself.

Agitated by the insistent memories, the goblin would leave his nook and make his way up to the roof. A damp mist hovered over the city. Somewhere in the skies, beyond the mist, storks were returning from warmer climes—the goblin's sensitive ear made out their cawing and the rustle of their wings. Down below, car brakes screeched, annoying him. The contact shoes of the trolleybuses clanged against the overhead wires, and the

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<sup>1</sup> Pryzba—a consolidated bank of earth raised against the walls of a village home and enclosing it on all sides (translator's note).

acrid stench of gasoline, asphalt, and rubber, pressed into the human anthill by the fog, sickened him ever more. At such moments he felt like a catfish hauled onto shore, in a net woven of brick walls, sidewalks, asphalted streets, and urban squares, under a sky that wasn't even real but grimy and stinking of soot and smoke, like the ceiling above the place Iakym usually put the kerosene lamp. The cruel, choking net tightened around him remorselessly and he wanted to throw it off like an old faded skin, bunched up into a dim gray clump and chased by the wind, rolling down between the ribs of the tin roof.

Despite the goblin's disgust with the inanimate bricks and the subconscious yearning for another world, the days and nights crept on. Damp and warm, they devoured the edges of the dark ice-coated snow and breathed a sultry languor. Making himself comfortable on the roof, he listened as sprouts willfully swelled and curled outside the city, as they burst through the asphalt- and brick-covered crust, bending, breaking up and drilling through it, as sap surged in the dwarf birches that nestled in the garret after a heavy storm had deposited a handful of soil there, as buds unfolded on chestnut trees along the boulevards. And a forgotten lust trickled through the goblin's body, evoking ancient memories of a young and handsome witch with whom he had whirled over a river in the shrouds of an azure morning mist, over the same river into which superstitious peasants had later thrown her for a swim, having swaddled her hands and feet, and in which she had drowned, surrendering her body to the ravenous crayfish and her soul to the lascivious water sprite.

One night, having waited until the city settled down, the goblin slid down the gutter and went hobbling alongside the houses. He could not walk far, because his left foot, shorter than the right, let him down and his hooves, accustomed to the earth's soft elasticity, kept slipping on the asphalt in an echoing, goatlike clatter that attracted the policemen at the street corners, and compelled him to step into the shadows now and again. Yet he did manage to cross the city, and the city slid off him like an old skin. New smells and sounds were reaching the goblin's senses through the gray bars of the high-rise buildings. They were the smell of fresh-plowed earth and the rustle of winter wheat, which had been numbed by the snow and was now languidly stretching and pushing up its sprouts.

At last the goblin reached the last building, the only one with a lighted window somewhere on the eighth floor that looked out onto a field (a hare flitted past into the gray dry grass of a narrow gully, beyond which lay a shadowy glade, doomed to fall prey to the growing city). Without looking back at the human anthill, which was just now waking, its window-eyes blinking here and there, the goblin trudged right ahead toward the distant call of the river swollen with spring runoff, reveling as his little hooves sank into the moist earth. He could already imagine reaching the ash heap where Iakym's house had been a year before, kindling a flame in the soot-grimed

stove, clearing the earth of ash and dead firebrands, and planting beans so he could shell them at the end of summer—he loved to shell beans, squeezing them out of the dry husks. His face brightened into a child-like smile.

## Summer

Every day, at dawn, the goblin lit the stove. The beet-red reflection of the fire darted around the black yard and the dew-covered meadow, inflamed the horizon, and lit up the sky in red. Day was breaking. The sun was rising out of the Nevkla, coloring pink the wisps of smoke swirling above the fireplace. Wagons rattled as they approached the river mooring. Chugging tugs strained against the current, pulling a rosary-string of long, glistening coal barges. Blaring their piercing horns, hydrofoils scudded around the bend in the river, churning the water, and the buoy-keeper, who traveled from the village in a clattering motorboat to switch off the buoy lights, had to hug the shore.

But people gave a wide berth to the ash heap where the goblin stubbornly kept the stove burning from sunrise to sunset.

The desire to act was overflowing in him. From the ashes around the stove rose charred oak posts marking the former corners of Iakym's house. One dark night the goblin lugged a gate from the village, raised it between the corner posts, plaited it with a weave of hazelnut switches, and covered it amply with dry reeds, cut down by a bog sprite for his relative from the silted pond by the edge of the forest. He held the reeds down to the switches with old wheels that had been lying in Iakym's shed, which had been spared in the fire but later rotted and collapsed. A pair of storks flew out from the village and settled on this roof of the goblin's shack. From the time of their forebears they had summered in the surrounding ranges, and now they built a nest among the spokes of one of the wheels. The mother chattered the whole day through on the pile of dry twigs, while the father stalked pensively around the meadows. A vast multitude of sparrows settled under the stork nest and in the reed thatch. Swallows molded a string of nests on the rain- and wind-battered oak posts. Swifts nested in every available nook and cranny around the stove, and linnets in the singed but growing thickets of lilac. There were orioles in the cherry trees, starlings summered in the hollow of an old pear tree, and the restless jays bustled in the glade behind the garden.

Sweeping away the ashes, the goblin stuck sunflower and bean seeds into the former *pryzba*. Soon afterwards, the sunflowers reached the thatch, and the beans wound around the oak posts and sunflowers, weaving green walls around the shack. He loosened the hard earth in the garden by dragging a rusty harrow across it at night, and then planted everything he could lay his hands on. Out of the mellowed and peaty black earth the bushy tops of potatoes shot up here and there. Spring wheat shone in green patches. Pumpkin vines with their long-stemmed broad leaves stretched toward the sun, and self-seeding poppies stood on tiptoe to rise above the pigweed, vervain, and sow-thistle, because the goblin liked everything living and did not weed out any plants. Radishes spread out their leaves,

spiky corn swayed above the garden, and near the edge of the field, where the earth was barren, the meadow insolently made its appearance in a foray of spear grass, broom grass, sweet-scented holy grass, spurge, and cow vetch.

It was dry that summer. Night after night the goblin brought handfuls of water from the river to sprinkle on his garden, while the water nymphs, the evil reed spirits, the fairies (who tickled their victims to death), the night ghosts, and even the busybody water sprite laughed at his useless efforts. But he paid them no mind and continued to scoop up handfuls of water and carry it to Iakym's yard.

Then came the warm summer rains. Nothing is more delightful than a summer rain for a place devastated by fire. The vegetation in the garden thrived, while the black sooty wasteland on either side of the *pryzba* suddenly became a riot of lovage, tansy, hellebore, mugwort, calendula, orach, wormwood, hemp, nettle, wheat grass, and silk grass. Iakym had planted them under the windows of his house, or they had propagated on their own and were now pushing upward toward the smiling summer sky. Soon a wall of green separated the surrounding world from the shack. Only the clattering of the storks, the smoke rising over the chimney in the early morning, and the track the goblin had beaten to the river identified its location.

It was the track that caught the fancy of a young couple. The sharp-sighted goblin, dozing on the roof near the stork nest, spied them in the distance as soon as they stepped out of the motorboat onto the planked dock. They were young, in the flush of life, and both were dressed in track suits—the girl also wore a wool jacket. Walking leisurely along the shore, they were happy, apprehensive, and bashful in anticipation of the wonder that was to happen that day. They turned onto the track and took a liking to the shack. Leaving their backpacks by the stove, they walked in the crimson sunset and splashed on the shore. At dusk they built a fire. Its flame flickered in red reflections on the waves and the bewildered water nymphs gathered in a small group and gazed enviously at the young couple from the water. The goblin brought some fresh balmy hay from the meadow and arranged it into a bed by the hearthstone. But when the boy and girl, silent and wary, returned to the shack, the goblin limped off to the glade by the pond, not wanting to be an invisible witness to their first love making.

He sat down by the riverbank on the decayed hull of the boat Grandpa Iakym had overturned long ago and listened for a long time to the alternating love calls of the frogs, crickets, and forest birds. A full and slightly ruddy moon sailed over the tree tops, as a human soul glided out of the sky like a star. Transparent and pure as a beam of moonlight, it fluttered its wings over the goblin's shack. The goblin closed his eyes and a minute later was lulled to sleep by the warm, soft night. He saw the witch in his dream once again, but this time it was a gentle and chaste vision.

When the goblin opened his eyes, crimson wisps of mist whirled above the mirror-like surface of the pond; the fluted goblets of water lilies broke through the surface and opened their snow-white flowers toward the sun; on the shack's roof the stork clattered its bill in alarm as her mate tested the inexperienced wings of their three fledglings so high up in the sky. Around the shack the swifts and their young offspring were chasing one another with piercing shrieks; young starlings fluttered over the garden; timid swallow chicks were rocking in the branches of the old apple tree; bumblebees buzzed around the shack; grains of wheat were tumbling off their stalks and sowing themselves on the ground; sparrows were alighting in droves on the heads of sunflowers, scattering the plump, fatty seeds on all sides; poppy pods were bursting, strewing their seeds around the garden. The goblin's eyebrows smoothed, his eyes became brighter, acquiring a more human appearance, and he began to look like Grandpa Iakym once did when he sat on the *pryzba* at rest after his labors.

### Autumn

Perched comfortably on a tree stump or on some gnarled roots, the goblin watched the whole day as the cold yellow leaves fell from the oak trees. Picked up by a gusty wind that ruffled the tree tops, the leaves seemed to hang for a fleeting moment under the cold, bright blue sky, and then rocked back and forth, like weightless boats wobbling from wave to wave, drifting ever lower until they settled silently and submissively on the fluffy, faded gold of the forest floor after a long, such an interminably long, flight.

The goblin waited, resolutely and hungrily for the moment when a leaf would break free from a twig with a barely audible snap and begin its melancholy leisurely flight. The concentration tuned his mind, making it incredibly sensitive and capacious and absorbing it so completely that the outlines of the real world and real feelings blurred, leaving instead something formless, and yet all-embracing, sharply sad and joyous but at the same time also imperceptible and unaccountable, because in the end the leaf reached the ground and everything had to be repeated all over again.

"The speck of time during which a yellowed leaf falls from a tree—that's what eternity is, and up until now I didn't understand anything in this world." The goblin tried to mold his feelings into words, but what he had molded was so pathetic compared with his profound and real feelings that he ceased philosophizing and greedily just absorbed the moments of his awe at the world, moments of bitter unease in the realization of their transience.

The leaves soared and soared, as in a dream.

The night mist filled the meadows to the brim and hovered over the river, gathering into pink clouds in the morning and disappearing into the breeze, like a casual and fastidious guest from the heavens.

In the forest the mist clung to the branches of alder and hazelnut in heavy, pearly drops and sonorously landed on the leaf-covered forest floor, as if a thousand woodpeckers were hammering all around.

Clusters of cranberry suffused by the sun were ablaze with such a ruddy purple light that the goblin froze in awe and sat in the forest, enchanted, until dusk.

In the evening the goblin would slowly return to his shack, where everything was again deserted and dead. Wild boar had rooted through and trampled the garden. Around the *pryzba*, the flowers beaten down by early frosts and rains had blackened and now reeked of rot. The storks with their young and the starlings had long since departed to follow the sun. The tomtits and sparrows had left to find people, where there was more food. An autumn windstorm had torn the shack with the stork's nest off the oak posts, rolled it across the meadow, and flung it into the river, to the gloating howls of the water sprite.

The goblin would kindle the fire in the stove and recline on the slowly warming hearthstone under the open sky. Shutting his eyes, he'd go over in

his mind, as if fingering the beads of an amber necklace, the vivid moments of the day. Although he had existed since the beginning of the world and knew for sure that he would exist as long as the world, and although previously time had been for him like air, unnoticed and unmeasured, it now seemed to the goblin that he had really been alive only during those moments. At all other times, when he had fussed or dozed in the blithe shallowness of time, he had not lived but had been dead.

Having fingered the beads of the moments of excitement and having reveled in them to his heart's content, the goblin slowly, anticipating wonder, opened his eyes. And lo! Right before him were the wide-spread branches of an apple tree covered with sparkling flowers that had petals of flaming rays—that was how numerous, brilliant, and radiant were the stars in the low autumnal sky beyond the apple tree. The goblin's throbbing heart missed a beat from the inexplicable emotion he was feeling. On such nights he would recall that strange woman in the noisy city who sat out her lonely evenings in front of the flickering candlelight feeling happy. And again he understood her.

He recalled that strangely quiet woman more and more frequently, ever since the sky had hung down like a linen sheet pulled from a water pail, pouring, dripping, and trickling from morning till evening and from evening till morning, at first in torrential downpours and drizzles and soon afterwards as icy sleet. He recalled the serenely peaceful twilights in that room, permeated with the smell of wax, cigarette smoke, and paper. He recalled the woman's large expressive eyes, which seemed to have encompassed in one view this room, the city, and the entire world. He recalled the black lace around her thin neck, the long white fingers of her left hand resting on the armchair, and the long white fingers of her right hand speckled by the light of a cigarette as if by a ruby. He recalled the candle's reflection on the sofa and on the glass of the bookshelves, the shadows on the carpet, its colors dulled and obscured by the dusk, and the blue altar of a window over the silhouettes of odd-shaped cacti.

And as the wind was wailing in the chimney, scattering wet, cold leaves onto the hearthstone, and pressing down the gloomy leaden sky, the goblin suddenly longed for winter, when he could sit on the roof by the weathercock and listlessly gaze at the city—where people and cars habitually bustled in the valleys of the streets, where the windows of homes and stores shone brightly in the evening, where tin roofs turned rosy under crusts of ice, where even the sky was pleasantly warm, like a hearthstone; where attics had a cozy smell of human habitation, and over all this, night after night, the lights of TV towers glowed ruddy through the haze.

An oppressive solitude and loneliness were enveloping the goblin, like a damp mist over a bog. Seeking relief, he would leave the hearthstone and dash to the river, the one and only thing still alive in this desolate gloom. Filled amply by rains, the river was rushing headlong to meet the city,

whose glowing lights shone invitingly on the horizon.

But as the flood receded, so did time. The Nevkla subsided, the motor launches and ships sailed through the mist less frequently until finally the first ice shimmered along the shore. When the last motor launch of the season cast off from the dock, the goblin's shadow darted onto the stern of the boat from under the ice-covered boards of the dock and stiffened on the wet snaking coil of rope over the churning watery abyss where the first ice tinkled and rang as it struck against the propeller blades.

Winter was rolling in, and after winter spring would come, and after spring—summer, and autumn again, and then winter. And for the goblin with every season everything—even eternity—would begin all over again.

*Translated by Anatole Bilenko*

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