

## A Burnt Summer

Taras Prokhasko

Day one

Something has changed. Already everything is something else, like yesterday. Summer has suddenly become the end of summer. It seems the totally unsummerlike rain, a spray of wet wind, will not cease before autumn. The irregular bark of the chestnut trees looks like streams of whimsical, rain-made brooks.

Laying a finger across such a stream, I didn't stop its flow—it found an alternate course.

But I shall seize this autumn. It will not slip away.

I could sense its presence at summer's dawn. It had been a summer of thirst. A summer holds many summers, after all. Today it is impossible to say what it was I had sensed. But I had said, autumn is right around the corner, it's already here, somewhere, even if there's just a little bit of it.

The responses were, yes, of course, autumn is just around the corner, but let's let summer pass, then you'll have your autumn. To which I had said, even in the summer you can have autumn.

The most gripping part of summer is when at first light of day you don't know if something entirely new hasn't begun.

Today, I think, it has.

Day two

A way of thinking exists which is impossible without smells. Or: a way of thinking exists where thoughts and smells are categories. Or: there is a type of thinking in which a thought is a smell and a smell is a thought.

If such thinking exists—fragraned thinking—then a philosophy must exist somewhere in which a scent is a category and a postulate.

Take that bundle of branches brought in off that blessed little tree and placed on top of the dresser, where it lay for an entire year, smelling of dust and nothing else: the branches have suddenly reclaimed their own, original, fragrance. Or: one morning (today), the fragrance of God's little tree has overpowered everything else: every single branch in the bundle has stopped smelling of dust, as it had all winter, spring, and summer.

A true sign of autumn.

But what is autumn? Autumn is an illusion.

Or: autumn is confusion.

Or: autumn is a conclusion.

At any rate, we wanted to bid one another farewell. We chose a small restaurant at the edge of town (a small restaurant in the woods). We hoped its walls of pure wood would be steeped in the vapors of fried wild mushrooms. We'd order dark beer with the mushrooms.

The two of us arrived by car. I drove, since she wanted to smoke a lot. An aroma of waterlogged, crushed mushrooms encircled our car. A steady flow of dutiful molecules escaped intact from the air tunnels that could be traced all the way to the solid darkness of the forest wall.

The smell of mushrooms broke off once we entered the restaurant. Still, we ate so much that we didn't have time to say good-bye.

It is generally well known that saying good-bye means talking, rather than eating together.

Afterwards it rained steadily. We sat in the car with open doors, wrapped in plaid coverlets, and talked. She knocked so much cigarette ash over the plaid coverlet that a gray smudge spread over it, its shape begging interpretation, like coffee grinds spilling from a cup.

In our casual directness we let ourselves sink into childhood.

Or: our casual directness elevated us into childhood.

Rain flooded the windshield. Autumn was determined to completely snuff out summer. I couldn't resist: I went out in the rain and put the flat of my hand on the windshield. For a single second the stream of rain beneath my hand stopped. I saw her as a red dot, and then as a white stain. Finally I saw all of her. Like through the diaphragm of a camera. Or: like a vibrant watercolor. She was watching me, and, I imagine, she smiled. I couldn't see her smile, though, because water was already flowing over my hand without stopping. The water had won, as it had in the morning. Yesterday morning.

We drove to town.

Freud would have understood everything.

Or: only Ziggi Freud would have known what we did not talk about along the way.

Or: Professor Freud would have known what questions should have been asked the next day. But everything we'd assumed about Freud did not match what went on between the two of us in town.

We drove directly to the train station. She was going to travel by train through the Carpathians and other mountains.

Day three

I suspect I would have sensed the immediacy of September 1914 and September 1939. Maddeningly, for some reason I can sense the looming of Septembers.

Right now, though, I'm in love with a street.

Or: a street is flirting with me.

I spent the whole day with the street. From the cold morning desolation after the rain to the troubling, not quite autumn sun reflected on the polished cobblestones crowded with pedestrians.

The street has the personality of a Latin American woman. She is an *avenida*. All she does all day is drink coffee. It is her way of filling the absence of senses. Coffee is her sense.

Or: her sense is coffee.

Or: coffee is a means, a goal; the goal—coffee.

Or: coffee—coffee—coffee...

Day four

Chronology is a useless thing. Even for my diary. All I want to remember is every mark. Which is adequate for getting by without dates.

I caught nothing else today. Because how is it possible to capture the sneaky approach of autumn.

Day five

She sent me a tape recording. It expressed what she couldn't say out loud. Something Ziggi Freud would know. She doesn't know yet that nothing can replace the inability to say things out loud. But I listen to her voice. One way or another, I will help her understand so much.

It is good to help wise women—they know who is helping.

Or: it is good to save wise women—they will always remember who saved them.

Can nut trees be shedding nuts at the end of summer? That's what has happened. Which means that the end has become the beginning.

My head aches: the domesticated ants in my home are moving out. Maybe they're looking for someplace to spend winter, or maybe they're setting out to go somewhere past the Carpathians and other mountains. They did like her presence.

Day six

A poem came to me in my dreams. A consequence of yesterday's nut-falling.

Like a black walnut, the sky  
will crack apart—there will be cries,

and that, I think, is us

with fistfuls of

sundry nuts

and a few left over, on the bench.

These are the skies that once were there, above.

Add the black one—

its crumbling will signify the end.

Day seven

I will hike across the Carpathians. I will burn this bridge.

Or: I will set this summer on fire.

I will burn these papers. I want to forever remember the irresistible allure of autumn mountains. The dryness of sun-burned grass, the brittle fragility of scorched moss, the smell of squashed blackberries. To bring her all this.

I will burn this summer—I want her like I want autumn. Once summer is gone autumn is here. With autumn, she'll be here. She said she'll come, come autumn. Isn't this autumn?

The only thing missing is smoke and ashes. Like when leaves are being burned in the streets on those late autumn evenings and you can't see the smoke or ashes, though in your mind you have a vivid image of the billowing smoke pushing the darkness around with scattering sparks. And ashes, heaps of ashes that for the longest time hold the shapes of leaves.

Day eight

Anyhow, yesterday I stayed with the *avenida* until nightfall. Her evening smelled of a woman with night cream on her skin. I promised I would return this morning to have coffee with her.

Where I'm sitting with my coffee it is so thick with cigarette smoke that I found myself sitting in the dark. In a kind of opaque chasm. She saw me, though, from the other side of the cellar. The same way I had seen her through water. Except that I probably looked like an etching.

She came over to my table with her cup of coffee and sat next to me. She was listening to a tape recording of the same message she had sent me. Only after it ended did she start to speak. Asking if I had a cigarette. She had a knack for asking questions like that, in a way that was completely out of the ordinary. But I don't smoke. Though I did have a cigarette. In my pocket I've kept one of her cigarettes from back when sheets of rain had streamed down the car.

We'll smoke it together. I would prefer to puff at it leisurely after she's done. But without a doubt she will want another drag after me. That was how our lips had touched the first time. We did set the summer on fire.

Mainly because a little yellow leaf had gotten stuck at the edge of my shoreline.

Now I'll torch my papers. I asked for a lighter. Just let me write down one more phrase.

Burnt, or not, a summer is what cannot be forgotten.

Now they're in flames: autumn has arrived.

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Original publication: Taras Prokhas'ko, "Spalene lito," in his *Leksykon taiemnykh znan'* [Glossary of Secret Knowledge]. Kharkiv: Folio, 2011, pp. 3–9.