

Evening Mead

Kostiantyn Moskalets

BOOK ONE
WINTER IN LVIV

I

The pine-scented, evening snow did not thaw. The crosses atop the cathedrals were golden and the birds—black. “And on this day the fetters of barrenness were lifted, for God had heard Joachim and Anna,” and they meet by the Golden Gate, dazed and saintly, and they embrace, and an old chestnut tree, flying past in a streetcar’s window, brings to mind the crack that cuts through that binary figure in Giotto’s Padua fresco; the evening snow and chrysanthemums, fresh, pale-yellow, and fragile; and the black birds fly in circles in the earthly heavens—silent circles, clear invisible lines, a sudden flash of a candle in the windowpane—and slender books on the table.

One floor above, a girl plays the flute. She’s blind and doesn’t attend school. The flute was purchased recently. *O Mensch, beweine dein’ Sünde groß...* And she weeps for him with unseeing eyes and invisible sounds as evening approaches—snow pours down from milky-gray and purple clouds and I don’t know her name.

Here a candle burns, there a flute plays, but in essence they’re one and the same, as fire simply becomes a voice, just like, in the highest of heavens, *civitas terrena* is transformed into *civitas Dei*; and when my wanderings here conclude, when this old pilgrim finally returns Home, these slender books will undoubtedly be among those that are carried away from here; look, we flow in a canal, we float past a cathedral and pray in a language that has long been forgotten, and the cathedral is so tall that the ravens above it are the size of black butterflies. And I am delighted anticipating how I’ll sit down in a warm, quiet study, behind a desk which I haven’t approached for so many years; how I’ll begin to pick through notes filled with distant times and lands. Without thinking, I’ll flip open one of the books, wanting to read my favorite poem, —and I won’t be able to resist crying out in shock because the poem I’ll find will be my favorite poem and yet, simultaneously, not my favorite poem, changed somehow in syntax and grammatical form, with either fewer or more lines, at times assuming completely different metrical feet, in a new Ukrainian language. And at that

time I'll recall the words of a certain bishop of Hippo concerning the beauty contained within a work of art, how it stems from a higher beauty, how it reminds us of it and how it induces us to fall in love with it.

And so—winter, a stack of clean sheets of paper and the voice of your flute. I'll tell you a little bit about each of these poets and you'll be an attentive, grateful listener. As precisely as possible, I'll try to explain to you what to others seems to be as obscure or self-sufficient as faith, as scorned metaphysics; I'll help you to believe in the bitter and transparent black currant, to hope for the blinding sheen of the snow, to see the candle that burns among the reeds; I'll be able to do this, otherwise, how will this miracle occur—that you will see me?

There was a time when the soul was ailing and the sorrowful fragrance of withered grass and smoke from burning leaves filled every crevice of consciousness, and it was no longer possible to peek through the cracks of the bright sheen of eternity, in which I am free, and this freedom resembles the snowflake that is forever a snowflake but whose form is never duplicated; this is the true picture of this young and archaic eternity: water that crystallizes into the enchanting and unrepeatable form of self-essence at the peaks of the spirit, where it is cold and the air is thin, but later, having descended here, once again becomes water, the turbid water of a flood; but do not be alarmed, little girl, water is eternal, water is eminent, like the eternal and eminent summer, autumn, winter, and spring. All of this is just snow, young and eternal, always the first snow; because of it we live and never die, for we, in our own way, are also sacred snow.

II

This, Andrusia, happened a very long time ago—I believe it was in February, on the eve of my birthday. Vovchyk and I wandered about Bakhmach looking for wine and finally found some in a small store next to the poultry farm. Purple twilight snow was lying all around, it smelled of tree sap, of the winter of the final school year, pine trees began just beyond the brick wall that surrounded the poultry farm. And we walked towards those pines with their twisted trunks, up to our knees in snow, out of which protruded remnants of park benches and plaster statues of Pioneer boys and girls with missing heads and arms. We gathered kindling, lit a modest campfire, and uncorked the first bottle. The wine was very red and very cold. There was lots of it, and we were in no hurry to go anywhere.

“Take a swig,” said Vovchyk, lighting up a Bilomorkanal.

“No, you go first.”

“You first, it's your birthday, not mine. Happy birthday.”

“Thanks.”

“May you grow big and strong.”

I swallowed several gulps, passed the bottle to Vovchyk, and also lit up a cigarette. The smoke was very blue. The world was very beautiful. The world was turning seventeen and it eagerly revealed all the signs of its maturity. And wine facilitated this process. The frost was intensifying with the night.

“The booze has hardened,” said Vovchyk, uncorking the second bottle.

“But, as Ivancha says—the hell with frost and fortified land.”

“This wine is also fortified.”

“It’s wine meant for strong men.”

“And for Kripke.”

“Shall we strengthen ourselves some more?”

“Let’s fortify our souls. All right! Cheers!”

Vovchyk took a couple of big gulps, passed the bottle to me, and lit himself another cigarette.

“I forgot to tell you. Riabchuk sent me a book and a couple of new poems.”

“Let me have a look.”

“You can take the poems, I’ve read them, but I’ll keep the book a while longer.”

The book was a pale orange color and had a Russian title, *Structuralism: Pros and Cons*. I randomly flipped open to a page and read the Russian text out loud:

“Language is possible because every speaker imagines himself as a *subject*, and designates himself or herself as the *I* of his or her speech. As such, this *I* constitutes a second person which, being absolutely foreign in its relationship to my *I*, becomes my echo, to which I refer as *you* and which refers to me as *you*.”

“Forget it,” said Vovchyk. “Constitutes-shmonstitutes. Drink wine, smoke cigarettes, and celebrate your birthday with me.

I returned the pale orange book to him.

The snow around us was littered with birds’ tracks and stained with their droppings. Our hands had become numb and resembled the color of the Soviet flag. It was getting dark but Vovchyk still had a bottle in his briefcase and once again we began to gather kindling. The sky was the color of our hands while the snow resembled a lilac. We drank wine and placed our hands straight into the fire. Our palms hovering above the flames resembled the gesture made by a priest imparting a blessing. We were imparting a blessing. This was a very ancient and very significant gesture. This gesture was provoked by the surrounding winter which, I guess, we loved, because we could not live without it. Whatever you can’t live without, you can only love, Andrusia. For example, I cannot live without you. Which means that—

“Don’t get off track,” said Andrusia. “I know very well *what that*

means. Continue telling your story. I would have loved to have been there with you guys.”

“You were still very little at that time.”

“Like a fly.”

“Oh yes, like a fly, or a little bird.” Then Vovchyk says, “Someday we will remember this day. About twenty years from now. And then everything will be different.”

“Ukraine will have become independent, Riabchuk will be the editor of a journal, and the two of us will have published our poems and novels in that journal.”

And we roared with laughter, Andrusia; we were as drunk as doors.

“Like ‘The Doors,’” added Andrusia.

Yes, of course, you know everything. We were laughing so hard that we keeled over, gripping our stomachs. We patted one another on the back, we were burning up, we were mad with the happiness that we had right here, in this hicksville, bird-shit-covered park, more than three thousand kilometers from structuralists and postmodernists; proudly yelling “Glory to Ukraine!” we grabbed handfuls of snow and threw it up towards the sky, bird-shit came back down onto our hats, inside our coat collars, into our gloves, and then suddenly Vovchyk grabbed me by the hand and said in a very odd voice, “Look—over there.”

At first I didn’t see anything out of the ordinary. The white brick wall glistened, the pine trees stood covered lightly by snow, the campfire glowed.

“Look higher,” he said.

I looked up and saw them. They looked like fruits. But large fruits like that don’t grow on pine trees. The only things that grow on pine trees are small pinecones. But these things were very big, very still, and somewhat otherworldly, I felt this at once—that they’re from a different realm, that they’re nourished by a different time and infused with a space unlike ours; they remained silent, so I assumed that they were sleeping.

“Are they sleeping?” I asked.

“They’re dead,” replied Vovchyk.

On each pine tree, on almost every branch, clutching fiercely with their claws, were birds; there were lots of them, a great number, hundreds, they occupied the whole park, they had frozen in their sleep, unable to endure the long February frost. On each pine tree and on almost every branch. Tens and hundreds—Andrusia, you can’t even imagine it. Dejected, we finished off the last bottle and covered the embers with snow; after walking Vovchyk to the Dankivka bus, I headed home.

Standing in front of the restaurant was my former classmate Serhii, demanding “Your cigarettes or your life” from passers-by; I offered him a smoke.

“Let’s go drinking, buddy,” said Serhii, “ma-a-a-an do they piss me

off, damn Sovietized bastards—but you’re ok, let’s do a shot and then beat the shit out of them, let’s have a drink, I can’t look at them any more, well, you know what I mean, let’s go, I’m buying, we’ll show ‘em what life’s all about.”

We entered the restaurant and each had a glass of dry red wine, which, amazingly, made me sober.

“You stay here, buddy, and I’ll be right back,” said Serhii and then disappeared forevermore. It was very hot and noisy there, the waitresses argued with the barflies, the barflies yelled and sang that folk song about Halia and the water that she carried and about the troubles she had carrying it, about the fantastically vivacious Ivan—in other words, everything was as it always is. I got up and left.

By the firehouse stood a kiosk, and behind its broken glass sat stuffed birds and squirrels. They were illuminated by electric lamps, had glass eyes, and held real pinecones in their paws. “There seem to be too many of you here today,” I said out loud, and recalled that earlier, about twelve years ago, these very same stuffed animals sat on top of the bookshelf in our nursery school; back then, I had a great urge to reach out and touch them, but my teacher forbade it. I was convinced that if I were to grab them, press them against my chest, breathe on them, and pet them, then the birds and squirrels would shudder, warble, caw, chirp, and start flying and running all around the nursery school and we’d rejoice and chase after them, playing blind man’s bluff; often I would dream about this. When father was drunk and mother was working the night shift there would be nobody to pick me up at school, and I would sit with the school housekeeper-cum-nanny and with these birds and squirrels until the late hours. Although she had proscribed picking up the stuffed animals too, one time she did allow it; then, trying to restrain my inner trembling, I began to carefully pet a little starling on its head and I breathed into its eyes, which fogged up but wouldn’t blink, no matter how much I wanted them to; nor would the squirrels, or the white-sided magpies, or the crow would blink, no matter what I said to them, no matter what pet names I called them, mimicking my mother, who knew how to converse with dogs, and with cats, and with birds, using a particular intonation that I cannot recreate today. After that, time, I became completely indifferent to all stuffed animals in the world, forevermore.

Searching my pocket for a cigarette, I chanced upon some sheets of paper and pulled them out—they were Riabchuk’s poems; I lifted a sheet to the light behind the kiosk and read it, believing my eyes less and less with every line I read:

*here I am
my dear poets
trying poetry*

*oh yes
I too
fall for the ancient temptation
to perfect the world*

*and so
I try to warm
the frozen birds*

*to straighten
the tatty pigeon's wings*

*maybe something will change
the wind will rise
the wings will spread
and the sawdust won't burst out
and those glass eyes
may blink*

III

A cold drizzle has been falling for four days straight—the city is drowning in a fog, all of its lampposts predict a catastrophe involving the Italian-style courtyards filled to the rim with floating plants and drowned birds and cats, involving the riverbeds of narrow streets which cannot accommodate the water that pours from the heavens, involving us, who have nowhere to go to chat about Kokh's, Kaufman's and Saienko's paintings over a cup of coffee, or about this accursed downpour, or about the talented and hapless Dem, or about the equally hapless Siur, or about the fact that novels are already being written about us, and that Radio Lux mentions us, and that films are being shot about us, and that ballets and theatrical presentations are being staged about us. This damned, loathsome, eternal, never-ending downpour.....

..... a downpour that is never-ending, eternal, loathsome, damned, this downpour, for the fourth day—the fourth century—in a row, not abating even for a second, the same thing, over and over: wet stone lions, wet cobblestones, the rattling of a streetcar, long queues standing under umbrellas, and, I quote: “*No one is buying anything, there are no jars, nets, packages, or bags to be seen, people silently pattering their feet, switching from one queue to another like molecules under a microscope,*” end quote, a downpour of stone, ruthless, directly over this city—this last remaining refuge for creative people, artists and philosophers—directly over

these black cats in whose health we continue to announce toasts downstairs in The Nectar bar, directly over these retailers and middlemen. Maybe it's because of them that we have this downpour, maybe, maybe it is because of this endless haggling, a punishment from the heavens, yes, that must be it, but does that make things any better? Any drier? Alcoholic beverages, the Elzbieta church, a downpour of alcohol, a chamber wind ensemble performs a Skoryk composition and Kos-Anatolsky systematically rolling around in his grave, "I'll buy me a phone, I'll call you, farewell my dear, I can't hear you"

..... Do you hear, Krilyk? Cactus, can you hear it? Chemodan, can you hear it? Yes, son, I can hear it: four days now and it hasn't stopped raining, can you hear it or can't you? Has this downpour plugged your ears and mouths, and certain other orifices that every person has, if they're normal, and which a person—as long as they're normal (Misko, you're not normal, she said to me!)—tries, as much as possible, not to mention in public, of course. What person? Where did a person come from, when any idiot will tell you that up to this point it's been about artists and other vendors, about prostitutes and lions, about cats and plants who exotically float in overfilled, Italian-style courtyards, mixed in with composers; a lot, for God's sake, has been discussed up to this point, but this doesn't mean that some kind of, excuse me, person, must necessarily appear; that, at least, is how I see it, I, Misko, the municipal mystic or the mysterious Misko, if this indeed is a city, and I am I, etc.

..... this person is Trotsky. Trotsky has a hangover. Trotsky's hangover began when it started raining, in other words, it's an almost everlasting hangover. Trotsky, together with his hangover, walks by The Nectar and peeks inside.

But, aside from the downpour, there is nobody. Only the downpour, Trotsky, and his hangover.

And then, Dem appears.

"Down to The Nectar we won't sink,

'cause that's where drunk Dem likes to drink!"

chant Trotsky and his hangover, with hope in their eyes.

But Dem is sober, and instead of having a hangover he has a cat sitting on his shoulder.

"Is that a cat or a *katzenjammer*?" asks Trotsky.

"Yes, it's a cat in the rain," affirms Dem.

"A very important discernment. Do you think he's got a dollar to spare?" inquires Trotsky diplomatically.

"No, he doesn't have one, but I do, and I won't give it to you."

"Well, I don't need your mangy, tattered, lousy, stupid—and possibly even wet—cat!" says Trotsky, getting upset.

every, every, every, every, every, every, ev...

Dem spits in anger and is the first to enter Ukrainian Affairs.

IV

This quiet rock music at sunrise, this whispered scream, in which Andrusia, your-my-our defective dreams vanish and fade, transformed into a frenzy of condensed, pocket-sized stadiums recorded on a cassette tape, right up against the heart—both the cassette and the heart can be forgotten; O Lord, thank You that there is at least something that can still be forgotten, boundless gratitude, O Lord, that there at least exists this one “can,” which does indeed exist, just as the Lychakiv Bee Garden, the Hlynian Path, and Kavaleriiska Street exist, just like

*poems at dawn
the finest*

do exist, just as we, after the umpteenth glass of champagne, decided to visit that loner in the swirl of June’s flowers, figuring that he was at home, and not at the café, or at the book store, and we knocked on the porch door, and we knocked on the windows veiled by snowy-white and red curtains, and we were in the midst of deciding where else we should knock when suddenly you saw something and started to laugh, rudely pointing your finger; and there, on the windowsill (no, it wasn’t Cactus), stood a sign, either pilfered or borrowed from a museum, which announced to those interested, to those engaged, to those eager, to those resolute, to those intoxicated, to those possessed, that “The Exhibit is in Restoration.” The Exhibit was in restoration, it hadn’t gone to a restaurant, or to The Nectar, it had chosen June, this was a June Restoration, Andrusia, after which must come the July Monarchy. So we decided to announce this major, majestic, magistratically-magniloquent restoration to all those who were also (still) as young and nonchalant as we, and whose intentions also gravitated towards The Dnister or The Centaur bar or towards the underground Writers’ Union’s Club, or both these and those; and those and these; or those and these and these and those; or, and those and these and/or these and those, because in June people hadn’t yet left for the seashore or for the Carpathian Mountains, or for God knows where else; we walked over to the No. 2 streetcar’s last stop and you were pondering where was this Restoration that The Exhibit was in at this moment, and from your deep well of cleverness gushed out the idea that this Restoration was being royally consummated by The Exhibit—pretty clever, and I publicly scolded you, and you were publicly embarrassed but did not alter your position, you didn’t renounce your views or the words you had conceived, you didn’t change a single

letter or mark of punctuation, you didn't compromise your-my-our dreams and visions to transitional, politically correct factors, because it was June, it had been half a month since I had returned from the army, and candles burned in the cathedral, and a priest wearing gold eyeglasses strolled about, and people crept to the altar on their knees and this meant that freedom was ubiquitous and eternal, freedom at the peak of totalitarianism, antiquarianism, authoritarianism, KGB-ism, Cage-ism, exhibitionism and befuddlement, and thus, you read, out loud:

*poems at dawn
the finest*

*they're
like a dream
fading away
to be forgotten*

you wanted to smoke, because you've always wanted to smoke, and we foolishly bought a small, clay whistle, and we drank coffee on Skelna Street, summarizing and joking about all the impressions we had developed from what we had heard, seen, and read today, the coffee was bitter, the cigarettes—strong, your slender, little fingers just barely trembled, your lipstick left a trace on the rim of every subsequent cup of coffee you drank, your gray eyes squinted from the setting, very green, and very red sun, your lips uttered words that were a thousand years old, your golden hair steeply hung down—and evening was upon us.

Kaleidoscopic, huge crowds flowed past the Hotel George; azure unicorns with sorrowful eyes from which brilliant reflections of memories and dreams swelled out pulled a lavish, gold-plated carriage packed with drunk generals and no less intoxicated whores, flowering chestnut trees showered ice cream and champagne all over Akademichna Street, elegant porters metamorphosed into lions with yellow and blue ribbons in their cologne-scented manes. We ran into Ivanka, she too was all perfumed-up and radiant and she invited us to go to the Philharmonic for a performance of Kagel's "Hallelujah." "Let's go!" I said ardently. "We're not going!" you said icily, and grabbed Ivanka by the hand.

"Let's go to Pohulianka Park, to listen to the nightingales," decreed Andrusia. "Are you nuts, Andrusia, nightingales in June?!" exclaimed a startled Ivanka. "There's a whole bunch of nightingales there, and fireflies and water nymphs, the spring waters bubble over with rum and brandy there, and pudgy little bears wearing tuxedos serve ice cream and chocolate on silver platters—let's go!" said Andrusia. "Let's go!" yelled Ivanka, but then, suddenly, a German appeared and dragged her away and we went to The Mosquito bar, fiercely arguing about whether Kagel was truly a

charlatan and a dilettante, as you insisted, and discussing other, no less important things as well.

We were already approaching the Opera when suddenly you stopped and commandingly waved down a taxicab; the cab stopped to find out what you wanted, Andrusia. “To Pohulianka,” you said, jumping onto the back seat of the cab; furious, I sat down next to you. “Don’t be angry, sweetie,” you whispered, sliding closer to me, “would you like me to recite you a poem?” The cab reeked of burnt buckwheat, Lviv shimmered past us—but now everything was in reverse: Kohutyk Bar, the monument to Mickiewicz, a mob in front of the Philharmonic, The Nectar, Ivan Yakovych Franko Street, the Krushelnytska Music School, Zelena Street, which is as long as the road that leads into bright nonexistence. Tickling my cheek with her hair, Andrusia moved even closer and whispered right into my ear:

*poems at dawn
the finest*

*they’re
like a dream
fading away
to be forgotten*

*a trail of smoke
from the day’s first cigarette
a coarse butt
the onset of a buzz*

“I know that poem,” I said, slowly moving away. “I’m the one who taught it to you. If it wasn’t for me, you wouldn’t even have heard about it.”

“You sure are rude!” Andrusia said indignantly. “Just you wait. Just wait until we get to Pohulianka. I’ll let the wolves have their way with you.”

“Well, I’m not going to pay for the cab fare. I don’t have enough money to fund the whims of a drunk—and an altogether unbalanced, more precisely, overbalanced, woman.”

“Asshole,” immediately rebutted Andrusia. “I’ll pay for it myself.”

“Sure, and what with?” I cunningly smirked, feeling more and more like an inquisitor.

“Jerk-off,” Andrusia said calmly.

We got out near the winery. From across the fence empty bottles clattered about and motors roared.

“So, where are your nightingales? Maybe it’s actually just your so-called ‘crystal’ that rings from within the walls of this fantastic palace.”

“Shut your trap,” Andrusia advised.

The air smelled of acacias and of a potentially serious argument, so I

reluctantly forced myself to shut up. The factory drone gradually subsided and soon we couldn't hear anything but the closest of sounds. *The stars were ablaze, twigs snapped beneath our feet, young leaves rustled, the green-yellow flicker of fireflies sparkled, the spring waters gurgled, an unknown bird shrieked, hops were airing out, and everything was finding its proper place, I followed a barely visible figure, suddenly understanding how good it was that you took me away from that whirlpool of lights and countless human faces, not knowing how to thank you, with what words to convey the authenticity and essentiality of this night in the ravines and forests, between the stars and the fireflies, between the hops and sobriety, between you and me, between a wasted day and this night, which ended up being the daily bread of a wasted day; I didn't know what to say, how to apologize, and then God glanced at my speechlessness, because I remembered that whistle, which we bought, in jest, this morning; the whistle needed to be filled with water and I filled it with the world's cleanest spring water; you noticed that I had stopped walking but you kept walking, further and further, disappearing into the mysterious darkness, immersing yourself deeper and deeper into the stillness of the clouds' dark snow, and in order to stop you, to keep you and bring you back to make peace with you and save myself, I raised the whistle to my lips and blew into it; a nightingale's voice echoed through the forest, shredding the night and alienation in a flash of black-silver lightning; the nightingale's voice baffled the heavy masses of frustrated time and the suffocatingly tight space; they slammed against each other and ignited an unprecedented thunder of sunrise rock music; and a brisk snow tumbled down from the starry heavens, completely covering in just a moment the flowers and spring waters; in just a moment the leaves yellowed and scattered, in just one, single moment we were buried up to our knees in a snowdrift, and the nightingale kept singing and singing, just like Jim Morrison, or Janice Joplin, you stopped as if dumbstruck, I caught up to you, stumbling into holes hidden by the snow and darkness, getting tangled in thickets of blackthorns, blackberries, and syntactic periods, stomping on frozen myrtle berries and the icy yarrow of strawberries, using all my strength to pull my legs out from the snares of determinism, which were slyly laid by evil hunters all over Pohulianka Park; I caught up to you and turned your face towards me in order to sense with my own lips that which the heart was screaming about, muffling the voice of the nightingale; you were crying, well of course you were crying, the weeper, the whiner, the wailer, my beloved and cherished one, my only one, the most beautiful one in the world, which is flooded with snow and with your tears. "If you want, I can give you the whistle" I said; "I do," you answered with a sob.*

We made our way home; in passing the deteriorating gravestones of the Polish Orleṭa, Andrusia stopped blowing into the whistle and handed it back to me; it was dawn, a new day was unfolding; the unfolding of a new

day, a day unfolded anew, new, not old, it was not the previous day that was unfolding but a new one, the street-sweeper meticulously swept the pavement in front of the entrance to our building, the mailbox apologetically stretched its empty mouth.

“We won’t argue any more today,” I declared.

“Of course we won’t,” said Andrusia, turning the key in the lock, “and you know why?”

“Because we’re going to sleep all day. Like those bears that you love so much. That’s why. It’s winter in Lviv.” I said, switching on the quiet madness of Led Zeppelin’s *Stairway to Heaven*.

“Wow, sometimes you really manage to come up with some extraordinary ideas,” Andrusia said, delighted. “But before we go to sleep, listen, listen very carefully because you didn’t let me say everything that I wanted to say. So, listen from the beginning:

*poems at dawn
the finest*

*they’re
like a dream
fading away
to be forgotten*

*the trail of smoke
from the day’s first cigarette
a coarse butt
the onset of a buzz*

*rays peeking in from under the curtain
the shadow of a Saint-Simonian slave*

Monsieur, have you great things to do? asked Andrusia, looking me straight in the eye.

O indeed! I replied without hesitation.

V

Winter is ever closer. A green desk lamp in the middle of a white and azure landscape with a river and hills, a crystal apple, at the core of which Andrusia hoped to see our future, but saw nothing but a few strands of a rainbow; a stereo full of wonderful music—from classic Pink Floyd to brand-new Bach, which Andrii brought with him from Strasbourg, along with some Ceylon tea and a carton of Gauloises—the smoke of choice for

Alain Delon, who had played Trotsky, that is, the role of Trotsky. *There are more and more yellow leaves outside the window, the early frosts grip the ground ever more tightly*, and a few boiled potatoes left behind in a ceramic bowl on the porch entwine each other with thin needles of bluish frost; you can't decide what to do with these potatoes: it would be a shame to throw them away but it would also be rather disgusting to eat them, they're so rigid and extraterrestrial, like meteors, like weapons, like ammunition for the sling-shots of heavenly Neanderthals. *It's high time to replace the broken window pane, to tape over the cracks in the frame—winter is ever closer—winter*, so beautifully painted by Pieter Bruegel the Elder and then later copied by Pieter Bruegel the Younger, a winter with ice skaters and a bird trap—but for which birds? For those that sit in the surrounding bushes? Are those birds even alive? Didn't they freeze for eternity back in that archaic and youthful February—of which you were so jealous, Andrusia—with its red wine and pale orange structuralists? But anyway; a trap is set up in order to capture live birds, somehow managing to ignore the existence of dead birds; can you hear their chirping? Can you see how hungry they are, how they covetously peck at the seeds that are scattered beneath their captivity, or maybe, their death—so, it is a trap for dead birds, isn't it, birds that will be dead in the future? *A trap to turn the living into the dead! OK, enough of that. There are ever more leaves between the frames, on the floor, in the buckets of water, and even in the cup of tea which was to have warmed you*; but what can cheer you up when, spontaneously and completely, you end up in that panoptic painting by Bruegel, in the sixteenth century?

“It's not the sixteenth century.”

“Which one is it?”

“It's eternity.”

They're as small as hummingbirds, *winter is ever closer, the air in your enormous apartment is ever more sonorous*; you thirstily gulp down very strong and very repugnant tea, which reeks of motor oil, which is why it is so cheap, you walk across the ice of the frozen Seim River with a cup in your hands; some kids who had been ice-skating run up to look at you, to look at you, to look at you and at how that mysterious drink steams, and at how you attempt to keep your balance on the slippery surface, being careful not to slip and fall and not to spill even one single drop that would melt the ice, ignite the snow and turn into ashes this entire postcard landscape—or is it Bruegel's self-portrait?—a landscape or a postcard, in which you timidly smile at the kids, holding the cup to your heart with all your might.

“Where's your Andrusia?” “Where, oh where, is your Andrusia?” the kids ask mockingly, coming closer and closer, signaling one another, holding fists full of stones behind their backs.

“How do they know about Andrusia? Who told them? Who let them know?” I wonder, moving backwards while continuing to smile timidly. At

that moment one of the stones hits me in my right shoulder, while another strikes directly into the cup next to my heart.

“Oh no-o-o!” I wail, falling to my knees, with my palms trying to gather what spills out in a dark, chestnut-colored blot on the crystalline surface of the hard apple, but it’s too late, it’s useless, irreparable, unavoidable—willow bushes and poplars flare-up, the white-white-white snow flares-up, the red-black flame licks the hill and the church on top of it, the postcard crumples, it darkens, disappears—and *leaves rustle loudly beneath your feet, as you walk with the cold cup from one window to another, awestruck by the first snowfall.*

A startled Andrusia shakes my right shoulder with all her might, “Wake up already—I beg you, wake up! I’m right here next to you, right here, it’s me!” I open my eyes and run my hand across my face—it’s wet.

“You were screaming again, it was so scary, you called for me and cried out. What’s with you, my darling, my love, my one and only?” Andrusia caresses my head, wipes my face with a handkerchief, and kisses me, and only then do I lean up onto my elbow, look out the window where Lviv’s monotonous, heavy rains are pouring down, and say in a voice not my own:

“I dreamt that you were gone; and some kids—you know that demons always appear in my dreams as kids, so obnoxious and vulgar—they asked me where you were, and I didn’t know what to tell them because you really weren’t there.”

“I am here,” says Andrusia quietly and convincingly, “I’m here, really, you can touch me, or better yet, kiss me; Good Lord, you’re still such a little boy! I do exist, I love you, I love, love, love you, so that I may exist, I exist in order to love you, my soulmate, my love, my one and only, I will cease to exist only when you cease to exist, we’ll die on the same day, and on that very day we’ll meet in heaven, do you believe this?”

VI

One bright July day, Lord Krishna is standing across from the Boim Chapel selling *The Bhagavad Gita As It Is*, *The Source of Atma*, and some pocket calendars.

But then Trotsky shows up, LOADED.

“Hare Krishna!” says Trotsky in greeting very courteously and very loudly, leaning on the table of books. Exhaustion.

“Get out of here, Trotsky, go away, don’t obstruct my work,” says Lord Krishna quietly.

But no, Trotsky has already arrived.

“So when are you gonna buy me some BOOZE to settle up for that piece of rubber I gave you?” asks Trotsky threateningly.

“Come to The Nectar this evening and I’ll set you up with GALLONS OF BOOZE, but for now, BEAT IT.”

“A snowstorm, a snowdrift, a snowstorm,” Trotsky starts singing a Belarusian tune in a perfect Belarusian accent.

Assessing the situation, Lord Krishna quickly gathers his books into a bag, comes out from behind the table, and says:

“Let’s BLOW OUT OF HERE. You FUCKED UP everything.”

And then Bumper ROLLS UP, loaded.

“Howdy fellow drinkers!” the loaded Bumper shouts elatedly. “Trotsky, when are you going to come over to paint those windows?”

“Let’s get out of here—now!” says the loaded Trotsky, all excited.

“No, not now. You’ll have a drink? I’m buying. There’s still time—it’s not evening yet. It’s not now yet. How about tomorrow morning?”

“You’ve gone nuts, Bumper,” Trotsky shakes his head disappointedly. “How many times have I told you, don’t drink so much. And now look, you’ve gone nuts.”

“Why is it that, all of a sudden, I’ve gone nuts?” Bumper ponders.

“Be-because tomorrow morning we’ll be undergoing medical treatment at a hospital bearing the name Ukrainian Affairs. They have I-Vs filled with beer and ampoules filled with port wine, my dear PORTOLLA.”

“No, I’m not gonna drink tomorrow. W-w-why are you so zoned out, Krishna?” asks Bumper anxiously.

“Becauss-se there’s no way I’ll be able to catch up to you boys today,” explains Krishna with melancholy.

“Don’t worry, you have a whole day ahead of you!” hollers Bumper.

And then, out of nowhere, The Nectar rises up, or, maybe, is created, right in front of them; sitting by its entrance are a very pale Dem and a very red Bielov.

“Wa-s-s-s-up Dem, you nut!” yells Bumper. “You wanna have a drink? I’m buying.”

Dem doesn’t say anything.

“He’s gotta have a drink,” calmly explains Bielov. “He’s FLIPPED OUT and *indubitably* hasn’t said a word for three hours.”

“Who *indubitably* is gonna go to the store?!” shouts Bumper. “Are we gonna save Dem *indubitably* or not, you fuckers?”

“Stop yelling, Bumper,” Lord Krishna says quietly. “I’ll go—just stop yelling.”

“Shut up, I *indubitably* command you!” says Bumper, becoming frantic.

“Give me THE DOUGH,” Krishna sighs.

Bumper gets THE DOUGH and starts counting it. There’s a lot of DOUGH, it’ll come out to three bottles of PORTOLLA per sucker. Bielov and Trotsky glance at one another—maybe that’s a bit excessive, but it’s too late.

“Don’t worry Dem!” Bumper is signaling with his hands. “You’re a

talented artist, you can't be zoned out so much. Your paintings hang in a museum of Ukrainian art in New York, for God's sake, right next to Dali's and Picasso's—you're a genius, Dem, it's not like you're just one of these Trotskys who, for two weeks, has been *indubitably* promising to paint my windows, you're a rare talent, if you want, I'll *indubitably* get on my knees in front of you, if that'll keep you from zoning out? *Indubitably?*"

"I have to point out that Picasso and Dali *indubitably* were not Ukrainians," interrupts Bielov.

"What do you mean, they *indubitably* weren't?" Bumper asks disconcertedly. "Well, then, they will be! Everyone will *indubitably* be Ukrainian, sooner or later—you included, you damn Muscovite, even if you *indubitably* don't want this to happen!"

"And everybody will *indubitably* be hung," adds Trotsky.

"That's it, Trotsky, you've pissed me off, shut up, you don't understand SHIT, unless you're talking crap like Trotsky," says Bumper with irritation.

Romko walks up to them.

"Greetings, distinguished gentlemen," says Romko. "Who is it that's insulting Bumper?"

Romko has had an operation and doesn't GET TRASHED anymore, but he still regularly ventures down to The Nectar.

"Romko, being that you don't GET TRASHED for weeks in a row, tell us: Is Dem a genius or not?" Bumper addresses him imploringly.

"Of course he's a genius," says Romko, shrugging his shoulders. "Could anyone ever doubt it?"

"You got that, Trotsky? You got it, you dog?" proudly asks Bumper, and commandingly lifts his finger to the heavens.

And then Lord Krishna, who has already managed to take his books back home, change clothes, and buy ten FIFTHS of Sloviansky wine, a loaf of bread, and five squares of spreadable cheese, comes up to them.

"Let's go to the Green Eye," decides Bumper suddenly. "Why should we stand here SHITTING IN OUR PANTS every time we see another retarded cop? Romko, are you coming?"

Roman stays behind while the rest of the group heads for the trolleybus, although none of them, except Bumper, really wants to leave this privileged, nectarous affluence. But evening is still far away, the keeper of the Sloviansky wine is Bumper, and it looks like there's no hope in the near future, so Trotsky, Dem, Bielov, Lord Krishna, and Bumper disappear into the depths of Green Eye Park for the sake of conversing with nature and wine, for the sake of heroically preserving the never-fading, liberating ideals of Lviv gypsy life, for the sake of singing and dancing in thick, tall grass, for the sake of reciting marvelous poems, singing rollicking old Lviv *batiar* and other drinking songs, for the sake of standing on your head, puking in the bushes, for the sake of manifestations of a friendship that exists before

and after death, for the sake of permanent hiccups and arguments over the correct pronunciation of the transcendental syllable: “OM,” “OUM,” “EOM,” or “OUN,” which escalates into a fight between Lord Krishna and Bumper; all potential supplies of cigarettes are quickly being used up for the sake of reconciliation, towards which Bielov, Trotsky and the eight FIFTHS work most actively, while Dem continues to remain silent, unaware that the ninth FIFTH is now almost empty, it’s getting dark, windows, stars and the headlights of trolley-buses and cars are flickering, and someone remembers that soon The Nectar and the corner store will be closed at which point it will be necessary to pay a ridiculous price to Niuska or Franek or some other scum-bag who makes a fortune at twilight, in the evening, and at night; and so the guys jump up from their well-warmed seats, forgetting about Bielov, who is in the midst of a peaceful and gentle snooze, but not forgetting about the last bottle of Sloviansky wine, which Trotsky regrettably smashes against the trolley-bus bench; the gang frantically curses Trotsky and no less frantically tries to calm an extremely incensed older woman, whose back, unfortunately, is now wet with the fragrance of the steppe, of the estuary, of the Dnister River, of golden autumn, of the *Valley of Narcissi*, of the valley of death; finally, they all successfully land in front of The Nectar and take the trouble to attentively count what’s left of Bumper’s DOUGH; there’s enough only for some dribbles, for three FIFTHS but just then Lord Krishna interjects and asks, extending his index finger into Dem’s chest:

“Are you gonna talk today or not? If you talk, I’ll pitch in for three more bottles, if not, then I’m going home—happy holidays, bye-bye. To sea, or not to see, vot ist ze kveshchenz!”

Faced with such an alternative, the crew shudders and shuts up, and all eyes turn to Dem.

Dem straightens his glasses and dithers.

“C’mon Dem!” Trotsky says pleadingly. “Alright, alright, I’m the clumsy oaf who broke the bottle; but three FIFTHS aren’t something you find just lying there on the street, are they Dem?”

Dem takes off his glasses and begins to rub them earnestly with a handkerchief.

“Dem!” says Bumper. “It would be a real injustice if an alented tartist like Dem ended up being the reason for the downfall of all our efforts and hopes.”

Dem fills his lungs with the twilight, nectarous air and says:

“Friends! Colle-e-e-g-z! I love you all so much. I am so happy to have such friends. It’s not about BOOZE, even though BOOZE is important. The point is that all day I have tried to figure out *what* it was that I wanted to say, because I really wanted to speak, but I couldn’t speak, not knowing *what* I was supposed to say; I found it very difficult to grasp the thought that sat upon my shoulders and tugged at my ears; wine has flowed, cigarette

smoke has drifted up to the heavens, Bumper has smacked Krishna, life has passed on by; I sifted through all possible thoughts that might be worthy of your benevolent attention, but they all seemed trite and senseless compared to Bumper's generosity, to Trotsky's unwavering optimism, to Krishman's kind and peaceful disposition, to the sharp and clever intellect of Bielov, who, by the way, seems to be missing. I chided myself with the worst of profanities and confessed to all mortal sins, but I still wasn't able to grab this thought by its tail. All that appeared to me were phrases and I was occupied with these phrases when there was really only one thing that needed to be done: to phrase this thought and express it out loud. We drank all of the wine and smoked all of the cigarettes, we ate our daily bread and our daily cheese, we returned to The Nectar, we sang, danced, fooled around and amused ourselves to our hearts' content, but this thought remained as distant and unreal as the pains of tomorrow's hangovers are today; and I was ready to burst into tears because of my weakness and worthlessness, because I was as equally unable to stop remaining silent as I was to begin talking; at the same time I couldn't say something else, say something just for the sake of saying something, in order to assume a presence in your communicative space; it seems to me that all the ills of mankind, including yours and mine, exist because language replaces thinking: language and feelings are a great substitute, sure, but you can't just live with surrogates and substitutes your whole life; language is like wine, by the way, so go ahead, Krishman, before the corner store closes. Now where was I, okay, language—is wine, and thinking is holy sobriety. Everyone except for Trotsky knows that drunkenness is temporary and accidental, while sobriety is constant and customary; just recall your childhood—how soundly and clearly we were able to think back then, how we were able quickly to grasp every thought and idea that appeared before our eyes. 'Why?' you may ask me, Bumper and Trotsky, my dear buddies and fellow countrymen. Because, I will reply, in those precious times we were not yet inebriated by language, as we are now. It would enter and leave us like sparkling wine, we barely got tipsy and sobered up right away, and henceforth we played with language and it was not frightening or dangerous to us yet because we were still able to think in silence. However, with time, the amount of language that had been swallowed increased, a dependence on language emerged and we didn't even notice when one fine day we transformed into deeply verbal fish stuck in the depths of that ocean known as the signified world. From that time on we could not exist without language like a fish cannot exist without water, which you all know about as well as I do; we began searching for someone to converse with, we started choking on the crystal clear air in which thinking and remaining silent take place; if we couldn't find someone to talk to, then we grabbed books and beat back the need to think with tons of somebody else's words and all sorts of languages, with studies of the eternal dialogism of human consciousness, of the

unfeasibility of existence beyond a communicational environment and other, similar nonsense. You both know very well the Mystic-Lunatic, but you probably don't know why he WENT NUTS; they say that he was hit on the head with a piece of asphalt but that is not the case. He hit himself over the head with the heaviest, hardest of all asphalts and that, as you may have already guessed, was language. Every day he would read more than the three of us put together could read in a year's time, because we only read bottle-labels, and even that we do rarely: why keep reading the same thing over and over again? So, he read a lot, in Polish, English, German, Russian and, naturally, Ukrainian and on top of that he also wrote a lot; he would lock himself in the attic, he has an apartment on Pekarska Street, where in the pre-Soviet days The Pekelko cafe was found—a most important detail!—sometimes he would lock himself up for three or four days and wouldn't come down from that attic, he always read and wrote, wrote and read, read and wrote, wrote and read, read and wrote, wrote and read, you may say, 'Dem, enough already,' but he didn't say, 'Mystic, enough already,' but just read and wrote, wrote and read, read and wrote, he didn't have broads or friends, he didn't even drink beer, didn't even drink coffee, perhaps only mineral water; I was at his house a couple of times and every time I became frightened, very frightened, like when you have of a bad hangover and you're afraid of even the wimpiest guy and you cross to the other side of the street to avoid any confrontation, so that he won't all of the sudden appear with an elephant's trunk instead of a nose and two green-red little snakes won't slither out of his eyes; well, you know what I'm talking about; so even way back then I said to him, 'Misko, stop all your reading and writing, just drop it, Misko, or, I swear, you're going to lose your mind.' Oh, Krishman has returned; did you get it? Good, let's go to my place, I'll finish the story as we walk, the Nectar has long since closed for the night anyway. You don't want to come to my place? You're afraid of Irka? So am I. Well then, let's go hang out in the passageway. So he says to me, 'You, Dem, are a very talented artist, but your creativity takes place in a boundless, mental space, whereas my creativity lives in the world of language. Language is the home of existence.' 'Misko,' I say to him, 'the mental space is a holding-cell for drunks, because there are lots of cops there and there are grates on the windows; but the living world is beyond these grates, a place where trees stand in the sweet hoarfrost, where nests await warm little eggs, where cats scamper and where there are charming, smiling Galician girls, whose legs run right up to their necks and between whose legs glow such beautiful openings, which get moist when you caress them with your finger; the living world is not the place where you jerk off, dripping black streams of sperm onto the white womb of paper, it's where living children are born,

where there is a lot of hollering and clamor, where it smells of their shit and a happy father washes diapers; the living world is a place where your friends scrape together their pocket change to save you, and simultaneously themselves, from total lunacy and deathly depression, which surrounds our colonial life in the empire of the foul and evil hangover, which, just like Lenin, always lives; the living world is a place where I twist the cap off another bottle, where I have someone to tell that I love him, her, them; the living world is a place where there is life, and not the eternity of yellowed scrolls written by those like us, nobodies, who drank & ate, fucked their lovers, and then croaked; none of them found out any more about what we *truly* know, because human self-awareness is limited for just that reason, because it is human; Misko, damn it, admit it—you're a useless creature, you're hoarfrost on the grass, the sun has set—and now, you're gone; admit it not to me, not in words, but to yourself, to your bookish, lifeless, rustling soul; admit it and you'll save yourself.' Well, a month later, our Mystic comes to The Nectar and mumbles to himself: 'A flood, an endless flood, the fourth century, O Lord, where are our horses,' 'the hum subsided and I climbed up onstage,' and 'it's cold in Europe, it's dark in Italy,' well, you know all his little sayings; they took Misko to the Kulparkiv Psychiatric Hospital, and after some time released him and he wanders around like that to this day, poor guy, but enough of that, let's drink!"

VII

Lord Krishna got lost; he was stuck in a very clever snare, which had been fashioned by the demon Vatsasura in the space between the Halytsky Market, Serbska Street and Rynok Square. Lord Krishna became tired and weak, his insides were being consumed in a forest fire, his trustworthy and loyal friends Dem, Trotsky, and Bumper had melted away into that lustrous ocean known as 'bye-bye,' for the sixth time now he walked to the No. 36 bus stop, angrily spat out bitter, burning pine cones and this year's nests, passed the interurban telephone exchange, made a left, walked up Serbska Street and ended up on Rynok Square, but he had ended up on Rynok Square for the sixth time now, that's why he also spat here, at City Hall and at a strange person holding a trident, and at the storefront of the medical bookshop and at the storefront of The Centaur bar; he desperately turned right and was almost prepared to take a first step towards the potential rescue of Virmenska Street, but the demon Vatsasura had strategically marked a white chalk-line, which Lord Krishna could not cross in any, any, any, any, any-any, any-any, any-any-any circumstance, even if that circumstance was World War Three, even if that circumstance was an unexpected Muscovite, Polish, Mongol-Tartar, or Israeli occupation, therefore he again walked down Serbska Street, pretending that he was just

innocently strolling around Lviv at twilight, delighting in its Renaissance, its Baroque, its Gothic and its god-damned Secessionism, he sat at the dry fountain across from the Halytsky Market, lit up his penultimate cigarette and, exhausted, tried to figure out how he could outwit that bastard Vatsasura, but the figuring proved to be unsuccessful, because, from the start, Lord Krishna was tied to the possible outcomes of his own musings, when what he should have done was abandon the outcomes of his thought process, but he didn't know how to do this, he simply forgot how this is done, because he had flipped out, because it turns out the Sloviansky wine was really gasoline, which does not help put out forest fires but instead helps to spread them, distribute them, extend them, prolong them, this may sound exciting but it isn't exciting, it is not excitement it is existence, organized with a clear conscience by the demon Vatsasura together with the KGB and the Angolian Secret Service; that simple, that boundless, that dyed-in-the-wool Lviv, with its High Castle Hill, Bernardines, Dominicans, Poor Clares, Carmelites, Arsenal, Lychakiv, Peter and Paul, Pohulianka, Levandivka with Filipovka, Akademichna with Skelna, Kaizerwald with Stryisky Park, and other kinds of marvels, had completely disappeared, and had turned into a disgusting, spat upon and muddled piece of space between two markets, the Halytsky Market and Rynok Square; why don't the militiamen see this, did their eyes fall out of their heads, where are they looking, why don't the government officials—who are presently snoring away in those parts of this ancient European city that have yet to be bewitched by the demon Vatsasura—see this, where are they looking, where, where, where is that dude with the trident—that bearded asshole who is pretending to be Stefko Orobets—looking, but no it's not Stefko, I know Stefko very well, Stefko wouldn't stand all night in the middle of Rynok Square holding the national symbol, Stefko is not like that; Stefko, please get me out of here, get me out of this cursed, bewitched circle, in which the demon Vatsasura frolics, that Indian shaitan, contraband smuggled in by those dark-skinned dickheads studying at the Medical Institute; Stefko, if you are there, save me, because it's time to go home, I want to go to sleep. Lord Krishna began to cry, to grind his teeth and loudly blow his nose. The clock struck three. A patrol of militiamen walked up to Lord Krishna.

VIII

Trotsky pressed on. He didn't know where he was heading but he was moving along quite well and he didn't give a damn about any of the world's demons, whether they were manufactured domestically or imported; the only one Trotsky feared and truly respected was that monster of alcoholic hallucination, the white squirrel; the white squirrel had a puffy tail and four paws, a jittery, well-intentioned animal carrying a crystal shot glass on a

silver tray. He tamed it about five years ago but still hadn't gotten his fill of its extraordinary wisdom and its companionship. It would often visit Trotsky in the most unexpected places—in the bathroom, in underground passages, in the streetcar, in bed; sometimes it would jump up onto the table at The Nectar, sometimes it would run along the bar in the basement of Under the Tower, especially when, as was often the case, there was a long waiting line leading all the way up to the stairs; the white squirrel loved the hangover but the hangover didn't like the white squirrel and this unrequited love stabbed at Trotsky's heart, especially in the morning when all of his favorite hangouts were in the midst of a sleep as peaceful as death; Trotsky kept riding, napping, and sleepily pondering the white squirrel's love for the hangover until someone vigorously knocked on the streetcar window; Trotsky opened one eye and saw that it was Smetana; Smetana died two years ago, having poisoned himself with anti-freeze and Trotsky was well aware of this but, nonetheless, became uneasy. That's why he opened his other eye. Smetana was walking at the side of the streetcar, to the left of Trotsky slept the big, fat hangover and on the shoulder of the hangover the white squirrel had found a comfortable spot and slyly winked at Trotsky while gnawing on a candy stick manufactured at the local Svitoch Candy Factory.

"Well then, it looks like we're all here," Trotsky announced, yawning and looking over Smetana's shoulder into the street to establish his present location. They were now in the Pryvokzalna neighborhood; the streetcar was heading towards the park.

Careful not to awaken the hangover, Trotsky stepped over its flabby knees, which were clothed in black-patterned Turkish pantyhose, and walked towards the exit. The white squirrel ran up to the front.

"I must have dozed off—please stop here," Trotsky said to the driver, who obediently fulfilled his request.

Trotsky hopped out of the streetcar, took a deep breath of the night air, and looked around. Smetana was hiding behind a shoe store while the white squirrel ran along the streetcar tracks trying to grab the streetcar by one of its wheels.

Trotsky's experienced mind brilliantly took hold of the situation in which he found himself; a situation which, let's be honest, was FUCKED UP, the worst and most important aspect of which was the presence of Smetana because the white squirrel and the hangover, their faults aside, were Trotsky's friends, while Smetana, although he also was a friend, was only a friend while he was still alive, Trotsky had vowed not to converse with the dead, no matter how much they wanted this. Trotsky weighed all the pros and cons and realized that this was not the place for such a serious battle and that it was time to retreat to a defensive position, that is, to the circus nearby where his friend Kolia, an artist, lived. He made the sign of the cross as he passed the Elzbieta Church and walked down the street. Coming right at him was someone very tall and fat.

“The hangover,” thought Trotsky.

“Trotsky,” thought the hangover.

Trotsky strategically crossed the street. This, however, proved to be a colossal mistake because in the storefront, among the frozen-stiff mannequins, stood the elegantly clothed Smetana, carelessly holding a severed male member in his hand; the member was still energetic and jerked about, which Trotsky was able to notice as he once more crossed the street. “MAN, AM I FUCKED UP,” thought Trotsky, and spotted an unfinished cigarette on the sidewalk. Ignoring the threat approaching from the rear, Trotsky quickly picked it up and smoked it. He became very dizzy, but the threat was beginning to fade. The circus was not far ahead. But he knew that running was out of the question in any, any, any, any, any, any, any-any, any-any, any-any-any circumstance, and that they are just waiting for him to lose his self-control, to give himself up, like a whore, to the first horror that should appear, one-two-three-four-seven—no, mustn’t count, must think of something else; “well squirrel, well you bitch,” whispered Trotsky, “well you bitch, well squirrel, I won’t forget this, you goddamn cocksucker, I just need to make it to Kolia’s place”; Kolia worked at night because the daylight clamor of streetcars and autos threw off his creative thinking; Kolia’s studio was in a marvelous quiet basement where white squirrels were strictly prohibited entry because in the cupboard, hanging above a table of paints, paint thinners, and paint brushes, there always stood five or six little bottles of Troinoi cologne, plus a bookshelf stuffed with detective novels, fantasy novels, adventure novels, prose and poetry; but Trotsky knew with the utmost of certainty that neither detective novels nor fantasy novels should be read at this time, that the first corpse or alien monster that inevitably appears on the initial pages of such a book will immediately materialize in all of its infernal beauty among the canvases and easels, winking and waving its finger at him; I must drink a shot or two of the cologne and read something very peaceful, pleasant, and cheerful, ignoring all the possible rustling, screeching, and coughing of the shadows, the murmuring of the diabolic; there must be some light, they’re afraid of the light, those bastards, I need to follow the text very carefully—this year, Trotsky had been particularly infatuated with Shakespeare’s comedies—and fall asleep at a table that smells of the reliable fumes of paint and paint thinner, or on an old-as-Lviv, springy mattress that stretches across the studio, but not, God forbid, follow the sounds, glance around the room, or respond to any questions.

“You won’t escape!” said Smetana loudly and sharply from behind Trotsky’s back.

The minus-thirty-degree July chill scorched his skin, his hair stood up and immediately became covered with puffy needles of hoarfrost, but Trotsky valiantly withstood Smetana’s unexpected and underhanded counter-offensive, confidently spat out the cigarette butt, which singed his

lip, and made the sign of the cross. Now he knew that the studio was only one hundred and twenty-four steps away. “So you’re thinking of spending the night at Kolia’s?” said Smetana calmly, once again from behind Trotsky’s back, “Well he’s not home, he’s spending the night in the Sykhiv neighborhood, at Ihor’s place, they’re partying away some cash they just made, and you won’t get away, because you want to see how my face has decomposed and how my eyes have rotted out, look over at me, you hear me Trotsky, I’m talking to you.” “Oh, fuck off,” thought Trotsky, but suddenly a big cat, as fat as a barrel of beer, stepped onto the path and flashed its eyes; the studio was only fifty-eight steps away.” “You think it’s a cat?” Smetana inquired in a benevolent tone. Trotsky turned right and walked past the cat without looking at him; “it’s not a cat,” laughed Smetana maliciously; Trotsky remained silent; he could now see that the studio window was lit up and that he was a mere eighteen steps from salvation, but don’t tell Kolia, explain all of this to him tomorrow, just not today. A piercing whistle squealed from behind. “Trotsky!!!” Bumper, Dem and Smetana shouted in unison, but Trotsky was already ringing the doorbell. “Trotsky, you fag!” Smetana bellowed. “Who’s there?” asked Kolia. “It’s me,” Trotsky answered in a rusty voice; the door lock screeched, light slashed at his eyes, there was the smell of freshly-brewed, extra-strong tea and of various paint thinners, Mick Jagger was happily singing. “Come on in, make yourself at home,” Kolia smiled. Trotsky entered and slowly sat down on a chair.

“Kolia, give me something to read,” he said quietly.

IX

When you first returned from Amsterdam and opened the door to our apartment with your key, you saw a picture that—as you admitted to me later—had nothing in common with either of the Bruegels but which convincingly resembled Bosch: the place was a complete mess, the air smelled unbearably of several weeks’ worth of alcohol, tobacco, and God knows what else, the flowerpots were overfilled with the weird stalks of mysterious desert plants and cigarette butts, garbage spilled out of tightly compressed trashcans, a broken coffee mill lay helpless in the corner, Lord Krishna was decisively and relentlessly puking in the bathroom, I was completely loaded and passed out in the bathtub with a rubber mat under my neck, covering myself with your little bathrobe. “Sweet Mary Mother of Bosch!” Andrianna whispered in shock; this, however, was just the overture; you pushed open the door to the room and stopped dead in your tracks: on the couch sat two aliens, while a third rummaged through the clothes closet, looking for some rope with which to hang himself; that was Trotsky, with an unshaven and swollen face, greasy hair, a banded-up

forehead and all signs of *delirium tremens*; you looked at the Martians more closely—they looked sort of like Dem and Bumper but creepier than they ever had looked before, or would ever after that remarkable day; “*a Martian god, long unshaven, wearing glasses with round lenses and always drunk, concerned with writing an outlandish novel and breeding rabbits,*” you recalled the words of a poet; Dem the Martian was missing the left lens of his glasses, a cigarette butt smoldered in his beard, his head was tightly wrapped in a towel soiled with soot and tomato sauce, while his feet were bare; Bumper hiccupped and cursed under his breath, his hands and face were smeared with soot, the whites of his red eyes glistened sadly while blood dripped from his unnaturally puffy, cracked lips. “*But what he likes best is spiritus vini rectificati with Martian tomato juice and rabbits with red eyes, for whom he consistently pronounces toasts*”—these were the words that swirled through your stunned consciousness. They all ignored you, each consumed with his own important matter: Trotsky with a search for some rope, Dem and Bumper with pulling corks out of empty bottles—because we didn’t have a corkscrew, we had been forced to push the corks into the bottles, and when this day of reckoning was upon us, it turned out that the recycling center wouldn’t accept bottles with corks in them. Thus everyone was rather busy and for a moment you felt awkward for intruding into this event-filled and, in-its-own-way, intimate space. If not for the macabre sounds of the dialogue between Lord Krishna and the toilet, if not for Bumper’s cordial monologue and the popping sound that the corks made as they were eased out of the wombs of bottles, then one could say that the silence in the apartment was eerily perfect. “*They can’t hear us, nor we them. We can’t hear one another, we sit quietly in a little room in mysterious twilight, lips, unheeded, uttering first Martian words, then whole, clumsy sentences...*” You noticed the legs of a couch that had been broken off, a saucepan with something really horrible lying on the desk, books carelessly scattered on the floor, mounds of cigarette ash, a shattered crystal vase, leftovers, potato peels, empty cans of food, window drapes singed at the bottom—ruin, chaos, and decay; you walked up to the windows and opened them wide, sat on the edge of the couch, and smoked a cigarette, trying to decide what to do next—go to your aunt’s place or begin the inquest.

“Trotsky, get away from that closet,” you finally said.

Dem and Bumper lifted their heads in unison. Trotsky froze in confusion, holding your shirt in his hands. Then they all glanced at one another.

“The white squirrel?” Trotsky half-assuredly and half-inquisitively began to speak in a trembling voice.

“It’s a bit too early for that,” Bumper reasoned.

“Well then, what is it?” asked Dem.

“Oh, I’ll show you a white squirrel,” promised Andrusia. “I’ll show

you a whole zoo.”

“Andrusia,” Trotsky deduced.

“Yes, it’s Andrusia,” Bumper confirmed.

“It could only be Andrusia,” agreed Dem.

And all three simultaneously and spontaneously dropped to their knees.

“Andrusia, have mercy! Spare us! Andrusia, don’t show us the zoo! We’ve had enough without that! We can’t take it anymore! You’re our only hope! We’ll be better!”

“Bozos,” said Andrusia, sucking in the smoke furiously. “Bearded cretins. Morons. Alkies, Imbeciles, Drunks. Dorks. Bums. My affliction. A fine welcome I get! So much preparation! Burned the midnight oil! Gave it all that you had!”

Trotsky began to cry. He feared for me. He wanted to wake me so that I could run away, but he didn’t have the guts to get off his knees. The only one who was able to save himself that day was Lord Krishna. He heard Andrusia’s voice and tiptoed out of the house and then hastily escaped to The Nectar.

“Andrianna, forgive us, we’re a bunch of rascals; we wanted to clean up after ourselves but we just couldn’t stop. We were planning to do it today but somehow we got caught up with the bottles, and, uh, you arrived and we...,” Dem explained uncertainly.

“And here I brought you a brand-name bottle of cognac, just like you wanted,” Andrusia continued, ignoring him. “And first-class cigarettes, a carton for each of you. And some nice tea. Hellfire is what you’ll get from me now. You pillaged the whole house!”

At the mention of cognac and hellfire, the threesome became completely dispirited. Kneeling was very painful, but they bravely suffered through it. As Dem later admitted, they were ready to suffer through anything, even if Andrusia developed a strong desire to set their beards on fire or smash all the empty bottles on their heads, or, like the inventive Gunther Uecker, bang some nails into their heads. But Andrusia wasn’t planning on banging anything into anyone.

“Get up off your knees, you nitwits,” Andrusia said with concern. “Bumper, go wash yourself—with soap—and comb your hair. I can’t look at your idiotic, black snout anymore. I can’t stand to look at you guys at all. How do you think you look right now? When is the last time you looked in a mirror? When is the last time that you actually bathed?”

Bumper tiptoed away to go wash up and wake me, while Trotsky and Dem obediently sat down on the couch anticipating their impending fate and concluding that electric chairs would be preferable, or maybe even just one for both of them. As Trotsky later disclosed, he had been this ashamed only once before in his life—in a playground when he shit his pants, too embarrassed to ask to go potty.

“YO, DUDE, get up, *it’s a FUCKING MESS*, get up man, hurry up!” Bumper said, shoving me.

“It’s the cops. It’s the neighbors. It’s a fire.” I guessed at the possible reasons for the fucking mess, without opening my eyes.

“It’s more fucked up than that; it’s ANDRUSIA!”

“O-o-o,” I groaned, “It’d be better if it were a fire.”

(Don’t stare like that, because I can feel it: the hair and clothes, the body, the grass beneath your feet, the tree—all burning.

The whole forest is burning as well as the water in the river.

You stand in the flames and laugh. Don’t stare like that, because you’ll scorch the Sun and the Earth, somewhere far away and unattainable.)

“To bring yourself down to such a state,” Andrusia continued her autopsy, “to drink yourselves into becoming pink elephants, to ruin the apartment, to break the couch, to rummage through my lingerie, to singe the drapes... Jeez, dear mother, and these are artists, musicians, poets! To hell with you and your damned music and poetry. Creative artists! The bright, ever-glimmering geniuses of the Ukrainian nation. Dem, take off that towel, right now! Does your head hurt or what?”

“Yes, it hurts,” Dem admitted, unwrapping the turban.

“Serves you right. It should hurt even more” was how Andrusia sympathized. “Trotsky, you’re the most disgusting of the lot. Go wash up and shave.”

“Andrusia, I can wash up but I can’t shave—my hands are shaking, I’ll slash myself,” Trotsky began explaining in despair.

“That’ll be great—then you won’t have to hang yourself. Beat it!”

Trotsky beat it. Now it was my and Bumper’s turn.

“Aha,” said Andrusia.

“Andrusia—” I began saying.

“Not a word more, or I’ll kill you. Not one sound. I’m going to have a very special and very long talk with you, don’t you worry. I’m off to visit my aunt, and I’ll be back in three hours. By that time, I want everything here to sparkle, I want to see flowers and to smell the faint scent of lilacs, not your disgusting, male fumes. There won’t be a particle of dust or grime, the couch will stand on all four legs without wobbling like Trotsky does by The Nectar, the shit-bowl will glisten, the windows will be washed, new drapes will be hung, the dishes will be clean, the books will be on the shelves, and so forth and so on. All three of you will be shaven, with washed hair and wearing a fresh change of clothes.”

“But there are four of us, Andrusia,” Bumper pointed out timidly.

“One escaped. Who was it—Krishman? That just makes it worse for him.”

“But this is impossible, Andrusia,” I uttered.

“What’s impossible?”

“Everything that you told us to do.”

“That’s your problem.”

“Ask her for a swig to kill this hangover, ask her, ‘cause we’re going to die—she’s got some,” Bumper groaned into my ear.

“Andrusia, give us a drop of something, anything, because we’re hurtin’,” I whimpered, fiercely hating myself, Bumper, Dem, Krishman, and Trotsky, and even more fiercely loving the unattainable Andrusia.

You looked at me considerately, shook your head, silently pulled a bottle of French cognac out of your bag, placed it on the table, and left. This was the most terrifying moment in my life. If I had had a pistol, I would have asked Trotsky to shoot me right here, right now, just to close out this scene. The fucking mess was obvious, it was touchable, it had a smell and a taste, it hung in the air, inducing serious depression.

“Y-e-s-s-s,” Bumper exhaled.

“It’s all over,” agreed Trotsky.

“A different woman in such a situation wouldn’t have contained herself,” said Dem.

“Enough bullshitting,” I said, “go rinse out the shot glasses.”

With trembling hands we raised a toast to Andrusia’s arrival. The cognac was fantastic. I poured everyone another shot and we drank to the resolution of the fucking mess. The depression, now disappointed, floated out of the open windows together with the cigarette smoke. Lines became clearer, colors became brighter. Then we each drank one last shot to the establishment of harmonious order in our souls, in our bodies, and in my house, to the idea of Andrusia forgiving me as soon as possible and to the end of this four-week hell. Then we collected our thoughts and frantically began our battle with INSANITY.

We fluttered about like swallows. We pierced the space in and around the apartment with golden arrows. Empty bottles—Trotsky called them “pelts”—were returned for deposit money, which was then used to purchase roses; because there were lots and lots of bottles, we were able to buy thirty-three roses. Floors and windows were washed, legs were screwed back onto couches, trash was taken out, books were shelved, AC/DC triumphantly blared, a whole bottle of air-freshener was sprayed—onto the walls, onto the freshly hung curtains and onto the surprisingly intact carpet; fresh soil filled the flowerpots in which house plants purchased with the left-over ‘pelt’ money were re-planted; Bumper donated his coffee-mill, which was exactly like the broken one, noticing, among other things, that the only time he had ever worked so hard in the past was in the army, during his first year of service, under the watchful guidance of the Tambov “elders.” Within two hours the apartment sparkled with cleanliness and innocence, no one had ever lived here, the only smell in the room was the faint scent of the French air-freshener; there had never been any hell here, hell was elsewhere, not here; fairies lived here. Surprised, we glanced at one another and laughed; we were sweaty, tired, and out of breath. Then we all scattered to our homes

to wash-up, shave, change clothes, put on white shirts and, of course, neckties; Trotsky didn't own a tie so I lent him one of my own. As for me, I filled the bathtub with hot water and jumped in, washing away the dirty remains of the fucking mess from body and soul with an unparalleled joy.

Andrusia arrived four hours later and, for the second time today, decided that she had opened the wrong door. In the clean, brilliant room, decorated with rose-filled vases the sound of an organ quietly playing Johann Sebastian Bach could be heard; candles were aglow, four young gentlemen wearing ties, with faces shaven to a bluish glaze and only slightly swollen, were conducting a leisurely discourse about the works of Van Gogh; a mellow, cozy twilight filled the room, the spines of books glittered in golden dignity, the flowerpots were full of greenery, and the scent of lilacs gently filled the air.

You leaned your head into the doorway and just stood there, as we silently stared at the slender, golden-haired young woman in a white dress who was looking at us; then, for the first time in my life, I became madly jealous of my friends, for you were looking at all four of us with an equal amount of love, with an equal amount of pity, and with an equal amount of forgiveness.

X

By night's end we no longer cared about the September thunder outside the window, about the roar of the wind or the pouring rain. We were running out of cigarettes, and, as is always the case in such situations, we were getting sleepy. Maybe this night was our only chance, the only way—a stormy, September night, with crisp fresh air flowing through the open-vent window; having gone through a candle, a cassette tape, a bottle, and through words spoken and unspoken, Andrusia, O nightingale, my obsession, my delusion. You know that we all write in this peculiar, playful, poetic way. Maybe this was our only chance, the only way. We all write this way and think this way and speak this way because we are all children of our accursed era, wherever the hell it came from. Because all of us are just us. Sailboats drifting on foggy, nighttime seas; stars obscured by clouds in the autumn heavens—half-, it's always half—of something. Andrusia, you know, you must know the way out of this trap. “Gnaw off your leg and escape on the other,” says Andrusia, searching through the ashtray for an unfinished cigarette; you're happy Andrusia, you've been happy your whole life, as far back as I remember you, you've always laughed and made jokes. And how far back do I remember you? Seven or eight years—you are seven or eight years old; on the porch in early morning, in a little white dress, with a bouquet of fiery dahlias, with huge eyes and the thinnest of lips, Andrusia, long before that end of a September night. Why did they deprive us of

Who?
Who?

W?
W? W? W? W? W? W? W? W? W? W? W? W? W?

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?ohW ?ohW ?ohW ?ohW ?ohW ?ohW ?ohW ?ohW ?ohW ?ohW

And I fall asleep too, right next to you, fully clothed, Tristan and
Isolde, the eternal archetype, only the sword is missing, there's always
something missing, whether it's cigarettes, a sword, there's only the gray
and unsettling morning outside the windows, crows and jackdaws fly by, the
Lychakiv trolleys are rumbling along, the curtain is swept by the cold wind
outside, sounds die down, colors fade, a soft heap of fluffy and worrisome
sleep sifts down upon our city and upon our room, how strange

..... *O child, little girl, how I loved
you so*

and later they wander through this snow-covered city, whose name no one
knows. They drink coffee in deserted cafes, watch films in deserted movie
theaters, kiss in the empty royal castle situated on a nameless river,
oblivious to the stares of the majestic statues standing in the niches,
oblivious to the echo of the bells and the fragrance of the oranges that roll
down from the giant mountain, on whose peak waves the flag of an
unknown country; and first we, and then everybody, runs along the narrow
street, heading straight for an invisible police cavalry squadron and not
letting go of placards on which something is written in an unknown
language, in letters, or maybe hieroglyphs, that have not previously been
seen; they pop into, we pop into, you pop into a cold hospital and head
straight for nurses carrying trays with chicken-like frozen babies with
hollowed out eyes, and I cry out of despair, Andrusia, I don't want you to
see this

.....*I didn't love—I lived as love, as if in you, as if I
were you*

and rolling into the corridors, with shaved heads, are representatives of
various countries and nations, Andrusia, Andrusia, if you would just wake
me up, if, for once in your life, you would just save me from these
impossible nightmares, but you abruptly turn towards a stone wall covered
with splendid stalks of purple-leaved, wild grape vines, your shoulders

tremble because you are crying, I look around just to make sure: the rumbling is actually the sound of your executioner, who dejectedly drags an axe dripping with the glimmering-blue sticky syrup of freshly-frozen blood; I'll save you

..... *in your pain and in your sorrow*

Andrusia, I'll trade my fate or my clothes with you, he'll get confused and won't know who it is that he's supposed to execute, he'll pull out a steel cigarette case and sit down, leaning up against the stone wall, in order to carefully mull over the situation, and we'll escape, Andrusia, we'll climb up a rope ladder tied to an old ash tree, first you, then me, breathing in the crystal air, which has the slightly bitter aftertaste of a young black currant, and this dream will come to a screeching halt, leaving in its trace the strong scent of Valocordin and the quick, winged shadow of fleeting schizophrenia.

XI

But, Andrusia, we will never part. Your golden braids have the fragrance of fresh water, antique rings slide off your delicate fingers, they are the only mementos of your grandmother, your snow-white gown has the fragrance of your exotic perfumes and you want to buy a couple of small, silver bells, but they are nowhere to be found because, in this country, there is absolutely nothing to be found that is worthy of your attention, that is worthy of you, Andrusia. Well then, let's listen to some music. But you don't want to listen to music. What do you want? You want to go and buy a couple of tiny, thimble-sized, silver bells. You're nuts, Andrusia, but we will never part. "What is the smell of freedom?" you ask me while staring out the window, combing out your long-long braids, thick gold with the fragrance of fresh water. And outside the window SNOW is falling. "Freedom smells like chocolate," I lie, but you turn your head skeptically ...

.....*Sybil, woman, prickly one*

..... how can you explain this snow to the bored masses? How do you explain knowledge that one does not acquire but, rather, is born with? To what manuscripts and scrolls will you refer these creatures, who are thirsty for truth, goodness, and beauty, while taking into consideration their undeveloped consciousness, the absence of gestalt in their souls, recalling their animalistic—and, from time immemorial—hatred of form? "You're right. There is no language," you agree. "There is no SHARED language." We are not obligated to explain, Andrusia, we are called upon to preserve. And you know this perfectly well

..... *again it falls, again it covers the dark, chestnut-colored earth,*

re-frozen after the thaw, filling in all the empty spaces, where leaves, warmth, life should be; it knows that nothing should remain unfilled, nothing should cool down, and it unhurriedly settles on bare branches of apple trees, on windowsills, it drifts into the birdhouse that you had hung up a long time ago, it drifts into faces and wide-opened eyes and the obediently open, obediently silent heart

..... attentively listening to Bach. Do you remember: a green-pink morning in Cracow, May, the bugler on the tower of St. Mary's Basilica, on empty St. Mark's Street, upon which you run barefoot and bareheaded, barely touching the cobblestones and short of breath? From whom are you running? Whom are you chasing? The memory fades before my eyes, the green and pink lose their color, the bugler is playing out of tune, Vit Stvosh's immortal tree is rotting into dust, and you, in shock, step back from the altar. "Have mercy on us, Mary," whisper your lips, chapped from the cold winter air; out of habit, you try to fix your hair—your hand touches the coarse bristle on your head, which has the texture of a man's several-days-old beard. "They won again," you say to me in confusion, not comprehending the SNOW that is heaping up outside the sharp and narrow windows

..... *snow, sprinkled with salt, sand, and yet still uncertain, insidious; snow, littered, stomped on, scorned, will nonetheless melt one day, it will resurrect, it will become clean, leaving them with their salt, sand, dirt, and discarded wrappers, their uncertainty, their insidiousness*

..... there are very many of them, all the same height, with high cheekbones, slanted, fat-covered eyes, with a lackluster yellow skin; they're dressed in camouflage; at first, this interests you, you address one of them, then another, and another, but they don't understand, or at least they pretend they don't understand, the English language. You get bored, you get into a car, you want to get out of here, to go to a place where they aren't, where there isn't even one of them, you want to forget about this unpleasant adventure, you turn on the radio, but Munich speaks their language, as do Paris, London and Melbourne. Now you understand the sense of that dream: the slogans on the placards were written in their language, SO THAT THEY COULD UNDERSTAND WHAT WE WERE PROTESTING. But there is nowhere for you to go from here, because 'from here' is everywhere; and you cry sullenly, leaning upon the steering wheel, O Andrusia, my obsession, O Nightingale

..... *Sybil, woman, prickly one*

..... "This can't be real," you sob, "this is all just a nasty, horrific dream, I'll just wake up and everything will be back to normal." You wipe away your tears and begin to think it over. You need to wake up, but how will you do that? Carefully you pinch your left hand with the tips of your nails—you dream of pain. After

hesitating a bit, you open the car door, stick your fingers into the crack and slam the door, shrieking. You dream that your hand is being flooded with blood. From this kind of pain one can lose his mind, let alone wake up. Damn it, something is not quite right. You look at your watch, but the watch has stopped. You look into the rear-view mirror with terror, but nobody is there. “Ah, it must be a dream, because this is impossible,” you breathe a sigh of relief, oblivious to the bright, cherry-red drops of blood dripping onto the car seat

..... How can I save you, Andrusia, advise me, answer me, respond to me, I’ll do anything you ask me to. “Physician, heal thyself,” Andrusia advises. You always give good advice. A fresh wind from the Dnipro scatters the fallen chestnut blossoms, the columns of the red university building drip with a creepy light of blood and fire, you dream of nationwide public meetings and political rallies gathering hundreds of thousands, of trash cans overturned by protestors, of newspapers and hunger strikes, of radio for morons, of television for oligophrenics, of idiotic commercials, of banquets for swindlers, of the inexorably growing anger of the masses, of the final days before a civil war, of other ways out that are better than obsession, than the nightingale, and of other delusions; of a populace which will never become a nation, of the Empire of Ukraine and so on

..... “They won again,” you say to me, failing to understand, not understanding that SNOW which is heaping up outside the sharp and narrow window in our room, coating equally the virtuous and the godless, the victorious and the defeated, that only SNOW, only it, itself, heals the soul, while everything else kills it, that only the first, unbelievably white SNOW is the true savior, and victor, that only SNOW is attained by worn-out mystics through their contemplations, only SNOW, only fire, only love—“*and everything is the same, everything is what it is, and nothing more, everything is the heart of SNOW, the foretaste of it, the forethought of it, the foretelling of cleanliness and silence*”—but you don’t understand this, and again I begin to explain to you: look, can you see these live branches of Breugel’s trees above the precipice, these weary dogs, eternally returning from ever-fruitless hunting, these hunters not yet old who passionately breathe the aroma of pine trees, do you see the greenish and diamond-hard block of ice below the legs of the skaters; look, finally, do you see this *snow* this eternal, this ever-forgiving *snow* of Bach and Breugel, look, do you see, do you see *yourself*? “*Myself* I do not see,” says Andrusia, disconcertedly.

XII

Bielov and I met by The Nectar and started counting the money. There was a lot of money. I was bidding farewell to Lviv. It was someone's birthday—not the Stork's in Riabchuk's story, but the 'birthday' of aerospace—and we set off for "Dem's Kitchen." As always, it was across the street from the Intourist hotel. For starters, we took a couple of bottles of beer and went out onto the street. The warm April breeze drove several flocks of slender-legged Galician girls past us, it flipped through the pages of busy, pleated skirts, it told fortunes with the colorful tarot cards of exquisite dresses and, looking back with fading youth, waved farewell with the supple seaweed of the fragrant girls' bodies. I loved them all. Bielov loved beer. That's why we got two more bottles, and soon Dem appeared before us; his beard and glasses were a convincing attestation that he too was sad, for above him Spring hovered with a skirtful of roses, because above him swam cupids, offering salutes with thousands of golden, sunny arrows which ricocheted off shiny storefronts, drying out the heart and lips, and so Dem wanted to drink, and The "Peretiah" store was selling Sloviansky and the words of a poet circled importunately through the consciousness, pierced by the blinding April luster and indolently spilling over from bottom to top and then back again: "*With chapped lips you kiss the arrow-head—you're insane*"—we had a lot of money, Dem was tormented with thirst, Sloviansky was available right across the street, so why shouldn't we end up where rituals in honor of the glass god had taken place for over a year; even more so, because we still had a full ten hours before the train was to leave, a whole tankard, you might say, of idle time; so the half-empty temple the common people call Ukrainian Affairs ceremoniously and mundanely opened its glass doors for us. "*You reject all faiths—you abandon love and search for a religion that suits your soul*"—and this was the last communion before the long trip into the Alps, where crazy Hölderlin wandered, in search of Dionysus or Hercules, Hercules or Christ, Christ or another opportunity to get together with Suzzette, with Suzzette or Andrusia, who has been watching me from Stuttgart, simultaneously finishing her term paper and sipping rosé wine, which we all despised, preferring, with an extraordinary stubbornness, Sloviansky or vodka, vodka or beer, or beer and Sloviansky which was stronger than all the rosé wines in the world, but vodka was even stronger than Sloviansky, so why shouldn't we end up in the quiet jungles of Stryisky Park, together with two bottles of the abovementioned vodka, with bread and fish, taking into account, moreover, the fact that we still had eight hours before the train was to take off, a whole ocean of sunny time mixed in with young leaves on branches and singing birds, which were performing the works of Hafiz, of Khayyam, and of other, even lesser-known poets, which had been set to music by Bumper, who had crystallized before us near the closed-until-

Judgment Day “Munich” bar and, seeing me, loudly sang for the whole street named after the immortal Ivan Yakovych Franko to hear: “He sold us out for a babe,” but then exhibited an utterly noble and, it can be said, natural desire to help carry the bag of booze; a multitude of legs and smiling lips stood at the No. 4 trolley-bus stop, but: “*no longer will you compare women’s lips to roses, clothing, or wine, not to mention rubies;*” indeed, it wasn’t rubies we had in mind then and there, on the steep bank of the sparkling stream with a temperature of forty degrees—was that Celsius or Fahrenheit? Forty proof, Bielov concluded, and we joyfully celebrated this unusual scientific discovery, for this was a day of scientific discoveries and of conquering the cosmos, the last day that we would be together, because after that day, as Vovchyk pointed out in his novel, “many were bitten by the white squirrel, some counted off their final years at ‘nut-houses’ or at the drunk tank, and there were also those who found their own less than completely seaworthy little boat called ‘taking an active role in life’ and, armed with the oars of ‘a healthy lifestyle,’ set out onto the stormy sea...”—end of quote. And so, six hours remained before the train’s departure, not really that much time anymore, but not so little either; the same could be said about the money, but what is money? mere trash, and, let’s be honest, what is our life if not a Game, as Trotsky, who was standing by The Nectar for some reason, logically observed; and so, we stopped arguing about the size of the ozone layer above Australia and began the second half of that Game known as life, a Game fiercely hazardous, and, sometimes, fatally uninteresting, with busy skirts and colorful dresses in the background, with a soft, warm April breeze up above, where puffs of clouds hung motionlessly, accurately executed by Botticelli, where trolleys rang their bells, where “My dear wine, my dear red wine” was sung, where Krishna felt queasy and represented “*The universe, ill and in pain,*” a minute earlier having admitted that he was the father and the mother of this shitty universe, its foundation, the syllable “OM,” and, correspondingly, also the Rigveda, the Samaveda, and the Yajurveda; armed with menacing, and even vulgar, words the vicious sons of tsar Dhritarashtra of Filipovka showed up, and they wanted to hurt Lord Krishna because it seemed to them that it would be the proper thing to do, but we understood that we couldn’t just stand back; I couldn’t stand back, neither could Bumper, nor Dem, no, even Trotsky couldn’t just stand back, and the first among us who couldn’t just stand back was Bielov, who fashioned his favorite weapon out of a broken bottle of Sloviansky; and you fought like an incensed and furious tiger, like a round, huge and impetuous monstrosity, and now: “*you hear moans and groans, wails and blood—from all sides,*” but there are a full four hours left before the train’s departure, loads of time, during which it is possible, in some manner, to lick or wash, and bandage the wounds, rescue the bodies of the fallen, get a few more bottles of something or other—which wasn’t going down very well already but nobody seemed to notice that—and celebrate an

ancient Slavic funeral feast, and continue seeing me off from Lviv, a parting for a long, long time, possibly forever, now and forever, amen, because a woman is waiting for you, a woman for whom you traded in your most loyal champions, and a foreign land, unknown, overfilled with attractions and temptations, wealth, democracy and rosé wine, AIDS, and other extraordinary things, abandoning this country, forsaken long ago by both God and people, a land that is destitute, idiotic, insidious, cruel, naïve, sentimental, honest, mendacious, in one mOMentous word “Slavic”; “*you see a woman with wind-blown hair and in parting you talk about meeting—you are not to blame, you’re not to blame for anything—you’re dreaming,*” you’re dreaming about this ancient city, these neglected cathedrals, these tiny cafes, this ruining of the spirit, this abandoned place, “*where dust is lifted by bodies, where the winds are the sighs of unseen passers-by, where other captives died,*” over fifty million of the drunk, the sober, the virtuous, the aggressive-and-sick, the polite-and-healthy, the geniuses-and-collaborators, the dissidents-and-the morons, the brothers-and-prostitutes, the sisters-and-rabble, in one mOMentous word: the Ukrainians; “*right here, right in the middle of your street you sense an arrow in your chest, its golden arrow-head in your heart.*” “Don’t worry” says Mistyk, pensively flipping a young dandelion through his fingers, “don’t worry, there’s a cabaret troupe with that name, maybe everything will work out, don’t worry, we’ll smooth out the road for you, and the farther you travel, the more you’ll see; if you stare off into nothingness, if you get upset, think of me, brother;” “don’t worry” says Bumper, saluting you with a freshly-opened bottle of Sloviansky; “don’t worry” says Dem, holding up Krishna’s body which, in turn, is holding up a head wrapped up in two facial tissues and, like an echo, repeats “don’tworryOMdon’tworry”—and then fades out; “don’t worry,” says Trotsky, lighting up the wrong end of a cigarette, “we’ll see each other again, and you’ll tell us how you’re doing, and we’ll see how you are.” “Don’t worry,” joins in Bielov, “the land will be ours; and the sky too.” They have lined up in a row on the railway platform and offer me their praise, placing their hands on their bare, foolish heads in a salute, passers-by notice them, look askance, and whisper, searching for a cop, but they fear not cops, nor these nervous gazes, they’re no longer afraid of anything, and, for the first time since all of this began, I think of counting how many of us there are and with fiery amazement I realize that there are seven of us, a nice number, a lucky number, a mystical number; seven samurai, seven dwarfs, one of which has decided to set out for Snow White; seven apocalyptic (“apoplectic” says, the uncorrectable—“Uncollectible? Then send me to the recycling plant!”—Trotsky, by way of timely correction) angels, six of which are standing on the Lviv railway platform, which drifts out into the enduring past, and the eyes of the angels are, without exaggeration, tearful—FOR REAL GODDAMMIT, I SAW IT WITH MY OWN EYES—and I wearily sigh, because I’m tired of explaining obscure or self-

sufficient, maybe banal, things, what I'm explaining to you is that these are not, in any way, drunken tears, and these angels aren't drunk, because angels never get drunk, even in their heavenly pub; and later, waking up at some unknown shade of railway Dao, listening to the banging of the wheels and the contemptuous cough of smoky lungs, I look out the window and see how "*stars of tears warm tears fly by along the dark sky stars of tears which don't shine,*" and I see an unfamiliar, ever new, ever ancient land and, just before I fall asleep again, I come to realize, in amazement, how beautiful my farewell with Lviv and its *winter* truly was.

End of Book One

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