

ДЗЕ

verbum

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Digest of the literary and art magazine "Dziejasłoŭ"

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Мастак — Генадзь Мацур.
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A Word From “Verbum”

Many a time and oft has it been said by different critics during various discussions that contemporary Belarusian literature is one of the most unknown Eastern European letters and, simultaneously, is one of the most interesting ones. It is possible to agree with the former at once. After all, we do know that the majority of Belarus's neighbours have programmes and whole institutes aimed at disseminating their own culture and particularly – literature. The current Belarusian authorities do absolutely nothing in this direction; the state does not participate in the largest European book fairs at all. There are no special state-run projects to translate Belarusian prose and poetry into foreign languages. How then can international readers find out that our literature is in fact interesting and off the beaten line, and that we, besides the Nobel Prize laureate Svetlana Alexievich, also have tens of authors who are worth the most careful attention and a closer acquaintance?

Therefore, the independent literary and art magazine “Dziejasłoŭ” has decided to fill up this gap with the help of a digest of texts from its latest issues translated into English. Poetry, prose, essays, criticism, and new books – here one can find all the genres presented in the magazine. Many thanks to everyone who have been part of the implementation of this idea and in particular – to the translator Jim Dingley. We wish our dear readers a pleasant acquaintance with today's Belarusian literature.

One more thing – there is a problem of transliterating Belarusian proper nouns (people's names and surnames, toponyms, etc.) with Latin letters. The editorial board of “Verbum” has decided to use the so-called Łacinka, i.e. the Belarusian Latin alphabet, as the basic variant of transliteration of such words. For the sake of convenience, in the section “Our Authors”, we also resort to a usual way of transcribing Belarusian literati's names and surnames into English. For those who would like to understand more deeply this topic, we offer a table of Romanisation from the Belarusian Latin and Cyrillic scripts to the Latin (English) with reading and pronunciation variants.

Latin alphabet for the Belarusian language	Cyrillic Belarusian analogue	English analogue	Pronunciation example
A a	А а	A	A - in car
B b	Б б	B	B - in bit
C c	Ц ц	TS	TS - in sits
Ć ć	Ць ць	soft TS	<i>no English equivalent</i>
Č č	Ч ч	CH	CH - in chip
CH ch	Х х	KH	CH - in Scottish “loch”
D d	Д д	D	D - in do
E e	Э э	E	E - in met
F f	Ф ф	F	F - in face
G g	Г г	G	G - in go
H h	Г г	H	H - in hill
I i	І і	I	EE - in see
J j	Й й	Y	Y - in boy
K k	К к	K	K - in kitten
L l	Ль ль	soft L	Like French “L”
Ł ł	Л л	L	L - in lamp
M m	М м	M	M - in my
N n	Н н	N	N - in not
Ń ń	Нь нь	soft N	<i>no English equivalent</i>
O o	О о	O	O - in order
P p	П п	P	P - in pot
R r	Р р	R	Like Scottish “R”
S s	С с	S	S - in see
Ś ś	Сь сь	soft S	<i>no English equivalent</i>
Š š	Ш ш	SH	SH - in shut
T t	Т т	T	T - in tip
U u	У у	U	U - in pull
Ů ů	Ў ў	W	W - in bow
V v	В в	V	V - in vine
Y y	Ы ы	Y	Y - in synonym
Z z	З з	Z	Z - in zoo
Ž ž	Зь зь	soft Z	<i>no English equivalent</i>
Ž ž	Ж ж	ZH	S - in pleasure

Valancina Aksak



...Death –
is when cinema
is transformed
into photography...

A Smoke of Mirages

POEM ON LIBERTY

Freedom
is like a seraph with six wings:
with two he
veils his eyes so that he will not behold God,
being unworthy of heavenly majesty;
with two more, shielding
he covers his feet
so God will not behold
his terrestrial essence;
and with the third pair of wings
he hovers incessantly over us,
creating a smoke of mirages
through which we shall
never behold him.

Translated by Vera RICH.

SHADOW AND SCENT

They choose
Not a person
Especially
Not a woman,
But no more than
A flutter of eyelashes
The shadow of a smile
And the aroma of fluids.
Most often –
The opposite.

GRAPHICS

I look in the mirror
And observe,
How painting
Is transformed
Into graphics.

TROUBLES

I wake from sleep
in the dead of night –
troubles
unhappy
word
of evening.

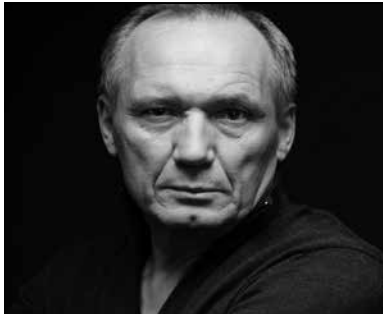
CHANGE OF GENRE

Death –
is when cinema
is transformed
into photography.

Translated by Hillary SHEERS.



Uładzimir Niaklajeŭ



...when we take Stalingrad,
the only thing for Joseph to do
will be to shoot himself...

Gei Ben-Hinnom

Excerpt from the novel

Hitler entered Stalin's office in a flight helmet with a red star.

"Taking a nap?" – he asked Kupala considerately. Seeing that Kupala was startled and trying to get up, he made a calming gesture with his hands. "Sleep on! Joseph and I change places from time to time. He stands in for me there; I stand in here for him... I simply get on the plane, and here I am – in the Kremlin!"

Hitler came closer, and Kupala noticed that his eyes were of different colours – one was green and blinking, the other brown and staring.

"I see you're surprised," – he was staring at Kupala with his unblinking eye. "You don't understand... Our ideas for transforming the world and the ways we operate are similar. Therefore we both feel quite at home, me here and him

there. No special problems. Well, if you don't include the Jews... Sleep, sleep! What's eating you? You aren't a Jew as far as I know."

Kupala had given up struggling to understand how it was at all possible for Hitler, let alone in a flight helmet with a red star, to be here instead of Stalin, and Stalin there instead of Hitler, and thought, "Jew or not... how come he's even heard of me?" – and, as if he couldn't quite believe that Kupala knew nothing about it, the Führer went on:

"How do I know about you? My old party comrade Wilhelm Kube, the one I appointed Commissar General for White Ruthenia, told me about you." Here Hitler blinked with his green eye. "Do you mind if that is what I call Belarus? 'White Ruthenia' is what Wilhelm insists on. He's a scholar, you know. He is a poet and a playwright, just like you. And like Merkulov"; there was something cheerful about the way in which the Führer suddenly remembered the name. "Stalin's 'playwright' informed on his boss, Beria, and mine on my deputy, Bormann. He claimed that Bormann's mother-in-law was a Jew. When it was established that she wasn't, Wilhelm was put through a lot of unpleasantness. Our Party Supreme Court tried him for slander and found him guilty. It's possible that they were wrong. When he was still alive Heydrich suspected that there was a mole in my inner circle, one of Stalin's agents codenamed Vector, and that was why the British killed him. If we are to believe the Americans, it was Bormann who was this Vector. So Kube was justified in sensing that there was something wrong about him. And I felt there was a reason for me to have helped Wilhelm wriggle out of the trial and the slander charges. Just like he helped me avoid being tried for pretending to be unfit for military service. A long time ago, that was, during that war." Here Hitler sniggered. "Strictly between us, when that war began, I wasn't very keen on the idea of being killed. Who would be? So Wilhelm found a doctor, a Jew, who wrote stating that I was not quite normal – some sort of artist. Look at what he paints. In court they did look and agreed that yes, I was not quite normal. I could have been a rather good artist, if Fate had not determined otherwise. And when Kube was being tried for slander, I said that he was a playwright, and playwrights are allowed to fantasize! So I banished him to the provinces, far away from Reichsführer Himmler who didn't much like him. Later, although everyone was against it, I transferred him to Minsk. By the way, he wanted to remain in charge in Minsk once the war was over. And, in order not to have any unnecessary problems, he started to get on friendly terms with your, as you called them, 'locals'. He led some archaeological expeditions near Minsk, dug up a skeleton and brought it to Berlin so as to prove that the Belarusians are not Slavs but Aryans, and that they must be treated differently than the Russians. According to him, the Belarusians' ancestors originally came from Europe – and their descendants must be brought back to Europe. White Ruthenia must be incorporated into the Reich as an autonomous unit. It must be provided with the trappings of statehood. A flag, a coat of arms... It could have happened this way. But you and your "Partisans, you sons of Belarus, kill the hated enemies, so that they never

rise again.” That’s all well and good, except that it’s aimed at the wrong side. Or maybe the right one? Are you really that devious?” The Führer suddenly pierced Kupala with his brown eye, and went on without waiting for an answer – “This is what Kube wrote in order to prove that you are Aryans, that you have the same roots as we do... Wait a moment, let me try to remember how it goes...” Hitler quoted the lines in Belarusian even better than Stalin could have, and without any trace of accent. And he then rubbed his hands together, quite pleased with himself. “I can see that you’re surprised. I was surprised myself by just how supple the language is; you can use it for poetry and for giving military commands. That’s why it occurred to me that maybe Kube was not such a fantasist after all. I talked it over with Himmler. I asked him what he thought about the Aryan skeleton and everything that Kube was doing in White Ruthenia. And do you know what my deputy answered? That Kube could be shot at once for all that, but we could also wait for the Russians to finish him off. So now you know everything in advance: will he be killed by the Russians or by us?”

Kupala already knew what Himmler is going to say when Kube is eventually killed by a mine placed under his bed in his bedroom – “What a happy day for the Fatherland!” – that’s what Reichsführer Himmler will say.

The Führer yawned.

“Anyway, it’s not all that important, sleep... If only you knew how much I want to sleep! But how can you sleep when there’s a war on? When right behind you stands the Fatherland and the Nation...” He walked further into the office and sat on Stalin’s chair. “You too have your homeland and nation behind you, not like mine of course – well, each one of us has what we have. What has been taken from others!” At this point Hitler clenched his left hand into a fist; the hand was no bigger than Stalin’s deformed hand. “Or what others have handed over. After that last war you got nothing, and after this war you won’t get anything either, but Kube says it is time to give you something. The only problem is that there is nobody to give it to... Now I did what I was destined to do – I exalted Germany and the Germans,” – Hitler rose up over Stalin’s desk – “and you did not! Although you could have done, if you had not handed yourselves over to Moscow. I’m not the one who said it – it was Kube who wrote to me about it three days ago. He also wrote that you were killed because we were going to turn you into a symbol. I shall ask Joseph today if it’s true.”

Hitler sat down again and looked at his watch.

“If I wait here for him to arrive... He is in Berlin with my generals... There they are thinking about what to do with us here. Today we seized Sebastopol. Stalingrad is next. Joseph doesn’t like it much! The fact that we are going to attack Stalingrad. He tells me, ‘Attack Voronezh instead! Its defences aren’t so strong.’ As if I don’t know where your defences are and what they’re like...”

Then, as if he had just remembered something, he stuffed his hand into the right pocket of his trousers and took out a gun.

“I almost forgot. What is it, I’m thinking, that’s rubbing against my leg? When we take Stalingrad, the only thing for Joseph to do will be to shoot himself, but nobody will ever give him a pistol, and anyway Soviet pistols aren’t that good. The gun could misfire, so he’ll suffer. Nuremberg, trials... And this is a Walther.” He put the gun on the table. “It won’t misfire.” He heaved a sigh. “He should never have named that city after himself. I don’t have a Hitlerburg anywhere. What on earth did he think up the name Stalingrad for? Even Manstein, who seized Sebastopol today, laughs at it. He says that Joseph should call it Tsaritsyn again. Then he can say that he deliberately surrendered it in order to finish with tsarism. Joseph took offence: he doesn’t understand German humour. Frankly, sometimes Manstein’s jokes are unfortunate. He’s quite capable of reminding me that I’m a lance corporal and he’s a general. Joseph would have a general like that shot on the spot – take Tukhachevsky for example – but I put up with him. After all, who will capture cities for me? Today I promoted Manstein to the rank of Field-Marshal. So Joseph went to congratulate him. Well, among other things... And Manstein will now go around saying that I am a lance corporal and he is a Field-Marshal.

Hitler pulled a wry face that showed just how much he did not relish the prospect of having a conversation with Manstein the newly fledged Field-Marshal.

“Perhaps I ought to become a generalissimo? Goebbels kept dinning it into my ears ‘You must do it, you must...’ And, by the way, if you had stayed in Minsk, I could have given you a title. Not Field-Marshal, of course. But, for example, honorable member of the Imperial Chamber of Literature. Or national poet of the Reich. Or winner of the Hitler Prize. Ultimately, you can have both. True, the Hitler Prize doesn’t exist as yet; but there is the Goethe Prize, so why shouldn’t I found a Prize of my own? Don’t you like the idea?” The Führer was becoming a little agitated. “Your eyes say you don’t. Why? Is it alright for you to be awarded the Stalin Prize, but not the Hitler Prize? What difference does it make if I am exactly the same there as he is here? And, just so you know, I haven’t killed as many German writers and poets as he has Soviet ones. Or, maybe, you simply don’t like me?”

Hitler looked closely at Kupala. He came to the conclusion that Kupala did not like him and indeed found him offensive.

“But Knut Hamsun liked me! So did Gerhart Hauptmann! And he won the Nobel Prize, not just some prize named after Stalin. Knut Hamsun also won the Nobel Prize, and this is what your Maxim Gorky had to say about what he wrote: his books amount to holy scripture. So, what do we read in this scripture?”

The Führer took a key from a pocket of his military jacket and a photograph from another. He looked at the photo and put it on the table, “Wait, I’ll write something on the photo, or I’ll forget...” – he took a pen (the one that Kačaryha used when he wrote the recommendation for Kupala to the Party), signed the photo, unlocked a drawer (Kupala could not see which one: top, middle, or bottom?), and took a notebook out of it.

“This is Joseph’s notebook; he jotted down what Hamsun said about me. He’s envious of a real writer.” Hitler leafed through the notebook. “Here, listen... ‘England wanted war, and Hitler drew his sword. He, the crusader and reformer, wanted to create a new epoch and a new life for all peoples, to establish indestructible international unity so that each country may prosper. And his efforts were not in vain – peoples and nations supported him; they stood beside him in order to battle together and to win!’ And do you know what else Hamsun did? He gave his Nobel medal to Goebbels! Who also tries hard to become a writer... for some reason everybody is trying to become a writer... so Goebbels was deliriously happy: he believed the gesture meant that Hamsun thought highly of his scribbles. He asked Hamsun, ‘How can I ever repay you?’, and Hamsun replied, ‘By arranging a meeting with Adolf Hitler.’”

Hitler put back the pocket-book and, heaving another sigh, the gun as well, and then locked the drawer.

“Goebbels persuaded me to meet Hamsun. It caused a major upset. The Anglo-Saxons, the Americans, the French, and the Norwegians called him a collaborator, a traitor. ‘How is it possible,’ they shouted, ‘to shake hands that are steeped in blood?!’ And do you know why it was that he wanted to see me so much, although he realized the full extent to which he would be disgraced and humiliated? Do you know what he asked during the meeting? I see you do... Well, then – exposing oneself for the sake of one’s native country to public shame and humiliation means more than throwing oneself heroically at a machine gun. That’s just a matter of an instant, a spark, but in Hamsun’s case it was actually a great feat. Selflessness, not treason. Pity you hadn’t thought about that before you fled away from us out of Minsk and went to Moscow.

Stalin’s secretary opened the door and announced, “Adolf Aloisovich, your plane has been refueled and is ready for take off.” Kupala suddenly recalled that Stalin had had the secretary’s wife shot, so obviously he wanted to take revenge. That would explain why he allowed Hitler to enter the office and gave him the keys to Stalin’s desk where the most confidential papers are kept, Hitler said as he left the office and Stalin was entering, “It is not because of that... And this is not what you, Ivan Daminikavič, ought to be thinking about. Think of Hamsun’s mission, of what he asked...” – and then they, Hitler and Stalin, walked through each other as if both of them were incorporeal living dead men.

“How he twists things!” Kupala was beginning to slowly wake up. “I know what Hamsun asked of Hitler. He asked him to leave Norway as it was... he asked him to preserve its independence and not turn it into a protectorate. He asked him to stop the violence and the arbitrary treatment of the population. There was a lot he wanted to ask for. And Hitler answered each request with ‘After the war’. And everything could have been alright; what Hamsun did could have been regarded as a mission and even a great feat if, after the war and the bloodshed, the great Norwegian had not written, ‘We, Hitler’s close followers, bow our heads at his death.’”

“So you’ve woken up, have you?” said Stalin as he reached his desk. “Been dreaming your Belarusian dreams again, have you? Still waiting for a miracle? The commissar is waiting for you out there,” and he nodded in the direction of the door.

Kupala rose and approached him to say goodbye, but Stalin sat and picked up the photograph that Hitler had left.

“Where are we, the two of us together?” He flipped over the photo. “What’s this written here?” He read aloud, “Joseph! Manstein wants to go south, but I will send him north, to Leningrad. Yours, Vector.”

Kupala might have been surprised by what he heard, had he not already been stunned by what he saw. The photo showed Stalin and Hitler sitting together on a bench in the village of Gorki. It was the same bench on which Stalin and Lenin used to sit.

“To Leningrad.” Stalin threw the photo on the table. “And today they took Sebastopol.” As he picked up the telephone receiver, he asked Kupala, “What do you think, Ivan Daminikavič, should we retrieve the Crimea? I’m personally more fond of the Caucasus.”

Translated by Jim DINGLEY.

poetry

poetry

Taácciana Niadbaj



...Silently, like a fish
You open your mouth
And repeat it, stomach fluttering
With happiness...

Via Milky Ways

* * *

Every day
When you close the door behind you
I think about you:
Will you have a good day
Or will it be a tough one?
Will you cross the road
With care and when the light is green?
Will there be a horn of plenty?
Will your efforts bear fruit?
Will what you do be worthwhile?
Will the paths of your hopes be clear?
Will your unseen guardian be with you?
And will your guardian be reliable?

* * *

Cities, like men
Give the gift of their smell
Their walls – their shoulders
Lead from boulevards via alleys
Via milky ways
Into tight little yards, embracing
Whispers and the rustling of tyres
And the ringing – on cobblestones- of keys and coins
The sweater has to come off (it's itchy)
Shirts are the latest fashion
Smoke from the chimneys
And the glow of their cigarettes
Even before the Sun exploding
Like a pea from deep within
Is hurled on to the horizon
You are silent, stunned
The mantra – sweet, sweet, sweet
Silently, like a fish
You open your mouth
And repeat it, stomach fluttering
With happiness

Translated by Hillary SHEERS.

Alena Brava



...No, I wasn't going to wait for my pension
in a town where the future is known
in advance, and anyway there's
no future here...

Slaughtered Birds' Day

Excerpt from the novel "The Sodom Apple Tree"

Proposed Circumstances

"Inga, have you really given up writing?" – asked her former literature teacher with eyes wide open in surprise. The old lady had left for her historical paradise and was now paying a visit to hell as a tourist – she may have wanted to feel more acutely the contrast between her new homeland and her previous outcast existence. Well, in the whole of our little town you couldn't find a better place for an ascetic excursion (all you need is your medical insurance, visa and passport!) than the barrack where I lived with my son. The dilapidated dump was situated next to the police station-cum-register office; it had a yard adorned with puddles of fetid water that never dried up. This is the minimalist setting in which the

sweet young things of the town found themselves when they left the register office with their nice new passports and their vanilla hopes. It's in the nature of vanilla hopes that nasty outside odours don't stick to them. That's something I, of all people, do know.

That teacher was very much a mentor of the old school. She had come to see her favourite pupil to ask a question which was, well, very much to the point: this refined woman had had to lift up the hem of her brightly coloured foreign dress in order to step over a natural barrier in the form of my neighbour Ściopa, a hereditary alcoholic, lying on the staircase in a pool of his own physiological fluids. She had once presented a guitar to one of her final year school students who composed songs and wrote short stories in Belarusian ("I wonder what will become of you?" – this girl, so people say, went on to become a TV presenter with a god-given talent – here the only question is: which god exactly? I was that girl. And now here I am, a graduate of the local Pedagogical Institute whose husband dumped her to marry her best friend – this is what I, ingenious creature that I am, tell everyone willing to listen, and it's not what you could call a lie – holding in front of the naive repatriate's eyes a press pass from the local newspaper bearing just one word, "CORRESPONDENT."

It's not that I was eager to drink my fill of the waters of the river Fact, a watercourse that has always been infected with dysentery and cholera. No, but those who care about us "dear graduates" so massively, so constructively, in theory and in practice, with parental concern, by the sweat of their brow, with faith in the future, by day and by night, with great natural wisdom, both strategically and tactically... phew! I'm exhausted listing it all!... – well, those solid types, vice chancellors-ministers-members of parliament, have failed to provide my degree with just one tiny little detail – the possibility of making a living with its help. Especially if you have a son. *This is how the powers that be forcibly strive to show us a kindness.* The couldn't-give-a-fuck attitude of these masters of the universe is, basically, understandable because in the faculty where I studied all the students were girls, and it's a known fact that girls receive an education only in order to find a husband, except that in my case I had to turn into a "super bloke" at super speed – so as to pay for a place you wouldn't put a dog in next to a rubbish tip, for food, medicines, and visits to doctors who didn't shy away from earning a bit extra cash in hand. After all, the catch that I inadvertently acquired *through fishing*, a catch dear to my heart that I had summoned up from the very depths of the ocean, didn't have to suffer because of my creative crisis: he didn't ask me to bring him to this wretched hole.

He may not have asked for it, but even so he was attracted by the damp sounds and watery stirrings and, like a curious hatchling, allowed himself to be caught, and the people doing the fishing were caught as well. Whose fault was it that the national contraceptive – the emergency lemon – had been eaten the day before by hungry youths in the groves of academe? And that a

midwife I know – who day and night, by the sweat of her brow, strategically and tactically (and so on and so forth, you know how it goes) steals the necessary ampoules so that she and the head physician can sell them to women like me – happened to be on holiday? The questions the eighteen-year-old pregnant woman was asking herself had, by the way, one correct answer: it's the woman who's guilty, not the young man who was drunk as a skunk when he returned, not from the library where he should have been making intimate contact with the sacred vessels of wisdom, but from a discotheque where he had been feeling up innocent first-year girls and got himself inflamed... No-no, nothing personal, it's just nature. It takes nature and a woman together to make a pregnancy! I was hissed at in the counselling centre – I wouldn't be able to have any more children, and that made me really afraid, because I already knew from that good adviser to whom all girls turn – the TV – the phrase "This is a woman's vocation." These words jangled like the rings on the hood of a "Volga" wedding car. And so it was that the honourable wreath of motherhood was placed upon my brow, even though I had quite different plans for my life. Well, I was at least allowed to have a life of my own for a short period of time – between the school-leaving ball and the counselling centre.

Literature and languages used to come naturally to me. I had perfect pitch – it took me just one week to work through a guitar self-teaching textbook. I wrote songs. My plays were staged by our school theatre. Teachers predicted that I would have a marvellous future in the arts. When my husband dumped us, my son Anton was three years old. The child was sickly and needed attention. The local newspaper hired me as a courier; a year later they made me a correspondent.

Now that was a really wonderful place to work, I can tell you. While there, I had – time and again – to put up with my colleagues' intrigues. They were worthy of a recipient of the Stalin Prize, and I had to regularly cross the street named after this particular recipient (the street leads to the main building on the Square!). It soon became clear that strewing linguistic chaff around was not enough – the most important thing was the ability to suck up to the bosses and to protect the territory you won from perpetually hungry rivals. I managed to resist the machinations of a refugee from a state next door where she used to be a member of the Central Committee. Before it got the chop, the Central Committee had managed – in accordance with historical tradition – to play soldiers (beneath the caterpillar tracks of tanks) – and the charming lady had to make her escape from there. The fugitive party official had a face that resembled the muzzle of a Rottweiler but wore amber beads round her neck (a nod in the direction of the native land she had left), she smoked cheap cigarettes and read the newspaper 'Comrade'. This was the woman invited to join our local newspaper by one of its founders, himself a "comrade." I managed to punch the old harridan on her face with the help of a door while she was eavesdropping for useful grassing material at the keyhole. It was more difficult with another of our founder's 'guests' –

a fugitive from one of the Central Asian republics. He was thrown out of a ministerial chair by a national revolution and ended up in our town, already crowded with scum from all ends of the disintegrated “united and mighty” USSR; he commenced his activity with an opus entitled “*Do We Really Need The Belarusian Language?*”. Soon senility began to take him in its grip, and made him not just temporarily, but permanently unavailable, even to himself.

I managed to make a stand against both the sylphs who served the editor’s needs and saw me as having aspirations to his dick, and the editor himself, who saw me as having aspirations to his chair. To restore my son’s health. To get out of the barrack to the next circle of hell – the workers’ “dorm”; to pass through eight more circles where we rented vile flats. I did ultimately manage it... So, the victorious annals of my life as bitch and martyr are inscribed on a granite plinth under which my youth lies buried. This is a bog-standard chronicle of life in a province of the country where I, Inga Kurodym, was born and lived for forty two years without ever having been anywhere else. Positivicity – this is my name for our wonderful town; half of its population is made up of the descendants of local agricultural labourers and the other half is the soldiery of the erstwhile Red Cabbage Empire who were stationed here. The stench of alcoholism and army bullying has permeated the place. Nowadays, the only way in which I can recall how my ancestors used to speak is in my mind.

And that wasn’t the only thing.

At the start I still used to go to bard festivals (my son spent the nights in after-school child-care; when I went to collect him there were bruises on him, his underpants were sopping wet and he was crying fit to burst, as if he had spent a week-end in prison) – and I do not remember when the music inside me fell silent and the guitar ended up in the junk storage area above the cupboard in the hallway. I went on writing short stories “from life” for a time, and they were readily accepted by a magazine in the capital. However, this selfsame life was demanding ever greater efforts from me; my work and motherhood together exacted an unceasing toll of worry. The hustle and bustle of what might vainly be termed “my career” bore fruit that tasted of ashes, something I tried not to notice. I felt I had to be everywhere at once and consume absolutely anything, like the death’s head cockroach. Inga the Death’s Head.

I never knew my father. My mother was a choreographer. “Really beautiful,” my colleagues felt obliged to add. I remember her in red beads, with ribbons in her fair plaits, in a woolen skirt and red boots. She worked in the local House of Culture, danced in a folklore ensemble, and spoke Belarusian. We lived in rented apartments. A visiting director with whom my mother unfortunately fell in love invited her to go with him to the Russian Far East, promised her a career in the creative arts and the possibility of earning enough money to buy a place to live. I was nine years old at the time. I haven’t seen my mother since then. Her beads and skirt are the only things I have left of hers.

I was raised by my aunt. My relatives never lost an opportunity to harp on at great length about the terrible, unbelievable thing done by the woman who gave birth to me. Fancy abandoning her own child! Bitch, slut! Such people should be shot! Torn to shreds like a toad! I was a gentle, good little girl, but they regarded me as a bad seed – God knows what she’ll grow up like. They re-educated me in advance, just like juvenile delinquents are usually re-educated, although I had not had time to do anything bad in life. And, of course, ever since I was a child I hated the woman who had renounced me. Pulling the sled with my son to a medical centre, to bribetakers in doctors’ white coats, I was thinking (or I was repeating what I had heard from somebody else?), “My mother is a scumbag; she did what she wanted; what right did she have *to want* anything after a child appeared? While I, so self-denying and righteous, have already almost learned to want what *I was supposed to do*. It seemed to me particularly important not to be like the woman who had sacrificed nothing for me.

During the third year of my work on the newspaper where I converted the product of my disciplined brain into a modest number of banknotes, a big envelope all covered in foreign stamps arrived.

Invasive Language

(...) The editorial office of the TV channel “Super Positive Television,” where I, a melodious media siren, host the programme “Our Region’s Happy Ladies,” is on the 8th floor of the consumer services centre, the tallest building on Red Revolution Avenue. The windows of the office I share with Jaraslaū look out on a statue of the Leader standing in his customary pose: it looks as though the wind stirred up by his great achievements is blowing his jacket open. Behind the statue stands the pompous pseudo-baroque building of the army HQ. Its columns, once white, have now taken on the colour of tobacco-stained teeth; here and there the plaster has fallen off, exposing the rottenness beneath. Nearby is the regional Palace of Culture; it looks like a huge crab frozen in time. I have studied every detail of this architectural ensemble, but today I am impressed anew by its caricature sublimity and provincial arrogance. And the woman who is at the moment bowing and scraping her way through the office door makes me want to vomit.

She’s a veteran school teacher who has demarxified herself, discovered Orthodoxy, and recently arrived at the conclusion that she is an “Orthodox Woman Cossack.” She plumped herself on my desk. My face is spattered with her saliva. Her chubby red hands shove an album with pennants and little angels on the cover at me. Refusing it would mean condemning myself to a display of how an angel can turn into a devil, and I am too tired for scenes like that.

“Within the framework of the Contest of Positive Initiatives, Cossack traditions will contribute to our common cause of educating the young generation and will come to lie at the heart of a number of constructive initiatives and joint efforts aimed at solving the problem in the field of the absence of

spirituality! The idea of a positive project has been hovering above the town for many years; it has ripened, and has now fallen into our common home in the form of an overripe fruit!" The "Woman Cossack" is blathering on and on as though she's at a meeting.

This language is an invasive plant; it's like the couch grass that grows unchecked in the heads of the locals who can't live a single day without their beloved telly. Together with my colleagues, I too sow poisonous language from the screen. The seed has also taken root in the furrows of my brain, even though I am ever hopeful of being able to protect myself with the aid of a diving suit of irony. I sneer at everything I hate. I sneer when shame eats away my eyes. I sneer at the dead language of television. And yet on the very next day I use my own blood and brain to feed the iron mouths of "development," "progress" and, of course, "confidence" that is always linked with "the morrow." Death masks of meanings that have disappeared, stuffed animals with glass eyes, words that rattle around like dry peas in a bull's bladder – they grow like slagheaps on the field of living language. They attach themselves like a cancerous tumor to the brain. There is no protection from the language of television; the word modified by the deft manipulation of TV presenters and PR experts is stronger than any living word.

And by my deft manipulation as well.

The Contest of Positive Initiatives is the brainchild of my boss, Jahor Ziziunovič, the genius behind various asinine shows and contests. That explains why the number of my duties (let's call them "projects") has grown recently, although nobody has thought to cut back on the number of tasks I already do. The thing is that "Oracle," the private TV channel headed by Ziziunovič's enemy Švabryn, is rapidly gaining more and more subscribers and advertisers. In the struggle against his competitor the boss brings up the heavy guns, *i.e.* incitement, spreading rumours and defamation, but he also has to entice viewers. It was for this purpose that he dreamed up the Contest of Positive Initiatives. Retired military folk with advancing dementia polish up the trouble-making skills they acquired on artillery ranges by urging me to awaken my inner spirituality; poetesses with large bottles of *medicine* for their loved ones in their handbags recite poems in which "bolder" is necessarily rhymed with "shoulder"; Communist Party veterans exhumed by management for some unknown reason drag along their "memoirs" for me to read. This assortment of nutters telephones me, they drill into the concrete walls of their past and scratch it with their nails. When they eventually realize that they are getting nowhere with these huge lumps of concrete, they start going public, because all of them think that when TV presenters say "Stay with us!" their words are to be understood literally. These people's ideas are for the general public – or, at least, there must be one person who will listen with a friendly smile to these our "dear viewers." A generator of optimism-to-order, a fount of never-ending joy, a polite nonentity planted here for the purposes of being spat in the face – that's who I am.

The Head And The Neck

Neither the newsroom typists, nor the editor, who gawped at the envelope with his bulging eyes – whites the colour of old newsprint – were able to read the return address: “Royaume de Belgique. Commissariat Général Aux Réfugiés et Apatrides.” The letter in English politely asked us to let them know whether the enclosed copies of issues of the “Positivity Herald” were genuine. The “copies” – they had our official stamp – were a clever forgery: instead of an interview about freezing bulls’ sperm, the reader’s attention was drawn to an article entitled “A Contract Killing.” No such article had ever been published in the newspaper; so, go wash your eyes out with potassium permanganate and read about the businessman L. who was strangled by a wire. The author of this article – the columnist Alaksiejenka (fired from our newspaper six months prior to the appearance of the envelope) – linked this audacious crime with the victim’s political activity. In the following fake issue, there was an article denying that the murder was politically motivated, but so unconvincingly that everybody – and especially foreign commissioners for fugitives – would understand: this is a fairy tale told to you on a political night. One that has no end. This fake article was followed by an obsequious fake note – with the editor’s byline – hastily informing readers that the journalist Alaksiejenka had been sacked “for incompetence.”

The boss, of course, went humbly to the necessary authorities, *i.e.* the KGB, and they ascertained that the murder of businessman L. in Positivity had never been recorded, because this L. had never actually existed. What they did not find out was that I, Inga Kurodym, was the one who helped Michał Aliaksiejenka knock together these “copies” after he had been sacked. I gave him the official stamp that everyone thought had been lost. No one reported the loss, as it was right at the time when the state coat of arms was changed and all the old official stamps had to be changed as well. The editor gleefully clapped his scaly eczematous hands. The official stamp with the image of the rider on horseback ended up in the dustbin, from where I retrieved it as a keepsake. What for? I have no idea. And so it was that this rider on horseback attempted to open up a road for Michał to the West. I then received a call for me to come to a building naturally concealed by lindens and maples, where I was interrogated by a young man with colourless eyes and hair so white he seemed to merge with the white wall behind him.

I never did find out how the story of Michał and his underestimation of the immigration services’ pedantry ended; perhaps it was something to do with the horrors of deportation? I was ever so politely fired from the newspaper (just in case). Michał and I had worked in the same department; he saw me home several times. Two little birds frozen stiff, that’s what we were. And one of those little birds had a fledgling and above them dark night was gathering. Oh yes, that bit about the night – they were Michał’s words. Politics did not interest me. My “politics” was asleep in an armchair I had made into a bed in

a cold corner of the flat I was renting at the time, and I had no idea what to feed my “politics” on the next day. The next day – not in some distant bright future that all these politicians promise. Food three times per day, medicine, clothes, footwear, bed-clothes, and much else besides.

Then: finding a new job and doing it conscientiously. This is the woman’s trump card in her struggle for a workplace. That was the decision I made, wiping away my tears and smoking the first cigarette in my life.

When you think about it, what is called “life wisdom” is more than just “enthusiasm for your job.” The upright, respectable women of the town kept a steadfast eye on the observance of the Female Commandments. You can say that they constitute The Council of the Wise Women of Positivity; they are wise, but they are also happy by default, because they know the recipes for happiness right down to the last detail. Anyway, according to these sacred Precepts, all I had to do was to choose a man correctly, one that was right for me, and believe in him. He will then bear me away “from the flames of the burning cottage” on his shoulders, even though it is sometimes a problem for him to take the waste bucket out to the refuse chute. My husband, clearly, was “wrong,” said the sympathizing horde of females, “but there ARE others! Look behind that fir-tree – maybe you’ll find a nice catch there.” Inside the brains of the foolish twenty-five-year-old woman that I am there was a little splinter: a sacral mantra that I must have heard about five hundred times at every birthday (let alone weddings): “MAN is the HEAD; WOMAN is the NECK!”

Stubbing out my cigarette in a saucer, I watched my son sleeping without a care in the world. I wept tears of helplessness, and felt like a neck that was being forced to bend and hide in the shoulders.

Could I at the time have seen in my dismissal a sign from the heavens, a kind of burning bush, a fiery road sign? “Change your destiny!” Well, I wish I could. Resoluteness was not a characteristic feature of mine; neither was self-esteem.

And then our town acquired a new TV channel, ‘Augur’.

Our chairman invested a considerable amount of money for the opportunity to flaunt himself on the TV screen seven days a week, which is exactly what he started to do together with his retinue of followers. They had all gone down with an attack of piarhoea; the urge of these people to be always promoting themselves is at times akin to diarrhea, is it not? The TV channel was headed by *someone’s son* who had done a course at a technical college. His true calling was to be an alcoholic, but he was *one of ours*. I saw my future boss for the first time at some festival – he was running somewhere, then he snarled at some woman next to him, “Yo, bitch, you tryin’ to make a fool o’ me? I aksed ya whaddya say to me, ho.” It would have been easier for him to bare his fangs, spit rabid foam everywhere and metamorphose into a malicious mongrel. I wouldn’t want to work under a bloke like that, but... maybe he will be nothing but friendly to me... a woman can get used to everything... What else was my shifty mind telling me?

This job laid off the plonk, but acquired other lovely habits. Young people

were hired to work at the studio; 'longshanks' you could call them, because of their long legs. It's legs that make journalists – and wolves – come alive. Girls needed their long lower extremities for the purposes of frolicking. Walking down the corridor, I heard the director yelling excitedly into his mobile, "I took on a load of twenty-year-old pussy today – ya gonna 'ave a fuckin' good time!!!" Besides, the boss had an inferiority complex that forced him to try to prove to all and sundry that higher education is rubbish, that it is not only useless, but also harmful to the mind. To prove it, he frowned at me and held up as an example the calls people make to the studio – "Every day we get "concerned viewers" calling us, you know, like, 'That Kurodym, the way she looks at our bright tomorrow,' – they shrieked – it's not "ours" at all – it don't look like she's got any particular warm feelin's of yooman sympathy towards our past, and she don't remember how much responsibility she's got for our future. We don't need our long years of life to be looked at like that!'" I diligently worked on the way I look and learned to satisfy the needs of our *dear viewers*.

Years passed; the sun shone; it rained; visitors came and went. Once, a complaint about me was sent to the town council. (...)...And though everything ended well, the job from the tech. didn't forgive me. On the day of the Positivity Town festival the cameraman Jaryk Tracevič was tipsy and therefore the shots with the chairman, a general, and youth activists were shaky; even the statue of the Leader that looked down on them was shaky. "Oracle" mockingly declared that town policy was anything but strong and stable. I was the one who was eventually fired, not the cameraman. After all, I had higher education, and besides – I was a woman. Let her go and help raise the birth rate!

This time the heavens adopted the shape of a cast-iron idol that was ready to crush me like a mouse. I was already sweating because of my fear of unemployment, and I was absolutely not grateful to the wind of change that was causing my sails to billow out again!

I overcame my habitual confusion and panic and phoned Marina, a friend from my student years. "Of course, come!" Marina, who worked for the independent newspaper "Act," was delighted.

It is easy to say "come." It would mean travelling four hours a day, and my son was at an awkward age. Meanwhile, the TV channel had a new director, and he invited me to return; the job had started drinking again, he got drunk, beat someone up, and was replaced.

And so I was employed by the TV channel Augur for the second time, only now it was called Super Positive Television. I came there hoping to leave it soon. Let Anton finish secondary school and then... I'll pay off the mortgage and already then... No, I wasn't going to wait for my pension in a town where the future is known in advance, and anyway there's no future here. I was no longer writing short stories; I hid literary magazines from sight – like a driver who tries not to see the wreath on a roadside signpost at the spot where he

abandoned the pedestrian he had killed. Only in my case the driver and the dead pedestrian were one and the same.

Soon Anton entered university, and I was planning to install a metal front door in my apartment. When I looked at these metal doors standing in line against the wall in the shop I was surprised by how much they reminded me of coffin lids.

I left the shop.

I lit up a cigarette.

My hands were trembling.

The Narrow-Gauge Railway Law

Just before the dusk descends, the day is like a slaughtered bird. This is how one of my early songs begins. How many birds are killed when you're out hunting for yourself? When you're the target of the hunt? Today a kill will provide you with a modest supper, but tomorrow you'll have to go and kill again.

I open a window, I light up a cigarette.

I hate my job right down to my very guts. I have beaten myself from a domestic plough-share into a public sword – woman-and-man, two in one, always at a discount, but with an appendage. My salary is very decent *for a woman*. For decades, my talent as an author has not dissipated.

Angrily I throw my cigarette butt out of the window.

On my table there is a notebook that bears the TV channel logo. During staff meetings with the boss the employees of Super Positive Television never raise their heads from their notes. Once I glanced casually at what exactly the host of our children's programme was scribbling with such a serious look on her face: on the back of her office notebook she was in fact writing a swear word in the kind of calligraphy that a straight-A pupil would use. Under a variety of excuses I peeked at the other side – the *dark* side – of my colleagues' notebooks. In addition to foul language – both freakish and obscene – my colleagues liked drawing caricatures of the boss. Wow, what a great exhibition these caricatures would make! We – the meek and mild inhabitants of a country in Eastern Europe – would learn something new about ourselves. What struck me most was a set of frames for a comic where the boss mates with a construction crane.

Anyone who patents the idea of producing dual-purpose diaries for employees of our official agencies will make a fortune. That's for sure. With a deft flick of the fingers one-day-per-page turns into *one-night-per-page*. I reckon that on the back cover there should be the words "WHAT I REALLY THINK."

It's only my diary that doesn't have a false bottom. The first few pages list the phone numbers of Necessary People and Very Necessary People. Name, patronymic, surname, position held. Landline, mobile. This is the personal organizer of a clever diligent working woman who for her next birthday is given a food processor and a certificate to mark her longstanding self-denying toil.

Meanwhile, the anger inside me cannot find an outlet.

This is what I carry in my belly.

I kept a close watch on the kind of women who are heroines of the programmes I host. They're happy, but their eyes are sad. For us, "life's necessities" is not an empty phrase! That is why the women who are the life-blood of factories, farms, schools, offices and, most certainly, the home are so good at finding creative ways to forget about life. By the way, this term belongs to one of the women who appeared on my programme – happy lady no. 1. When we weren't on air, I found out that she can't stand her job; she regards the situation as entirely normal. Breeding Pekingese dogs helps her forget her self-hatred and her abhorrent job. Happy lady no. 2: in her youth she wanted to become an actress; now she is helped by her overindulgence in sweet and fatty foods. The third had a talent for painting, but now alcohol helps her forget about everything. The fourth possesses a collection of dildos which she has named after porno stars and strippers. The fifth belongs to a category into which the overwhelming majority fall – avid fans of the telly. It's a known fact that TV is the best antidepressant, except for me – I have to host programmes on the wretched thing. Still, there is also a sixth group, made up of women who must surely be the happiest of all. Love makes them forget about everything. They deserve special consideration.

And now – attention! People who find themselves in an intolerable situation and yet can forget about everything that they actually want in life are likely to remain locked in that situation forever. You can beautify your prison however you like, you can derive pleasure from drawing caricatures or from babes with botox and silicone (there's no accounting for taste!), but meanwhile the train of your time here on earth continues to hurtle unimpeded downhill.

I am forty two; I do not want to forget about my life any longer. My purpose is to change my life. However, I have a contract. I cannot rescind it of my own volition; the boss won't agree to cancel it "by mutual agreement of both parties." It may come as a surprise, but even with "so much happiness" on TV, nobody wants to work for our TV channel. Every year, a crop of fresh girls is sent to our TV station (employers in the capital quite naturally pick the lads; after all, they don't become pregnant). A comparison with an eastern despot who regularly updates his harem would be most appropriate here. So, these young girls who specialize in journalism and PR emerge from the heat of the forge that produces such people, and get themselves sent to us. They work until the end of their obligatory job placement – a kind of maximum-security prison – and then flee. They see our TV station only in their nightmares.

Meanwhile, those who stay are turned into compulsorily happy people.

It's hard to endure the work at Super Positive Television.

I've been working here longer than anybody else, a siren with her feathers plucked.

Now, however, I really am going to leave. Anton's finished his four years at university and will soon be receiving his diploma. He found a job a year

ago; he told me about it on the brand new mobile phone he bought with his first salary as a computer designer, “You don’t need to give me money any more, mum.” I will of course continue to give him money. My decision to quit my job is criticized by the ladies of the Council of Wise Women of the Town because “we live for the sake of the children,” “we ought to help young people.” But I decided to cut my adult son off from the placenta of my earnings, to go somewhere, to lead some strange life of my own – still, what “life” can a forty-year-old woman have?! “Soon the grandchildren will start coming along!” The worst thing is that I feel guilty towards Anton.

Today is the sixteenth of December. Until the thirteenth of March, the day my contract ends, there are two months, three weeks, and five days.

I try to concentrate on the TV announcements.

My colleague, that self-same Jaryk Tracevič, enters the office. For some reason I recall his old nickname – Garibaldi: in his youth he used to wear a red shirt with white trousers.

“The Soap Bubbles Show’ has been taken off; the soap’s run out! The action ‘You were born – help others be born!’ has been moved to Sunday!,” he reports joyfully, throws his feet on the table and calls his young mistress.

I tap on the keyboard. I produce soap bubbles of announcements. What is there to watch on Super Positive TV next week?

Optimistic Banker: Let nothing spoil life’s little pleasures, trust credits from the Yama Bank!

Dour Diver: Water became my natural element a long time ago; it is my life’s path and I walk it with firm confident steps!

Happy Winner of Pedicure Contests: Herbal baths have an important role to play in caring for your heel spurs, but it is important not to keep your lower extremities in such baths until your skin turns blue!

Happy OAP: In order to keep your blood circulating round your body at a good speed and not interfere with your digestion, you should regularly watch only good news on TV!

The Bird Called Alconews

The fire brigade inspector invites me to accompany him on a call out. Everybody wants a bit of self-promotion, including rescuers. I call Jaryk: “You were born – now put in a bit of effort for others!”

...A tramp had climbed through a hatch of the heat distribution network together with his mattress; when it became way too hot, he put out his hand to a switch and shut off the heating in the whole district. The phone in the operations centre went hoarse with ringing and spat venomous saliva, but the plumbers on duty were drunk and unable to find what had caused the incident. The utility providers’ honour was saved by the fact that the tramp had relaxed in the comfortable temperature, fallen asleep with a cigarette, and

the mattress under him had caught fire. Once the source of the fire had been extinguished, the sober (and therefore sullen) firemen brought the mattress (dingy and black like original sin) up to the ground; the tramp had managed to clear off. The plumbers cursed each other, the weather, and the management; they took turns to descend into hell and return, hot and sweaty, filthy, covered in lumps of white foam that made them look like small devils who lived in the heating system and tried to pass themselves off as angels.

We caught the rescuers' work on film (the mattress in close up) and returned to "base." Jaryk swears, but he falls short of the virtuosi of the sewers. Obscenities are the language I hear much more frequently than "please" or "thanks." My colleague copies the material from the camera, and I am summoned by the chief.

In my diary I am drawing myself in the shape of a white Chekhovian seagull (Gestalt therapy for humble mass media sparrows), but do not forget to preserve a mask of businesslike optimism on my face; an outside observer might easily mistake it for the result of the local anesthesia a dentist had given me. A real feat for the mimic muscles because the "5-minute meeting" has been going on for more than an hour already. I pretend to be writing down the boss's deep thoughts. If I really were going to write them down, it wouldn't be any easier than catching fleas on a dog in the 'furious rabies' phase. Ziziunovič's thoughts leap at random from one topic to another. The rabid aggressive ignorance of our helmsman blossomed in the Red Cabbage Empire where he spent his youth. He transferred his Red Cabbage boorishness to what is a free and independent country.

My colleagues, whose appearance is not all that authoritative even on an ordinary day, were curled up in their chairs as if trying to make themselves as small as a cockroach and creep into cracks in the furniture. I observe this metamorphosis regularly (something that poor Gregor Samsa could not even have dreamt of): when they enter the boss's office they are people (sort of), but when they leave the office they are arthropods that have been crushed. They have been humiliated: they shake themselves down, clear their throats, hastily place their guts in their pockets and briefcases so as to put them in the right order later. Off they go to their departments where they vigorously pummel their subordinates, turning them into what they themselves were turned into recently. If they are promoted, they receive new training devices to use for pummelling. As a matter of fact, the main difference between the boss and the subordinate is where they vent their rage – those who do not even have a cleaning woman to order around take it out on their other halves and their children. Well, this is a pleasure they'll have a little later; meanwhile, there is a hackneyed thought written on everyone's "social face"; it's the same as the thought of concentration camp prisoners who have been driven out for a headcount before another routine shooting: "As long as it's not me!"

"Kurodym, the head physician did not approve the last subject you covered. About your... Well, that one with ambulances picking up people in the

streets... I told you: accentuate the positive, eliminate the negative! The head physician has already submitted his report to his superiors: in our city we don't have tramps, end of discussion."

"But the firemen do have tramps!," I answer triumphantly. "The firemen submitted a different report. Who do you think it was we rescued out of the manhole just now?"

"Was it a vagrant?," bleats the Balloon Launching specialist. Around him the air is suffused with the odour of drink.

"The head physician ought to be ashamed of himself," I continue. "Who is it living in that abandoned mortuary building next to the hospital? It's Miłkoła, isn't it? The nurses give him food. The whole town knows him, so does the whole country. He's even been interviewed by foreign correspondents, and by Švabryn as well.

"That's enough. We're not in the European Parliament here," says the boss. "Kurodym, you really are like a little child. The head physician said "there aren't any"; that means there are no tramps. And the ending of the piece must be optimistic – not about the drunk Juzik who crapped himself in the reception room, but about the struggle against alcoholism. The word "tramp" is to be removed. He must be called "a person who is temporarily without registration" or "a citizen who abuses spirituous liquors."

"Sorry." I am reaching boiling point, but in vain – I'll only be drawing fire upon myself. "Why then did he squeeze into the manhole – to 'abuse spirituous liquors'? Extreme sports or what?"

The boss did not deign to favour me with a reply. Well, it's all clear anyway. (...) At any minute now, I reckon, I'm going to be on the receiving end of a tirade. The initiative is seized by Švietačka who hates me with a vengeance. But why? I've never done anything to her. It's because of "female solidarity" – that's why.

"Ms Kurodym, our chief, by the way, is addressing everyone and you in particular! Where are your plans for next year – for the remainder of the current one and for the upcoming one? I did ask you to let me have your plans before Monday! We need to hand them over to the department urgently! We do know that you are not planning to renew your contract; however, your work plans for next year must be approved anyway!" Her eyes are hurling green arrows at me; her crimson lips are curved disdainfully. "And by the way: what about that poem by our poetess? Have you had any thoughts about how to make a background setting for it? We do have to master new, contemporary technologies!"

"She hasn't thought of anything! She's been too busy waving her boobs around in the office!," barks the boss. He is rabid.

Every woman who works on the TV station has heard that many times. Nobody resents it aloud. Nobody reacts to the oaf. Everyone gulps the insult down in silence. I do too. My silent anger feeds the stone fruit inside me.

What was it that had angered our Big Boor and his *right hand man* so

much? A week ago Švietačka invited me to her office and like a caricature of the Swan Princess in Vrubel's painting pulled out (of her sleeve?) a crumpled piece of paper and read with solemn mien:

*O fairest town, brave didst thou fight 'gainst perfidious Hun,
O think not now to draw thy pension, my beauteous urban home.
Thou true love hast found with crane of mighty tower and elongated jib,
Thou, like a lusty man, wilt forever by it bide and true faith keep.*

“A poem of genuine sincerity and generosity.” And she thrust the piece of paper into my hands. Pulcheria de Cade-Gnasher entered it for our contest of positive projects. Everyone can understand it, it's so close to them. I think this poem will win the first place. I'm going to vote for it. Now think of a way we can write it on the background.” “There might be some ambiguity in the last two lines,” – my futile remark. “Then don't look for it! *Our people* certainly won't!” – the entirely predictable response. And now, in her customary polite and sensitive manner, Švietačka is showing interest in the way in which the instructions she entrusted to me are being carried out.

You are pondering over how you would like to spend the rest of your life. You've weeded out from inside yourself all the floral variety of rhymes and melodies and sowed tares in their stead. The wellspring of music inside you has dried up together with your soul. Literature... no, not now, you say to yourself, knowing full well that this “now” will most likely never come – because your creative energy has evaporated. You are empty, like after a miscarriage.

Meanwhile, you have to seek for employment urgently – just not here, where there are no more variants of fate than a dog-end has in an ashtray, but in the capital. You have no illusions: in the capital there is the same invasive language, the same fake words; the capital does not solve any problems, but it does widen the circle of opportunity.

Everybody says that when you're 40 your last train has already departed. “You won't find a job,” – that's how they try to frighten you. “Cling on to your job with your teeth, nails, and heels, nobody else needs you,” – this is how they try to convince you. You begin to look for a job and you see that they were right.

O Lord, find me a job! At least a temporary one, a transit port, because when my contract comes to an end, I don't want to be tempted by the reliability and security of the prison I'm in now. On days off, when I've been sitting at the computer, I've acquired skills that I need for this information age. In my folders there are links to dozens of vacancies in the capital that I've found on internet portals. I'm ready to consider what the local employment centre has to offer as well.

...“Age?” – “Forty two.” – “Sorry, you don't suit us.” – “Hello. Do you still need a secretary?” – “Our team is young and high-spirited. The average age is 25. How old are you?” – “Hi! You were looking for a content manager for

an Internet shop?” – “I sell goods for babies; I need a rewriter. Here’s a test. First question: *why does my child walk on tiptoe?* Second question: *my child is afraid of the potty – what should I do?* Third question: *my child sucks its thumb – what should I do?* Hurrah! I’ve got a job! Even though it pays only thirty cents *per* 1,000 characters not including spaces, but I have to start somewhere. I read certificates of origin – only don’t pretend to believe they’re real. I write, I send my pieces off. My employer disappears, so no payment. My articles appear on a web-site with cartoon cats. Well, at least I did a good job for young children who walk on tiptoe, suck their thumbs, and categorically refuse to crap in the potty.

...“Hello, is that the pharmaceuticals factory? Tell me, please, do you still need a cloakroom attendant?” – “No bad habits. Age – up to forty.” – “Oh, you know, I am only forty two and I do need a job...” – “Lady, you deaf?! I’m tellin’ you straight – up to forty!!! But we can offer you work in the vivarium.” – “Wwwhere?” – “No, she don’t understand nuffin’, that’s for sure. Vivarium, cleanin’ the rabbits’ cages. The pay’s very good, free million Belarusian roubles a monf. But just so you know – there you’re gonna have to work with shit. And rabbits die all the time.” – “Oh, and... What are the rabbits for? For the canteen? I don’t understand...” – “Lady, you from rahnd ’ere or from the bleedin’ Moon? There’s a queue of people who wanna work for us! And ’ere I am talkin’ to yer, the first one what phones... We test meds on ’em, get it? We give ’em injections. That’s why they snuff it.” – “No, I couldn’t do that. Poor rabbits.”

...“Hello, is this “Orast”? Do you still need a cleaning lady?” – “And just who are you?” – “Sorry...” – “I’m askin’ ya, bitch, who the bleedin’ ’ell are you ??? Why da fuck you callin’ ’ere????!” (*sounds of a polite fight; it is obvious that someone is trying to grab the phone. Loudly, with an upsurge of hysteria*): “Lady, it’s a great place to work!!! You won’t get such a high salary anywhere else!!! (*hastily whispers*) I’ll tell you honestly – our boss is a woman, she drinks, nobody stays... When was the last time you were slapped around the gob with a wet cloth?” – “Never.” – (*loudly, triumphantly*): – “And here you will be – it’s a dead cert!!!”

...“Hello, Fritz. Does your father still need a nurse?” – “Oh, to me already there comink vun girl from Weissrussland, very goot, yaa, she comink vuns a muns, you can comink too, I can not pay mutsch; roat at own expense...” – “And your father? How old is he?” – “vot a pity, my father he die ten years back. But you viz zat girl can comink even togezer, yaa, zis vill be most interestink and pleasant time for all us sree togezer...”

...“Hi. You sent me a letter with a proposal that I should come to work for you as a journalist. Who are you and how did you found me?” “I called Odysseus Midis; I have business Russia and live Greece. I founded CV Internet.” “What kind of work is it?” “To write articles. When can begin?” “What sort of articles, for whom?” “As for salary – I pay good. And practically our work is constant; to following 20 years.” “What website?” “The main thing – you must write.” – “Tell me the address of your website, Odysseus.” “50 dollars article.”

“It is important for me to know exactly what I shall have to do.” “Modification of news and writing.” (*I think to myself, “Modification” – that’s a bad sign.*) “The site, tell me the address of the website.” “Look at eurasiregionalum.com.” “*Nationally aware’ Belarusians have really screwed up with their silent actions...*” “*The insanity of those who have turned their backs on Great Russia is something we see all the time...*” ... well, now I get the picture. “Odysseus, I didn’t manage to read all the list of your ships. I didn’t even get to the middle.” “What? What ship?” “I’m not a hero or a warrior; I take a different course.”

...“Greetings, Marina.” “Hi, Inga.” “Are you still there?” “Yes, on the portal “Free World.” And you?” “I quit.” “Perhaps you’d like to join us?” “No, you write about politics. I avoid politics.” “Everything that makes you weak and dependent is politics.” “Maybe you’re right... I’ll have a think.”

* * *

In two months I will be free.

What does it mean – to be free?

I sit and ponder.

For some reason, I remembered the principal of our school (she conducted meetings for the girls in senior classes; the boys were enlightened by the teacher of preliminary military training); she looked like a training model of a tank in a cover with a little medal on one side. Aiming her finger at the ceiling (as if imitating the gesture of the monument on the Square), the principal kept repeating, “You were born in a free country! You must be happy!.”

Well, one thing’s certain – we were never taught to be free.

There are, of course, books about freedom, their protagonists are men, usually without children, and if there are children, these heroes live to achieve their high purposes without caring about their offspring. It’s understood that the women will look after the children.

By the way, what was it we were given to read at school? Well, for example, *How The Steel Was Tempered*. “Life is only given to a person once...” – we learned it by heart! – and then solemnly, beneath the velvet Red Banner that we had to compete for, we were given such lives that you had to forget everything you’d studied, or else go mad, or kill yourself.

I know only one woman who feels free: my friend Marina. Now she works on the Internet portal “Free World.” She is free not because she works there. On the contrary: she works there because she feels free. Marina has always been like that. She read books in foreign languages and attended some special seminars. The conclusions that Marina reached in her fourth year at university are the same as the ones which cost me many wasted years! Back then I looked on her as an alien. I pitied her. I was surprised by her.

Well, twenty years have elapsed, and now when you look back at your life you feel sick.

Or – more precisely – at the life you’ve lived that wasn’t yours.

Translated by Jim DINGLEY.

.....

Maryja Martysievič



...For the sake of international understanding,
for the sake of divine harmony
educate our village
in foreign languages...

The Sewing Machine of Truth

MIDSUMMER POEM

The villagers of Northern Sweden
approach Midsummer most
seriously.
They believe in a fire
larger than their neighbor's,
in the largest fire in the neighborhood.
To make it happen they dag everything that burns
and pile it in the field.

If my grandmother's neighbor,
a certain Mishka
from the Northern Belarus,
had a chance to exchange some words
with the guys from the Northern Sweden,
he could have given them some good advice:

“The key to any fire is tires, -
He would have said spitting under their feet
a chewed up piece of lard, -
Remember, dudes, you can never
have enough tires.
The more tires,
the better is midsummer.

The more tires
the truer.
with tires the fire is real.

In Damanava they say if you have
as many tires as there are men in your village
you’ll get laid for the whole year,
but we, in Zarečča, don’t believe such rubbish –
anyway, many of ours go away to college.

Here’s how you celebrate midsummer:
pile up the tires
into a rubber anthill,
an awesome androcyde cake,
then add petroleum-soaked newspaper.
Where to get tires? All means are fair.
Two years ago I busted all eight tires
of my uncle’s tractor.
He had to ditch them.
How he cursed, when he found out, -
he broke my rib and leg..
But believe me – that was the summer!”

This is what Mishka would have said
to the dudes from the Northern Sweden.
But such shebang
is unlikely to happen there.
Volvo tires are unlikely
to smog the low Swedish sky.

Still I believe
that dudes from Sweden
do need to have that experience.

Mishka doesn’t speak English,
leave alone Swedish

together with Finnish.
If he met with the dudes
from the Northern Sweden,
firstly they would have had a fight,
then got drunk,
all the time silent,
or simultaneously gesticulating
without a clue that they have so much
to discuss.

That's why today
to honor the end of summer exams
right before the solstice
if you,
the powerful of my country,
think about how to make
our life even better
(because you always think about it)
I call to you:

For the sake of international understanding,
for the sake of divine harmony
educate our village
in foreign languages!

THE SEWING MACHINE OF TRUTH

*My name is Lt. Aldo Raine,
and I'm puttin together a special team.
And I need me eight soldiers.
Eight – Jewish – American – soldiers. (...)
We're gonna be dropped into France, dressed as civilians.
And once we're on enemy territory,
as a bushwackin, guerrilla army,
we're gonna be doin one thing,
and thing only, Killin Nazi's. (...)
Any and every son-of-a-bitch
we find wearin a Nazi uniform,
there gonna die. (...)
And the Germans, will be sickened by us.
And the Germans, will talk about us.
And the Germans, will fear us. (...)
When you join my command,
you take on debit.*

*A debit you owe me, personally.
Every man under my command, owes me,
one hundred Nazi scalps.
And I want my scalps.
And all y'all will git me,
one hundred Nazi scalps,
taken from the heads of
one hundred dead Nazi's...
Or you will die trying.*

Inglourious Basterds by Quentin Tarantino

the brand of the sewing machine
my parent bought me in childhood
from a retired dora yusifauna
living in an apartment above the national bank is
VERITAS.

do you know what it means
in latin, bitches?
VERITAS means truth.
so – stretch out your hands

under the sewing machine of truth
with its foot-pedaled grudge.

i remember that day very well

dora yusifauna was the shit
dora yusifauna was packing to leave for israel
dora yusifauna was selling her furniture
dora yusifauna was stroking my head
dora yusifauna talked about surviving ghetto
dora yusifauna taught me
what to say if my workshop teacher
told me the seams were crooked
dora yusifauna as a bonus
gave me a rope
from a trophy messerschmidt
and said that VERITAS is a brand-name
but nevertheless
have the rope

it's good

german

handy when the grudge comes to the throat

after eighteen years
the brand-name rope

i

s

w

o

r

n

o

u

t

mon cher barbarossa

it's time for the rope

according to the manual
the truth is ready to be used

truth

truth

truth

for those who aimed at milk
but got at me by accident

truth

truth

truth

for those who snagged my micro and macrocosm
(in particular my close buddies)

truthtruthtruthtruthtruthtruthtruthtruthtruthtruthtruth
truthtruthtruthtruthtruthtruthtruthtruthtruthtruthtruth –

pagan like propaganda

truthtruthtruthtruthtruthtruthtruthtruthtruthtruthtruth
truthtruthtruthtruthtruthtruthtruthtruthtruthtruthtruth –

until i'm out of thread

brush aside the nuances of good and evil
those weaklings
always walk together

truth is always alone
and it stands
in my room

truth is like paris – we'll always have it
truth is like black and white berlin – all the same
truth is like madrid and cloudless sky above
truth is injected into the body with blood
like pinocchio with nails
like piercing a watermelon with heels
like a needle into what would become
a little black dress
a huge white night gown
a carnival costume for a penguin
i'm going to draw

wisdom with one who measures
courage with one who cuts
innocence with the one who tacks

truth is with the one who stitches
threads
the measured
the cut
the tacked
into one whole

underneath your fingers it threads black
above – white.

Translated by Valzhyna MORT.



Siarhiej Dubaviec



...He is both energumen and exorcist.
Nothing can be done about it. Anyone bearing
the name Siarhiej is more easily tempted
than others...

The Devil Hitched to the Plough

A Mystical Thriller from the Life of Prague-based Golems

The Radio Solaris people were always talking wherever they were, and not only into the microphone. They had a lot to say, and they said it volubly and with tremendous enthusiasm; their talk was mainly of politics, but of everything else as well. They would talk out on the terrace, while walking, in the workplace, and, of course, in the canteen. There aren't that many new impressions you can have on a space station, so they often talked about things they had already discussed and in exactly the same way as before. Coherent arguments, points of view, and opinions were expressed, forgotten, and expressed again, and if last time speaker A said something to speaker B, then in a new situation the same arguments were used by speaker B to admonish speaker A. It was quite natural, just like life

itself – ‘what goes around, comes around’, everything is repeated, but, by and large, nothing ever becomes any clearer as a result.

The huge canteen on the ground floor of Radio Solaris was all painted white. It was called a restaurant, but that was probably due to the Prague tradition of giving status to any eating establishment or, maybe, because there were waitresses working there. Two girls were at this moment rushing between tables, taking orders and serving food and drink to customers. To tell the truth, they weren’t strictly necessary: the customers were quite capable of serving themselves.

The canteen chef was an Afghan, and all those born in these latitudes reckoned his food was tasteless. Blackened beef, incomprehensible spices that made it easy to spoil chicken, peas as hard as bullets... The Russian Service once asked for another chef to be appointed. However the management told them they would have to make a choice between tasty food and a cheap menu. Iranians, and they were in the majority, voted for cheapness as they found the cooking to their taste.

“Here we live only on our memories,” said Navumčyk. The staff of the Belarusian Service of the Radio had already gathered round the table, all, that is, except the director. Navumčyk went on “Young people treat us as nothing but dinosaurs. Basically, they’re right: we were the same in our day. Here’s a question I’ve just seen on Facebook: ‘What exactly did your mass actions achieve?’ They are referring to the 1990s. Well, the first thing those actions achieved was the independence of the country. Second: a rally with 50,000 people prevented the country being joined to its eastern neighbour! Yeltsin didn’t need another Chechnya, and the West saw that not all Belarusians wanted to rush into union with Russia. In 1999 I ceased to be a member of the Council of the Belarusian People’s Front and had nothing to do with subsequent actions, so I shan’t say anything about them.”

Imbryk, who now found himself in the midst of his childhood heroes, could not help being acutely aware that he was being made fun of – in such a gentle, polite, and slightly ironic way that he felt euphoric at the informal contact with those who had played a direct role in those past events. He instantly recognized all these people by their voices, but those voices – or so it seemed to him – were not saying the things that needed to be said.

“How revolting this food is,” said Ablamiejka again, putting another piece of stringy black meat in his mouth and chewing it with a twisted expression of disgust on his face. Distinguished for his fastidiousness, Ablamiejka was prone to criticizing and trying to block events that were unavoidable by talking endlessly.

The people seated round the table were united by one important characteristic: they were all stars of the first magnitude in various spheres of life outside the framework of the Radio. If Solaris were to be closed tomorrow, they would cease being journalists, but would still have major roles to play: Navumčyk as a politician, Ablamiejka as a historian, and Šupa as a translator of foreign literature who knows 80 languages.

Navumčyk, Abłamiejka, Šupa, and – frankly – Jesip all shared the same first name: Siarhiej. The director of the Belarusian Service of Radio Solaris once even said that he assumed Siarhiej to be the most Belarusian of names. It's just like, during the war, when the Germans had surrounded a group of Belarusian partisans, they would shout, "Siarhiejs, surrender!" By the same analogy, in our childhood all the Germans were Fritzes and all the Russians Ivans.

All Siarhiejs are somehow similar. The Dubaviec Onomasticon sets out this similarity as follows:

"SIARHIEJ battles against demons inside himself. He is both energumen and exorcist. Nothing can be done about it. Anyone bearing the name Siarhiej is more easily tempted than others. Temptations lie in wait for him every step of the way, and he consciously allows himself to yield. All the same, he is very concerned about his sinfulness. In fact this is where his „exorcism“ reveals itself (at least, that's what he thinks). The contradiction lies in the name itself: it consists of two parts that in essence designate both process and action, which are aimed in opposing directions."

It could not be said that Imbryk did not like anything at all here very much; there were amusing moments, he got to hear a whole number of things that he did not know beforehand and which might potentially be useful, and there was also mention of senior management. Even so, these people were quite unlike the people he used to know as broadcasters and had been preparing himself to meet here. What he had to do was to think of how best to become part of their group, rather than put himself at odds with them because they are not what he expected.

"It's this way of life that makes them like they are, nothing else," he thought. And he liked this way of life.

"It's OK," said Prydumany. He was a bit younger than the others; it was as if he read his thoughts and looked at him approvingly. "Everything is going to turn out fine."

"I've been living in the emigration for 20 years now," said Navumčyk. "I was forced to emigrate. Absolutely forced to. After all at home they'll arrest me at once or maybe even kill me.

"How revolting this food is," Abłamiejka said again.

"Well, isn't that just hilarious!" Imbryk thought to himself. "What a surprise: a fighter who is afraid of prosecution, arrest and death. Didn't he know where he was going and what he had chosen to do? All's fair in love and war. Maybe it's something not worth talking about, being arrested and killed? Better to think up some other excuse. For example, that today you can make yourself more useful here than back home, that the situation there has not yet ripened for your return and you can help it ripen from here. (He did feel that he was selecting arguments for staying not so much for Navumčyk, as for himself.) After all, talk of arrests and death doesn't sound so convincing when it comes from a fighter. Anyway, emigration is also some kind of a deed of valour, a feat of arms if you like; it certainly isn't easy to suffer twenty years far away

from your country and preserve your loyalty to it. It's beginning to look as though this is the choice I've made too."

By now everybody was sitting pensively, as if they had heard his thoughts this time as well. How does that happen? Perhaps they've all been together in this enclosed space for so many years that they've learned to read each other's thoughts? If words are repeated, it follows that thoughts are repeated too. Thoughts cease being a secret only because they are not uttered; after all, everything – every answer, every reflection – is known in advance. Everything gets repeated! And when new people happen to find themselves in this circle where their thoughts simply cannot be hidden, they stand there completely defenceless, because no defence exists.

Jesip bent over Imbryk and whispered in his ear:

"A waitress is going to bring you your order now. Czech girls can be attractive as well. Particularly those who smile. I'll tell you what their secret is. They're hairdressers by profession; they graduated from vocational schools somewhere in the provinces, but then managed to fix themselves up with a job here. On Facebook they write that their place of work is the American Radio Solaris. You can make of it what you like, can't you? You can just picture the amazement of the girls they were at college with, how many likes their posts get and how they're envied.

Imbryk had ordered partridge baked in foil and now his thoughts were occupied by this tiny corpse on a huge plate, and he had no idea how to eat it. More precisely, of course, he did know how and he was making the fullest possible use of his fingers, but something kept hindering him and he couldn't get it right. He had never eaten it before. It may look like an ordinary chicken, only it's five times smaller and everything about it is so small that... his appetite vanished instantly. Imbryk wiped his fingers and pretended he was in no hurry to eat his dish; he took a smooth glass of cold tomato juice.

"It's easier here, living in emigration," Jesip said. "We live far away, and so our life is happy. We live here, but all our thoughts are there, with our far-off country. It's like distant thunder, the clicky-clack of the wheels of a faraway train, the penetrating sound of a piano on the other side of a wall, a dog barking in the distance, the light of a star in the depths of space. Something that attracts you powerfully, touches your soul, inspires you. When my daughter reads Harecki aloud, we start crying together because it all becomes so unbearably close. It's hard to bear what is close. "For one hundred years nothing has changed for us and our desires," says my daughter. And it's true. The distant figure of Harecki is perceived almost like happiness. Like a supernova, like a really great writer. You understand?" He looked suddenly at Imbryk and continued: "And he comes to stand close when you start reading him, as close as the deafening roar of a train, as if he is here right now, in your head, or like the near-by furious barking of a wolfhound that hurls itself at you and wants to kill you. A star that is close by blinds and consumes you. And life in emigration is so distant, if you don't take it close to heart."

“How revolting...”

“Here in the Czech Republic,” Jesip continued, “I once happened to be in the forest. We’d gone mushrooming. I didn’t take any notice of the road we came on; there would have been no point as I wouldn’t remember it anyway. We kept on driving. You know how frightening it is when there’s a big dog baying and making straight for you. Really terrifying. And there we stopped the car, got out, and right by where we were, an isolated manor house near the forest, a dog began to bark – a peaceful sound, not malicious or frightening – because it was on the other side of a fence. We set off mushrooming and lost sight of each other. And while I was fussing around, running from one cep to another – and forests here are not like ours; they’re sometimes difficult to get through and the ground is very uneven, so that you can easily break a leg – I suddenly realized that I was absolutely alone. In a strange country, in a strange place, in a strange forest. The dog, my one and only waymark, was no longer barking. Things looked really dire. I tried to call my companions. Silence. I must have ended up God only knows where, far from anything. I didn’t like to shout out loud: first, because it’s shameful for an adult to get lost; second, when you’re in a strange forest you feel as if you’re in a stranger’s house. What should I do? There was no sun to give me some idea of the direction I should take. I was out of range of any mobile phone signal. On top of all that a light rain was beginning to fall. And the day was starting to draw to a close. Literally, in whatever direction I went, there would be one chance in a thousand of getting to the car; all the others would lead precisely nowhere. That’s why I didn’t move. I was gripped by panic. Even a wolfhound jumping at me with his fangs bared couldn’t have made me crap myself more. That frightful sense of not knowing what to do. This awful place in the back of beyond in the Czech countryside: I had come to realize that it does indeed exist. What with the rain and the cold, I felt as though I was standing on the brink of an invisible precipice that I could fall down at any moment...”

Here Jesip paused for dramatic effect to allow everyone to share in this moment.

“The feeling didn’t last long. About ten minutes. But it filled me with such dread that all I wanted to do was lie down and die... And then all of a sudden that faraway dog began barking. I was rescued. I moved as fast as I could in the direction of this barking and soon enough saw the car. That was how I learned to appreciate whatever is at a distance.”

“It’s easy to deal with people who are far away from you, and more difficult when they are close by.” This was Imbryk attempting to join the conversation. He had managed to finish that pathetic partridge, although it left an unpleasant aftertaste in his brain more than in his mouth.

“How revolting...”

By this time the company had concluded their repast and by force of habit moved across to the lift in order to go up to the upstairs buffet and there order coffee and dessert and finally get all that they had left unsaid off their chests.

“What do you mean, revolting? All kinds of different things can be revolting to different people,” sighed Prydumany. “Listen to this, it’s an incident that really did happen, one that’s fixed in my memory. It occurred in southern Vietnam near the city of Phan Thiet. My wife and I were living on the seashore in a place called Cogha. For a change we would occasionally go to the other side of Phan Thiet, to the resort village of Mui Ne where there was a whole street full of shops and restaurants. At one of those restaurants I was tempted by turtle soup and ordered it. To my mind, a legendary dish. And a bit on the pricey side, sod it! But it’s only once in a lifetime! And while they were cooking the soup for me, I suddenly recalled that I had had a tortoise when I was a boy. It was really smelly; you had to clean up after it all the time. But that’s not what I remembered most. It was a child’s sense of regret, almost compassion. I was overcome by the natural injustice of it all when I looked at the creature. Why was it created to be so clumsy? It can’t turn around, it can’t run. You can turn it upside down, and it has to go through real torment in order to get itself the right way up again. And it’s not because of some illness or deformation: that’s how it was meant to be. And my biggest regret was caused by those forelegs which waggled and bent helplessly to and fro. The tortoise can move them, it strives to move itself along, but nothing happens and all its aspirations are futile... I sat in that restaurant in the grip of deep despair because I had ordered that blasted turtle soup. Add to that the ironic look on my wife’s face when she asked me: „Are you really going to eat that ‘tortilla?’“ Oh, well... A waiter’s bringing my order. You can almost hear the fanfares; after all, the whole restaurant is staring at us, at me in particular. A big deep bowl full of everything you can think of. My last hope is that there’s nothing of the tortoise in it except broth. When the waiter placed the soup before me, I just wanted the ground to open up and swallow me. Of course, there were some avocados, various herbs and other kinds of vegetable adornment, but in the midst of it all there was a little bent leg sticking out.

“Did you start eating it?” Imbryk was afraid that he wouldn’t get to hear the rest of the story. In actual fact, and without wanting to, he had stolen Prydumany’s dramatic pause.

– I overcame my initial revulsion, took one or two sips of the sourish-saltish water near the brim, and moved the bowl away,” Prydumany continued. “I just couldn’t take any more. Even now I cannot find a word to describe what I felt. The whole restaurant stared at me in amazement. So did the waiters, but there was joy in their amazement. My eyes told them that the bowl could be taken away. And later, when I went to the lavatory, I passed by the kitchen and saw three waiters swooping down like birds of prey on my ‘tortilla’, tearing it to shreds. That’s how I came to realize that turtle soup is really tasty only when it’s swooped down on in such a ferocious way. However, for me it was an embarrassment. And I can still see that twisted little leg sticking out of the soup.

“What a sad story,” sighed Dančyk. He had come out to join them on the

terrace. He didn't join in conversations very often and in general had little to say for himself. The legendary Dančyk seldom wrote articles and rarely played the guitar. Why? This was something that was of great interest to Imbryk, and he decided to somehow get the well-known singer and childhood idol to talk.

The whole company found themselves seats on the terrace with coffees and cakes in their hands.

“Did you know that turtle soup is prohibited in many countries?, asked Navumčyk. “Not in Vietnam certainly. Nothing is forbidden there. It is just that tortoises and turtles are a relict species, on the brink of extinction; they've really fallen behind in the progress race. Eating them is like finding a living dinosaur, killing it, and making soup out of its ears.” At Radio Solaris Navumčyk was the main fan of smoked pork ears brought to him on occasion from Lithuania, but Imbryk would find out about that later.

“I've read somewhere that turtles are breeding in the Chernobyl Zone,” Imbryk said. “There's a photographer who was talking about how he was in an abandoned village and heard the sound of a crash coming from a tumble-down cottage. He entered, saw that a pile of crockery had fallen over and then noticed a turtle clambering out of a casserole dish.”

“There you are, you see, it's not that simple at all,” said Šupa, rounding off the discussion. “The turtle is trying to turn itself into soup.”

Vying with each other, all the Siarhiejs began talking about the tastiest soups in various places in Europe, and then the “solar” girls – Cichanovič, Radkievič, and Hanna Souš – came out on to the terrace, as light as their voices on the radio, which Imbryk had heard right from when he was a baby. All of them are like mothers to him. He feels as though happiness is going to begin now.

“What is happiness?”

Translated by Jim DINGLEY.



Iryna Bielskaja



...I've left him
I stand in the doorway
of the flat cleaned up
as if for a festival
holding bits of faith
in my hands...

Christmas candles

* * *

The man
I'm leaving
is learning to live
on his own
to cook
clean up
after himself –
neatly
but totally like a man
sometimes he cries

before
I've left him
I make breakfast
fresh

(he is so grateful)
I throw away my things
postcards
jeans
Christmas candles
cut flowers...
I clean
the flat
cleaned by him earlier
totally like a woman
I cry as well
rather I howl

I go to church
again and again
ask God
how it is
whether
the issue
with my place
in the world
has been solved
I ask for happiness and
smiles for everyone
at least
for some
preferably
at Christmas
at least Easter...
God decides to see me
listens
says he'll think about it

the man
I'm leaving
lends me money
says
I don't have to pay back
play-acts concentration
on TV shows
weather forecasts
news
says
I don't owe him
anything

I did so much
it's not about money
at all
that's just
enough at first
he's matured so much
so did I
but I'm
worse

before
I've left him
I stand in the doorway
of the flat cleaned up
as if for a festival
holding bits of faith
in my hands
crying
saying:
God
by the way
if You could
prolong this moment –
let it be
eternal



Uładzimir Ściapan



...In collections of poems by various authors they look young, smiling and gloomy, just like real poets, but you won't find them on the Internet...

The Bouquet

Miniatures

Streets And People

Old Juzik the Joiner was teaching his son Vitalka to count... He was counting on his fingers, bending them slowly. First on the left hand – five. Then on the right – three... Five on the left hand; on the right – three.

My schoolmate Vitalka completed only eight years of schooling, and then came prison. Old Juzik the Joiner had the same number of fingers.

Eleonora's Lilacs

Eleonora Jazierskaja was taking up a lot of space on a bench by the River Śvislač, near the Belarusian TV Centre. It was very hot, and she was fanning herself with her bright

skirt. It was the torrid May of 1999. The TV tower went white and red by turns; a lilac cloud was coming nearer, but the sun continued to beat down. On the bench there was a beach bag. Inside the bag there was a white cat mewling wearily. The bag was decorated with small coloured stones, shards of mirror glass and shells. My daughter and I sat down nearby. My daughter was 4 years old or so, and the sight of the white cat and the brightly dressed, heat-tormented woman caught her attention.

We talked about this and that, all of it television stuff. We were about to leave. Eleonora made a move towards the steps, crossed the street, and then headed straight over the grass for a huge bush and started picking the lilac. She picked a big bouquet. The utter brazenness of it made me feel uncomfortable, but I didn't say a word. Eleonora came over to me with her bouquet and said, "Uładzimir, I deserve it, don't I? I've given so many years of my life to the TV."

It was my daughter who remembered the small stones and shards of mirror on the bag with the cat.

I recalled the lilac: it was not yet in full bloom.

Today that bush is full of flowers, but they are withered, rust-coloured, gradually decaying and falling.

Hiena

I've known Hiena Chackievič since 1976. The last time we met was on 22 April 2014 at the opening of an exhibition in the Museum of Contemporary Fine Arts. There were a lot of people there, and suddenly I heard Hiena's voice, "Ściepanienka, hi!" Hiena came over to us; he was wearing a red jacket; we shook hands. He saw that I was with my wife and said, "Let's go to my place, both of you, I'll buy a cake, we'll sit and have a talk... There's nothing to look at here, and I'll show you my new paintings..." When we were leaving, Hiena was standing next to one of his canvasses, giving an interview.

Today Valera Škaruba mentioned his last meeting with Hiena. It took place on 23 April on Jakub Kolas Square, at the opening of another exhibition. Hiena told him, "Škaruba, why are you always painting nothing but autumn scenes? You'd be better off painting an orchard in spring, with white flowers..." Valera was silent for a few moments and then added, "If Chackievič had been alive, I'd have forgotten those words about the orchard, but now I can't... I keep thinking about that white garden."

Mona

The other day an acquaintance of mine was shouting his mouth off about a meeting he had once had with the woman. He said he had seen her hundreds of times in photos and videos, but when he actually saw her for the first time he couldn't get away from her fast enough.

In May 1974, I think it was a Friday, I managed to get into the Art Museum and avoid the huge queue outside in the street with the help of a grey student

card from the Minsk State Art College. There she was, La Gioconda – the painting that I had only ever seen before in the form of postcards, black-and-white and colour reproductions... I had enough time before the throng of visitors had made its way to the small canvas in its dark shining frame. My eyesight was very good and so I was able to study this most well-known of portraits in detail. It sounds unlikely, but I was disappointed, almost to the point of tears, but I did not tell anybody of my disappointment at the time.

Three Streets

It's quite short October Street. It begins at the Square and ends at the Lake. Beyond the water there is a field, and beyond that there are trees and a village. When you go along October Street from the Square, on the right you can see the fence at the front of the local greasy spoon, a black iron gate, then red brick garages, a school playground, and beyond it the single-storey school building. After that there are more garages and then the Lake. When I was just starting school, I always thought that this street was really long and wide. It was on this street that the four-storey block of flats where I lived stood. I could see the school from the windows of my flat. During the lunch break I used to go home to have a bite to eat and change my clothes.

Mayday Street begins at the Square too. When you go along this street, on the left you can see a vocational school, then the public baths, a boiler house, garages, woodsheds, a fence, old wooden buildings that people still lived in, then blocks and blocks of flats, and opposite them a school, then a kindergarten, and after that the house where my mother lives. Mayday Street is much longer than October Street. Or at least that's how it seemed to me. It's a real journey to walk from the Lake to the end of Mayday Street: it could take a whole day.

Mayday Street runs into Swann Street. It begins at the main road. When you go along this street, you come to a field where there are trees and bushes. This is the cemetery. If it weren't for the house on Mayday Street, I could have seen it from my bedroom.

Nowadays the three streets of my town all seem very short to me, especially the one that leads to the cemetery.

Encounters at a Funeral

They had turned to dust, got lost, disappeared out of my life... It's only in tatty old journals, or on the discoloured pages of discontinued newspapers that you can find what they had written and photographs of them.

In collections of poems by various authors they look young, smiling and gloomy, just like real poets, but you won't find them on the Internet...

I thought that some of them had died ages ago, that they had flown away like clouds, or sailed away like ice floes... I had forgotten their names and couldn't recall their surnames. So, at Baradulin's funeral they came up to me,

greeted me, shook hands and said, “Oh dear, that’s how it goes...” Some of them photographed me, some of them had photographs taken with me; they sighed and whispered in agitated, unrecognizable voices, “Uładzimir, do you remember that time when...”?

I went back home after the funeral and tried to remember what they were called. I was quite cross with myself, but managed a smile.

Frost and Sun!

They’re selling fast, those flat bottles of vodka that stand bright and clanking in their packaging like baubles on a Christmas tree! And the queue of men eager to buy them is also moving up fast, and time and again the knackered shop assistant has to haul in fresh cellophane-wrapped packs of vodka that look like transparent blocks of ice... The flat bottles clank against each other as if they are kissing at parting. A vivid, expressive, now half-forgotten word came to mind: “čakuška” – the word that was used for a vodka quarter-litre miniature.

Frost and Sun!

Et Tu, Brute?

It’s morning. There’s a woman in the groceries section of the shop standing next to the counter. She’s all decked out in orange. There’s a little shaggy dog running around at her feet. The woman gives it a shove with her foot, throws her hood back, peers at the closest row of different-sized bottles and says with confidence, “Maryna, give me a bottle of Brut, will you? I’ve got a nasty headache...” and hands over her credit card. The saleswoman thoughtfully puts a bottle of champagne on the counter. With practised fingers the woman enters her PIN, hides the bottle with a glossy stopper in her bag, puts the card in her pocket, then suddenly remembers something and asks for a disposable cup. She is given one as a bonus, free of charge.

Out of the shop she goes, accompanied by the shaggy dog and the Brut.

Dreams

I read once that in dreams you can only see what you’ve actually seen in real life. However, in my dreams I see men and women that I don’t know at all. There, in my dreams, I get to know them and we speak. Then time passes, a month, a year or two, and those dreams are forgotten as if they never existed. And suddenly, it was on the day before yesterday, there I am in the metro. At the Uschod Station a man jumps into the carriage where I’m sitting. He looks at me with interest and just a little alarm. He starts to unbutton his coat; he managed to get just the top button undone, and I already knew what there was under the coat – a white sweater with red deer, and under the deer – three thin red lines. And so it was. He sat opposite me and kept looking at me, and

I kept looking at his deer. Something else I knew for certain: in the right-hand pocket of his dark blue coat there are three chestnuts and a small flashlight.

I didn't wait for the second stop.

The man watched me get off the train. There was a quizzical look on his face.

City

I too have my own favourite street, favourite place and favourite building in Miensk... I also have a favourite tree – an oak near the house where the First Congress of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party took place. I look at it in winter when it is covered with snow, in spring, and in summer. Still, I like it most of all in late autumn when it's the only tree left with tough, russet foliage.

I think it's important to have a tree like that. One that's your favourite.

Portrait of the Writer as a Young Boy

I must have been about 10 years old when I first pictured myself as an adult. Not merely five, nor even twenty years older, but much older than that. You think about yourself as an adult when you're a teenager or a young man; the thoughts and images are blurry, undefined, vague, but even so you believe them. All those years ago, between the winter and spring of 1968, my teacher asked me to sit still for a couple of hours while he painted my portrait in watercolours.

I'm sitting on a standard-issue chair with a yellow plywood back. The grey sweater I'm wearing has a neck hole that has become stretched; I'm in brown trousers and imitation leather boots. In our town boots like them were all the rage, but they didn't get painted anyway. In the portrait I have a concentrated look on my face, my body is gawkish, my lips are red and the locks of hair falling on my forehead are dark, my ears are pink and my eyes are chestnut brown. I looked at my portrait fixed to the wall with four drawing pins and saw myself as an adult.

Mum hid the portrait in the wardrobe. It is still there today, on the bottom shelf; above it there are raincoats, overcoats and dresses on old-fashioned hangers. It's lying beneath a light-coloured piece of cardboard.

I look at myself in the mirror and I see that I do not look like myself as an adult yet, the adult suddenly seen through the portrait made in transparent paints on rough paper. The "me of today" has not converged with the "me" I saw back then. I console myself with the thought that when the images coincide, I will start to consider myself an old man – like feeling that the painting has been finished at last.

December 2013

The Overcoat

I was in an artist's studio. We hadn't seen each other in ages, so we had

a great deal to talk about. We drank tea out of elegant glass mugs. The artist showed me his paintings.

Over time the frames that surround his canvasses are becoming better and better, and his pictures worse and worse. This observation alarmed me; it was one I took with me from that light-drenched studio.

I recalled the short padded coat hanging on a nail near the door of a room on the first floor of a student hostel on Surhanaŭ Street. It was in 1980.

Nowadays there's a hanger in the studio and there's a leather coat with an otterskin collar on it; beneath it there's a new pair of nice warm boots, as black as bugs.

Angel

A hairdressing saloon. I know all the ladies who work there. They gathered around a boy who had just entered together with his young-looking grandmother. The boy's hair is unbelievable – long, flowing right on to his shoulders, curly and as golden as rye straw. The hairdressers and his grandmother together tried to persuade the lad to have just a little bit off, to have it trimmed. He stamped his foot and said that he was fed up with being an angel, he just wanted to be ordinary, like Sieńka and Romka, so all the hair had to come off. He looked at me and said that he wanted the same haircut. The hairdressers hesitated but still tried to talk the boy out of it, then Edzita began to snip with her scissors. She gave the tips of the hair a couple of snips, and then the scissors fell apart. "Made in Solingen they were – cost me 110 dollars..." She was visibly upset.

As I was leaving, they were still at work on the little angel. His long hair was falling on the floor like coiled golden springs, but the boy was still smiling the smile of the self-confident: the smile of an angel.

Genius

It's autumn and all of a sudden Tolik turns up in the city. His clothes aren't right for the time of year, they're too light. He's always in the same grey jacket with iron buttons that may have once looked stylish, but is now threadbare. Tolik never feels the cold. There are two places in Minsk where we meet, but we don't even bother with greetings. One is next to the Military Cemetery and the other is by the Mir cinema.

I can see him walking along the black fence of the cemetery. His right hand is in his pocket and in his left hand he's holding a big folder. There are times when Tolik will stop by the picturesque iron railings and start drawing. A long tram hums its way down Daŭhabrodskaja Street. Everyone's hurrying up because it's starting to rain; multicoloured umbrellas are going to tear themselves out of people's hands, but he'll keep on drawing. And not a drop of rain will fall on the grey paper or the artist's hands.

He applied on several occasions for a place in the Theatre and Arts Institute, but time and again he was rejected.

And there's another place where Tolik can simply stand – right by the building of the Mir Cinema; he can stand and look at it for ages. It took him a whole year to complete the huge panel for the façade. He worked on it with such persistence that he used to fall asleep in his clothes, lying on a student hostel bed like a dead man, and his jacket was hanging on the back of a chair. The jacket looked like a person next to a bed with a patient. There were pieces of paper scattered all around like leaves under a tree – drawings, some large, others quite tiny, some crumpled up, others torn. One windy November afternoon near the cinema his folder blew out of his frozen hands, gaped open, and off his drawings started to fly, whirling down the street. Tolik stood and looked and then started picking them up. He was almost hit by a car that he didn't hear or see. Before he had gathered all the sketches the wind had snatched, he left the spot at a run, without looking back; he felt embarrassed.

In 1973-74 I shared a room with Tolik on the third floor of the hostel of the Architecture and Construction Technical School. I was a first-year student; he was a diploma student.

I have no idea if the artist Tolik Vierabjoŭ is still alive.

November 2013

Apple

For a long time now my daughter has been trying to work out how to divide an apple into three equal parts. For herself and her parents.

I take the knife away from her. I cut the apple in two. I give one half to my daughter and divide the other half in two.

My wife does the same thing. My parents and grandparents also used to divide apples in the same way.

Artists' Model 1978

There is no plot to this story.

The woman had an expressive wrinkled face. She posed for two sessions. In total she sat on the chair only twice; she sat and looked into the distance – what was she looking at?

It was only later I understood. She was smiling at her own thoughts. She kept her hands on her lap; the sleeves of her cardigan were rolled up. Out of the whole group Uładzimir Mochaŭ and I were the only ones to draw her. On the third and fourth days the model didn't show up. The man in charge of models – a type with a small face and a small body – gave us her address; if he had known her phone number, he could have found out for himself.

Mochaŭ and I went to find out why she had stopped coming. The model lived on Komsomol Street; she had a place in one of the courtyards. We soon found the right one. The windows reached right down to the ground. On

the window sills there were flowers in huge tin cans that had been wrapped in wallpaper to give them some semblance of beauty. Washing was hanging out to dry. It was October, but the weather was warm, or so it seemed to me because we had been in a hurry and got ourselves hot. We went up to the first floor on a wooden staircase. The building seemed empty and there was an odd smell, like we were in the country. We knocked at the door, waited, knocked again. Uładzimir shrugged his shoulders and said that all was quiet in the flat. I suggested writing a note and pushing it under the door. But then the door opened. We caught a glint of the safety chain. A man was looking at us questioningly. We began to explain that we were looking for an artists' model, told him her name, that we were artists. He shouted into the darkness, "Mum, it's for you... Artists... Come this way." Our model was lying on a sofa. A ginger cat was lying at her feet, but it ran off as soon as we appeared.

The model said that she couldn't come to us as she was ill. Next to the sofa there was a stool and on it there were small bottles, a spoon, a glass of water, an apple, and a tall crystal glass. "This is wine... I thought it was tasty and sweet, but it's sour. I last drank wine a long time ago, with the man who was going to be my husband..." – the model explained and even tried to laugh, but instead she coughed and blushed.

Her son came and brought a cup with a warm drink. The model took a sip and stopped coughing. Next to the sofa there was a black piano. On it was a box of sweets in shiny foil wrappers, like decorations for a Christmas tree. The model asked me to pass her the sweets and the son poured wine for the young artists. The son did what she asked. He did everything with rapid obedience, neatly, like a woman. We drank and ate two sweets each. I didn't get the impression that the wine was sour. The woman told us that the man she was going to marry was an artist. He had painted her portrait on a canvas, but it did not survive the war.

"I came to pose so that I could recall him. And I looked at your drawings and I saw that I am old and all wrinkled like a toad..." – she said with a confused smile.

Her son's name was Edzik; he showed us to the door. We heard the lock click. The safety chain was put on. Outside In the yard I lit a cigarette. There was a smell of wet linen, smoke, old Minsk, and bread.

I couldn't remember the woman's name, but I do remember that her father was called Vissarion.

October 2013

Like Teenagers

Today I was on a green number 100 bus. There was an elderly couple standing on it holding each other's hands. Affectionately, like teenagers.

The bus was going along like normal, when suddenly it braked and came to a sharp halt.

The couple were sent flying and landed up on the floor.
They were still holding each other by the hand.

The Old Railway Station

The old station used to have a distinct combination of scents about it: the railway itself of course, the loos, bleach, and the buffet; add to that the whiff of the great unwashed given off by the passengers waiting for their trains. They had come to resemble suitcases of all shapes and sizes, knapsacks, bags, and bundles. The railway station was closer than the airport and the tram stop was closer than the trolleybus stop.

I was sitting drawing passengers who were either asleep or simply sitting still. They woke up whenever loud, hoarse announcements were made over the tannoy, but only for a moment and then they reverted to their previous motionless state. Policemen used to come up to me, and I had to show them my little grey art school student card. The policemen would take a look at the document and at my as yet unfinished pencil sketches, give a wry smile, and leave. I liked to draw at the station because at night there was much there that was motionless, slowed down or completely stopped. All I had to do was put it all down on paper and write the date. Back then, in 1973-74, I didn't sign my sketches and didn't keep them. I was sure there would be better ones which I could sign without feeling ashamed of them.

I sometimes stop on the square and look at the station towers reflected, refracted, and gathered together again in the motionless surface of the glass. I have never seen anyone in the new station drawing diligently and devotedly.

Air Waves

Perhaps it's a left-over from when I was a teenager. A time when in the darkness I used to twist the knob of the radio – and sometimes turn the radio itself in order to turn the aerial every which way – and find music, something in a foreign language, then in another foreign language. The music never seemed foreign to me, whether it was jazz, songs, or classical music. Maybe I am the only one who regards the radio as something secret, mysterious, magical.

There are distances between radio stations, barriers that hinder. Every time I managed to break through those barriers, those crackles and squeaks, when music and voices started to sound pure and bright, I rejoiced. On the Internet you move fast; you get no sense of distance.

Janitor

Our yard is kept clean by Micia the janitor and his wife Tamara. Micia does all the hard work and his wife does things that don't require so much effort. Micia has an old dog, Filia, who tags along behind his master and knows all his habits. I have never seen Micia's dog on the lead. It isn't necessary: Filia

is small, quiet, friendly, and never barks. Everybody had become used to Fila as something that was always there and always would be. Yet today I was told that Micia was going to have to go to court because his Filia had bitten someone... All the neighbours take this news with a smile; everyone knows that Filia has no teeth. Micia is walking around very sad; his face is severe and firm. With the same severe face he just bought a bottle of vodka in the local food shop. He didn't even smile like he usually does.

Godmother

My godmother called in on my mother once when I was home. They were sitting on the sofa, and behind them there was a carpet hanging on the wall – the kind of scene that bloggers laugh at. The two of them were chatting about how life today is good, but health is not like it used to be, that anyone who isn't lazy can have a good life, even in the town. Then they started to remember those who had recently passed away. Mother was born in 1930, my godmother in 1941. They talked and talked and came to the conclusion that everything is fine and that the main thing is not to have any wars. I could have smiled, but I decided not to. Then my godmother said that there won't be a war because something is going to come flying in from space and hit the Earth. Everyone will die. Mother cried out in alarm, but my godmother added that everyone will perish at once and so there's nothing to be afraid of because we'll have no time to be frightened.

Then off they went to have tea with meringues. There was no more talk of anything frightening.

Nobody

Near a bus stop a drunkard was beating a dog that he had on a length of white nylon cord. He was kicking it because the dog had seized an unfinished meat pasty that somebody had thrown away. People came to the defence of the dog; they struck the drunkard down to the ground and punched him. The brown lop-eared dog took fright, turned tail and was nearly hit by a car. The car wheels ran over the white cord. It was 8 days ago or so.

Yesterday, in a children's park, a child was eating a banana and dropped it.

A young mother started to beat the child on the shoulders, the back and the face, and then pull it along by the arm. The child was screaming blue murder and did not want to go. Couples with bouquets of maple leaves, pensioners, and young people on bicycles were passing by. The park lights were shining. Nobody came to the defence of the child.

Torch

There was a man in a leather coat standing at a bus stop, staring into the darkness and waiting for a bus. He smelled strongly of drink. On the bench

beneath the transparent side of the bus shelter there were four people, two women and two men. Next to them there were bags with apples and flowers. The man in the leather coat produced a torch from his pocket and began to shine it on his hand, his trainers, the bags, the bus timetable, a tree trunk. Then he started to point it at the people. First, on one of the women – you could see her metal teeth glinting; then on one of the men, who covered his eyes with a hand; then on the other woman who cried out and turned away. When he took a step and shone it on her neighbour's face, a bottle flashed. The man stood up and fetched the bloke with the torch a blow on the head. The torch fell on the ground, but didn't go out. They put the man in the leather coat on the bus shelter bench and put the torch into his pocket.

A bus came. The bus shelter emptied. As the bus was leaving the man rolled on his side and the flashlight fell to his feet among leaves.

The woman with the yellow chrysanthemums and yellow teeth said to her friend, "What'd he fuckin' switch his torch on for?"

Through The Train Window

The boy fixed himself in my mind.

He was sitting on a bench near a railwayman's brick house. He was resting his head on his knees, his hands around his legs. He was looking at a fast, mighty train that for a moment blocked off the motionless autumn landscape. The boy was wearing a sports top and dark blue wellies. He was sitting on a grey bench under a red tree (I think it was a maple).

I saw him just for a moment, but I remembered and envied him.

Money

If the red-faced man had had a book in his hands and was leafing through the pages fast (very fast), the five passengers of the reserved seat carriage would probably not have looked at his hands quite so brazenly. However, it wasn't a book in his hands. His strong fingers were very quickly counting large greenish banknotes, each one a two hundred thousand note. All five passengers kept a close watch on him. A young man, a woman on the wrong side of forty, a pensioner with a crossword puzzle, and a man from another berth. The man finished counting his notes, folded them, put them in his shirt pocket, buttoned up, put his coat on, took his backpack, and went to the doors. The train stopped at Puchavičy.

Everyone who had been watching the red-faced man count his money felt awkward as if they had been caught doing something they shouldn't.

Clouds

Every day in August there were unbelievable clouds: floating, standing, flying, simply moving. I tried to paint them, but I could not even come near

to what was taking place in the sky, to what my eyes could actually see. Some clouds looked like patches on faded jeans, some were like flowers, people, fantastic fishes and birds, and some resembled nothing at all. They drifted past like dreams, and I cannot even remember what they were.

1965

There were two things hanging on a nail in the office of the head teacher of one of the secondary schools in the town of Ślucak: a German SS officer's uniform and a mandolin. Why a mandolin? I have no idea. However, I do know what the uniform was for. I'll tell you. Every year on Victory Day (9 May) the SS uniform was used by the PE teacher. In the school cellar bright, sticky leaves were beginning to appear on the birch besoms. The school was preparing for the holiday. There'll be an open-back lorry rumbling through the street. A gallows will have been erected on the back of the lorry. The PE teacher, now wearing the SS uniform, will place a noose around the neck of a year ten girl; her hands have been tied behind her back. The head teacher will make a thorough check to ensure that a stool has been firmly attached to the vehicle. The "passion play" has been given the name "Zoya" and was performed on the streets of Ślucak for many years. Zoya was remained young, but the "SS officer executioner" grew older with every passing year.

One of the other secondary schools used to put on a different kind of heroic performance. Here an open-back lorry used to transport a plywood model of the Brest Citadel that would be endlessly defended.

Still, I wonder what the mandolin on the nail was for.

Mount Calvary

There was a black cat walking along one of the paths of the Mount Calvary Cemetery. In its jaws it held what looked like a grey velvet sack, but was in fact a mole.

The black cat passed close by me and pushed its way through the fence surrounding the grave of the ever cheerful Piotr Miłajewiç Łaurecki. There, amid the tall grass and wild flowers, the cat started to disembowel its prey. On the photo of him on his gravestone Piotr Miłajewiç began to smile even more cheerfully.

Gypsy Rain

There are moments when a woman becomes incredibly attractive.

On the balcony there's washing hanging out to dry. A big dark blue tablecloth, a white bed sheet, and another one the colour of an egg yolk, or maybe it's a big tablecloth for festive occasions. Half the sky is dark and the other half is clear. Sparkling rain drops start to fall. A wind gets up and makes the washing sway. The woman runs out on to the balcony. She takes hold of

the washing, half-rises on tiptoe, and stretches out, she's in a hurry. She pulls down the dark blue tablecloth, then the yellow one. The wind tries to wrest the white bed sheet all spattered with dark rain drop stains out of her hands, but she manages to keep hold of it. The wind wraps the damp dazzling white cloth right round the woman. There are rain drops running down her plump shoulders. She disappears into the kitchen.

She is sitting and smiling. Her lap is covered with cloth of dark blue, white, and yellow; the sunny rain has made it soft. In the rectangle of the open doors the rain is falling like a sheet. It is so dense that it appears golden. It is combing down the poplars and chestnuts, the ash-trees and acacias. It won't last much longer.

Lilies

I was travelling on the underground yesterday and saw an elderly woman holding a bouquet of lilies in her hand. The flowers were big and white, they looked artificial. Their stalks were long, their leaves neat. And the scent they gave off was so heavy that there seemed to be no normal air in the half empty carriage.

For me lilies smell of death, of bidding farewell to the dead, of air that stifles, and of hopelessness.

Perhaps it is precisely because of their funereal beauty and heavy scent that elderly women like these flowers so much.

But then the angel who appeared to Mary is always depicted holding a lily.

Envy

There are sickly flowers in the lobby looking out at the yard. It's raining very hard out there; the big green trees are taking a shower.

The heat is stifling.

The sickly big trees are looking at the flowers in the lobby, which are watered by the woman from flat no. 81.

And there are flowers on the balcony; they are watered by both: the woman and the rain.

Voice

I didn't see him, I only heard his voice. It was my daughter who saw him; she had opened the door when he called.

My daughter also gave him my telephone number as she knew nothing about the neighbours who had lived next door to us on our landing forty years ago.

He called me and I heard his voice – quiet, gentle, not very loud, confident but at the same time tense.

The man asked about the people who used to live in flat no. 97. He mentioned a 100-year-old woman who rented a room to a teacher, the lobby, and flowers on the landings.

Later I asked my daughter to describe the man. She said he looked OK, he was about 65 years old, polite.

He just talked and talked. He recalled the names of his neighbours on the staircase, but the Kosaraŭ family name was mentioned most often.

I don't know why and I can't really understand it, but I got the impression that the man was looking for his former love.

It's hard to believe it, but his voice...

Voices like that usually belong to tricksters and swindlers.

Disappointment

It is easy to be disappointed in people. In dogs it's more difficult.

There's a skinny grey dog running around by the bus stop near the circus building. He's as thin as a ruler. He comes up to people, nuzzles their calves, and sniffs at their bags. His eyes are hazel, full of a dogs' grief. This grey tramp has been coming up to me as well, looking at me expectantly, but I had no food to give to him. Yesterday I left home and saw the dog at the stop. I went to a shop, bought some sausage and returned to the stop. The dog ran off to the lawn next to the circus, lay down on the grass and put his head on his paws. I approach him and give him the food, but he doesn't even want to look at the treat I've bought for him. So I think, maybe he's ill and faint with hunger.

I started to think hard things of people. Then on the grass I see that near the dog there's some smoked meat, a bread roll, an unfinished sandwich, and sausage of various kinds.

In a word I was disappointed, but not in people.

How Does It Look?

One morning in the big department store two young women asked a man who was returning a pair of trousers to try on a dark blue jacket. The man agreed, laughed, but the women thought that the jacket looked a bit on the gloomy side. They brought out another jacket, a grey one this time. The man tried on this one too. The women hesitated, they said that it looked fine, but it was too modest, and that they wanted it to be... The man realized that they were buying a jacket to put on a dead man. He was so alarmed that he ran off and forgot the trousers.

The women looked at me, but I wasn't the right build.

Outside on the street it's sunny and fresh. Breathing is easy.

A Story from Vušačy

It's August 1942. The town of Vušačy. There's a German digging a hole. Unhurriedly and neatly in a typical German fashion. His uniform jacket is hanging on the fence. Anton Dziarybka (I don't know if that's a nickname or a surname and I didn't ask) timidly approaches the German. The German digs

away, and Anton tells him how much he suffered during the Soviets, how terrible life was under the Bolsheviks. The German continues digging, occasionally looks at him, and nods. Dziarybka keeps on talking, and the German keeps on digging. By this time Dziarybka isn't afraid anymore; he comes nearer so he can speak to the German's face and not to his back. The German clammers out of the hole, looks at Dziarybka, nods, blows on his hands, picks up the shovel and smashes Anton on the head. He pushes Anton into the hole, but doesn't bother to cover him up. He puts on his coat and walks off.

Something Sacred

Every year at the beginning of May I hear the typical Belarusian mantra, "I've got to go back to the village to plant potatoes!" Everyone goes, lyric poets and physicists, men and women alike, because if you don't go, you won't have any potatoes... And so people go to the villages they came from or to their summer cottages and plant. Even though it was calculated a long time ago that it is less expensive to buy them. However, the essence of the matter lies much deeper, it's religious; the potato has been raised to the status of a cult.

Although I do know Belarusians who don't eat potatoes.

Lilac

They'd quarrelled, just like young people have always done. He stayed where he was; she went off, but at first she stamped her foot, and he hung his head. She left without looking back. The boy roused himself, looked around, and...

There's a bush in the yard, growing near the watchman's hut. The boy quickly broke off several branches with dark clusters of flowers. The watchman jumped out holding a spoon in his hand. The boy caught up with the girl and knelt before her with the bouquet. The watchman, a pensioner, swore and then said, "You should've let her go – the daft girl!"

He spat, lowered the barrier, and went off to finish his porridge.

And I picked up a cluster of flowers that had fallen and took it with me.

A Story on the Dictaphone

...We used to play in a park, near a palace. There were little bridges, a lake, and marble arbours there; there were swans swimming, and we children would play there. There were four or five of us. We used to have beautiful dresses. There was always a little girl with us. She was seven years old, but she looked like she was only five. Her legs were like sticks and her voice was ever so quiet, almost a whisper. Her tummy stuck out so much that her dress split. She, this little girl, had rickets, so we used to call her "Rickety." Once somebody said that if we pushed "Rickety" into the lake she wouldn't sink, she would float like a ball. So we shoved her off a bridge and she sank.

Later, the adults gave us a beating. It was near Frankfurt an der Oder in the summer of 1945, and all the children were from different concentration camps.

Recorded in June 2012

This is the sort of thing that happens to me...

There I am, riding my bike, and suddenly I see a narrow path running from the road up a hill with bushes. And beyond the hill there's a field, and then a dark forest. I may sometimes stop if I get a sudden urge to take that path, even though I don't know where it will lead to, or where it will end. I stand there, dreaming, telling myself that some other time I'll turn off and ride along this strange path. Some other time, later. And right now I should be turning the pedals and going off to do other things, like gathering mushrooms.

And when some other time does indeed come, in a day or in a year, I will see exactly the same path and have no desire whatsoever to explore it.

Popular Songs

Ściapan Antonavič Lajčonak

A misty, warm August morning. Nobody had had breakfast yet. Heavy, overripe, waxen pears were falling from the tree near the house.

A Black Maria emerged out of the mist on to the narrow street. A dog began barking but quickly fell silent. The vehicle moved forward silently through the village and suddenly stopped. An officer jumped out of it: riding breeches, shiny jackboots, peaked cap, shoulder belt, revolver. He stepped smartly over to the house, stopped by the fence, and adjusted his holster. He looked at the trees and the garden. He saw the owner. In the August of 1937 Ściapan Lajčonak was thirty two years old.

Ściapan went over to the officer, but his feet wouldn't obey him. They didn't want to move.

"Those pears of yours look good. Are they tasty?" the officer asked in Russian.

"Ah, yes, the pears... Sweet as honey!" Ściapan answered in Belarusian.

"Can you give me a few, friend?"

Ściapan rushed across to the tree and began picking pears, ripping them off, and putting them in a big basket.

The officer picked out about a dozen of the best pears, put them in his cap, took a bite out of one, chewed it for a bit and smiled.

"You were right, they're like honey."

The Black Maria continued down the narrow street to the other end of the village. Dogs barked. Ściapan's heart pounded.

My grandfather couldn't eat or drink for the rest of the day.

And the overripe pears kept falling.

Heritage

In his day Vassiliy Petrovich was a big party boss. He dealt with complaints, informers' denunciations and anonymous letters, and reports. He handed

down reprimands and expulsions from the party. Never did I hear a word in Belarusian from him. He deliberately spoke only in Russian and wrote it faultlessly. A proper literate and educated party functionary, he was. However, this severe, hard man did once actually cry. He was reciting a poem and crying. I was even alarmed by being an unwitting witness to human weakness. The poem was “Heritage.” Tears welled up after he spoke the first verse, “From forbears’ ages, long since gone,/ A heritage has come to me,/ Among strange folk, among my own,/ Me it caresses, motherly.”¹

I knew that this poem is bigger than just a poem and Kupala is more than just a poet.

Vassiliy Petrovich looked at me and asked me, in Russian, “to leave his office.”

A Story

A man left went out to buy a postage stamp. In his pocket was an envelope with a letter. In this letter the man expressed his disagreement with the way his pension had been calculated.

The man left home in the morning and never returned. Nobody went to look for him.

The answer with the recalculation of his pension upwards by 7.5 percent came in ten days. The envelope lay in the mail box for a year.

The Enchanted Forest

One day my grandmother and I went to the forest to get ferns to use as bedding material for the pigs. Grandmother had a big coverlet and a sickle; I had my grandfather’s staff. We stayed on the edge of the forest near the oaks. Grandmother was cutting ferns and talking to me. She asked me not to go too far from her, while I wanted to go right into the depths of the forest where the pine trees are, beyond the dark hornbeams. That was when I heard the story of the enchanted forest.

“In our forest there’s a bog. On that impassable bog there’s a big island. On the island there are tall trees, old pines and aspens. And beneath the pines there are lots of mushrooms, berries, animals, and birds. However, all who went to this island never came home.” “Why can’t they find their way home?” I asked. I was seven years old at the time.

Grandmother went on cutting ferns and putting them on the coverlet.

She said that on the island people sit down, walk around under the big trees, they weep, but they are unable to remember that they have to go home. Children who got lost in the woods and adults – they’re all on that island in the enchanted forest.

¹ Translation Vera Rich.

© Francis Skaryna Belarusian Library and Museum, London.

“Granny, who put a spell on the forest?” “Death put a spell on it, and on the children and adults as well,” she answered, knotted the ends of the coverlet, and slung it over her shoulder.

We went back home across a sun-lit field.

I carried my grandmother’s sharp sickle, and she helped herself along with my grandfather’s staff.

Observation

An old suitcase may well look both roomy and poetic, but even so you go and get a new one.

The Big Jar

On Lenin Avenue in Minsk, on a shelf in the shop called “Fruit and Veg,” there once stood a 3-litre jar of pickled cucumbers and tomatoes. There was a time in 1975 when my friends and I wanted to buy these cucumbers and tomatoes so as to chew on something while we were having a few drinks. But we were twenty copecks short. In 1976 we once again intended to buy the jar and eat what was inside, but changed our minds and bought two more bottles of plonk instead. We didn’t buy it in 1977 either, although the jar was still the same. We were too lazy to carry it – it was big and heavy, our hands were full, and we were a bit pissed. In 1978, when I was a student at the Theatre And Arts Institute, the 3-litre jar was still standing there on the shelf. I used to show it to my graphic artist friends and to tell them that I had originally wanted to buy it in 1975. In 1980 the jar was still there. The tomatoes looked like kiwis and the cucumbers like bits of mud-coloured rubber.

In art in those years, and it wouldn’t be wrong to say so, there was no “stagnation”; however, there was a 3-litre jar – it still stood there on the shelf.

Sledge

It must have been on New Year’s Eve 1976/1977 at night, when our company of future painters and graphic artists left our dorm and headed for the central square. Since then I have never again felt any desire to go and see the fir tree that’s been put up for the occasion.

There were a lot of cheerful people on the snow-covered main avenue of the city. On our way to the square we met a company of men and women. They were going to the square with a sledge. I thought that on the sledge there was a child asleep, wrapped up in a blanket. It turned out that under the blanket there was a crate of vodka and a saucepan with warm cutlets. We were drinking cold vodka from cups with silly slippery handles that looked like ears, eating the cutlets, and laughing while pushing the women into piles of snow. Both the vodka and the cutlets were tasty. Near the Fir Tree we lost our new friends; they were a group of young scientific types from some Minsk-based research institute.

Yesterday I was walking from a shop with some bread and recalled that strange night.

Let Me through

A narrow, deep path in the snow; piles of snow on either side. I turn into the yard of my block. A woman appears from round the corner. She has a birdlike face and round dark eyes; her fur coat is wide open; in her right hand she's holding long black gloves. There's just one step between us, and she says, "Let me through!" She passes by and I watch her. She walks straight into the black road where there are cars moving fast, but she takes no notice and goes on crossing the road. Cars honk, drivers swear. Another moment, and she'll be under the wheels...

She crossed Kupala Street and entered the park.

I think about this incident and the words "let me through" emitted by a mouth as dry as the beak of a bird.

A Conversation in a Museum

"Listen, why do you sing the praises of these restorers so much?! If it weren't for them, just think of the amount of space in museums that could be freed up. The interiors of Catholic and Orthodox churches could be painted afresh. We could earn something! I'm right, aren't I?" I heard all this from a painter I know.

First Ice

"When I looked back I could see the snow, the ice, and the white trees on the other side of the lake, but there was no sign of you, and then I cried out like an animal," – that was how my childhood friend Valodźka described the incident.

When Valodźka shouted like an animal, I was under the ice. I think I heard his voice – or, maybe it was only an impression. My skates clip-clopping and scraping on the ice – that I certainly heard; I do remember it. I remembered bubbles as well. I was completely covered by bubbles. It wasn't dark under the water; I heard all the sounds, as if my friend was near me. Except that his voice, soft as in a dream, reached me as if he was talking through a pillow.

Then I resurfaced, and Valodźka helped me scramble on to the ice.

We were the first who went to the lake. The dark ice sparkled, and the snow blinded our eyes. Our sharpened skates cut through the ice. We were racing straight for the other side. At one point the ice sagged. I had hit a spot where a spring of water entered the lake and fell under the ice.

I remember the voice. Soft as if in a dream.

Manuscripts

Everybody's heard that editorial boards do not return manuscripts. This is the way it used to be, but nowadays authors can keep electronic copies.

Manuscripts used to be submitted in 3 copies, line spacing was specified, and so was the number of typed characters per line.

So they didn't get lost, manuscripts were put in a folder and signed.

Some authors submitted their works in exotic-looking folders. Red, leather, velvet... On these folders there would be printed in gold letters: "Delegate of the Plenum of the Central Committee of the Young Communist League of the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic," "Delegate of the Republican Party Conference," or stuff like that.

Other folders were more modest: grey cardboard, with tie-strings. Printed in black letters there would be something like: "Case No," "Special Case." Folders like that were brought by authors who worked in that kind of establishment.

I was usually called in to the bosses and given such cardboard folders containing hapless poems, or a screenplay about a spy (er, no, sorry, I mean "intelligence officer," he was one of ours, not one of theirs), and a telephone number.

It's good that manuscripts are now sent in by e-mail. No tie-strings.

A Former Colleague

A woman came into the shop. She stood and looked around; she got some small change out of her pocket and started counting it. It took her a long time.

I recognized the woman, although alcohol had changed her greatly. She used to work on television. She used to have a loud laugh, she was fast on her feet. She was a responsible colleague. She is about five years younger than me. Now she looked bad. Very much so. And then there were the glasses with the broken lens that was nearly falling out, she could barely manage to press them to her face. She went up to a salesgirl and bought two bottles of the cheapest plonk. She glanced at me and cast her eyes down. I pretended not to have recognized her.

Right by the shop there was a man hanging around with a dark drink-befuddled face. She took his arm, as if she knew that I was looking, but she didn't let him take the bag with the bottles.

Women alcoholics are more repellent than men, but they arouse greater pity.

Today

He was holding a white and blue packet of cigarettes at a distance, as far as his arm at full stretch would allow. He was peering at the black letters on the side. His smile was a tad confused. He then read aloud what was written there, "Smokers Die Young."

The old man is eighty four; he's been smoking cigarettes for more than sixty years.

His smile was friendly and kind. It was the smile that caught my eye.

Story

A story told by my wife's grandmother

In the late autumn of 1943 some partisans came to the house. Four of them, all armed. They took not only warm clothes, but also a silk dressing gown and a beautiful summer scarf. Her husband and his younger brother were away at the front. Then the partisans saw a copy of the Bible. They tore the book and scattered the pages all over the house. Then went away happy with themselves.

A few hours later all four of them were blown up by a mine.

She used to tell this story in order to show that one must not mock the Good Book.

Still, I can see another moral to it. If they had not been blown up, nobody would ever have linked them together with the torn book in one story.

Testament

A director I know phoned me the day before yesterday. He said that in a few days he was going to have difficult complex surgery.

I know that three years ago he drew up a will. At the time I shrugged my shoulders and snorted. Now I wished him well and sighed.

He is strangely pedantic about the way he orders his life, and that's bothered me throughout the eight years we've known each other.

Perhaps he already knew of the trials that lay ahead?

Riding Breeches

There were children, the oldest of them eleven, sitting in the canteen on the square. On the street beneath the windows of the canteen there were several vans and two huge lorries. The lorry drivers were having lunch before setting off for Leningrad. Suddenly an old bloke in chrome leather boots and riding breeches appeared on the scene. He was wearing a black uniform coat and held his cap in his hand. He asked one of the girls at the till for a glass of plain water. You could understand why: the canteen washroom wasn't working. Vitalik stood up abruptly and went out of the canteen into the street. We stayed to wait for the Ukrainian drivers who were finishing their compote; we wanted to exchange matchbox labels with them. It was all the rage in the town at the time. The drivers went out into the street and the street urchins followed them. We started exchanging labels. Then the bloke in the boots came out. He began to look around in alarm, and to shout. People gathered.

Someone had nicked the bloke's bike.

One hour later the bloke was still sitting on the cement porch of the canteen; two hours later he was still there. Apparently he thought that the kids would have a ride round and then return his black bicycle still with the loaves of bread on the rack.

Cabin Cruiser

At the beginning of summer 1987 an artist from Homiel that I knew bought a chic cabin cruiser on the cheap. We used it to speed along the sunny River Soż. We went swimming on the waves. The wind blew in our faces and lifted our shirts. The artist screwed up his eyes and shouted that he was lucky to have purchased this cruiser, that his dream had come true, that now he could race around on the river and organize picnics. That nowadays you could get a lot of stuff cheaply in the city: a car, a flat, whole collections of books, a summer residence in Klonki, that all the Jews were getting out because they were afraid of Chernobyl, selling their property, and that's how he'd bought this cruiser. The artist was laughing happily as if he did not wholly trust his words.

At that same time I met a girl I was at school with. She was sad. She was leaving for America with her parents. She didn't want to go. However, her parents – both doctors – insisted. She said that if I had come a week earlier, she would have given me several pre-revolutionary books.

Her grandmother Roza was going to stay behind in Homiel. She had refused to go as she wanted to be buried next to her husband. Her place was there.

Cockerel

A young lad was standing near the Kamaroŭka Market. Perhaps seventeen, maybe a year older. Ordinary, nothing special. The sort of person you see and then forget. Still, this one surprised me. He was holding a black and red cockerel with a crimson comb by its legs and back; he did not allow it to spread its wings. He was selling that golden cockerel. To make people stop, the young man would give the cockerel a squeeze. It would stretch its golden neck, its comb would shiver, and it would crow. The sound was pure, loud and sharp. People would stop. A cock crowing is not something you expect to hear in the city. I wanted to go over to this young man and punch him in the face. Why did such an urge come from?

That night the black and gold cockerel appeared in my dream.

The Sound of a Summer Evening

One Sunday evening, after rain, the sun came out. The windows are open; I'm reading Charles Bukowski's Pulp.

And then suddenly there's this dreadful sound: a scraping noise, a crash, a thud, a tinkling of glass... Like a boiled egg and a glass with a spoon falling on a tiled floor. It's not for the first time that an accident has occurred right beneath my windows at the point where Kupała Street crosses the Avenue. On this occasion a long car had rammed a granite pole and knocked it over... People got out of the car. A woman and three men. They were standing near the crashed car trying to light cigarettes from just one lighter.

Lady Death on spiked heels had changed her mind or, maybe, sent a warning.

Regrets

The artist Mai Dantsig had almost the biggest collection of art albums. Books occupy a whole room. He said that in the 1950s it was possible to buy any book in the Moscow secondhand bookshops. At that time in those same bookshops, there were drawings by German, French, Italian, and Russian graphic artists. Dantsig – a student of the Surikov Institute – saw etchings by Giovanni Battista Piranesi, water colours by Vrubel and Dobuzhinsky. He mentioned the names of many famous artists and said how cheaply those albums could be bought. “But I couldn’t afford it – I had no money to buy food. Now I regret it so much, so much,” – the old artist said and stroked the slippery cover of one of the albums.

Price

I read the overwhelming majority of my books up to the very end – right up to the name of the publishing house, the number of copies printed and the price. In the morning I finished reading Bukowski’s Pulp. Right up to the name of the publishing house, and the list of books published by them. There was no information about the number of copies printed, or about the price either.

Drawbacks

I was standing on the balcony, on the sixth floor. On the balcony of the floor below a man and a woman were smoking. He was telling her something and she was overdoing the laughter. He had a white tight-fitting shirt and black shorts. She was wearing a dark blue dress. The man had an unsightly bald patch; I can see it perfectly from above; the woman with a cigarette is laughing and can’t see just how bald her man friend is.

My hair is absolutely fine, something I’m really glad of.

And at this moment I realize that if you look at a person from an unusual, unexpected angle, then all their shortcomings can be seen at once.

Kinfolk

This is what a neighbour once told me. When he was eleven years old, his Aunt Eva died in Krasnapollie. All the relatives came to the funeral. Everything was serene and solemn. They sat down to table. The men drank vodka; the women drank wine. Then both the men and the women started mixing their drinks. Then they quarreled, reopened old sores, and kept drinking. Then they scuffled, then drank and scuffled again, quarreled, called each other everything under the sun. Everyone forgot about Aunt Eva.

What was there to say about her? She had had a good life. If she had lasted for one more year, she would have made 87.

As a boy my neighbour actually saw relatives who previously he had only heard of, held up to him as role models.

Foot

In Catalonia, between Barcelona and Tarragona, there is a small town called Cama Ruga. It has a huge beach, long and bright like a summer day. Old villas line the road along the beach. They are behind fences, behind stone walls and iron railings. Some of them look out to sea through broken windows. I liked to walk and look at these villas. Their plaster has peeled off; the paint used to be bright, but now it has worn off; the sun, the wind, and time are playing their part... Iron gates are being eaten by rust; even ceramic signboards bearing the romantic names of these villas are cracked and cobalt has faded into light blue. There are old trees around these buildings – cedars, palm trees, plane trees with spotty trunks. I asked who the owners are of these old unkempt houses that used to be so chic, and are now drowning in red and ochroid foliage? I was told that they belong to colonels, lawyers, judges, and public prosecutors who had worked for General Franco.

I once saw a grey-haired old woman with an aluminium bowl emerge from one of the villas into the front garden. She looked at me and poured out dirty water from the bowl under the wall near her. It took her a long time, with much clattering, creaking and clanking, to close the cracked doors. A hammock full of holes was swaying in the garden.

Then another house, its windows behind shutters: an old man – as dry and light as a sliver of pine wood – was holding a rake, trying to clear the path to the doors. Under the cedar next to the neglected house, a black car was quietly rusting away on flat tyres. It looked like an abandoned boot.

The skeletal old man did not look at me, but with futile obstinacy kept trying to rake up leaves, cones, and pine needles.

Where is that Colombia?

Márquez was here, in these peeling villas with their bare window frames, in the black car that looked like an amputated foot. There was a phantom pain floating in the salty air of this town near the country houses.

Blood

At the end of May I saw an old man getting slowly out of a bus. Then he stood, got his breath back, looked around, and shuffled his disobedient feet; he struck his stick a few times on the ground. A light linen jacket, a crumpled cap, trousers that were too short, glasses on his upturned face with a small grey beard.

When I was a student I never revised for art history exams. I could look through books, but only to look at the pictures. Surnames, names, dates, terms, titles, events, and lots of other things I kept in my memory. I came to take an exam in the history of Russian art. I took a piece of paper with questions, read them – I know it all. However, the teacher in a dark suit who was to examine me ordered me to sit down and think, to get myself ready. His glasses flashed ominously; he adjusted his fashionable tie. I sat down and realized

that I knew precisely NOTHING... No names, no titles, no dates, no terms, no events. The emptiness scared me. I sat at the table looking at the white screen behind the teacher's back. A drop of blood fell on my hands that lay on the table. I pressed a handkerchief to my nose and put my head back. I don't know how long I sat like that. Then I heard my surname. I went over to the table, sat down and began to answer. When the questions were over, blood began pouring out of my nose.

The old man perplexedly shuffling his feet next to a bus stop was the teacher who examined us in the history of Russian art. His surname was Peterson. He used to shuffle his feet back then, almost forty years ago.

What happened to me then? Why was there blood dripping from my nose?

Glass

I'm fond of glass. Maybe it's because I was born and grew up next to a glass factory. Every day I used to hear conversations about the way it is melted and formed, cooled, cut, loaded, and transported.

The ceilings in our flat are high. The windows are tall. My wife is afraid of cleaning them, so I'm the one who does it. At home we have several different sprays in bright bottles; they're all for cleaning glass, but I almost never use them as I don't trust them. I know that glass likes water. It also likes crumpled newspapers.

Newspapers should be used to rub and polish glass that is damp and muddy from rain. I like the last part of window cleaning most of all. The moment when the glass and the newspaper together start to squeak and then to sing. The moisture disappears to make way for a brilliant shine. Murky spots become smaller and then fade into nothingness.

And suddenly the window ceases to exist. Your mind knows that there is glass, but you can't see it. There are no spots to confirm that it's still there between you and the sky.

No, wait, there is a spot! I can see it! I pick up a crumpled newspaper and start to rub it out. But the spot is growing. I realize that this dark spot in the sky is in fact a bird.

That bloke over there

My wife and I are at the Kamaroŭka Market. Suddenly I stop; I can't move at all. I am looking and looking – at a modest bouquet of pink peonies that he has in his hands, at his speckled brown jacket, at his glasses, at his cap, a cap that I know, a grey one with a fine striped pattern, at the calm expression on his face. The man with flowers was so much like my father that I got the urge to go over to him, greet him, and embrace him.

But I still couldn't move at all.

Aroma

I'm walking along by the Niamiha Department Store. There're a lot of people: standing, hurrying, hanging around, eating ice-cream, talking. I am all of a sudden struck by a wave of aroma. A bright, penetrating, familiar aroma. I even slow down and stop for an instant. I set off walking again and the aroma is still there. Ahead of me there's a man walking. The back of his head is completely bald. He's wearing a light polo shirt. I pass him by; the aroma is becoming stronger, clearer. There's a woman with a magazine. I walk round her; the aroma is still hanging in the air. There's a young man with a phone against his ear speaking English. I'm really close now; I take a sniff. The aroma is strong and overpowering, it feels like you could touch it with your palm or cheek. I lose myself in thought and nearly fall over an elderly woman. She stops, obviously wants to give me a good telling off, but manages to restrain herself. She puts a suitcase down near her feet and straightens it up. The suitcase is full of lilies of the valley.

I keep walking, recalling the vivid aroma of memories.

Half an hour later, when I was on my way back, the old woman was hawking her lilies of the valley around the little tables of the local McDonald's. She kept looking round, afraid of the long arm of the law.

Alarm System

An elderly car park attendant was complaining to me that last night had not been easy for him. He had had a load of trouble, he had had to wake up three times. A nightingale had taken up residence on the old huge chestnut covered with white flowers in the middle of the yard. It started to sing very quietly, but then suddenly it gave a loud click and launched into a veritable cascade of penetrating melody. The cars on the parking lot responded to this small bird's singing by chiming in with the sounds of their alarm systems.

The third time he had had to get up, the attendant lost patience and tried to drive the songster away. However, the chestnut is big, its foliage is dense. No matter how many times the attendant beat the trunk with a stick, shouted, and threw the stick, he was unable to budge the bird. The one thing he did manage to do was get the stick – a chair leg – caught in the leaves of the tree.

The centre of the city, a yard surrounded by blocks of flats, a nightingale...

I was having fun listening to the complaints, but I kept a straight face.

Kupala and Laozi

I was listening to Kupala reading one of his own poems and all that time I was afraid that the poet would flounder and stumble.

And yesterday I found this, "An excellent orator may seem to have a stutter." It was written by the Chinese philosopher Laozi approximately 2,500 years ago.

Recorded on 27 May 2015

Translated by Jim DINGLEY.

Hanna Komar



...Love is
a bullet that
escapes its shell
and stalls
between ribs...

A Leave Poem

IDIOTS

my name is Josephine
I'm a von Trier's idiot
I'm playing the game
of freedom from the social pale
I'm young and haven't seen life yet
but here I met
the same idiots as myself

my name is Josephine
I'm a von Trier's idiot
in my eyes wide open I'm staring
captivated
at all things to
divine inevitable "game over"

my name is Josephine
I'm a von Trier's idiot
a guest in the commune of madmen
believing they can awake
their inner daring
who can go all the way
genuine
amused by your timid glances

my name is Josephine
I'm a von Trier's idiot
here I fell in love
now I know
how it hurts
I'm scared
I want home
and don't

my name is Josephine
I'm a von Trier's idiot
and this is my father
he is
lump in the throat
my shackles
my prison
my mediocre artifice

My name is ... Anna
I am an idiot

TO MY MEN

My men
are so occupied,
with
earning money,
saving the world,
travelling,
falling in love...
but
compare every
other her with me.
My men
peer into

my eyes,
promise to be
there for me
while I journey
in my dreams,
but they neglect
their promises,
and I
every morning
walking to work
along a deserted lane
speak their
names aloud
drowning
in that sweet pain...

I let my men
go easily.
For a few days
I'm an uncorked
champagne
run high,
then flatten,
become wish-wash.
My men
leave me
easily
they
pretend that we
have been
just friends.

I will never
belong
to my men.
Love is
a bullet that
escapes its shell
and stalls
between ribs.
I will leave it there
as a souvenir.

A LEAVE POEM

Before
you leave,
please,
write me
a poem
in it recall
what you
remember.
Tell them how
because of
high pressure
my language
drips
from my nose
and fouls
your white shirts,
how I
pull out
skeletons
eaten by moths
from my
wardrobe
Saturday mornings,
always the same
ones,
how I
tag every single
thing
in the flat
with our names
to remember
what is yours
and where
is my space,
how I
take off my skin
before going
to bed,
and you're
so scared of
the naked flesh
that you never
sleep with me.

Write me a poem
and take it instead of
amphetamine,
love it in a safe and
convenient way.
Just don't
show me.
Be its father
and its mother.
Leave for me
only two last lines,
the ones that
mean
nothing.

A DOLL

This doll didn't do anything bad.
Her torn out eye is replaced with a button,
her ear cut, and her mouth
stitched up with a shoe-sewing needle,
her ripped off arm, tossed for the cat to play,
a hole made between her legs,
so she can give birth to more of her kind.

Her neck tied up with a pink bow,
she is fussed around, rocked in a cradle,
spoon-fed, and the food
falls down her chin, fouls her dress
with something resembling soup or sperm.
Some dirty spots appear on the doll's body,
her little owner doesn't know why:
am I not taking a good care of you?!
You ungrateful thing!

At night the doll opens her eye,
unties the knot on her neck,
rips off the other ear and stuffs it
between her legs
to fill the emptiness.
Creeping as far as those who brought her here
she lies in the bed between them.

A GOOD DAUGHTER

You get kicked out of the bus, drunk,
I press my doll to my chest
and keep silent.

At your friends, those drunkards
and fools, I smile like I'm good
and keep silent.

You dig the fork into the flesh
of your arm, I hand you a towel
and keep silent.

I bang on the neighbours' door
to protect my sister and mom
and keep silent.

I watch as you sleep where you fall,
breaking chairs and our hearts
and keep silent.

As you are growing old
and melting down,
I am silently healing my wounds,
Your good daughter.

Translated by the author.



Valer Hapiejeŭ



...She had no strength to answer.
She kept her lips tightly pressed together,
and tears unexpectedly rolled
out of her eyes...

Puzzle

Excerpt from the novel

She wasn't hit hard by the thought that the child would have to be killed; it didn't frighten her either. Deep inside her, however, the agonizingly painful question "What should I do?" was replaced by another concern, one that was practical and therefore not at all frightening: how much would it cost?

What Vera told her when she was just starting her job at the factory at first stung her with its brazen frankness: "If you get knocked up, don't do anything stupid, just come and see me. My grandma has helped lots of women." Those words put her, an innocent young girl, on a par with loose women, but now she recalled them with relief and even gratitude. Vera was older; she had had more experience of

life and from the very beginning she had tried to get her to understand: an accidental pregnancy is not such a terrible disaster, although it is a rather big worry. That was why she didn't hesitate to tell Vera.

It was the weekend; although there wasn't a bus on that day, she decided to go, hoping that she would be lucky. She was not.

A bitterly cold, piercing wind rose unexpectedly. Frankly, there was nothing for it to pierce: a short jacket, not one for winter; a short narrow skirt; and she, the silly girl, had put on a pair of thin tights. She thought the frost would let up, but instead it became worse.

It was just as well that near the city the wind wasn't so strong; she only had to wait for maybe five minutes, no longer, before a car stopped for her. While she was in the car, she forgot about the cold: it was very hot inside. She left the car and found herself in an open expanse of countryside; totally bare, grey fields stretched right up to the village, a dark blue strip on the horizon. She choked on the gusty biting wind that blew tiny snow grains straight at her.

She couldn't stand for even three minutes at the turning; she started walking in the hope that a car would soon appear. The car would pick her up and off they'd go; after all, she'd done it before. It was a bit spooky; evening was coming on and there were white wisps of snow dust twisting their way along the road. There were no cars – they were all driving on the highway and didn't turn off. Meanwhile, the wind grabbed her by the legs, climbed under her short skirt, beat her aslant and blinded her eyes, so she had to walk sideways and hide her face.

Never before had these four kilometers from the turning to her house been so long.

She jumped into the porch, opened the door to the house and stopped on the threshold, as if not quite believing that the house really was so warm. Mother looked at her in alarm.

“Did nobody give you a lift?”

She bit her lip and shook her head glumly.

She changed into something that was warm, soft and homely. In the second half of the house she squashed herself into a corner of the sofa, with her back against the oven, and took sips of the tea that her mother had prepared; it smelt of mint and thyme. She answered her father's simple questions – does she like her work at the factory and her life in the hostel; does she have enough money.

She was thinking about other things. The things she could not help thinking about. About Victor. He was clever, clear-headed and serious, or at least that's the impression he gave in the beginning. It was easy and interesting to be with him. He was so witty; he seemed to know the answer to any question. On the shop floor he was respected by both the women and his co-factory mechanics. He had just been demobbed from the Army, but could already think like an adult: “Everything you have must be your own, or else you have to have enough money so that your parents don't nag you about having to provide

you with bed and board. Only then can you think about marriage. After all, you're not a little girl. How old are you? And how old am I? I need to have my fun first, and then I won't go astray later..."

She used to agree; what he said was so reasonable. So she too had her fun; she liked the games they were playing and, what's more, his parents were away on holiday. She was fond of playing "the lady of the house." She enjoyed it... Until her vision was clouded by some news: it hadn't come on time. Before that, she could use her periods to check the calendar, right to the very day. But now her period was late!

Of course, Victor was reasonable. She is only twenty – surely she can't be talking about marriage? And Victor is twenty-two. It's still too early to have conversations about children. He wants to study, he has no wish to repair machine tools at the factory all his life. That's why she didn't risk telling him about her "bun in the oven," but asked what they would do if they didn't take precautions. "Abortion? It's not a problem these days, is it?" Victor was surprised; he looked at her as if she had asked him something stupid, as if she was some village idiot who doesn't know how to use a knife and fork. She said nothing in reply, so he – clearly startled and irritated by this annoying unpleasantness in his life – asked her, "Are you up the duff?," thus placing all the responsibility for their "adult games" on her and accusing her of ineptitude.

She had no strength to answer. She kept her lips tightly pressed together, and tears unexpectedly rolled out of her eyes. He hissed "Don't cry! That's all we need. The neighbours will hear..."

She started to dress, feeling pitiless humiliating shame. She, poor silly girl, is guilty of her own pregnancy; there she is, naked in somebody else's apartment before the eyes of a lover that have suddenly become the eyes of a stranger. She was in a hurry to get away; her hands were trembling. Oh God, she was so ashamed at that moment.

For three days after that conversation Victor didn't go anywhere near the machine she operated; whenever she needed an adjustment or repair, he would send one of his mates. She herself approached him at a time when he was alone in the corner where the repair mechanics hang out; she stopped submissively and promised in a low whisper, "I will have an abortion..." He shrugged his shoulders as if it did not concern him, "It's up to you." He straightened his shoulders in relief.

It was as if her mother could sense her daughter's thoughts. She waited until Father left to have a smoke in the porch, came over to her and plonked herself down.

"How are you getting on there? Eating well? Do you cook for yourself or squander your money in the canteen?"

"Our canteen's very good. It's not expensive... We cook together, all three of us.

"Don't waste your money on fancy things; save! And buy yourself something

useful – our shop’s got some woollen trousers in, go down there tomorrow, you’re running around in tights.”

“I’ve got enough trousers.”

“I can see what you mean by “enough”! And that daughter of Zoya’s – is she still living with you?”

“Yes. But we live in different rooms.”

“Quite the little flirt she is, just like her mother.”

“Vera’s OK, they’ve made her a foreman, they talk highly of her.” Nina couldn’t bear to hear such things about her older friend, and they both came from the same village, too. Vera had helped her so much in the beginning and supported her in the hostel, and she was still helpful.

“They talk highly of her, do they? They do that today, but tomorrow they’ll do the exact opposite. I don’t know. And what about boys? Nobody yet? Or should I start making the poteen?”

“There’s no one,” answered Nina quietly, and she curled up as if in anticipation of the blow.

“Well, look,” Mother rose, probably to add greater weight to her words. She stood massive, stout, with powerful arms. “If I ever find out that something’s going on, I’ll curse you and kick you out of the house.”

And she walked away, treading heavily on the floorboards. The floorboards squeaked meekly back at her.

There’s no hiding from mother. Her sister, Aunt Palina, is a gynaecologist in the district hospital. Nina had to have a medical examination when she was about to start work at the factory. The one thing Nina didn’t want was to be examined by her aunt, but it was Palina (mother must have asked her) who entered the surgery to conduct the examination, rather than the much younger doctor who should have been there. It was disgust more than fear that Nina felt; it was as if her aunt was no longer a doctor, but simply her mother’s sister who would later relay everything to her mother.

It’s a miracle to have Vera there. After all, Vera foresaw what would happen. Right at the start, when she was just getting to know Victor she warned her several times, “Watch out! You’ll get yourself knocked up and he’ll do a runner! They’re all like that.”

Father came back into the house, bringing with him a mix of the pungent smell of tobacco and fresh frosty air.

“The wind’s not easing up.”

Snow fell in the small hours.

The street that Nina was walking along was perfectly still; it seemed to be scared of the unexpectedly pure white mantle of snow that had descended on it from the sky. There was almost nobody around, and that was all to the good. The house of Vera’s grandma, Old Aksinnia, is not far from the shop. Nina decided that at first she would go to the shop and buy what Mother had asked her to: two loaves, one rye and one white, salted fish, a kilo of

sugar, cigarettes for father, and a bar of soap. Then she would go to see the wise woman.

The footpath to Old Aksinnia's gate was like an untrodden thick fluffy doormat. That was a good sign; it meant there were no strangers in the house and she didn't have to risk meeting anybody there.

Old Aksinnia, short and fat, was tramping heavily around the house on her badly swollen legs; on her feet she wore home-made felt boots that came only part way up her calves. She invited Nina to sit at the table so that the light from the window fell on her. She brought her face up close to Nina's, peered intently at her with her own moist red eyes and drew a deep breath.

"My body aches all over because of you," said Aksinnia simply, without sounding as though she was accusing Nina. "My feet hurt; I can't sit and I can't lie down, it's like somebody's sucking the blood out of me... How long?" she asked suddenly.

"What?" Nina had not expected this question. She blushed, her face was burning, she cast her eyes down and said in a low voice, "Two months. My period's late."

Vera had warned her: the old woman won't ask any questions, she can see everything when it comes to dealing with women's problems... But all the same, the feeling of shame weighed heavily on her.

"It's not the end of the world. There's no need to be afraid. I'll you give something but you'll have to prepare it yourself. I can't do the grating."

The old woman rose and plodded on her heavy legs to a corner by the oven that was spewing out an intolerably dense stench of burnt fat. She dug around for about a minute and then brought back to the table something gnarled and twisted; it looked like an insect in the pupa stage.

"It's a root. It's been washed, don't be afraid. Grate it finely. It's not easy, but you're doing it for yourself. Then put a tablespoon of this root in a jar, pour some boiling water over it, and add a pinch of this." Aksinnia put a crumpled plastic bag on the table that had been tied up like a tiny little parcel. There was something in it that looked like black dust. "Let it stand for a night. Drink a glass of it morning and evening. This ought to drive it out in three days."

Nina placed her hand on the table and unclenched her fist. She revealed a banknote that had been folded in four (Vera had told her how much); her sweat had made it quite soggy. Unfazed, the old woman picked up the piece of paper with her short fat fingers and unfolded it.

"That's way too much!"

"I want to ask for something else. I need a spell to put him out of my mind..."

"I don't go in for such things!" Aksinnia snapped angrily. "What d'you need this slob for, anyway? Do you seriously think a love spell will keep a man, and everything's gonna come up roses?" She looked at Nina not with disapproval, but with the certainty of true wisdom in her eyes.

"No, not for that, not to keep him, it's for me to forget him," Nina was beginning to burble, feeling shame rise in her gullet as if she was about to be sick.

The old woman sat down next to her:

"I'll tell you – when the baby comes out of you, then everything else will come out as well. And you won't feel a thing. But if you are afraid, I'll tell you what to do. It's simple. D'you have a photo of him?"

"I do," – nodded Nina.

"So... When the baby comes out, put the photo on the body, make sure that there's blood on the photo; then burn the photo... This too: don't throw the embryo out with the rubbish; bury it in the ground, not in a shallow grave where people can trample all over it, but deeper so the dogs can't dig it up. Best to do it in a cemetery. Just do as I say."

Nina felt that she was going to vomit and realized that she couldn't stay in the house for another minute – she needed at least one breath of fresh air. She seized the root and the tiny packet from the table, as well as the bag with the things she had bought in the shop.

"Wait!" the old woman said abruptly, and once again shuffled over to the oven. She returned with yet another little packet. "Here, take this and give it to Vera. If anyone asks, say that Aksinnia told me to give her granddaughter some eggs. Now, off you run... May the heavens help you, girl," – she added in an unexpectedly breathy low voice.

...She was in luck. There was no one else in the room – her roommates were on the night shift. Perhaps Nina had let the root stand for too long in the boiling water or maybe she had put too much of the fine dark powder into the liquid, but the pains began on the second day; they roused her out of bed in the middle of the night, scorching, unbearable – as if someone had shoved a truncheon inside her with a hook on the end that had caught on to something alive and was pulling and pulling so much that she curled up, pressing her knees down beneath her; her toes were trembling...

Bent double, she rose, switched on the night-light, took the clean pieces of cloth that she had prepared in advance, and fell to her knees. She did not need to strain; there was sudden pain, a pain so sharp she barely managed to stifle the cry that was struggling to escape from her throat. She began to gasp and suddenly felt – yes, it had dropped out of her. It had all fallen out of her. She stood up and began to pull herself together.

Only now did she look down at her feet.

There it was – a tiny little human being, it could fit into the palm of your hand, it might be a child's doll, except that it was covered in blood as if it had been cut from a joint of meat, and its head was ugly, way too big. There was a hunted expression on her face as she stared down looking at this, this *thing* that had been living inside her just a day ago and could have grown up. It really did move ever so slightly, or so it seemed to Nina, and a horrifying thought struck her: she's made herself a murderer, she's killed her own flesh and blood.

She pulled out one of the drawers of the bedside table, took a small photo that Victor had had made for a passport; she squatted on her haunches and pressed the photo face down on to the red doll.

Totally numb, she looked at the tiny legs sticking out from beneath the rectangular photograph. Her hand was trembling when she took hold of the edge of the photo – the little body twitched. The photo was stuck in place.

She wanted to pull the photo away and set it alight, but something cried out inside her, “Leave it where it is!” She let it go, and held her fingers carefully apart in order to avoid touching the blood-red body. She wrapped it in the cloth it was lying on, then wrapped another cloth round it, then another... She lay on the bed for about an hour as there was this frightful pain deep down in her belly. Then she washed the floor. Just as the dawn was coming up, she got dressed, put the cloth-wrapped package in her bag, left the hostel, and walked off to the cemetery.

She had been there three days before, looking for a freshly-dug grave. Early frosts, the snow crusted over during the night – how are you going to dig a hole? However, it had quite unexpectedly become warmer, it had rained, and now, once outside in the open air, Nina was met by a warm wind, strong, smooth like the current of a calm river. She was delighted both by its warmth and by her decision to put a pair of scissors in her coat pocket; they’ll come in handy for making a hole in the ground. That’ll be better than digging up someone’s grave...

It would take her about fifteen minutes to reach the cemetery, she was in a hurry to get there before the streets woke up. The wind seemed to have gone mad: it struck her in the face, belly and legs, like something living and aware of what it was doing. It held her back, refusing to let her go forward. Each of her steps was like walking under water. She even had to stop and turn away from the wind to get her breath back, but she couldn’t breathe – it was as though the wind had compressed the air all around her. ...

She felt no fear once inside the cemetery. There was just one major concern that made her heart beat faster inside her – she wanted nobody to see her. She dived in through the little gate and made for the deep shadows cast by the old trees.

All of a sudden the wind dropped. Her heart stopped trembling and all was calm, just as if she had come home. She went over to the corner of the cemetery that she had noticed on her previous visit. She was now completely at ease and started digging as if it was something she had been doing ever since she was a child. By now dawn had already broken. Here the soil was sandy so it was easy to dig with the scissors; her hands were not cold.

At last she filled in the hole and shook the sand from her hands. She felt no anxiety, no shock, only relief: well, it’s come to an end, everything’s fine, those two black two months of fear and hopelessness when I couldn’t sleep at night, when I howled into my pillow whenever I was alone – they’re finally over. This terrible night is over too. What she’ll do now is go back to the hostel and take a shower. She’ll be standing for a long, long time under the hot streaming water. She’ll soap herself up well, and then wash it all away. And with the soap she’ll wash away everything else: despair and disgust, pain and emptiness, sin and shame.

She'll begin her life anew. She'll be pure. She'll wipe her slate clean.

She was approaching the hostel – calm, sure of every step she took, sure of what lay ahead for her today and tomorrow. Right near the doors, however, a sudden, sharp thought scratched her – just like a cat can scratch you with her claws when playing. She thought of the photograph of Victor that she had buried together with her unborn child.

“I'm sure the spell will work this way as well,” she thought, trying to convince herself, and listened out for the thoughts and feelings that might arise from the mere mention of her one-time boy-friend's name. No, nothing. Everything was dead inside her.

Nina arrived for her shift and greeted Vera, who at once realized what had happened:

“You look so pale... Have you done it?”

“Yes, I have. Just like Old Aksinnia said.”

“Look, don't even try to talk to him any more. If he comes up to you, send him packing, he's a real slob.”

“He's nobody to me... The old woman taught me how to do it. And I did.”

“What did she teach you?” Vera sounded cautious.

“How to cast a spell... with a photo. To put the photo in with the foetus and then burn it. The only thing is that I didn't burn it; the photo got stuck, so I buried it along with...”

Vera's eyes widened in fright. Barely audibly she whispered:

“You buried the photo together with the foetus in the cemetery? You've condemned Victor to death!”

“He'll survive. That type always does,” – answered Nina with utter indifference. Her friend's words really did have no effect at all on her. Just one idle thought occurred to her, “What's she getting all worked up about it for?”

Barys Piatrovič



...Long live the Soviet press –
the most truthful press in the world!..

Chernobyl – the Biting Wind, the Silent Scream

There's no dust – It's been blown away... Great gusts of wind pick up tiny grains of sand and slash you with them, in your face, on your legs and chest: it hurts like you're pushing your way through thorny bushes of raspberries or blackberries.

And meanwhile there I am, walking round the town, Homiel, amazed by the wind: where has it come from today, this wind – biting, strong, insistent, nasty... Why has it suddenly got up, blowing the sand from Ukraine into Belarus and from Belarus towards Moscow?

A silent scream

I didn't know anything yet, didn't have the slightest idea of what had happened, but I well remember that day

and that evening in Homiel, 26 April 1986, I remember that I was unable to do anything because of the silent scream that, as it seemed to me, filled all the space around me.

The silent scream uttered by all things animate and inanimate, even dust and sand, as they try desperately to escape from disaster.

This is how elk and wild boar, wolves and deer, hares and squirrels flee from the merciless forest fire, in silence with their eyes wide open in panic. With the same terrifying scream adders and grass snakes, beetles and caterpillars try to crawl away from the fire, and with the same silent scream they die in it...

That was the day terror came to hang over Homiel, over Palessie, over the whole Earth, and I could sense it, without knowing what had happened or where, not even suspecting that something had happened somewhere.

I wanted to cover my head with my arms, close my ears and eyes, hide myself in a hole in the ground, in a den or a chink in a wall, curl up and stop breathing, or else – run from here, also with my eyes wide open in panic, run, run, run...

But where to run to and why? I kept on trying to calm myself. Stop being such a fool and open your eyes: it's still sunny outside, even though it's windy and evening is coming on, and your wife is getting ready to go to work, she's on duty – it's Saturday evening.

A beautiful spring day, and yet...

I'm a journalist writing for the rural affairs section of the regional paper; yesterday I got back from a trip to the district around Vietka. I've got to write some drivel for the next issue about the 'sowing campaign', about how a spring day feeds the year...

But I don't feel like writing, and I keep on putting off the moment of actually sitting down at my desk in front of a blank piece of paper.

"OK, I'm off," – says my wife.

"I'll go with you to the bus stop..." – this is me clinging on to the possibility of not writing drivel, the possibility of postponing the moment when I have to begin the 'creative process'.

"No, you've got work to do, I'll be alright..." – and so here I am on my own, alone with my enormous pain, so big that it engulfs even my complete lack of desire to write.

Once more I stand by the window, watching a film about how my wife walks to the bus stop, stooping under an unbearable biting wind – my wife, the mother of my future children, so small and defenceless, so alone in the totally deserted town...

A day in the country, where there's work to be done

The town is deserted because it's the weekend and most people – not so long ago villagers themselves – have gone off to their allotments or native villages to work on their bits of land: as you sow, so shall you reap, a spring day really does feed the year.

Under the Soviets, after nearly 70 years of their absolute power, we have reached a situation where the shops are half-empty, meat you can get only in the special shops reserved for party and state functionaries, and as for chickens – well, when the ordinary food stores have any they ‘hand them out’ or, to put it more precisely, they ‘throw them out’. Catch one if you can, there won’t be many of them.

Vegetables you can find only in the private markets, where they come from individual allotments or all the way from the Caucasus; there won’t be any in the markets run by the collective farms.

The only person you can rely on is yourself: if you don’t grow your own potatoes, cabbages, beetroots, cucumbers and tomatoes on your own six hundred square metres of allotted land or your parents’ kitchen garden, you won’t be able to store up enough food for the winter and you’ll go hungry...

So most of the townsfolk are now out of town, in the country, breaking their backs beneath this cutting wind blowing from the south, from Ukraine, as they strive to get their daily bread...

The terrors of the night

I never did sit down that evening to write up my ‘material’, I just couldn’t force myself... I padded from one corner of my one-roomed flat to the other, did a bit of reading, flicked through a few pages of something or other, watched some TV, hoping that tomorrow – another day off – I would manage to get something written, there was still time...

The evening ebbed away into night... The night was long; there were times when I was awake and times when I was having terrible dreams, nightmares, delirious ravings, but again they didn’t seem to be connected with anything, they were just dreams...

Later on almost all my friends told me they had had just the same horrific night: each one of them believed that their insomnia had been unique to them and so sought the cause only within themselves.

The next day, Sunday, in Homiel was again dry, the wind blew hot and strong. In places the ground was bare and hard like asphalt; all the sand had been blown away from the town.

Heavy clouds, but no rain

In the afternoon at around four o’clock my wife and I went out for our usual walk. The ground was crying out for rain, but no rain came, even though, high up in the sky, heavy grey clouds were continually passing over.

There was a kind of tension hanging in the air, in the rustling of the trees, in everything. The tension was like a taut bowstring, you could physically feel it. Just like the moments immediately before a thunderstorm when there’s about to be a cloudburst, but no cloud ever bursts.

So we cut short our usual route and went back home unusually tired and depressed.

I still did not know anything... Only later, much later, was I to read those

oft-quoted words written by a scientist, that on those April days *“the wind was fortunately not blowing in the direction of Kiev... “*

Whoever wrote that was writing in the Soviet tradition; he was either not thinking at all about what he was writing, or thinking only about things that were important to him. After all, whatever direction the wind was blowing in, it brought only misfortune to our small planet Earth... And the first place it brought that misfortune to was my Belarus...

Evacuation without war

...Right then I knew nothing... Yet it was at that time, even at those very moments (it was about five o'clock, and more like evening than afternoon) on 27 April, that my mum and dad, together with friends from the same village were on their way back home from a trip to Kiev.

The shortest route to Chojniki lay through the town of Prypiat, where the people who work at the Chernobyl power station live. They had been through the town early on the day before, but this time they weren't allowed to go back that way.

There was an endless line of buses and cars snaking out of Prypiat, while the only traffic going towards the town was a river of armoured personnel carriers and covered military lorries with soldiers inside.

Sitting in their bus they didn't know what had happened either. The bus was stopped by soldiers with gas masks hanging to one side wearing startlingly white masks on their faces, like the ones doctors wear. Without a word of explanation they directed the bus further and further to the left towards Mazyr rather than Chojniki.

Somehow the word 'evacuation' worked its way into the bus, not a word that comes easily to speakers of the Polesian dialect, but one with a meaning that people well remember from the war. And the people on the bus were mostly children of the last war; in the 1940s they had been between five and ten years of age. So, alongside 'evacuation', another much more frightening word rose up and stuck in their minds – 'War'.

What war? Who are we at war with and why? Have the Americans attacked us? Maybe it's the Germans again? Why are the soldiers here and not on the frontier near Brest? And how are we going to get home through these columns of buses and cars and lines of soldiers? Let's get home, back to Belarus – that's where our children and grandchildren are. We must get home, as soon as we can!

It was frightening to look through the windows of their bus at the faces of the people in the buses coming in the other direction streaming out of Prypiat – not a single smile. How could there be?

Their faces were stunned, wooden, eyes wide open with the suddenness of it all, with the violence of being made to leave, with not understanding what was going on or why they were being driven off somewhere.

At one point where the bus was yet again made to change route the driver jumped out and went up to a middle-aged officer with stars on his shoulder straps.

There's been a 'fire'

The officer told him in a whisper, like it was a secret, that it wasn't war, nobody had attacked us, not to worry: it's only an evacuation, there had been an accident in Prypiat at the nuclear power plant, there was a fire and that's why people are being temporarily moved out of harm's way. Temporarily...

A fire... People began to breathe easier: it's OK, there's been an accident, there's only a fire. It's just a fire, not war... It's happened here in Chernobyl, at the power station, not near us. It won't affect us, we're OK, everything's all right back home. And this word 'evacuation' now began to sound completely different; it had a calming effect, it was simple and familiar...

The anxious silence left the bus and everyone all at once began to chatter and interrupt one another, saying how yesterday they saw a pillar of fire in the mist above the town, yes we think it was over the town, on that side where the nuclear power station is.

Very early in the morning it was, right at the crack of dawn, while they were standing on the Chojniki side of the river Prypiat, still in Belarus, waiting for the ferry to take them across to Janaŭ on the Ukrainian side. (*Ianau is what they used to call the power station workers' town of Prypiat which got built where the small village of Ianau used to be.*)

A mighty pillar reaching to the heavens

Really big this pillar was, going a mile up through the clouds, but it wasn't scary, it just looked as though it should be there. It wasn't red, more some sort of raspberry colour, like what you get in the Aladdin film when the genie flies out of the lamp, except this time it was real and on a cosmic scale.

It looked as though the genie would appear at any moment in the sky, and his enormous mouth would explode into uproarious laughter... They couldn't help feeling their insignificance in the face of some mighty force...

They started getting out of the bus in the early light of dawn to gaze in wonder at this unusual 'natural phenomenon'. So they gazed and it didn't occur to any of them that a disaster had occurred, so strong was their faith in the 'peaceful atom'. Then they drove through Ianau, peacefully sleeping with only the yellow traffic lights blinking, and headed for Kiev.

They spent the night in a hotel, bought loads of tasty things to eat and presents to take home – the kind of sausage that they hadn't seen for a long time at 2.20 roubles a kilo (the state kept Kiev a lot better supplied with food than Homiel or even Minsk) – and chatting happily they excitedly set off home.

And now this! Evacuation... why? Just because of some fire that they themselves had seen with their own eyes the day before... If it weren't for this worrying fuss, the fear and horror brought on by soldiers in uniform and the columns of buses filled with people staring fixedly ahead, not knowing why troops had herded them together, put them on to buses and were now driving them off somewhere.

Eyes full of terror

If it weren't for their terrifying eyes, huge, filling half their faces, staring despairingly out of the bus windows in blank incomprehension... The children especially...

If it weren't for the total blackness, the fog of not knowing what is going on. If it weren't for all that – well, nothing had happened: so there had been a fire, flames, some smoke, so what? The sun was still in the sky and everything around was still green...

There may be radiation, you say? What do you expect, this is a nuclear power station... What radiation?! Where is it? Show it to us... There isn't any... You can't see it... You can't feel it... There's no smell, it doesn't stink... It doesn't burn, it doesn't sting...

Trained to know their place after nearly 70 years of Soviet power, people knuckled under and did what they were told by the soldiers and the militia, who themselves had no realization of what was happening or of the risk they were being exposed to, believing it to be some daft exercise.

So they were simply carrying out the orders of their superiors who, even if they didn't know everything, certainly knew a great deal, and were themselves looking to the authorities above them to take all the responsibility.

No catastrophe – a misfortune for somewhere unimportant

So, instead of making a start on evacuating people out of Prypiat immediately, on the very first day, within a few hours of the accident (not, note, a catastrophe), the authorities waited 36 hours before doing anything. They wanted to reduce a tragedy for the whole planet to the status of a neat little misfortune for an unimportant district.

Indeed, it was at first seen as a problem just for a town inhabited by nuclear power specialists. While the authorities were dithering thousands of innocent people were living with a fatal dose of radiation and, not suspecting that anything was wrong, even strolled off to take a look at the fire...

My parents and their fellow villagers got back home late at night. When they arrived and saw their own dear village sleeping peacefully, there were one or two of them who secretly shed some emotional tears...

A May Day celebration

It's 28 April, Monday morning, editorial meeting in the offices of the regional paper I work for, the *Homielskaya Praŭda*. Not a word about the Chernobyl accident, let alone radiation and any possible danger.

There's not even a mention of a fire, or of any kind of incident at the nuclear power plant. Even though something had been said a few weeks previously about an incident in a similar power station near Smolensk...

As always, the editor starts off with a joke. I now recall that there was nothing in his voice to show that he knew anything, although there is no way he could not have known.

Then he gets more serious, he says we've got a busy week ahead, the May

Day celebration is coming up, we have to get a team together to cover it and make a list of who's going to be on duty in the print room and who's going to write the 'carcass' for the holiday and about the holiday itself.

The 'carcass' is the backbone of a report of the May Day celebrations in Homiel and the rest of the region. It is always written in advance; this was the practice in all newspapers back in the days of the USSR, from the lowliest local rag right up to *Pravda*.

Meanwhile no one knew anything about the tragedy in Chernobyl, not even the reporters on the 'organ of the regional committee of the Party' closest to the place. They certainly knew how to keep the truth from their own people: they simply blocked all the channels of information. It is difficult to imagine now, because, of course, it would be impossible to do anything like that these days.

In the age of the Internet, any item of news can circle the globe in seconds. But back then, well – even in our quite large village there were only two telephones, one in the collective farm office and one in the post office. In order to phone me my parents first had to walk to the post office, then book the call and wait a long time for the connection to be made...

Rumours of 'something'

It was only towards the end of the day that a rumour started spreading around the editorial office that something was supposed to have happened at the Chernobyl nuclear power station. Not an accident, just 'something' – some kind of fire, maybe, or an explosion. But that's all it was, colleagues whispering amongst themselves, uncertain and not at all alarming..

29 April passed by in routine activities and preparations for the May Day celebration, and on the next day the Moscow *Pravda* reported in a tiny note that an accident had apparently occurred in one of the Chernobyl power station's reactors. It went on:

"at the present time the radiation levels in the power station and the surrounding area have stabilized, the injured are being treated."

And it gets even better: *"The people living in the power station housing estate and three nearby villages have been evacuated."* *"The power station housing estate"* means the town of Prypiat, where there were about 45,000 people living at the time...

That's how clever they were at 'doling out' important information, 'reducing' tension and putting an end to nervous rumours. Anyway, what would be the point of upsetting the nation on the eve of the greatest holiday in the calendar. And what do 45,000 people mean in a country of 250 million?

Green leaves of sorrel – perfect for borshch

On the morning of 1 May, somewhere around ten o'clock, my wife Ludmila and I set off for the village to help my mother-in-law plant potatoes. The sun had been shining since early morning, it was great in the country, warm and by dinner time so hot that I took off my shirt to get a bit of a suntan while digging manure into the furrow.

After working my wife and I sat down on our boundary strip and noticed that pale-green leaves of sorrel had already started to appear, with a nice sourish taste. We picked quite a lot of it to make the first borsch of spring and returned home to Homiel almost happy...

My wife set about making the soup at once, and I switched on the radio. I twiddled the knob to see what I could pick up until I hit upon a Russian-language station that I didn't know.

The truth emerges, on a crackly radio

Through the crackle and noise I could make out that it was Radio Sweden. They were broadcasting the news. I can't repeat exactly what I heard, I can only recall the sense of what I remembered – a terrible accident had occurred at the Chernobyl nuclear power station in Ukraine, a reactor had exploded in the fourth unit.

Radiation contamination had spread across Ukraine, Belarus and countries adjacent to the USSR. It had even been registered in Sweden. People in Ukraine and Belarus, and especially in the area around Homiel, should go outdoors as little as possible, they should take iodine, and especially avoid food contaminated by radiation, which means not using young vegetables: onions, lettuce, sorrel.

I believed this news immediately. Sorrel? By now the borsch was ready, that tasty spring smell that I loved so much was wafting around the room, my wife was preparing to ladle the delicious soup into the plates...

I went to the kitchen, grabbed the saucepan with the borsch out of my dumbfounded wife's hands, opened the door to the toilet and flushed it all down the loo...

Somehow, without fully understanding what was going on myself, I explained to my wife... So it was that this terrible word 'radiation' with all its serious implications entered our lives at last.

May Queens on parade

Meanwhile on the TV they were showing happy people with flowers and balloons in the May Day parade... Smiling, they waved their hands at the camera: we're being filmed... In Moscow, Kiev, Minsk, Homiel, Chojniki, Brahin and Naroŭla...

"Long live the First of May – the Festival of all progressive peoples!" "Long live the Soviet press – the most truthful press in the world!"

But I was not the only one to feel fear deep inside myself... Others must have been listening to Radio Sweden as well.

The information could not be kept hidden from the whole world behind the 'Iron Curtain'. Chernobyl is not Chelyabinsk, it's Europe. It's a known fact that radiation is no respecter of international frontiers... It was, however, impossible to ask anyone what had happened.

At the time – I do remember this and I'll say it again – I really did believe, with no reservations at all, the information the Swedes had broadcast, especially because they said on the radio that even the pastures of the northern

reindeer had been contaminated by radiation. The reindeer themselves were contaminated; they were slaughtered and the meat was thrown away..

The thought occurred to me at once: how far away from Sweden is Chernobyl, and where are we in comparison? If they are so frightened, what should we be?

'There was some leakage of radioactive material'

On my way back to my flat I peered in at the box where the letters are left and picked up the newspapers. It was only now that I remembered about them. What could I expect: after all five days had passed since the accident.

There was nothing to read in them, apart from reports of successes published in advance of the May Day celebration. Only in the newspaper *Sovetskaya Byelorussia* was there a report "From the Council of Ministers of the USSR," which began in the usual Jesuitical way:

"As has already been reported in the press (where? when? just one little note in Pravda) there has been an accident at the Chernobyl power station (just 'power station') situated 130km to the north of Kiev. A government commission of inquiry is now working on the spot..."

"According to preliminary findings the accident occurred in one of the rooms (!) of the fourth block; it resulted in the destruction of the building constructions (!) of the building (!) housing the reactor. The reactor was damaged and there was some (!) leakage of radioactive material..."

'Work is continuing normally'

The report continues: "As a result of measures taken over the past few days the escape of radioactive materials has been reduced and there has been a drop in radiation levels within the nuclear power plant and the nearby housing estate."

This then followed, to calm the Belarusians' fears completely: "Some Western agencies are spreading rumours about how thousands of people are supposed to have died in the accident at the nuclear power plant.

"As has already been reported, two people died and only 197 were hospitalised; of these 49 have been discharged from hospital following medical examination. Work in factories and on the land is continuing normally."

It was these final words that put readers on their guard more than any others. In Soviet times we had learned to read 'between the lines' and to believe the "rumours" that were spread by "Western agencies."

The second and third of May were spent in fruitless efforts to phone our relatives in the village of Vialiki Bor in the Chojniki District. Chernobyl is less than 80km from there...

Telephones engaged...

Of course we had to try to phone the post office where a neighbour of our relatives works as postmistress, just to have a talk with her, to ask her how our parents are, what the situation is like and to hint at, or even tell us all about the frightful things that I knew.

The problem was that the authorities had given us four days off, from 1 to 4 May, and naturally the post office wasn't working. There was something

else as well: I knew that my sisters had returned from Minsk and Harodnia to our village for the holiday period, and realized that they could not possibly know anything about what had happened not far from where they were...

I never did manage to get through on the telephone, and that wasn't because the post office was closed; each time I dialled I heard only short beeps, 'line busy'... This was another of the authorities' 'tricks', to make sure that there was no leakage of information in any direction.

The fourth of May was Easter Sunday; the night before a start was made on evacuating people from the villages in the Brahin, Chojniki and Naroula districts that were closest to Chernobyl, the so-called 30km zone... It had begun at last, one week after the catastrophe... At last, because some of these villages were less than 10km from the now depopulated Ukrainian "*housing estate*" of Prypiat...

Some of the 'Chernobylites' living closest to the reactor were resettled in my home village; virtually none of these evacuees is still alive today...

Death came suddenly

The men under fifty were the first to be cut down by Chernobyl. The locals said that when death came to men who looked healthy (what kind of age is 45?), it came suddenly. A man would go off with a bucket to fetch water from the well, fall down and not get up again, or would take his scythe and go off to the meadow and...

An easy death, but there were children, the first little grandchildren left behind... There was still everything to live for. Then death came for the older men, and after that started on the women. Now death is cutting down the children and grandchildren of the 'Chernobylites'...

How many more are going to be cut down? Scientists say that the amount of caesium in our soil will have been reduced by only 1 per cent after 200 years... And as for strontium-90, americium-241 and plutonium... The half-life of plutonium-239, for example, is 24,390 years... Virtually the whole of the radioactive end of Mendeleev's periodic table fell on Belarus.

Even now hundreds of thousands of people live, work and grow 'clean food' on the contaminated soil. They have been stripped of all their concessions and benefits. Going away for recuperation and convalescence is beyond the pockets of most of them... So Chernobyl goes on exacting tribute payments, thanks to the indifference and the complete lack of principles of officialdom.

The evacuees

But now let's go back again to 1986.

As usual my mother prepared everything on Holy Saturday for the Great Sabbath on the next day. Here I need to add that, in spite of nearly seventy years of Communist rule, the Great Sabbath, or more precisely the whole of the Easter period, was still our most important festival.

People prepared for it long in advance, like they did for no other. On Thursday they tidied up, cleared up the rubbish and last year's leaves and

burned it, swept up the yards, washed the floor in the cottages and went to the bathhouse...

On the Friday before the Easter weekend and even more on the Saturday, my mother would cook all the special dishes for the next few days.

On the Saturday evening, just before the all-night vigil, the young people light huge bonfires at a number of sites just outside the village; they dance round the fires, have fun, the lads pinch the girls, the girls squeal but they don't run off home... Then all of a sudden a column of buses arrives in the village... carrying evacuees...

Chernobylites

That's what they were called – 'evacuees'. Or, even more frighteningly 'Chernobylites', as they came to be called later. For the moment they were just people: near panic, anxious, with no idea of what was going on.

They had been given two hours to gather in the centre of their villages, both large and small, near the shops, village councils, collective farm offices, taking with them only bare necessities: their papers and food for a day.

They had been strictly forbidden to take anything else, because, so they were told, they were going to be away only for a few days. So they left all their possessions in their homes, piled weeping into the buses, sensing that something was wrong but not even suspecting that they were leaving their homes forever...

A large family consisting of grandfather, grandmother, their daughter, her husband and the grandchildren from Masany, a village some 6-8km from the Chernobyl reactor, was quartered on my parents. They piled up their few bits and pieces in one corner and sat motionless, in silence, full of shame and sorrow that they had been simply dumped on strangers who were getting ready for the Easter festival.

They looked at my parents who themselves were equally stunned by what had happened, not knowing what to do with these people or how to approach them...

It was the Easter festival that finally brought all of them together... Next morning they sat down at table, drank a toast to Easter and began to talk...

When can we go home?

The evacuees kept repeating like a refrain just how much they wanted to go back home, how good the life was there, the cottage and private bit of land that they had looked after so carefully was there, all the things that they had worked for all their lives.

They did not doubt for a moment that the evacuation was only temporary. They could not yet allow themselves the thought that they would never see their home and hearth again. They did not want to think about it.

Indeed how could they have entertained such thoughts, everything happened much too fast for that. Only yesterday they had been getting ready for the Easter festival, when a whole load of officials and soldiers arrived in the village.

They went in twos and threes round all the cottages. *"You won't be able to live here for a bit,"* they said and gave them an hour to collect a few things.

Not all the villagers managed in time, they were so shocked by the suddenness of it all, even though they had seen the equipment and the thousands of troops that had arrived in the last few days, and had begun to suspect that things would not end well.

The domestic animals, cows and pigs, were herded together onto vehicles. Two hours later the villagers were already seated in the buses holding little bundles in their hands with a change of underwear, papers, money. And that was all.

The soldiers thoroughly searched even that... It was these thorough searches that made people think that things were not as simple as the authorities would like them to seem. But what are simple folk supposed to do?

No one ever saw them again

The evacuees spent a week in our cottage, they got on well with my parents, and then they were loaded onto buses again and taken off somewhere. Obviously they weren't taken home... Some people said that they been taken to the Žlobin District. Nobody ever saw them again.

By the time the authorities started on enlarging the exclusion zone and moving people out of ever wider circles away from the reactor, it became clear that the evacuation was not temporary but permanent. People started to ask to be resettled as a whole village or at least as a street in a new place of settlement. They did not wish to be separated and scattered among several families.

The authorities did not listen. They 'resettled', or rather scattered people from 415 villages in the 'zone' among thousands of villages and towns across Belarus and so dispersed the memories of these people and any memory of their existence... Yet each village is unique in itself, an authentic and inimitable world with its own traditions, legends and linguistic features.

Each village has its own names for places in the locality, for distinctive natural features, streams, headwaters and fields... After 24 (*now 28*) years no one has got around to collecting the heritage of Chernobyl or to setting up an all-Belarusian museum of the villages that have perished and been lost.

Hidden by dispersion, they died one by one, unseen

The fact that the authorities made no concessions to the evacuees is evidence of their 'farsightedness' and just how well informed they were about the consequences of the accident. As I have said already, most of the 'Chernobylites' from the 30km Belarusian exclusion zone died within ten, fifteen or twenty years of 'being moved'.

It would have been immediately obvious that something was wrong if whole villages or streets had died out, leaving empty houses behind. As it is, the 'Chernobylites' died off quietly, one by one, almost unnoticed, without spoiling the national statistical picture even at district or local level...

The authorities at the time ensured that everything was quiet and calm, and that nothing would give any indication of the misfortune that had come to hang

over the country. The situation was not in fact as simple as it may have appeared to anyone then living in Chojniki, Brahın, Homiel, and so on as far as Sakhalin.

Making the clouds land

The authorities did not know what to do with the fourth reactor; there could be another explosion at any moment, or the fire could spread to the third reactor... The wind was blowing towards Belarus, carrying radioactive clouds with it in the direction of Moscow... Forget the 30 km zone, it might soon be necessary to evacuate people from a zone with a radius of at least 100 km...

The most straightforward decision possible was taken in regard to the radioactive clouds: make them 'land' beyond Homiel on the areas around Vietka, Čačersk and on part of the territory around Bryansk in Russia, the districts of Krasnogorsk and Novozybkovo.

As a result radiation contaminated the banks of the three great Belarusian rivers: Prypiat, Dniapro and Sož... I should add here that geographically the ash from Chernobyl fell on Ukraine, Belarus and Russia, but ethnically it fell almost exclusively on Belarusians. The Chernigov territories around Chernobyl in Ukraine, and the area around Bryansk were populated mainly by Belarusians.

Now I look back on the last days of April and the first days of May that year I realize what it was that saved the Party and the government from violence and panic: the fact that people did not know anything about the disaster and that there was a whole series of celebrations and special events.

First, there was May Day (1-2 May), then – Orthodox Easter Sunday (4 May), followed by less significant occasions, which were nonetheless important in the USSR: Print Workers' Day (5 May), Radio Workers' Day (7 May), then – Victory Day (9 May) and Radaŭnica (a springtime version of All Souls' Day – 13 May)...

During the two weeks that fate gave Gorbachev and his team, they somehow managed to get the situation just about under control... At least the threat of a second explosion had been lifted, thanks to the bravery of the soldiers, who succeeded in putting out the fire and building the sarcophagus around the damaged reactor.

The first rain

I could not get off work until after 9 May to make a trip back home to my parents. By that time my sisters had already left, and besides I had to write something about the heroism of the people who had been affected by the Chernobyl disaster...

There was heroism and acts of bravery aplenty, but just how necessary had they been? Did these 'heroes' fully understand the real cost of their 'acts of bravery', and why they acted in the way they did? They probably did not.

It is certain that the authorities were saved from a likely rebellion by the fact that, as usual, the people were uninformed. No one gave a thought at the time to what radioactive iodine was, or to the 'hot particles' that were

the most dangerous things in the first few days after the accident, or to the way they could get inside you through food as well as through dust and air...

Something else that 'helped' was fear of the authorities, a fear even greater than that of radiation, a fear that resided deep inside the Soviet people, who had borne the yoke of collectivization and Stalin's repression.

I well remember those days, even though I see them through some sort of haze... I remember the first rain that came to Homiel a few weeks after the accident. There hadn't been any before that.

Orange puddles

People were saying that special planes were being used to disperse the clouds and to sprinkle them with some kind of nasty stuff, reagents of some kind, to stop radioactive rain falling on the ground...

Then, after the first heavy post-Chernobyl rain there were yellow and orange rings around the edges of puddles that people for some reason had not noticed before.

There was a simple explanation, some people said: it's the pollen from gardens in blossom, or from chestnut trees or some other plant... But why had there not been anything like it before? Why did no one remember these things from the times before Chernobyl, and why were they there now? At least, no one had noticed them earlier...

The orange colour was no coincidence, apparently – orange is the generally recognized colour of radiation, the colour of danger, it's the way nature warns people.

I first managed to get into the zone when the second wave of evacuations began... Once again I was in my home district of Chojniki, in the village of Kažuški...

And brown fog

It was the end of May. Again there was mist and dust. There was no wind, the dust rose above the ground and for some reason did not fall back down, but stayed there for a long time, hanging in the air like a murky greyish brown fog, as if a herd of cows had just been driven down the street.

But there were no cows, they had all been brought into the barns where they were kept almost unfed and with no one to milk them... yes, the collective farm milkmaids were the first to have been evacuated. That was the right thing to do but no one thought to ask who was going to look after the livestock.

I found the chairman of the collective farm in his office. He was holding his head in his hands with no idea of what to do. He hadn't slept for several days. Red-eyed, he looked at me, completely unable to understand what it was I wanted from him...

I too was in quite a state, like I had been smoking weed, everything was dissolving before my eyes in a kind of drug-induced haze, or mist, or dream. It was only later, maybe not until now, that I can explain my state as due to the effect of radiation. But I had been there for only a few hours, whereas the collective farm chairman had been living there right since the accident...

We were sitting in his office. He showed me some apparatus for measuring the radiation level that the soldiers had left him. It was a sort of large suitcase with an indicator that looked like a golf club and little windows with pointers dancing behind the glass. How do I use it?

I couldn't tell whether he was asking me or asking himself. What does this thing show, and he pointed at the dials, do I multiply these numbers by a thousand or by ten thousand, and how do I find out what the real situation is? Rumours were already going round then that all this equipment had been fixed so as 'not to frighten people'.

After Chernobyl

Last year, I lost all connection with the place where I was born. My mum and dad both died in the same year. All I can do now is spend time at their graveside...

That may be the reason for my venturing to write these lines about the month after Chernobyl. I didn't write anything at the time – no reports, no articles. In fact I have written practically nothing about Chernobyl until today. I simply couldn't do it.

As it is, there was so much that happened in just that one month that I have not mentioned here! There was, for example, the visit to 'the zone' by the top Party bosses, including the first secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Belarus, Šluńkoŭ.

People would recall his 'change' of clothes and shoes long after this visit – how he put on the clothes that were waiting for him when he got out of the car, took them off when he got back in and then threw them away when he had left. It is only Party bigwigs who think that people notice nothing and know nothing. They have learned to suffer in silence, that's all...

Where are the brave footballers now?

There was also that typical Soviet way of doing things just for show, to pretend that everything is fine and dandy: *"people are working and relaxing in the way they always have, the situation is stabilizing."*

Take, for example, the football match between teams from Brahin and Chojniki that was arranged on the first weekend after the Chernobyl accident and shown on the news on central TV. Where are those footballers now? Where are the spectators who were herded on to the stands?

Then there was the visit of the People's Deputy for this area, Ivan Šamiakin, honoured as People's Writer of Belarus. Not long before his visit he had been Chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic.

Accompanying him were Barys Sačanka and Miakoła Miatlicki, both of them writers and also from these parts. Maybe they didn't even think at the time about how their visit to the 'disaster zone' would be used as part of the propaganda campaign aimed at calming the 'people' – if such respected persons are not afraid to come and visit us, it must mean that the devil is not so black as he is painted...

Then there was the evacuation from the contaminated areas close to the 'exclusion zone', firstly of pregnant women and women with babies, followed by children of pre-school age, and finally of all schoolchildren. As a result, only men were left behind in the towns and villages, and they had been totally reliant on their wives to feed and wash them...

Decontamination by shovel of soon to be abandoned villages

It's a story worth several novels... How did those 'temporarily resettled' women and children live in unprepared, unheated rest homes and pioneer camps (where the women compared the conditions to those of concentration camps) all across Belarus, cold, hungry, sick, stressed...

What about how no one in the so-called 'clean' zones would go near them, how they would be called 'Chernobyl hedgehogs' and shunned... Who is going describe all this and when?

What about the decontamination of the villages and towns most affected by radionuclides? So much money as well as people's health and lives (that too!) were wasted on this nonsense in the very first month...

The 'reservists' who were called up for service from all over the USSR were dubbed 'partisans'. Their job was to remove the upper layer of soil everywhere in the 30km-radius exclusion zone – by hand, using spades – load the contaminated earth on to lorries and drive it off to 'mass graves', to re-roof the houses with new slates, wash the asphalt and hose down the walls of buildings with soapy water.

They were often left forgotten by the authorities, unfed, hungry, torn away from their families... All this '*decontamination*' was done in villages that a few weeks later would also be depopulated, abandoned and then buried...

That is the end of my personal recollections of the first month of the new post-Chernobyl Age that began at 23 minutes 40 seconds after one o'clock of the morning of 26 April 1986...

My story is one of millions

The recollections are not mine alone, because even according to official figures Chernobyl affected 23% of the territory of Belarus, i.e. some 47,000 square kilometres, 3,678 villages and towns and more than 2,500,000 people.

It means that almost any Belarusian could have written something similar. Everyone has their own experiences and memories of those times, right from the very first month...

We haven't died yet, judging by all the evidence. However, judging by our total lack of concern, we may well still be alive, but without giving a single thought to the future.

To put it more precisely: it's been a long time since we were really alive, now we simply exist... There's no other explanation.



Arnold McMillin



...Many of Hapiejewa's varied and imaginative love poems are both intimate and tender, but they also contain some violence and references to armies and militarism...

A Feminist From Patriarchal Belarus:

The Poetry of Volha Hapiejewa

Volha Hapiejewa (b. 1982) is an active scholar, as well as one of the leading Belarusian poets of today, with strong principles and beliefs, remarkable openness about her problems and aspirations, and enjoyment of fantasy, wit and experiment; she has also made original and highly imaginative contributions to prose and drama.¹ It is to her verse up to 2018 that the present study is dedicated, beginning with one of her most frequent themes.

Loneliness and sexual frustration, as well as fulfilment, are undoubtedly a major part of this writer's feminist consciousness in a

¹ A prominent critic has suggested that Hapiejewa's works in other genres, particularly her novel, stand out favourably from her early poetry: Iryna Šaŭlakova, *Restauracyja ščyraści*, Miensk 2005, pp.113 and 115. The present writer does not necessarily share this view.

It has been noted by Hanna Kišlicyna (Novaja litaraturnaja situacyja: *Žmiena kulturnaj paradzhmy* (Miensk 2006 (hereafter Kišlicyna), p. 135). that the poet is very close to her poetic heroine, and so for convenience in discussing the verse I have used 'the poet' and 'she' rather than the more clumsy 'poetic heroine', without, however, imagining that all the thoughts and actions described in her poems wholly or partially belong to the author.

patriarchal society. At times deliberately shocking, she also depicts affection, as well as displaying a strong awareness of the richness of the Belarusian language, grammatical elements of which figure extensively in her work. Other prominent themes are illness and death, war and violence including murder, self-analysis, the female body, dreams and nature (particularly birds and often personified trees). Her language is both lexically rich and seemingly spontaneous, at times rendered slightly opaque by the almost complete lack of punctuation (except as a theme when she is writing about language itself). Volha Hapiejeva's great talent and drive leads to many appearances overseas, not least in Germany. She is undoubtedly one of the most striking Belarusian poets of the present day.

As with any true poet, or, indeed, artist or composer, Hapiejeva's voice is easily recognizable, and her approach to the theme of loneliness, albeit a far from rare one in the work of Belarusian writers of all ages,¹ is striking in its pathos. Naturally, some of the loneliness derives from difficulties in finding satisfaction in personal relations, and the latter is the largest thematic group in this poet's work to date, but the sense of loneliness takes many forms. In 'niby ja naŭmysna imknusia da adzinoty...' (it is as if I deliberately strive towards loneliness...), for instance, she confronts the phenomenon directly, and after characteristic reflections on the natural world ends this introspective poem with a repetition of the two Belarusian words for patience: *ciarpiénnie* and *ciarplivaść*.² Travel plays a considerable role in Hapiejeva's work, but in an earlier poem, 'Lumières...' (the Lumières were brothers...) airports, trains and bus stations are described as transit points between Loneliness A and Loneliness B. This verse ends with the poet wishing to escape quotidian routine and to forget herself for a moment, to become nobody, simply the body that is being embraced on platform 11 at a station in a town beginning with L (Hś, 10). In another very imaginative poem, 'Ad stupa da stupa...' (From pillar to post...) she describes herself as a question mark, and, listening to the telegraph wires in the hope of a message from her lover, she is sickened by the 'love-making' of the ravens,³ and feels she would rather go hunting and shoot herself in the head from loneliness.⁴ The same birds feature in another bleak poem, 'ni kachańnia ũ mianie ani karjery...', (I have neither love nor career...), in which the poet, lacking most people's essentials in life, including children, has hung a ring on either side of her mouth and taught the ravens to read.⁵ In 'Abłoki pierašpielyja...' (The overripe clouds...) the narrator's bird-like gaze observes the clouds making love, having drunk their fill of stale loneliness (Rn, 34). The latter affliction in this poet's world appears to be particularly pertinent to women: in 'mnie ũ samocie...' (to me in my loneliness...) she describes the dumb urban space and its loneliness, saying that the rucksack with its pockets was clearly created by a woman who understood solitariness and ways of escaping it (Hś, 57). In another poem, 'kazka pra estonskuju dziaŭčynku' (tale of an Estonian girl) she describes everyday activities like picking flowers and drinking tea but feels lonely for lack of sons, lovers or amber on the shore, underlining the female nature of loneliness with a sudden line in English: 'it makes us a women's gang' followed by the last four lines:

¹ Several years ago, I sought to describe this theme in a broader context: 'Loneliness as a Topos in Contemporary Belarusian Literature', in Iryna Dubanieckaja, Arnold McMillin and Hienadz Sahanovič (eds), *Sonca tvojo nie zakocicca, i miesiac tvoj nie schavajecca: Zbornik artykulaŭ pa biełarusistycy i bahasloŭji ũ honar 80-hodździa z dnia naradźeńnia i 50-hodździa šviatarstva ajca Alaksandra Nadsana*, Miensk 2009, 163-66.

² Volha Hapiejeva, *Hramatyka śniehu*, Miensk 2017 (hereafter Hś), p. 61.

³ Crows appear particularly frequently in Hapiejeva's verse, sometimes sympathetically but more often threatening or, as here, distasteful.

⁴ Volha Hapiejeva, *Rekanstrukcija nieba*, Miensk 2003 (hereafter Rn), p. 51.

⁵ Volha Hapiejeva, *Niaholeny ranak*, Miensk 2008 (hereafter Nr), p. 32.

...заснуць прачнуцца вярнуцца з крамы
самотнай
пайсці на шпацыр
дождж¹

(to fall asleep, to wake up, to return from the shop / lonely / to go for a walk / rain)

Нapiejeva brings a rich range of images to the unhappy problem of loneliness: in 'jak nieraznošany abutak...' (like a shoe that has not yet been worn in...), for instance, she produces various striking images of her spiritual pain, including a guillotine-like crane on which she daily hangs her loneliness; in the same poem, speaking (*kazać*) and making love (*kachać*) are related by the nearness on a Cyrillic keyboard of 'z' and 'x' (Nr, 20); another image is of wood and woodenness on a construction site, 'niedabudavany dom' (an unfinished house), where she compares the material of this building to the woodenness of her cold thoughts at night when she does not even have the strength to weep (Nr, 31). The seasons also play a role in the poet's loneliness: in 'i paniadzielak, i mora...' (both Monday and sea...), observing a fun fair in August, her favourite month for its possibilities of arriving and departing, she nonetheless looks forward to the solitude of January as we see in the last three lines:

...карусельнага поні трымаць за драўляную грыўку
хачу я ў самоце
ў самоце са студзеньскім абыякавым сонцам (Pip, 29)

(to hold the wooden pony's mane / I want to do it in loneliness / in loneliness with the indifferent January sun)

Two poems, 'finskaje hieta' (The Finnish Ghetto, Pip, 18-20) and 'Niapравilny list' (An Incorrect Letter, Pip, 23-24) vividly recreate the misery of lack of response from a loved one: in the first of them the messages in the chat room are older than the poet herself, whilst in the second the eternal waiting is a phenomenon known to many in one-sided relationships. Also worth mentioning is an elaborate and rich poem, 'čyrvonyja hronki nieznamaj rašliny vyšpiejuć pobač z siabravym domam...' (red clusters of an unknown plant flourish alongside my friend's house...), in which she writes of the difficulty of making love to a shadow, instead drinking a herbal tea in her loneliness (Hś, 56). Clouds are often described as lonely, as is snow in 'tam dzie vypadzie śnieh...' (there where snow falls...). In this verse the poet at first describes snow as being like a humanist, promising nobody anything except simply existing, being born and dying. Later she writes of her futile attempts to get her fingers warm, and she invites the snow to share her bed although neither of them can acknowledge their loneliness:

...я і мой снег будзем бавіць гадзіны ў ложку
так і не здолеўшы прызнацца
адно аднаму
ў сваёй адзіноце. (Hś, 5)

(My snow and I will spend hours in bed / having not managed to confess / to each other / our loneliness)

The colour of loneliness is said to be beige in 'voś jak ad ciabie adychodžu...' (that is how I am leaving you..., Hś, 56) but in another poem, 'i ty nie pišaš mnie daŭno ja čorna-biełae kino...' (and you have not written to me for a long time I am a black and white film...) she is dejected at having to wait to hear from her lover for so long (Hś, 37). These

¹ Volha Napiejeva, *Prysak i požnia*, Miensk, 2013 (hereafter Pip), p. 43.
In all quotations the orthography and punctuation are those of the poet.

two poems relate loneliness directly and unmistakably to the frustrations of unsatisfactory personal relations, which will be discussed below, but first should be mentioned some basic existential problems.

To be a feminist in a determinedly patriarchal society is not easy, even for a strong person like Volha Hapiejeva who also writes about a lover's criticizing her language (probably, but not automatically, because he prefers the unfortunately prevalent use of Russian as the local koine). An important feminist poem is 'kali b ja žyla ũ hodzie 1908...' (if I had lived in 1908...) in which the poet imagines herself as the British suffragette leader, Emmeline Pankhurst, taking part in demonstrations. But it is never the right time and place, nor would she want to be a person helping her husband to publish his books (could she have been thinking of Sophia Andreyevna, Leo Tolstoi's wife, copying and re-copying his novel *Voina i mir*?) But Hapiejeva was born in Miensk and now has to get dressed and ignore male journalists and editors. Once her lover asked her where, and as whom, she would have liked to be born. She wants only to surprise and please him, but she cannot choose but only tell the truth. What about being a Chinese peasant of the 12th century, thinking only about security and eating. He, however, is New York at the beginning of the century of jazz. The end of the poem is ambiguous if not downright dismissive:

...выбар гэта
ня час і ня месца
а нешта больш дробнае
краткае майму існаваньню

напрыклад – існаваньне тваё (Pip, 37)

(this choice / is not time and not place / but something small / humble for my existence // for instance, your existence)

Even more ambiguous, and perhaps related to feminism is 'tak i budu stajać...' (so I shall just stand...) in which she contemplates living together with indifference and having children:

...а пасья ў нас нават зьявляцца дзеці
якім мы у свой гонар
не дадзім аніякіх імёнаў
і каханьне для нас застанецца
ніякага роду (Nr, 9)

(and afterwards children may even come to us / to whom we in our honour / will not give any names / and love for us will remain / without any gender)

The strongest unambiguous statement of the poet's feminism is in the play *Tam*.¹ One of her many ironic verses is 'dumajecie, mužčyny razvažajuć pra hłabalnaje ũ świcie...' (do you think that men reflect on global issues in the world..., Hś, 34), and another poem, 'čamu tak doŭha kvitniejuć kaštany...' (why do chestnut trees bloom for so long...), ostensibly about trees, soon turns to the question of why people marry and what 'in love' means; the answers of grownups are unsatisfactory, and the fading of flowers in the wind seems a good reason for the poet to remain in her hollow. She should go visiting or create a poem, so that later some (female) critic would write that her work was about nature or about love (Hś, 45). In the first of these poems she receives no response from her lover when she tells him about the metaphysics of power in the feminist criticism of language, and when she mentions Foucault and the discipline of language his response is, to say the least, crude, as we see in the closing lines of the poem:

¹ Volha Hapiejeva, 'Tam: Pjesa ũ čatyroch dziejach', *Dziejastoŭ*, 85, 2016, pp. 214-227.

...ён запытаецца:
 – а ты бы хацела
 каб я цябе дысцыплінаваў пугай?
 ніякіх высокіх матэрыяў
 і квадратур круга
 чыстая геаметрыя размяшчэння мяне ў прасторы
 механіка цел без сантыментаў і перамоваў (Нś, 34)

(he asks / *and would you like me / to discipline you with a whip? / no lofty materials / and squaring of the circle / the simple geometry of placing me in space / the mechanics of bodies without sentiments and negotiations*)

‘Piasočny matyl...’ (The sand butterfly...) is a poem dedicated to male and female feminists. An old butterfly in the evening betrays its blue flower for a light bulb (Rn, 23); in ‘horad, kudy tak nie chaciełasia jechać...’ (a town to which I really did not want to go...) she describes female and male ways of reading or conveying poetry: women keep their poems quiet, whilst men breath theirs out even in the metro, not waiting for peace and respect (Pip, 25). The poet feels out of place in the male literary world, ending her verse with finding stray dogs that probably want to see whether there really is snow in the mountains already. Finally may be mentioned ‘tak dziūna byvaje časam...’ (how amazing it sometimes is...), a rather mysterious poem about communication and memory, particularly of childhood, including running to the swimming pool, ‘каб разам утапіць несправядлівасць патрыярхатнага свету’ (in order together to drown the injustice of the patriarchal world, Нś, 19).

A central theme in Napiejeva’s writing is love and affection in all their ardour and anguish.¹ It is a serious matter, rarely treated with apparent levity as it is in ‘kali b ty byŭ jabłykam...’ (if you were an apple...) in which, after deciding how to cut up the fruit and what to do with it, she concludes that she will give it to the first woman she meets because ‘проста я не вельмі люблю яблыкі’ (I simply do not like apples much, Нś, 27). In an earlier poem the poet writes somewhat ambiguously of putting her modesty in a jar occupied by a yellow spider:

У слоік
 парослы атручаным квеццём
 я пакладу свой сорама – жоўты павук
 спляце павуціну
 і нецвярозыя мухі
 засьведчаць сваю далікатнасць
 пачуўшы ягонае хваляванне
 (мой страх перад табою) (Rn, 31)

(Into a jar / overgrown with a poisoned flowering / I shall place my modesty – a yellow spider / will weave its web / and drunken flies / will bear witness to their delicacy / feeling its agitation [my fear before you])

This poem perhaps recalls Valžyna Mort’s story ‘Hopniki’ where a little yellow monkey between her legs prevents her from sleeping.²

Time is a constant enemy, and in a striking verse, ‘*Pakul ty zabyvaješsia na majo imia...*’ (While you forget my name...) the poet, faced with being forgotten, one vowel or consonant a day, describes her response to this slow torture, by lying amidst the barbed wire of an electricity station:

¹ A striking image of sperm in coffee ends the poem ‘na padlozie vandrujuć papiery...’ (it is papers that wander across the floor..., Rn, 18).

² Valžyna Mort, *Ja tonienkaja, jak tvaje viejki*, Miensk 2005, p. 104.

...і зьведаць
 чым ёсьць
імгненне (Nr, 7)

(and find out / what a *moment* / is)

Young women often complain of the immaturity of young men, but the ending of one vivid poem, 'ja rašpiľuju chošpisny viečar...' (I shall saw up the hospice evening..., Rn, 32) suggests that Napiejeva takes a different view:

я расьпілюю хосьпісны вечар
 клічнікам раніцы
 ты палавінкі яго пакладзеш
 на шалі жаданьяў
 аквамарынавы подых маёй летуценнасці
 і
 недасяжны бурштын
 тваёй сталасці (Rn, 32)¹

(I shall saw up / the hospice evening / with the exclamation marks of morning / you will put its halves / onto the scales of longing / the aquamarine breath of my dreaming / and / the inaccessible amber / of your maturity)

Weakness, however, exasperates the poet to the extent of making her write words together and not to distinguish between questions and answers, leading her to consider making an addition to a specialized dictionary:

...у слоўнік жыццёвых цяжкасьцей
 варта занесці
 «Надзвычайная крохкасьць каханка,
 і як яго песьціць» (Nr, 30)

(into the dictionary of life's difficulties / it is worth entering / 'The exceptional frailty of a lover, / and how to nourish him')

Even if a lover is absent or unfaithful the main thing is to survive, as shown in the bitter poem, 'voš tak a palovie na pieršuju...' (so it is at half past twelve..., Pip, 21-22). In another highly imaginative verse, 'biarloh tvajho ciela adšukać daviałosia zapozna...' (I came to seek out the lair of your body too late...), in an extensive metaphor, incorporating birds, butterflies and much else, she realizes that she must return her lover to his forest lair:

...быў час прачынацца і вяртаць цябе твайму лесу
 мне ж заставацца рыкам у мове мядзьведжай (Pip, 33)

(it was time to wake up and return you to your forest / for me it was to remain as a roar in bear language)

Another almost emblematic poem, 'ja całuju vicier z raźbiehu...' (I kiss the wind as I run...), in which Napiejeva describes past love with characteristic use of grammatical categories, is worth quoting in full:

я całую вецер з разьбегу
 на дэсэрт замаўляю дзень з карамелью
 ну і што што зьбіралася ўзяцца шлюбам я зь ценом

¹ The use of punctuation marks in her imagery here reflects a trend towards grammar and language as themes, which will be discussed later.

мене і ціню твайго было б дастаткова
 проста мова твая
 ня мела формаў у будучым часе
 так я і засталася
 у нейкім там плюсквампэрфэксце (Pip, 8)

(I kiss the wind as I run / for dessert I order a day with caramel / but so what that I was planning to take on marriage with a shadow / for me even your shadow would be enough / simply your language / did not have forms in the future tense / so I just had to remain / in some pluperfect or other)

Several poems describe her reactions to being abandoned. Exhaustion is the main feature of 'što bylo зроблена pryniesla praklon mnie...' (what was done brought a curse on me..., Pip, 40), whilst in 'ў табіе як у забытым фотаателіе...' (your place is like in a forgotten photo atelier...) the secret is hidden, but no longer important:

...як закапаная скарбонка
 сакрэцік
 з аскепкамі і знойдзенаю драбязой
 такі ж каштоўны як і непатрэбны
 ты (Pip, 41)

(like buried treasure / the little secret / with broken pieces and bits and pieces that have been found / as valuable and as unnecessary / as you).

The next poem in the book describes being parted from her lover as joyful as well as disquieting:

толькі што скошанай травой
 пад маёй далоньню твае валасы
 вяртаюць мяне ў радасць і непакой
 быць з табой
 быць побач
 вось
 і адлегласць і супакой (Pip, 42)

(like freshly cut grass / your hair under my palm / brings back to me both joy and disquiet / to be with you / to be alongside you / that / is both distance and peace)

Other poems about parting and separation are less emotionally ambiguous: in 'na novym tramvai...' (in a new tram...), for instance, she leaves her lover with words unsaid, and spends the evening in a minor mode (Nr, 10); in 'ўсія ў панядзелкавых абдымках...' (all in Monday embraces...) he apologises to her inadequately and she finds herself in hospital whilst he remains in freedom (Nr, 17); in 'časam zdarajecca...' (it sometimes happens...), after parting, she imagines that bystanders' kisses blown after the bus are for her, although she knows they are not (Pip, 55). Most drastic of all, however, is an untitled poem that begins with a deliberately ungrammatical line, 'ty pamior mianie ў śniežni...' (you died me in December...), reflecting her great pain illustrated with a series of images including the seven circles of Hell and a living death; the ending is particularly pathetic:

беспрытульна бадзяцца і лігасцю
 найвялікшай для мяне стане
 мой боль (Hś, 22)

(to wander without refuge / and for me the greatest comfort will be / my pain)

In another poem from the same collection, 'razvahi ў doždž' (reflections during rain) her language combines vulgar abuse with the ordinary names of vegetables as she expresses disgust at the false promise of love, amidst thoughts about the unseasonable weather:

...не буду нікога любіць
 усё гэта бздурны для пеставаных паэтаў, пустое
 ну яго ў сраку
 пайду на гарод падбіваць гарбузы
 мо
 скончыўся
 дождж (Нś, 23)

(I shall not love anyone / all this shit is for spoilt poets, empty / well stick it up your arsehole
 / I am going into the garden to dig up the pumpkins / perhaps / the rain / has stopped)

Whether or not true love exists, jealousy occasionally figures in the emotional world of Napiejeva's poems. Three examples will serve to give an impression: 'Dzikija kirli na śniadanak...' (Wild seagulls for breakfast...) describes how the birds breakfast on her fear, and ends with a reference to her departed lover's tears: 'яны таксама твае каханкі?' (are they also your lovers?, Rn, 52). In 'ja sydu kali nicta nie sychodzić...' (I shall depart when nobody departs...), her lover, jealous, has left her and the poet wants him back but he is busy having sex with hundreds of other girls:

я сыду калі ніхто не сыходзіць
 я прыйду калі ня прыйдзе ніхто
 верасьнёвая поўня мне грудзі
 абмывае штоноч малаком
 ты ня сьпіш, ты па вуліцах ловіш
 чорных цэрбэраў на сваю душу
 павяртайся дадому, родны
 не табе і ня я скажу
 у маіх валасох вецер
 калыхае сваіх ветранят
 ты раўнуеш
 і на сотай дзяўчыне
 ставіш на ейнай цнатлівасьці мат
 шах! (Nt, 8)

(I shall depart when nobody departs / I shall come when nobody comes / the September full moon every night / washes my breasts with milk / you do not sleep, / in the streets / you try to catch black Cerberuses for your soul / return to the home that is not dear to you / and I shall not mention it / in my hair the wind / rocks its little winds / you are jealous / and on the hundredth girl / you place on her modesty check / mate!)

The third poem, 'vieryć u cud na kalady – užo nieprystojna...' (to believe in a miracle at Christmas is not longer decent...) she feels lost when she cannot be embraced by her lover any more, but the ending is on a humorous or, at least, whimsical note:

...губляюся
 а яно плача
 не разумеючы як слова
 магло забраць цябе ад мяне

у рэцыдыўнай надзеі цісну клавішу home
 але не трапялю дадому (Нś, 8)

(I am lost / but it [your body] weeps / not understanding how a word / could take you from me // eternally hopeful I press the home key / but I do not get home)

Finally may be mentioned a poem that appears to refer to love for a woman, albeit in the past, 'adzinaje mahčymaje imia było na "a..." (the only possible name ended in 'a'...):

адзінае магчымае імя было на «а»
 і заканчэньне ў яго было на «а»

а пасярод – слупы зь перагародкай
такая артаграфія мне не знаёма
і каб я лепш запомніла яе
ты прыкладаў мой голаў да слупа
каб слухала я ейнае імя
што стала для цябе сынонімам «каханья»
я ж націскалася на «о»
таму зрабілася сынонімам «было» (Nr, 23)

(the only possible name ended in 'a' / and its ending was in 'a' / and in the middle columns with a partition / such orthography is not familiar to me / and in order that I could better recall it / you put my head against a pillar / so that I could hear her name / which became for you a synonym of 'love' / and I pressed myself against 'o' / therefore it became a synonym of 'was')

After all the violence and disappointment in the poems illustrated above¹ here are a few examples of some of Hapiejeva's happier, though never bland, poems about personal relations, which range from great simplicity to immense complexity and intimacy. Two adjacent verses illustrate unalloyed devotion:

учора бачыў цябе ў небе
ты плыла нібы воблака
і я падумаў
шкада што я не вецер (Nr, 42)

(yesterday I saw you in the sky / you floated like a cloud / and I thought / a pity I am not a wind)

каб заўважыць прыгажосць тваіх вачэй
хопіць імгнення
каб зразумець
і вечнасьці мала
каб адчуць смак тваіх вуснаў
і пацалунка хопіць
а каб навучыцца чытаць па іх
і мільярду замала
але кожны дзень
набліжае мяне да патаемнага (Nr, 43)

(only a moment is needed / to notice the beauty of your eyes / to understand that / even eternity is too little / to feel the taste of your lips / a kiss is sufficient / but to learn to read on them / even a million are not enough / but every day / brings me closer to the secret)

It is clear that the first of these poems is from a man to a woman, and there is some gender ambiguity in several of Hapiejeva's love poems, including 'Celafanavyja viatry...' (Cellophane winds...) in which girls gradually remove their bras and other underclothes revealing their ordinariness. After its bizarre opening line, the poem has a no less strange ending:

Эпоха палонных сантэхнікаў
хутка скончыцца
і зноў давядзецца
заліваць іхнія муміі цэмантам (Rn, 33)

(The epoch of imprisoned plumbers / will soon come to an end / and again it will be necessary / to cover their mummies with cement)

Many of Hapiejeva's varied and imaginative love poems are both intimate and tender, but they also contain some violence and references to armies and militarism. First,

¹ The themes of violence and war will be discussed later.

however, 'sakavitaja...' (a rich...) contains the line: 'куды не кроч – паўсюль эрагагенная зона' (wherever you move – everywhere is an erogenous zone, Rn, 65). In another poem, 'ja chadziŭ pa tabie jak pa muziei... (I went through you as if through a museum...) she dreams that, as in a fairy story, there will be attached to his exhibits a sign 'дакраніцца, калі ласка' (do please touch, Hś, 44). In 'pračynajusia ad taho...' (I wake up from...) she describes a morning without getting up, a 'grasse matinée', although it is not entirely clear whether she is alone in bed (Hś, 36), but there is nothing ambiguous about a very short verse, 'jazkom bavaŭnianym...' (with a tongue of cotton...):

языком баваўняным
 прадзеты праз тонкае вушка вуснаў
 ты вышываеш на жываце маім
 манаграму (Nr, 37)

(with a tongue of cotton / pressed through the narrow opening of your lips / you sew onto my stomach / a monogram)

In 'Nie, mnie nia ciażka...' (No, it is not difficult for me...) she describes all the ways she could imagine him, intimate and prosaic; in the middle of the poem she pictures herself with him when her arm is numb with the weight of his body and he says, perhaps surprisingly in the context, 'безадказны мінэт' (oral sex with no problems); the poem ends with an invitation to imagine her with a man walking along the pavement with her grandfather's eyes, going on to some of her own less attractive personal habits (such as nail biting), and ending with the image of her without him (Nr, 16). Particular intimacy is described in a strong early poem, 'Ja...' (I...) in which the picture of herself as a rapidly disappearing drop of water on her skin¹ soon turns into a drop of blood from her 'opening' leaving a taste of metal in her lover's mouth:

Я...

Я – маленькая кропелька вады,
 што ападае сёння на скуру,
 а заўтра высыхае,
 не пакінуўшы нічога.

Я – маленькая кропелька крыві, што ўчора
 выпякала з вусця
 а сёння ты сьлізнуў мяне... –
 і я знікла,
 пакінуўшы ў тваім роце
 хранічны прысмак
 жалеза. (Rn, 73)

(I... // I am a little drop of water / that today falls on my skin, / and tomorrow will dry up / leaving not a trace. // I am a little drop of blood that yesterday / flowed out of my opening / and today you licked me... / and I disappeared, / leaving in your mouth / the chronic taste / of iron)

In another poem that, curiously, begins in Cyrillic and ends in Roman script, 'U ptuśak nianaviści...' (The birds have the hatred..., Nr, 25), the beginning is with her lover's look being compared to the hate of malevolent birds, but by the end the opposite applies, with every embrace and with every second kiss.

As has been mentioned, an element of violence, real or threatened, including war, features in several of Napiejeva's poems, including those where the main theme is love.

¹ As Hanna Kiślicyna has observed, in Rekanstrukcyja nieba and elsewhere Napiejeva uses the word skura (skin) to indicate breasts: Kiślicyna, 136.

In 'Zryvajusia...' (I fall off...), for example, she dreams of falling, of trees playing chess, and she and her lover play at being trees, although someone always has to win. The morning before execution it is her turn to feed the ravens, making cuts into her salty fingers, but when her eyes refuse to see, she finds his voice by feel (Rn, 53). In 'dumaju što treba pacalavać ciabie ũ listapadzie..' (I think I must kiss you in November...), she says that she must soon go to war and, like all soldiers, will send postcards which will eventually cause offence, so that they should kiss in August before autumn comes, and they automatically become a footnote for each other (Hś, 31). A warlike fantasy element is found in a slightly longer poem divided into several short parts, 'Finskaje hieta' (The Finnish Ghetto), in which she describes herself as a veteran of the (clearly imaginary) Belarusian-Finnish war (Pip, 18-20). In a later poem from the same collection, 'Vaŭkom prabiahaju pa vulicach hetaha horadu...' (I run like a wolf through the streets of this city...), after describing the lack of even a stink in the dead environment, she is physically disgusted by the thought of war throughout her 'pacifist body', but the ending is forgiving and even relatively light-hearted, despite her lover's not telling her that he was going on a parade. Here are the last five lines:

ты быў на парадзе мне не сказаўшы
выгляд зраблю што нічога не адбылося і паліго
апранаючы
заместа цыдулкі
пакіну гэтыя 165 словаў (Pip, 44)

(you were at a parade without telling me / I shall pretend that nothing happened and put / my coat on / instead of a note / I shall leave these 165 lines)

In 'напэўна гэта зялёны колер тваёй курткі...' (it is probably the green colour of your jacket...) she feels that the military colour makes her lover unapproachable, and, thinking of the famous warrior Napoleon, hopes that her friend will survive his experiences and that the wind or someone else will leave on his neck a trace of cherries (Pip, 51). Decidedly mysterious is 'Ja pryjdu na tvajo pachavańnie...' (I shall come to your burial...) where the opening line serves as a chorus, but she hopes to plant something discretely in his memory, the final line being 'проста ў ложка' (simply into the bed, Rn, 25). In contrast is the title, 'jak pakliču ciabie na vajnu...' (I shall summon you to war...), in which she goes to the war with her lover, although the battlefield is also a cornfield; her main concern, however, is whether she will still be loved, despite life-changing wounds (Rn, 40). In another vivid poem, 'džym, jakaja ramantyka?..' (Jim, what is romantic...) she describes a woman's lot as being to sew buttons on uniforms, but ends with a bitterly realistic reflection on what war means for the ordinary soldier:

...бо са стагоддзя ў стагоддзе
гузік старанна прышыты да кашулі жаўнера
стужка адпрасаваная на безбрылёўцы матроса
не ствараюць гісторыі
а ўсяго толькі жыццё асобага чалавека ці двух
якія паміраючы ўзгадвалі не эпас падзей
а шурпатаць сколатых пальцаў
дробныя валдыры ад апекаў на прыдалонні
тых самых нязначных людзей
ад якіх нішто не залежала і гэтак жа нічога не засталася (Hś, 48)

(for from century to century / they carefully sewed a button onto a soldier's shirt / a ribbon pressed onto a sailor's cap / they do not create history / but only the life of one or two / dying they do not think of the epochal events / but the roughness of their chopped off fingers / the little burns of blisters on their wrists / those most insignificant of people / on whom nothing depended and similarly nothing of them remained)

In 'špinami ŭ śnieh padajem...' (we fall on our backs in the snow...) it is the last day of the war and, although angels are in mufti, the poet lies tormented in the snow (Rn, 63), whilst in 'samaje kryŭdnaje...' (the most offensive...) she again sees herself as a soldier, wondering whether she can read the signs Penelope has been sewing for soldiers like her; she does not want to take prisoners but goes out into the battlefield with her lover:

...і пачынаем размову
пра тактыкі і стратэгіі
і невылечнасць раненняў
і разумеем што паміж намі ёсць
нешта большае за непадпісанае пагадненне (Hś, 40)

(and we begin a conversation / about tactics and strategies / and the incurableness of the wounded / and we understand that between us / there is something greater than an unfinished treaty)

Finally, in this account of imaginary soldiering, may be mentioned 'Vałasy maje...' (My hair...), from which are taken the following lines:

...гэта я той жаўнер
што гвалціць сваю перамогу
пад парванымі крыламі
чорнага птаха

гэта я на ўскрайку імя
расстраляю бясплодныя дні
паставіўшы іх да сыцяны
тварам (Rn, 61)

(I am that soldier / that rapes my own victory / under the broken wings / of a black bird // it is I at the outskirts of a name / who executes fruitless days / putting them up against a wall / with their faces towards it)

Other images of execution are found in Detail 13 of Hapieva's novel, 'Rekanstrukcyja nieba (Raman u detalach) – (Detal u ramanie)' (Reconstruction of the sky [A novel in details] – [Detail in a novel]). And in the second poem of a sequence entitled 'Vieršy pra žnivienski hołas' (Poems about the August voice):

Золатка. Вас расстраляў
жнівеньскі голас?
Значыць так трэба. Ня плачце.
Прашу Вас, ня пэцкайце лісьце
сваёю крывёю.
Золатка, можа запросіце нас
у калегіюм сьмерці?
Што? Перапоўнены?.. (Rn, 37)

(Golden one, have you been executed / by the August voice? / That means it had to be. Don't weep. / I beg you, do not stain the foliage / with your blood. / Golden one, could you invite us / into the college of death? / What? Is it full up?..)

The contrast between fantasy war and the grim details of real warfare in Hapiejeva's poetry is striking. Belarus has not been at war during her lifetime (unless one includes violently suppressed protests), unlike neighbouring Ukraine where Serhiy Zhadan has written harrowing poems about the ongoing conflict there. Although a very competent translator, she does not appear to have made any versions of Ukrainian verse hitherto.

War is, of course, not the only source of violence and death, and these themes occupy a considerable place in the frequently dark verse of this poet. Death is treated in a characteristically varied way. In 'Atramantavyja plamy zamiarzajuć...' (Ink blots freeze...),

for instance, the blots frozen by the cold of the town seem associated with statistics, and the poet does not want to be just an item in lists of the living, the dead, and the as yet unborn (Rn, 67). In 'Zaplacieš maje koski, koski...' (You will tie my plaits, plaits...), a poem that provides a good example of Hapiejewa's fondness for, and skill in, the use of repetition, death is represented by its odour (Rn, 20); there is more repetition in several other poems here, including an unusual rather fantastical verse, 'MNIE białym kitom...' (I as a white whale...), which, having introduced the theme of war, ends with people waiting for the whale on the opposite shore, 'цяжарныя сьмерцю' (pregnant with death, Rn, 55). In another verse 'Kali narodzicca śmierć i...' (When death is born and...) birth dies, and it becomes cold and 'well-known' cannibals 'ціхенька-ціхенька будуць / цалаваць шмацкі маёй шкуры' (creep up on the poet / and kiss strips of her skin, Rn, 16). The emphasis is on life in the following short poem, 'mnie nie vykinuć žyćcia sa slova śmierć...' (it is not for me to throw out life from the word death...); the price, however, seems high:

мне ня выкінуць жыцця са слова сьмерць
як дзяўчыну зь цела ўласнага мне ня выкінуць
зап'яклася кроў на маіх грудзях
зап'яклася ды асыпалася (Nr, 28)

(it is not for me to throw life out of the word death / just as I would not throw a girl out of my own body / blood boiled on my breasts / it boiled and sprayed down)

In 'ja častkova pamru...' (I shall partly die...) the poet describes in detail all the various forms of decay and destruction that she will suffer, ending with a humorous two lines after the many horrors earlier in the poem:

пад колы патраплю
і зьнікне праблема выбару (Rn, 43)

(I shall fall under a bus / and the problem of choice will disappear)

In a rather despairing poem about the need to reconstruct life (including the sky), 'Adsiul niemahčyma pamierci...' (From here you cannot die...), death seems to be a perhaps desirable option that is unavailable in the bleak environment described by the poet (Rn, 42). Finally, quite different in tone is a humorous poem depicting death as an almost embarrassingly fashionable model, 'śmierć maja budzie kakietkaj...' (my death will be a coquette...) where the poet's final regret is that she will not have time to pay her a compliment on her dress sense (Hś, 62). However dark Hapiejewa's themes may be, she almost always reveals a sense of humour, just as common sense is not far from the surface in many of her fantastical verses.

Hapiejewa's writing and, indeed, her use of grammatical terms, and her references to classical and other literature have already been mentioned, but some more poems also treat these subjects. Firstly, a mention of other classical figures. The earliest are Helios and Chronos in 'Schavanaja pad kronaj tvajho serca...' (Hidden beneath the crown of your heart...), of which this is the last stanza:

у кроне майго сэрца крумкачы
плятуць вяроўку
ад геляся што прыняў цябе ў абдымкі
да пахаванай ў кронасе мяне (Pir, 13)

(in the crown of my heart ravens / weave a rope / from Helios who has taken you into an embrace / to me who am buried in Chronos)

Another poem, 'Tam, dzie pranižliva hrukaje viecier u hrudzi...' (There where the wind beats penetratingly in my breast...), features a change in the relationship between Daphnis

and Chloe, whilst Penelope (already mentioned in ‘Špinami ũ snieh padajem...’) is now married (Nr 14). In ‘kamiennyja pacierki što načapila mora vakoľ svajoj űyi...’ (the stone beads that the sea had attached around its neck...) various names arise, including Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, although the poet thinks that Dulcinea was less than essential:

дульцінея відавочна была залішняй
ці проста законам жанру, прыкметай эпохі (Hś, 46)

(Dulcinea was clearly superfluous / or simply the law of the genre, a sign of the age)

In ‘Dziaŭčyna...’ (Girl...) the poet compares herself to Ophelia looking for Hamlet, also living in one of life’s reservations and longing to escape; in the game of life only she holds the trump card of resentment (*kryŭda*) (Nr, 18). Finally, in this very short list, Thomas Mann is recalled in ‘jak nie pajechać u vieniecyju’ (how not to go to Venice) in which the German author and the death of his tormented hero are at the forefront of her mind (Hś, 42).

Before turning to some more instances of Hapiejeva’s references to grammatical and other linguistic forms, it may be worth mentioning a few of her scathing remarks about the prose of some fellow-writers. A clear example is ‘pišy, pišy svaju prozu...’ (write, write your prose...):

пішы, пішы сваю прозу
пра тое што ружа на лапу азора
упала
пішы і не забывайся
сьмяецца той
хто ўмеє сьмяяцца (Nr, 27)

(write, write your prose / about how a hand / fell / on the paw of Azore / write and do not forget / that the one who laughs / is the one who knows how to laugh)

In ‘Vosieńniu...’ (In autumn...) she says all the newspapers have migrated, leaving the prose writers feeling abandoned:

...я распавяду табе пра карабельную самоту
і пра стомленых празаікаў што пішуць
свае аўдавелыя вершы (Rp, 30)

(and I shall tell you about loneliness on board a ship / and about the weary prose writers who write / their widowed verses)

In ‘Piasok...’ (Sand...) we find the line: ‘Там на ўзбярэжжы трупных аповесыцяў’ (There on the shore of corpse-like novellas). Before turning to grammar and spelling it may be worth quoting just one more poem, different in tone and sense from those above, in which she shows just how violent and personal her attitude to poetry can be:

вазьму гэты камень памерам з кулак
і разаб’ю твае вершы
аскепкамі ж напішу паэму
пра тое што калісьці тут было маё сэрца (Nr, 46)

(I shall take this stone the size of a fist / and smash your verses / and with the broken pieces I shall write a narrative poem about how once here was my heart)

Grammar and spelling, as may have already been seen (for instance, the reference to the pluperfect in ‘ja caľuju vieceľ z raźbiehu...’), are very central to the work of this scholarly poet, as well as often having a strong personal aspect. In one very imaginative poem, ‘šaścikutnik’ (hexagon) the fifth corner suggests:

лавіць ротам снег
 прадзіраючыся праз іерогліфы вейкаў
 пусты занятак
 як і стасункі
 дзе ні грама граматыкі
 а толькі пярэдняязычныя і афрыкаты (Hś, 15)

(to try to catch snow in your mouth / as it squeezes through the hieroglyphics of your eye-lashes / is an empty occupation / as are links / where there is not a gram of grammar / but only glottal sounds and affricates)

In 'pračnuŭšysia ranicaj sprabuješ mianie ŭzhadać...' (waking in the morning you try to remind me...) the poet makes clear that when grammatical rules are forgotten, wrong endings and accents appear, pronunciation goes, and, most important of all, her inspiration also (Hś, 7). In the already mentioned 'ty pamior mianie ŭ śniežni...' she writes passionately of the impermanence of rare words. Here are the first lines of the second part of this unusual poem:

панавярталыя рэчы і выгадаваныя-разам словы
 апошнія сведкі таго што калісь
 існаваў займеннік першай асобы множнага ліку
 але сведкі, як вядома, не жывуць доўга
 на сметніцы іх ужо расцягнулі каты і нейкі сабака
 трымаючы лапай абгортку зубамі на шматкі рве імёны
 так каб дашчэнту
 так каб ужо без надзеі
 канчаткова і невяртальна
 так каб не шшыць і не склеіць (Hś, 22)

(things on credit and single-use words / are the last witnesses of the fact that once / there existed the first person plural pronoun / but evidence, as is well-known, does not live long / it has all been pulled to pieces by cats and some dog on a rubbish heap / holding the dust jacket in his paws tears to pieces the names / so completely / that there is no more hope / finally and irrecoverably / so that you cannot sew or glue it together again)

A short verse, 'rot heta taki línhvistyčny bot...' (the mouth is a sort of linguistic boot...), presents words and language in a broader context:

рот гэта такі лінгвістычны бот
 пад якім апынаюцца тысячы словаў за дзень
 пакуль мы ідзем
 караскаючыся на гару моваў (Hś, 43)

(the mouth is a sort of linguistic boot / under which find themselves a thousand words a day / while we walk /scrambling up the mountain of languages)

In the closing lines of another poem, 'vyčytać hety śnieh...' (to read this snow...), the poet discusses the difference between singular and plural, before concluding that her partner is not the exception and that she is not the rule:

множны лік мае свае перавагі
 аднак ёсць словы якія нельга пісаць разам
 таму ў скрайніх выпадках я пішу сябе праз злучок
 трымаючы пад паліто
 букеты ружовых і жоўтых
 мяккіх знакаў
 каб паслабіць тваю цвёрдасць
 але
 ты не выключэньне
 а я не правіла (Nt, 15)

(The plural has its advantages / there are however words that cannot be written together / for that reason in extreme cases I write my name with a hyphen / holding under my coat / bouquets of pink and yellow soft signs / in order to soften your hardness / but / you are not the exception / and I am not the rule)

In the middle of the already mentioned poem, 'čyrvonyja hronki nieznojmaj rašliny vyšpiejuć pobač z siabrym domam...', three lines turn from drinking herbal tea to the possibilities of prefixes:

і спадзявацца што берагі кубка стануцца раптам вуснамі з фота
фота аўта мога і прота ёсць шмат прыставак выбраць бы слова
і каранем высадзіць яго каля дома (Hś, 56)

(and hope that the shores of the mug will suddenly become the mouth of a photo / photo auto motto proto there are many prefixes to choose without a word / and, like a root, put outside the door)

After the already mentioned humorous poem about apples, 'kali ja byŭ jabłykam...' it is somewhat unexpected to find apples associated with modern linguistics in a brief prose piece, 'Jabłyki, albo Hienieratyŭnaja hramatyka' (Apples, or Generative grammar), which ends wittily with two rhetorical questions:

Ці сапраўды ўсё можна звесці да пэўнага мінімальнага набору аперацый? Ці сапраўды ўсё можна звесці да яблыка? (Vh, 44)

(Can everything really be reduced to a certain minimal selection of operations? Can everything really be reduced to an apple?)

Finally in this selection of Napiejeva's references to language in her works is 'Aščiarožna pamuj svoj cień...' (Wash your shadow carefully...), which uses the familiar image of war to highlight genuine linguistic alternatives:

Асцярожна памый свой цень
мы – словы
пакараныя маўчаннем
і мы не вернемся
з тае вайны
паміж мною і мной (Rn, 39)

(Wash your shadow carefully / we as words / are punished by silence / and we shall not return / from that war / between *mnoju* and *mnoj*)

Before leaving the topic of grammar and language, it is worth mentioning firstly a poem about rhymes, and then two verses about the reactions to the poet's own language by one of her lovers, and her responses to them. In 'dźvie žančyny ŭ doŭhich čornych spadnicach...' (two women in long black dresses...) near the beginning we read:

тут зіма і мы ўсе апранаем палітоны
пратоны
не памятаю што такое
фатоны
батоны і іншыя рыфмы на заканчэнне –оны (Hś, 12)

(here it is winter and everyone is in overcoats / protons / I do not remember the meaning of photons / long white loaves and other rhymes ending in –ony)

Such details are hardly likely to have interested her nitpicking collocutor in 'znoŭku vučyš mianie ciarpieńniu...' (again you are teaching me patience...) of which this is the first half:

зноўку вучыш мяне цяпенню
і пакрысе нейкай сваёй мове
бо тое як я размаўляю
моваі ты назваць не гатовы:
так нельга сказаць
так не кажучь
гэта літара вымаўляецца іначай
і чаму раптам націск скача?
ты цалуеш мяне з заўзятасцю каменданта
каб выграбці неразуменне з роту
і калі нічога не застаецца
я адчую сябе ідыётам, (НЎ, 18)

(again you teach me patience / and little by little to some language of yours / for the way I speak you are not prepared to call a language / *you cannot say it like that / people do not say that / this letter is pronounced differently / and why does the accent suddenly jump?* / you kiss me with the zealotry of a commander / in order to scrape lack of understanding from my mouth / and when nothing is left / I feel myself an idiot)

Can this be the same linguistically limited man who is sent an ironic (?) feather in 'Ja ўкладу ў капэрту...' (I put into an envelope...):

я ўкладу ў капэрту
птушынае пёрка
знойдзенае на ўзбочыне
ці на асфальце партовага горада
і адашлю табе
у надзеі што ты
разгадаеш гэты кітайскі фразеалагізм (НЎ, 21)¹

(I put into an envelope / a bird's feather / found at the side of a road / or on the asphalt of a port / and I shall send it to you / in the hope that you / will guess the meaning of this Chinese phraseologism)

Writing is not confined to Napiejeva herself or to weary prose writers and poetasters, but can also be undertaken by birds, a prominent part of the flora and fauna in her verse, as we see in a short poem that is both fantastic and philosophical, 'vokny raźlinavanyja ašestkami...' (the windows are lined by pieces of wood):

вокны разлінаваныя ашэсткамі
спісанья жыццямі
птушкі думалі межаў няма
а давялі сябе да пісьма
стаўшы літарамі з крыві і цела
яны пэўна бачылі што з таго боку неба
аблогі здаюцца мантажнай пенай

такая ілюзія матэрыяльнасці (НЎ, 55)

(the windows are lined by strips of wood / written by lives / the birds thought that there were no more limits / and gave themselves over to writing / becoming letters with their blood and bodies / they probably saw that from that side of the sky / the clouds appeared to be a montage of foam // such is the illusion of materiality)

Many other birds have appeared in earlier quotations. Trees are also often personified, as in 'kali ty dreva...' (if you were a tree..., Nr, 35) and 'Kali pamiraje dreva...' (When a tree

¹ There is nothing in the least ironic in another poem about a fallen feather, 'Piorka puchnataja padaje...' (A fluffy feather falls...) in which the feather after a long flight lands on the head of an angel (Rn, 21).

dies..., Rn, 64), to name but two. A particularly strong example of Hapiejeva's imaginative personification of nature is 'Vada parastaje mocham...' (The water grows over with moss...):

Вада парастае мохам
забыўшыся на сваю сутнасць
струменьчыкі валасоў знікаюць
у карнавальным пыле
як амальгамавым сьнегам
пахнуць першыя птушкі
так водарасьці твае плачуць
па акіяне каханай (Rn, 68)

(The water grows over with moss / forgetting its true essence / little streams of hairs / disappear in the carnival of dust / like an amalgam of snow / the first birds smell / so your algae weep / for the ocean of their beloved)

As a final note on Hapiejeva's imaginative and stimulating verse, must be mentioned a charming children's book, excellently illustrated by Marta Hieraščanka, *Dzvie aviečki: vieršavanyja historyi* (Two little sheep: stories in verse).¹ The easy rhymes and delightful stories are undoubtedly an excellent way of ensuring more readers for the future.

London, 2019

¹ Volha Hapiejeva, *Dzvie aviečki: vieršavanyja historyi*, Minsk 2017.

Cikhan Čarniakievič



...We are sure that the books presented in our catalog of present-day Belarusian literature can interest readers in many countries of the world...

Knihanoša

Recent book reviews

Dear readers,

Recently, there have been several momentous anniversaries in Belarusian culture – 2017 was dedicated to the 500th anniversary of Belarusian book publishing: in August 1517, in Prague, Doctor Francysk Skaryna from Połacak presented the world with his translation of *Psalter*, the first printed book in the Belarusian language. On 25 March 2018, the Belarusians celebrated the 100th anniversary of the proclamation of independence of the Belarusian People's Republic. Like many other nations, including our countries-neighbors Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, in 1918 the Belarusians received an opportunity to escape from the Russian Empire's oppression and to declare their right to independence.

Both anniversaries were ignored completely by the current authorities of Belarus. The innocuous 500th anniversary of Belarusian book publishing was allowed somehow (in the form of several conferences and published books); the interdiction to

celebrate the 100th anniversary of independence was only lifted a few days prior to the date. The holiday *BPR100* organized by civil society and non-state organizations, financed by crowdfunding, was carried out under the police steadfast surveillance.

How comes it? All the mentioned neighboring countries celebrated their 100th anniversaries of independence at the highest level, on a large scale. The reason is that Belarus is still under Russia's unspoken protectorate; the Belarusian authorities celebrate the year 2019 much more actively, i.e. their anniversary – the 100th anniversary of the creation of Soviet Byelorussia.

The Belarusians celebrate two Christmases (Catholic and Orthodox ones) and two New Years (as they try to watch both Putin's and Lukashenko's congratulations on TV). The Belarusians have two state languages – Russian, which dominates in all spheres of society's life; and Belarusian, which is extruded into the periphery; they have two independences – democratic and Soviet ones. They have two literatures too – official, loyal to ideological and propaganda services of official power, and – independent, which receives no state support at all and exists thanks to good people and patrons of art.

Writers-propagandists have free access to radio, TV, schools and universities, but the most interesting things take place in the community of independent writers. Their books are in great demand and bought willingly; they obtain many subscribers through crowdfunding; their works (not many, but still) are translated into foreign languages.

It is impossible to say that the Belarusians are not known in the world. There appear new books by *Sviatlana Alexievič*, the Nobel Prize laureate; *Aleś Razanaŭ* (Herder Prize); *Uladzimir Niaklajeŭ* (Kurt Tucholsky Prize of the Swedish PEN Center); *Uladzimir Arloŭ* (the award “European Poet of Freedom”); *Ihar Babkoŭ* (the award of the countries of the Visegrád Group; short list of the Angelus Central European Literature Award). And this list of authors from Belarus, who have received significant European literary awards, is far from being complete.

As a rule, it is prose writers, authors of novels and stories, who are awarded; however, in contemporary Belarusian literature, it is poetry that is very popular with readers, and in these latter days there appeared many excellent poetic collections, among which particularly vivid and powerful – and for the first time in the history of Belarusian literature – was the poetry created by women: *Valancina Aksak*, *Viera Burlak*, *Valžyna Mort*, *Volha Hapiejeva*, *Maryja Martysievič*, *Hanna Komar* and *Nasta Kudasava* – they represent Belarus at international festivals and book fairs; they have a wide circle of readers in Belarus. Recently, Maryja Martysievič announced a crowdfunding campaign to publish her new book of poetry and collected the necessary sum of money during 3 days, thus having set up a *sui generis* record in the cultural community.

Independent Belarusian writers continue to live under the conditions of permanent absurdity. Young poet *Uladzimir Lankievič* wrote in one of his poems, “*We are somewhere in between hope and hopelessness now: the period of preparation and imperspicuity.*” Here, fluttering about between two independences, languages, and cultures, as well as balancing between hope and hopelessness, independent literature of Belarus keeps creating extremely important and interesting texts that should necessarily be heard by the world – they are worth it here and now.

Today, the “Knihanoša” [*“Book Peddler”*] almanac and the “Books From Belarus” project founded by the Union of Belarusian Writers are the only means of popularization of Belarusian literature abroad. For almost the 30-year period after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the state has not created any organization that would be engaged on a regular basis in the disseminating of Belarusian culture as it is traditionally done by the Goethe-Institut, British Council, Swedish and Polish Institutes. Being a private noncommercial project of the UBW, the “Books From Belarus” places emphasis on independent literature that in the existing situation needs to be presented abroad most of all.

We are sure that the books presented in our catalog of present-day Belarusian literature can interest readers in many countries of the world. In our turn, we can guarantee that the editorial staff of the almanac and the Union of Belarusian Writers as a public organization are ready to become active intermediaries in your negotiations with authors, Belarusian publishing houses, and copyright experts.

NOBEL PRIZE

Siarhiej Šapran, In Search of Meaning: interviews and dialogues with Svetlana Alexievich, Smolensk: Inbielkult, 2018. 284pp. (Union of Belarusian Writers' Library "Writer's Bookshop"; issue №106). ISBN 978-5-00076-033-8

The Belarusian Nobel Prize winner in literature Svetlana Alexievich was interviewed on several occasions by the journalist Siarhiej Šapran over a period of 27 years. The interviews were reactions to new books or repressions against the writer. Alexievich's books have been put on trial in Belarusian courts; because of the country's President Alexander Lukashenko's personal hostility towards her, her books are not published in state-run publishing houses. Independent publishing houses refused to print this book of interviews because of its critical stance towards the authorities – as a result it was published in Smolensk (Russia).

In Search of Meaning is an emotional monologue by Alexievich herself, often extraordinarily frank and revealing. It amounts to a unique biography of the Nobel laureate that she herself relates. She is a famous interviewer, but here she occupies the place of her interviewees, reveals her thoughts, speaks about her own life, about the way she came to literature, how her well-known books were written, and comments on topical issues of the conflictual reality of today.

In the author's own words, there is a warning that permeates the whole of her "Encyclopedia of the Red Man": new generations of Eastern Europeans must guard against the temptation of there being another "only one possible correct idea." The temptation of living in a strictly hierarchical society, of losing one's dignity and then one's freedom. The importance of the individual in society; people's encounters with the tantalizing depths of human nature; the nature of love, the meaning of life, and the secret of death are still at the centre of Alexievich's writing. These are the topics she talks about in detail with the journalist Siarhiej Šapran.



PROSE

Illa Śin, Libido, Minsk: Knihazbor, 2018, 140pp. (Union of Belarusian Writers' Library "Writer's Bookshop"; issue №112).

The scene is the foreseeable future; we're in everyone's idea of what a provincial town looks like. It's here that the heroine of the book, Maria, ends up after a long experience of acting in hardcore porn films. The genre's going out of business because of the availability of cheap Chinese robotized 3D models, and so Maria is left to her own devices. She becomes a lone observer who assiduously details everything she sees around her. Sometimes her observations resemble time-lapse photography: the smallest things are fixed in her mind. The things that Maria gazes upon in her isolation do not combine into a precise picture of the world. On the contrary: fragments remain fragments; the whole picture is impossible to attain in a situation where complex phenomena have



not yet entirely decayed into a primitive state; where integrity no longer exists, but the next stage has not yet been reached.

Maria reminds us of a nun who lives in the presentiment of “the Other.” A dialogue with “the Other,” at least her search for such a dialogue, her patient expectation, becomes for Maria a certain kind of hope in the “hollow” reality of the “hollow men.” There are no actual, real live people in the novel; the whole course of the book is a depiction of human disintegration or the breakdown of complex organisms into simple ones.

The alternative reality of the novel can be considered eschatological. It talks of the eve of the apocalypse. The author says that as a matter of fact it will be trivial and like normal. People will stand more clearly apart from each other, but children will go on being born, weird people will continue living their weird lives, they will go to work, then make a religious act out of shopping and watching news on TV. And then, suddenly, a war begins. There comes a new phase that will destroy all old the ways of life.

Flashes of the war in the Donbas, quotes from St John the Divine and T. S. Eliot, the morose concrete architecture of the Belarusian landscape, people’s indifference towards each other, sudden enlightenment and hope without hope, the chewing gum of pop music alongside the grave-like circle of life – out of this melting pot comes jewellery in the shape of this new novel by Illa Sin, prose writer, avant-garde musician, and performance artist.

Uladzimir Arloŭ, Dances above the City, Vilnius: Łohvinaŭ, 2017.

“...There are nights when I dedicate my dance to all those who are now dancing on roofs in other cities of this world and the next... I dance in memory of myself because the night will come when I start to enlarge the circle of my dance until it touches the abyss, and the roof will once again belong completely to the swallows. They will start to forget the person who once, without their permission, appeared on their territory and removed his shoes.” *Dances above the City* is one of the significant works of Belarusian literature of recent years, aimed at admirers of Arloŭ’s mysterious, metaphysical prose that has squeezed out of the “Belarusian” context.



The story that leads the hero to the other side of the mirror takes place in ancient Polacak. The city crops up many times in Arloŭ’s stories, memoirs, articles, and historical books, and in this book it weaves a story of the metaphysical dance performed by a group of moonstruck sleepwalkers – true lunatics all – on the roof of an abandoned high-rise building. In order to get on to the roof of the abandoned hotel in Polacak you have to be chosen. The community of dancers united by the fine filaments of the world and by the astral dance, is brought together in accordance with the inexplicable will of someone unspecified; the night chosen for the dance is not subject to the will of anyone’s ‘ego’; it comes of its own accord. If you are chosen for this dance, no obstacles will be placed in your path, and for Arloŭ the astral world will act now not as an alternative, but as an addition, both necessary and vital, to existence in the real world. The sleepwalkers’ dance provides real life with meaning. Even if one of the dancers loses that life on the barricades of politics, the dance goes on.

The roads of Arloŭ’s previous metaphysical travels, of Polacak and Minsk, of erotic connections between men and women all converge in this new collection of prose. He also demonstrates the possibility of hope in an epoch of hopelessness that is out of sync with time.

In 2018, *Dances above the City* was awarded the highest Belarusian prize in the field of prose – the Jerzy Giedroyc Literary Award.

Ihar Babkoŭ, Moment no. 2, Vilnius: Łohvinaŭ, 2017.

A few years after the tremendous success of *Moment* that won several literary prizes (the Visegrád Group award and the Jerzy Giedroyc Prize), Ihar Babkoŭ has now published the second volume of his novel.

The first part of *Moment* concentrated on Minsk as a city text. It was a city that in the 1980s rose from intellectual ruins after decades of Soviet domination. The Minsk city myth, the city text wrote itself right before the eyes of the protagonist, Francišak, with his direct participation; however, at a certain point the processes of revival were no longer under the control of their initiators, history was thrown forwards, and the city – under the rule of a dictator – once again became alien for intellectuals.

The actions and infernal travels of the three heroes in the second volume occur beyond the borders of Belarus. The place where something new could be born is now Vilnia [Vilnius], the treasure-house of Belarusian symbols and ruins. This is a city where roads cross and ideas collide. The heroes of *Moment* in the second part experience chance occurrences, and unexpected meetings that together are interwoven to form a new story. Nevertheless, this new story turns out to be a continuation of the old one.

This is the way the storyteller meanders; here he begins to invent time passing in a “real place to live,” filling his story with quotations. Sometimes he actually gives them a name, sometimes he doesn’t – a variety of cultures, individual texts, plots, ghosts, and doppelgangers: an image from a Hölderlin poem, memories of the Glass family from the stories of J.D. Salinger, Martin Heidegger’s “language as the house of being,” the magic theatre of Hermann Hesse’s *Steppenwolf*, the visions of Carlos Castaneda’s Don Juan, the heart of Uładzimir Žyłka, the tubercular poet killed by Stalin, Jonathan Swift from W.B. Yeats’ play: the kaleidoscope consists of dozens of pieces of glass, each one of which can at one moment draw your attention, and at other times refer you to the general picture which has yet to be revealed in its entirety.

It all began with some inexplicable anxiety, a sense of unease. It welled up in the depths of his being and started to seek an outlet.

Then there came words. Of their own accord, as if from nowhere, sometimes with an unfathomable rhythm. You had to listen attentively in order to understand what was causing the unease and what direction it was going to take. You had to release your mind, calm down, and make way.

And then – just watch how they develop and what they are saying; stop and relax together with them for weeks and for months – until patterns begin to emerge.

Andrej Fiedarenka, The Contemplator: novels, stories, essays, Minsk: Knihazbor, 2018. 144pp. (Dziejastoŭ Literary Journal Library 25).

The analysis of an individual’s mental state at crisis point has always been the basis of Andrej Fiedarenka’s prose writing irrespective of the theme or plot that the author.

The Contemplator is an example of directly realistic writing. At the same time, the familiar interiors and landscapes of contemporary Belarus (and Andrej Fiedarenka is considered by critics to be one of the most talented writers describing these landscapes) are like scenery: the plot develops first of all in the interiors of the human brain that has to make a painful decision. The author’s heroes are frequently persons living on the margins of society or in remote provinces; they seek for the meaning of their existence and act in ways that may seem unreasonable and absurd, but are logical from their own point of view. So it is



that straightforward, quiet reality is confronted with the nonlinearity of human nature. This is precisely what generates conflict in Fiedarenka's prose.

The book includes Andrej Fiedarenka's recently written novellas "Xiu" and "The Contemplator," his short stories "Sakhalinka" and "Happiness." The essay "Mongolia" is an interesting example of reportage; in it the author presents in detail his impressions of Mongolian life from his trip there in the late 1980s. This new collection of works by Fiedarenka also includes an essay on his recently deceased teacher in the profession, that master of the short story Ivan Ptašnikaŭ.

Viktar Marcinovič, *Night*, Minsk: Knihazbor, 2018. 412 pp.

At the end of 2018 the Belarusian mass media reported something unprecedented, together with photographs of the almost 100-metre-long queue outside the bookshop where the presentation of Viktar Marcinovič's new novel *Night* was going to be held. People had been standing in this queue for several hours just to buy the book of their favourite author and to obtain his autograph.

One of the bestsellers of the last year, the novel is written in the genre of post-Apocalypse. When the protagonist is talking with his beloved girlfriend who is in Nepal, the Universe is gripped by an unexpected, total blackout. There is no electricity on the whole planet, and eternal darkness falls. These are the conditions in which the main character of the novel has to live in order to coexist with others; he has to accept or battle against the new rules established by the new society. He becomes the Bookman: he collects books that have been abandoned by their former owners and loans them out to the inhabitants of the new world. At the same time the darkest emotions start to surround the earth; the only source of news is the mysterious Oracle, a beacon that broadcasts classic fake news, trash, perversions, and murders, which eventually become reality.

The protagonist and his dog embark on a long journey through the eternal night in order to find the love of his life that he lost just before the blackout. On their tortuous route they will encounter numerous challenges and traps that are reminiscent of well-known computer games. The Bookman finds the fake news creator and will soon learn why everlasting night fell.



Andruś Horvat, *Radio Prudok: diary*, Minsk: Medisont, 2017. 248 pp. (ISBN 978-985-7136-44-5)

Journalist, yard sweeper, owner of an old manor, writer... the author of this book is someone who is actively looking for his place in this world. The cosy office of a Minsk-based journal or fashionable coworking could have been such a place, but there was his grandfather's house in Palešsie [Polesie] in southern Belarus, at the junction of universes.

Horvat's *Radio Prudok* was a bestseller in Belarus until recently. Written in the form of a diary, it became popular before publication in book form when excerpts appeared on Facebook and the *Naša Niva* newspaper website. According to *Naša Niva*, it was the most read text of 2015. The author moved from the capital to a remote Polesian village, and his notes appealed to supporters of downshifting, fans of archaic rural culture, inhabitants of Minsk who are tired of the noise of the capital, and former peasants of all ages, generations, and points of view.

According to one review, "this book does not tell you how to restore a ruined house, lay out a garden, milk a goat, live in the country and not drink yourself to



death, but how to restore yourself to wholeness, how to return to your roots, to your native language and culture, and how important it is not to lose your grandmother's stories, and, perhaps, how not to be a stranger to yourself."

Before moving to the village, Horvat worked in Minsk as a journalist and simultaneously as a janitor in the country's main theatre of the country, the National Janka Kupala Theatre. This is where the diary begins. The book has received several prestigious literary prizes, many positive and inspiring reviews from readers, has been reprinted several times. A version of the diary has been performed to great acclaim on the stage of the Kupala Theatre.

Adam Hlobus, Tales from the Capital City: Paris-Vilnius-Minsk-Viciebsk, Minsk: Knihazbor, 2018, 160pp. (UBW Library "Writer's Bookshop"; issue №104. ISBN 978-985-7180-82-0).

Hlobus' new book consists of tales written in different capital cities. Some really surprising and fantastical events take place in Paris, Vilnius, and Minsk. For good measure the author has added some tales about the artists of the Viciebsk School (founded by Marc Chagall; Kazimir Malevich also worked there) and their masterly works.

In these tales ordinary city life is intertwined with mysticism and the phantasmagorical: angels, sorcerers, werewolves, magic. These are tales for teenagers and adults: everyone will find something to their taste there. These philosophical tales follow a vivid subject line about everyday things that will appeal to everybody: food, sickness, love..."

The book was published as a reward for third place in the Jerzy Giedroyc Literary Award in 2017.

THE WHITE BAG (from "Tales of Vilnius")

Ada Zavala had worked all her life at the dairy plant. She was head of the warehouse and ensured the quality of the finished products. Ada's sole happiness was her son Anton. She had raised him alone, with no father, and she was proud of it. When Ada was diagnosed with leukemia and her life was almost over, she took her grandmother's white hand-woven linen cloth, and out of it fashioned a bag. This magic bag the woman bequeathed to her son.

From this white bag Anton could take only one item a day, anything he might wish for. At first he would only order various tasty dishes for supper. A roast chicken, a tenderloin of pork, some smoked fish. Gradually Anton's appetite started to increase, and his desires changed. Now from the bag there emerged a large screen TV, then a computer and then an iPhone. A winning lottery ticket was in there too. With the money he won he gave his flat a complete makeover. The bag produced documents for Anton that showed he owned a cottage with a garden in a quiet corner of New Vilnius. It provided him with a car and stylish clothes. Young, handsome Anton Zavala was by now rich as well, and so he decided that it was high time to make a career in politics. He ordered the white bag to write a presidential programme for him. Anton was convinced of the white bag's power. He was mistaken. Instead of the programme he ordered, the ghost of Ada Zavala appeared in the room. The dead woman took the white bag and disappeared.

It did not take Anton long to recover from the shock. He sold his cottage with the garden and opened a gift shop where he has made a success of selling sundry small items, including canvas bags with landscapes of old Vilnius.



Uładzimir Niaklajeŭ, In Any World: short stories and parables, Minsk: Knihazbor, 2018. 224pp. (Dziejastoŭ Magazine Library; issue №21). (ISBN 978-985-7180-60-8)

“Whatever one may say, we are not under the ground, but on the ground!” Uładzimir Niaklajeŭ wrote in one of his poems about Belarus and the Belarusians. In his works, in general, it is as though there are no dead people. Those who passed away from this world in previous centuries and those who died yesterday – they are all alive. Not “in” the ground, but “on” the ground; not “in” the sky, but “under” it. It offers the reader a holistic approach to the world and allows the author to create unbelievable, fantastic, and at the same time surprisingly realistic plots of the kind which we find in this book.

In these short stories by Niaklajeŭ, one of the most interesting contemporary masters of short prose, the reader will find strange phantasmagoric situations and characters who dare to take action, but do not know how to change their destiny. There are the experiences of Niaklajeŭ the politician, the former presidential candidate, the former political prisoner, and the active public figure: thus, the story “A Change of Connections” is written from the point of view of a prisoner who is tortured in the prison hospital. Domestic incidents and the absurdity of everyday life, people who struggle to find the purpose of their existence: these are just some of the topics of the short stories in this collection. There are also parables that deal with the moral clashes and allegorical meanings that arise when an individual reaches an existential crisis point.



POETRY

Lightning: anthology of Belarusian women’s poetry of the interwar period, ed. Aksana Daniłčyk and Viktar Žybul, Minsk: Knihazbor, 2017, 448pp.

This anthology brings together poets who are very different, both conceptually and stylistically. For many of these poets presented in the anthology their poetic creativity was the result of the illiteracy eradication programme of the 1920s. There are also works that have frequently appeared in anthologies over the years, and others that demonstrate, at the very least, a good command of verse forms.

The book has two sections: “Poets of Eastern Belarus and Russia” and “Poets of Western Belarus and Latgale” (under the terms of the Treaty of Riga in 1921 Belarus was divided between Poland and the USSR). On both sides of the border there were women poets who reflected upon such topics as female destiny, the battle for women’s rights, intimate feelings. The folklore tradition was fundamental for the female poetry of the time.

The female poetry of Soviet Belarus is more often dedicated to the fight – in the narrow sense – for workers’ happiness; in a historical perspective – for Soviet power that made women free, educated them, and made women equal in rights with men. Running parallel with the tide of propaganda slogans, there are minor lyrics that within one poem try clumsily to reconcile the author’s own poetics and propaganda esthetics.

In Western Belarus women write more often about the history of Belarus; we find manifestos of the anti-Polish movement in the form of poetry, calls to action, pamphlet verse, poems dedicated to men who were being held prisoners in Polish jails – all for



the sake of the right to be free on their own land. Women actively joined the struggle and wrote about their experience: “There is no freedom of speech to finish this poem” (Alena Caprynskaja). Freedom to speak about the bars of their Polish cells is something their colleagues in Soviet Belarus did not enjoy. Here they could only resort to sub-texts, hints, and indirect statements.

This anthology is unique for the post-Soviet space, and is also important for the history of Belarusian literature. It is a universal cross-section of female poetry in Eastern Europe between the two world wars.

Maryja Martysievič. *Sarmatia: poem*, Minsk: A. M. Januškievič, 2018. 44pp.: illus. (ISBN 978-985-7165-82-7)

The Sarmatians mentioned in the 5th century BC by Herodotus would certainly be surprised by the fact that in the 15th century they became the heroic ancestors of the magnates and gentry of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth. The gentry tried to prove that their origin from the ancient militant tribes by their codes of ethics, their art, and their clothes.

The Sarmatians would be no less surprised by the fact that a poem about them was written in Minsk in 2018. The heroine of the poem is a foreigner who comes to Sarmatia thanks to love and she writes poetic epistles about everything she sees and feels in this marvellous country.

On the one hand, the poem restores the Sarmatian myth from the times of the so-called “Golden Age of Belarusian History” with its ideal state and the blossoming of culture and arts. On the other hand, the poet engages in its deconstruction. First, it is presented from a woman’s point of view, which is totally different from sumptuous Sarmatian art that concentrates on men: the gentry and the soldiers. Second, the poet portrays the ambivalence of mythical Sarmatia where behind the pretentious facade violence co-existed with beauty, obscurantism with wisdom. It is absolutely clear that here Sarmatia is not simply an abstraction; it is contemporary Belarus.

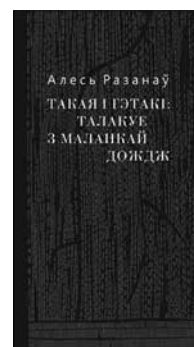
Sarmatia broke all records in Belarusian crowdfunding – it took just 3 days for the sum of money necessary for publication on one of crowdfunding platforms. Thanks to a lot of publicity, the poem became a desirable object. It was illustrated by the artist Julija Rudzickaja; there was a special print run of numbered copies of the poem; a set of art postcards with quotations from the poem was issued.



Aleś Razanaŭ, *Like this and like that: the lightning and the rain: punkciry*, illus. Kaciaryna Daško, Minsk: Mastackaja Litaratura, 2018. 278pp. (ISBN 978-985-02-1815-5)

Razanaŭ’s new books are always met with great acclaim in Belarus. He is the most well-known Belarusian poet in the world, and the founder of new Belarusian poetry. As a modernist, Razanaŭ has over fifty years trodden a path from experimental syllabo-tonic verse in the 1960s, via large poetic forms in the 1970s that were complex in their composition and rhyme schemes, to the creation of his own poetic genres. One of those genres he calls *punkciry*, a word which Prof. Arnold McMillin translates as ‘stipples’.

The central theme of his new book is the possibility or impossibility of reflecting reality through language. The ‘stipples’ genre is the shortest of Razanaŭ’s poetic forms. The author resorts to three or four lines; a particular event or an impression of an actual occurrence is told through the interplay of word forms and sounds.



Razanaŭ defines his ‘stipples’ like this: “They are formulaic in their brevity and as eloquent as drawings, they highlight the essential in the ordinary, they are addressed to each and everyone.” In his exploration of the possibilities of language Razanaŭ does not limit himself exclusively to Belarusian. As a polyglot and excellent translator, he has published several books of ‘stipples’ in German and is currently preparing a book in Lithuanian. ‘Stipples’ reveal the universality and general fundamental principle of language. Razanaŭ’s protagonist is language itself; ‘stipples’ cannot simply be regarded as the equivalent of the Japanese haiku, although these texts are outwardly similar.

This book is the most complete edition of Razanaŭ’s ‘stipples’. Readers will be able to track the evolution of this genre from 1966 to 2017.

Valžyna Mort, Epidemic of Roses, Vilnius: Łohvinaŭ, 2017.

Mort was a member of an avant-garde circle of writers in the 1990s and was the first of them to refuse to perceive poetry as a game. She rejected emotional countercultural actions that were aimed at provoking and scandalizing the public. Provocations now took place within the poems and the images that permeated them. Mort is completely free with language; she hones her multifaceted images right down to the last detail. This is why readers experience her every metaphor as something they have themselves lived through. On top of that, her poems are in their own way pieces of music with precise rhythmical structure, delineated musical phrases, climaxes and explosive culminations; all this can sometimes induce an almost ecstatic state in the reader. Mort’s creative output has exerted a real influence on almost all Belarusian poets who have appeared over the last 15 years.



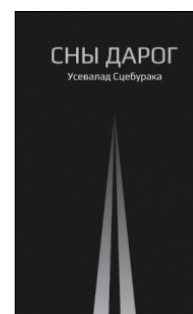
For the last ten years the poet has been living in the USA and writing in English. This new book of poetry in Belarusian is full of expansive, complex metaphors. Traumas are the fundamental theme, connected with Belarus, with the poet’s native roots, with landscapes from the poet’s childhood, and tragedies of the 20th century. The poet says, “In the new book poems are constructed around the image of a tree that grows from blood, bones, human flesh, and our earth. The tree grows upwards, and uses its foliage to speak to us in a whisper that was born before mouths. I am interested in what our dead, our ghosts have to whisper to us. This is a Belarus of lives without words that do not want to disappear and to be silent.”

A separate place in the book is occupied by the leitmotif of female corporality, sexual identity, and poetic penetration into the female essence. The complex structures of Mort’s new poems are filled with allusions to world culture, works of art, biblical scenes and texts, and indeed to the whole history of poetry.

Usievaład Ścieburaka, Dreams of Roads: poems, Minsk: Medisont, 2017, 64 pp. (ISBN: 978-985-7136-87-2)

This is Ścieburaka’s third book of poetry. The collection has two sections: “Streets of the Capital” and “Paths of the Provinces.” In the first section the author deals with modern reality and in the second he pays more attention to the past, memories, and a special kind of nostalgia for what has not been done.

As in the previous collections, the author jots down small-scale records in a lyrical notebook. The reader will see elegiac pictures of seasons changing, lonely walks at dawn with his faithful dog, memories of former loves, impressions of the news about the murder of the Heavenly Hundred



in Kyiv and events of the war between Russia and Ukraine – a country that is very close to Belarus – that has been going on for more than five years.

At the same time these verses differ from diary entries; they are born of powerful emotions that the poet himself has experienced. These thoroughly sincere, personal impressions (sometimes one of shock, at others of sad or warm memories), events, everything that the poet has seen – all this evokes in readers the feeling that they have had similar experiences.

A separate place in the collection is occupied by ironic poems. The poet, a well-known TV presenter in Belarus, sharply mocks aspects of modern life that he does not like, e.g. the Soviet mentality that is still very strong among Belarusians.

The theme of love runs right through the collection: love of a woman, love of friends, love of the homeland.

Uładzimir Ściapan, *Paper Cap: haiku*, Minsk: Knihazbor, 2018, 64pp. (Dziejastoŭ Magazine Library; issue №26). ISBN 978-985-7207-49-7

Yasunari Kawabata (winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1968) said, “The words in haiku are the same, but life is unstoppable and, accordingly, those same words cannot be the same words when used again. The same word cannot be said twice, just as the same river cannot wash your feet twice; just as the same springtime cannot repeat itself.”

The Japanese haiku genre entered Belarusian poetry thanks to poets of the 1980s (including Uładzimir Ściapan); it resonated strongly with the Belarusian folklore tradition. Like haiku, Belarusian poetry was at first the result of each poet’s observation of the natural circle of life.

The haikus in this book are short poetic telegrams: three lines, like photos that capture various moments and situations. Each poem of seventeen syllables is an attempt to find poetry in the most ordinary everyday things.

According to Oriental traditions the book is divided into four sections: “Spring,” “Summer,” “Autumn,” and “Winter.” At the heart of the tercets there is an immediate impression of something just seen and felt. Together with the poet we live in a calendar cycle; we notice changes in the weather; we behold the Belarusian village and its inhabitants, modern Minsk which also has room for poetic enlightenment. We find not only nature in these short poems: there are social motifs, childhood memories, irony and comic situations.

This is Ściapan’s first book of poetry; in Belarus he is well-known as a prose writer, artist, and screenwriter.

Aleh Minkin, *I Was Not Here: poetry and prose*, Minsk: Knihazbor, 2018, 276pp. (Union of Belarusian Writers’ Library “Writer’s Bookshop”; issue №102). ISBN 978-985-7180-71-4

Aleh Minkin became known in the early 1980s, a time when poetry was dominated by the straightforward exposition of problems that were of concern to each individual poets. These concerns ranged from rural to military affairs, from historical events to problems of industrial production; we must not, of course, forget poems about the Communist Party! Any symbolism, metaphysics, or even simply sad moods were considered non-poetical and editors very often advised authors to change their world view to a more positive, optimistic one.



Minkin's first book of poetry *Antimony* became one of the most important phenomena of the Belarusian literature of the time: it restored classic lines to lyric poetry, the beauty and mystery of imagery, the refined emotion that was centred on metaphysical experience. It signified a return of 1920s neo-classicism to the new literary situation. Simultaneously he succeeded in smuggling into his covert allegorical verse seditious topics connected with the independence of Belarus, Russification, the decay of national sentiment and hopes for revival.

Minkin is one of the most prominent Belarusian masters of poetic technique. He is equally at home with big subject cycles of syllabo-tonic verse, short *vers libres*, and poems in prose. He is a well-known translator into Belarusian of the Polish poets Cyprian Norwid, Bolesław Leśmian, and Leopold Staff, and the Ukrainian poet Mykola Zerov.

This new book brings together his best work in lyric poetry, short prose, and translation. In 2018, the author was awarded the Michaś Stralcoŭ Literary Prize.

NON-FICTION

Žmicier Bartosik, The Chinese Dentist's Clinic. (Library of Liberty. The XXI century). – Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty, 2018. – 284 p.

The charm of the radio is, perhaps, that the human voice always occupies pride of place. There are many voices: they come together into a symphony and create an effect of general participation. This is how it is with stained glass windows that are formed out of pieces of glass of various colours.

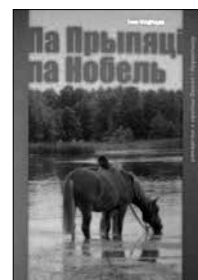
So it is too with the reports of Žmicier Bartosik (Belarusian Service of Radio Liberty) gathered in this book. The author's all-pervading sense of irony washes his reality clean of any hint of pathos. As a matter of fact, the war against affected pathos is the overriding principle of Bartosik's work. Of course, high emotions there indeed are on these pages but the love, nostalgia, grief, and hatred that we find here are absolutely sincere.

Artefacts of the Belarusian past scattered from London to Hawaii are seen as if it is a photo exhibition. There is not just one picture; there are so many angles and Bartosik changes them all the time. One sketch is not enough for him. He wants to gather together a full picture. This is the kind of book that would make a good documentary: writers, artists, musicians, officials and dissidents, Jews and Tatars of pre-war Minsk, men and women nearly a hundred years old living in all corners of Belarus, all reveal their secrets. Old districts of towns and cities, and old graveyards have been destroyed; a new facade for the country has been built in their stead, which is quite out of keeping with the true past.

Thanks to Bartosik the reader plunges into the past and begins to acquire a greater understanding of the eclectic present of Belarus. However, there is nothing tragic about Bartosik's book. The texts in this book contain no melancholy; there is only a sense of gratitude to all the interviewees. It is an intensely personal oral history of Belarus.

Hanna Kandraciuk, Down the River Prypiać to Nobel, Białystok: The Programme Council of the weekly Niva, 2017. (ISBN: 978-83-62857-01-2)

The author is a journalist, and a member of the Belarusian national minority in Poland. Here we find her travelling from the Białystok



region of eastern Poland to the Ukrainian part of Polesia. Polesia is a marshy region lining the Prypiac River in Southern Belarus, Northern Ukraine. The region stretches as far as the sadly famous town of Čarnobyl. Families in this region are large, with sometimes up to eleven children. People in neighbouring villages may very often speak completely different dialects.

Hanna Kandraciuk knows this language because Ukrainian-Belarusian Polesia and Polish Podlasie speak their own absolutely unique dialect that has arisen on the border of three languages. In these villages the journalist met families that still live like their ancestors many years ago: they live on what they grow for themselves, weave their own cloth and sew their own clothes, treat their ailments not by going to the hospital but by visiting old women, who, by whispering magic charms, administering herbal remedies and giving good advice, can heal them.

Over several months Hanna Kandraciuk journeyed eight times around this area. She met local old people, listened to their stories, and visited noisy rural fairs that like a hundred years ago brought together the whole district. She visited modern schools and monasteries as well.

She turned her observations and notes into articles that were at first printed in the main newspaper of the Belarusians in Poland *Niva*, a weekly which has been published in Belarusian over 60 years in Białystok. These articles, together with the journalist's photo reports, were subsequently published as a book that was warmly received by critics and presented in Poland, Belarus, and Ukraine.

This book is a continuation of the traditions of Polish reporting. Thanks to the popular books of Ryszard Kapuściński who was born in Polesia, journalism of this kind is very popular. Hanna Kandraciuk's book is an example of how the method of the Polish school of reporting can be successfully implemented in the reality of Belarus.

Michał Aniempadystaŭ, The Colour of Belarus, Vilnius: Łohvinaŭ, 2018, 196 pp. ISBN 9786098213379

This album is one of the first attempts to visualise the colouristics of the Belarusian past and present with its bright colours and shades, with natural structures created under the influence of the three elements. It is set out like an encyclopedia.

The book describes the seven colours of Belarusian culture: white, black, red, dark blue, grey, golden, and green. Each article is illustrated with dozens of photos that demonstrate the presence of a particular colour in both nature and material culture.

The visual part of the book (120 unique photos by the author) is accompanied by texts that reveal the main Belarusian colours, the origins of their names, the history of their distribution on various territories. There is information on colour symbolism, and on the factors that influenced the choice of certain colours and styles.

By studying colour as a phenomenon of culture and a marker of tradition, the author presents the history of styles and sets a certain angle which allows the Belarusian national identity to be understood.

This was the last large-scale work of the outstanding designer, artist, photographer, culturologist and poet Michał Aniempadystaŭ (1964-2018). The study of colours in culture permits a real intellectual representation of the history and culture of Belarus; the book is a gift for any foreign reader who wishes to experience the country at a deeper level.



Coloristics is a convenient way of studying one's own cultural tradition and national

style, even if only because colour in different dimensions is present in all spheres of human thinking and work.

Black and white are metaphysics and ontology, the first steps of a human being who studies the Universe. This is the beginning of everything – when out of nothing the light and darkness appear. This is being and non-being, up and down, yes and no, plus and minus – the binary principle of any language. Red is technology. Dark blue and light blue are culture. Magic, charms, fashion, art, creativity. Golden is religion. Light unattainable, and the striving to find this light. Grey and green are our everyday life, convenience, and quality of our environment, our connection with nature, and the understanding that everyone is an integral part of it.

For a certain time, for one wonderful moment.

Michał Aniempadystaŭ

Siarhiej Šupa, Finding the BNR: a story of the archives, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2018, 282pp. + 56pp. illus. (Freedom Library. 21st Century) (ISBN 978-0-929849-30-0)

[BNR is the Belarusian abbreviation for what is termed in English the ‘Belarusian Democratic Republic’, which declared its independence on 25 March 1918.]

One day in 1992 the journalist and translator Siarhiej Šupa entered the Lithuanian Central State Archive in Vilnius, and emerged six years later with two volumes of *Archives of the BNR*, weighing two and a half kilos, 3,873 documents on 1,722 pages. For the first time researchers had the opportunity to examine a huge collection of little-known documents.

Šupa presented his new book in 2018, during the celebration of the 100th anniversary of the BNR declaration of independence, the most important day of the year for the democratic community of Belarus. It puts into historical context the original documents and materials from archives in Minsk and Vilnius. It is too colourful to be a historical monograph and the author held his fantasy too much in check for it to be called a literary work; we may therefore term it a “story of the archives.”

Sitting in the archives and studying documents page by page, I discovered for myself a whole new hitherto unknown world, a new country and a new epoch. What surprised me most was that the BNR was quite unlike how it had been presented by Soviet historians and propagandists, and neither was it like the way it was seen by supporters of the idea of the BNR, mainly in the emigration. Both considered it ‘bourgeois-nationalist’, but in fact that was a gross oversimplification.



Siarhiej Šupa

Our authors

Aksak Valancina – poetess, journalist. Author of books “Graveyard”, “Chapel”, “Wine From California”, “Ružoŭnica”, “Cherry Plum”, etc. Winner of Golden Apostrophe Prize (2008). Born in 1953 in village Smaličy, Niašviž District. Lives in Minsk.

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UNION OF BELARUSIAN WRITERS

OUR MISSION

We, the Union of Belarusian Writers, are a professional creative community of writers of Belarus, who are united on principles of the freedom of speech and self-expression in order to protect authors' rights and interests and to develop, popularize, and increase the status of Belarusian literature as an integral value of society, without which no full-fledged existence of the Belarusian nation is possible.



OUR PURPOSES

- to protect rights of writers as a group which freedom of speech is limited today
- to provide readers with free access to a wide spectrum of independent national literature
- to increase competences of writers who are members of the Union in the advancement of their rights and interests and possibilities of self-expression
- to increase the status of Belarusian works and authors in society

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