

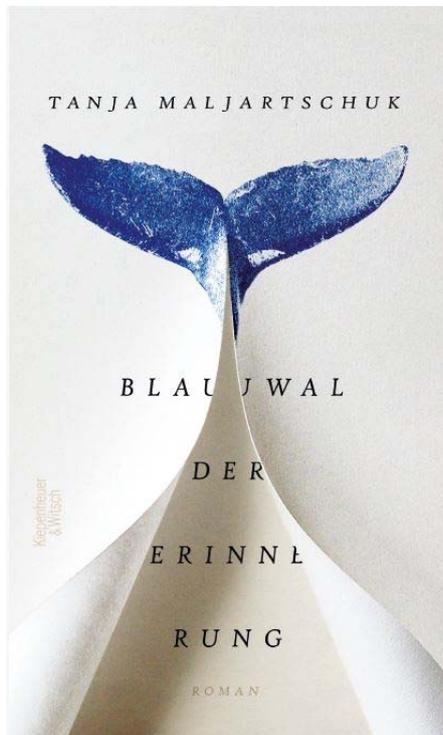
Sample Translation

THE BLUE WHALE OF MEMORY

by Tanja Maljartschuk

Translated from the Ukrainian by Zenia Tompkins

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“The Odyssey of Vyacheslav Lypynsky’s Archival Legacy” – A 1983 article from the Ukrainian-American weekly newspaper *Svoboda*.

I

2016: In the Belly of the Blue Whale

The most difficult thing to explain—and to myself as well—is why him all of a sudden? Where did my tale about him come from? Who are we to one another?

I reply, no one.

We've never met (our meeting was physically impossible), we aren't relatives, we aren't fellow countrymen, we aren't even of the same nationality. He's a Pole; I'm a Ukrainian. He's an intellectual, a philosopher active in politics, a poet with a place in history; I'm a person without a particular profession, a manipulator of words and ideas: I can write, I can remain silent. We're sufficiently different from and alien to one another that no narrative could unite us into one whole were it not for my irrational stubbornness.

I pulled together three points where our lives intersected, two in space and one in time. That's all that I was able to; there simply are no more. Here is the first one: He once spent a few days in my home town. The war had just ended. He was an envoy of the Ukrainian State and had an important engagement there. I likewise spent a few hours in his native village. I went there purposely. A village man with an old-fashioned mustache by the name of Peter, who now looks after his family estate, gladly showed me around but did ask, "So who is he to you? Why are you interested? For a run-of-the-mill museum visitor, you know too much."

I replied that I was just interested, simply because, that it was hard to explain. Peter nodded his head that he had understood. He squeezed my arm with his course calloused palm. I didn't admit that there was one more thing that united us—a strange coincidence that I had noticed quite recently and that I was cherishing as if it was the ultimate justification of my obsession. Our lives intersected once in time as well. We were born on the same day, both on April 17. Only he exactly a hundred years before me.

Now I often think about time and tell everyone that only with time does a sense of time come. That the further in time you go, the more palpable it becomes. The longer you live, the more of it there is. And all the other times—those in which I haven't lived but which I know existed—grow over the little grain of my individual time, stratifying it, incrusting it. That's why it seems as though I have lived interminably long and the end should be arriving any moment now.

The end did indeed arrive: It came to me in the form of my "heart in my throat." That's what I began calling the sudden panic attacks. When I'm consumed by a tremendous fright and my heart, the central organ of my body, suddenly thunders and creeps up to my throat, threatening to leap out onto the floor. I tried to describe my bouts with words—they're my army, for I am, after all, a woman of letters—but the words raveled apart, as if someone was cooking them, stirring them sporadically with a wooden spoon. Words no longer meant anything. The end that I was experiencing, the end of all times in me, couldn't be described in the old way. New words were needed, a new truth, and the search for them grabbed hold of my entire mind.

Over the course of my former "literary career," which entailed all of six slight books, I always worked on a computer. I never wrote by hand and, quite frankly, don't know how to, so when the need arises I painstakingly trace out scribbles and, for lack of practice, make a slew of mistakes. A computer is instead my weaving tool. In the past it seemed that I wrote on it as though weaving a rug, and I had the urge to make the weave of the text as colorful as possible. Now the process of writing reminds me more of playing the piano. I'm making music. I press the keys adeptly, I rhythmically lean the torso of my body forward, my fingers halt mid-air when I'm in need of a musical rest and then obediently drop down to the keyboard, forcing the needed letters to sound. In the past I wove a colorful life path; now I compose the inexorable music of the end. A requiem for my own self. That doesn't mean that I'll die tomorrow—not at all. Having survived and accepted one's own end, it's possible to still live as long as you please.

The "heart in my throat" would be so unbearable, especially the first times it happened, that I would've thrown myself out the window had I been able to move in the moment. Palpitations, pain in my chest and temples, shortness of breath, dizziness, nausea. Though it wasn't the physical suffering that was truly unbearable, but the distortion of reality, my new perception of it: as if from the opposite side, the one from which there is no longer any return. It

was the entire horror of death as the living imagine it. Simultaneously, I was experiencing the loss (or the primordial absence?) of the slightest sense of meaning: the foundational one, the one from which everything begins. The question “what for?” eclipsed all the rest. The “who am I” wasn’t important, only the “what for” was. The when and how didn’t matter, only the why did.

And so at one such instant, while suffering from abysmal uselessness, I suddenly began to think about time as the thing that unites an endless rosary of senseless events, and also about the fact that only in the sequence of these events is there meaning, and that it’s not God, not love, not beauty, not the greatness of intellect that determine this world, but only time—the flow of time and the glimmering of human life within it.

Human life is its sustenance. Time consumes everything living by the ton, by millions of tons, like a gigantic blue whale consumes microscopic plankton, milling and chewing it into a homogenous mass so that one life disappears without a trace, giving another one, the next in line, a chance. Yet it wasn’t the disappearance that grieved me the most, but the tracelessness of it. I thought to myself, with one foot I’m already there, in complete forgottenness. The process of my inevitable disappearance was initiated at the moment of my birth. And the longer I live, the more I vanish. My feelings and my emotions vanish, my pain and my joy, the places I’ve seen vanish, and the people I’ve met. My memories vanish, as do my thoughts. My conception of the world vanishes. My body vanishes, more and more every day. The world within me and around me vanishes without a trace, and I can do nothing to safeguard it.

It was then that I took to reading old newspapers in large quantities. The fragility of everything living in the face of the omnipotence of time can be felt most in the dusty pages of daily newspapers. There it was still important: The headlines abounded with the dreams and fears of entire nations, discussions were conducted, scandals exploded, rebuttals were published, pharmacies and bookstores and travel agencies placed their ads, someone was collecting donations for war-crippled countrymen, someone was announcing a literary soiree, and on the final page there were always one or two mediocre poems on patriotic themes, for the soul, until suddenly, Poof!, and this gurgling time of the present had become the past, the mouth of the blue whale was already open and was beginning to suck in, the editor sorrowfully shared that due to a lack of funding the newspaper was halting circulation, “but not for good!” And not a single issue more. The end. Time had prevailed. The blue whale had swum on.

So it was with the first Ukrainian newspaper *Dilo (The Deed)*, which was published from 1880 to 1939 in Lviv. 1939 became the concluding year of a centuries-old history of this city: The entry of the Red Army initiated its new—Soviet—era, the particular predilection of which was the killing of the past and a ban on memory.

So it was with the second large Ukrainian newspaper *Rada (Council)*, which was published daily in the years 1906–1914 in Kyiv. The publisher Yevhen Chykalenko was forced to contribute not inconsiderable funds from his own pocket so that the newspaper would continue to exist because no one subscribed to it. The First World War solved this problem in a definitive manner, and Yevhen Chykalenko breathed a sigh of relief because his conscience wouldn't have permitted him to shut down the newspaper himself. He said that a newspaper was like a flag: If it was flying, that meant Ukraine was still in existence.

But the fate of the newspaper *Svoboda (Liberty)*, which the Ukrainian community in America began to publish in New York back in 1893 and publishes till this day, was entirely different. This newspaper became my favorite not because it was the best, but because it saw everything and forgot nothing. One hundred and twenty uninterrupted years. Six generations of people united by one chronology. The murder of Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo and the fall of the Soviet Union, the fire in Husyatin in 1893 and the Bolekhiv butcher Anton, who in 1934 cut off his own mother's head with an ax. Or, for example, June 20, 1931: The gangster Al Capone was arrested in Chicago. I mulled over this information for a moment, attempting to imagine what was going on in another part of the world that same year, in the villages of my grandmothers and grandfathers for instance, but the only thing that kept popping into my mind was that those women didn't wear underwear because they simply didn't have any and routinely, when the need arose, had to sit at home so that no one would see the ritual blood trickling down their calves.

Only later did my attention migrate to the big black uppercase letters on the front page, over which a conscientious reader had no right to prioritize the arrest of a Chicago gangster. Three words in total, stamped in black printing ink. It was impossible to not see them. An eerie chill swept down my back. I reread the headline over and over until I stopped feeling anything. Over and over:

VYACHESLAV LYPYNSKY DIED

At the time I didn't know who he was and why he had died. But the death of this man was of considerable importance to someone if *Svoboda* was reporting it on the front page, neglecting the fates of Al Capone and his New York counterpart Arthur Schultz, who too would be thrown into jail within days. The announcement that the Russian writer Maxim Gorky had been admitted into the ranks of the Communist Party likewise didn't outweigh the death notification in importance, as didn't the suicide of the wife of the rabbi in Vilnius, the cause of which was apparently a "nervous disorder." In this issue of *Svoboda*, nothing was more important than the death of Vyacheslav Lypynsky. In contrast to the hapless wife of the rabbi, whose name went altogether unreported, Lypynsky's name needed no explanation, otherwise he wouldn't have been written about in the spot typically dedicated to some sort of global catastrophe, such as, say, the devastating 1906 earthquake in San Francisco.

I read the obituary below the black headline. An eminent historian and a prominent politician. He ordered to have his heart pierced after his death because he feared being buried alive. The heart puncture was performed in the Austrian sanatorium Wienerwald, the same one where the little-known writer Franz Kafka had unsuccessfully undergone treatment a few years earlier. Lypynsky's young daughter Yeva and his brother Stanislaw served as witnesses to the procedure.

At that same time, in June of '31, my grandfather had just turned five years old. His mother, having no horses, used to harness herself to a plow in order to till up a hectare of land and signed her name with an X. Ukraine, or, more precisely, Eastern Galicia—their homeland—was still a part of Poland then.

My other grandma, on my mom's side, was also alive already. Her mother had the best voice in her parts, but few got the chance to enjoy it because the woman died immediately after childbirth. Her widower, a once prosperous grain farmer, left his daughter on the steps of an orphanage and himself died of starvation in 1933. Their homeland—*Malorosiya*, "Little Russia," the Greater Ukraine that straddled the Dnipro River and neighbored Russia, the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic—was de facto a part of Russia. Though is it possible to call a land that kills a homeland? I don't know. I had ended up right in the belly of the blue whale. Swallowed whole, I still had the chance to resuscitate my story. Mine and his—Vyacheslav Lypynsky's. My story

through his story. I needed only to pretend that no one had pierced anyone's heart and that it was beating till now. In my throat.

II

1931: Inhale, Exhale

The entirety of the Ukrainian press without exception, actually, reported his death with some delay. Vyacheslav Lypynsky died. Lypynsky was dead. What a loss. Finally. Everyone knew Lypynsky. It would be harder without him. Or easier? In any case, it would be lonelier because he didn't let anyone get bored. Along with Lypynsky, Ukrainian nobility died. He was a mad victim of tuberculosis. A recluse. It had been years already since anyone had seen him. But everyone read what he wrote. He wrote a lot. At times ten letters a day. Did anyone even understand his scribbles? Did anyone even grasp what it was exactly he was trying to say? He was feared because he demanded dignity of people, contending that it was their duty. Who needed that? That's precisely why no one liked him: Everyone endured him. And sighed with relief when he died. Lypynsky's enemies wrote laudatory obituaries. They had made stockpiles of obituaries long before then. Everyone had been waiting for his death. It's a wonder he didn't die sooner.

They carried him out of his home in their arms. The car waiting to take him to the sanatorium was in the yard in front of his house.

"Will I see all this again?" he said to himself, glancing around.

"You'll see it. You've lived through worse," replied Lypynsky's housekeeper Fräulein Yulia Rozenfeld. He spoke in Ukrainian, she in German. Their interactions after many shared years were perfectly tuned. She understood him better than anyone else living, knowing how to assess the state of his health on a given day solely by the depth and rate of his breathing. Analyzing Lypynsky's breathing was her passion—a hobby the housekeeper had managed to polish to perfection alongside the housework, the washing of his clothes and the shining of the shoes that Lypynsky hadn't worn in years already. Everyone called the *fräulein* Fin Yuli. Older than her employer by five years, never wed, a now-gray blonde, she was sharp-tongued but at the

same time fair and loving. These words were hers: “Where are you rushing to? Breathe slower. O-o-one, two. I-i-inhale, exhale.” Lypynsky would wave her off with exasperation.

“I’m glad to still be breathing at all. Let me be.”

I-i-inhale, exhale. I-i-inhale, exhale.

Lypynsky would try to calm his lungs—that is, the part of them that (so he thought) hadn’t become entirely perforated yet. Then Fin Yuli would open the windows wide, and the cold mountain wind would burst into the neatly tidied room with the large bed in its middle. The bed had long served as Lypynsky’s office. Snow-covered alpine peaks were visible from the window. Lypynsky would close his eyes and breathe. O-o-one, two. I-i-inhale, exhale. Two hours. Three hours. As if rocking in a cradle stretched between two mountain tops over a deep valley. His mustache, still fully black, would grow covered with hoarfrost bit by bit.

Lypynsky’s daughter Yeva was also standing in the yard. She had made a special trip from Krakow after learning about the heart attack. The attack occurred in late May: The doctor spent six hours en route because horrible weather had enveloped the mountains and turbid waters with rock-hewn young tree trunks were streaming from the highlands in stormy torrents, eroding even the good roads, to say nothing of the paths. Lypynsky was very nervous. Fin Yuli stood at the window, while he, like a child, asked every few minutes, “Is he here?”

“Not yet, but soon.”

“In my condition,” he was exclaiming, “I can’t afford to wait this long for a doctor.”

It was decided that he would go to the sanatorium. Lypynsky sold his archive to Andriy Sheptytsky, the Metropolitan Archbishop of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, in order to pay for the costly stay in Wienerwald with the proceeds. For the archive—which consisted of letters, manuscripts, notes, unpublished articles and related materials—he received a few hundred dollars. That should suffice for the first while.

Lypynsky had been preparing for death from his very childhood, but precisely then, as it stood right next to him in the forty-ninth year of his life, he suddenly began to resist it with all his might. He didn’t want to die. He would mutter under his breath, “Just a few years more.” When he thought that no one was watching him. It would be good to finish writing a few more

articles, to see a few more people, to do a few more things. To destroy his political enemies. Lypynsky had a fair number of them. To spend a few days with his daughter. Perhaps go with her to the sea, as he once had with her mother? It was just a shame that breezes did him such harm. Breezes and mistrals were his killers. Winds—that's what destroyed Lypynsky. He distinguished them by scent. Based on the scent of the wind, he knew the time of day. The wind that blows at five in the morning smells differently from the one that replaces it at six. That scent will be sharper already, somewhat fresher, like morning soap. Lypynsky distinguished between all of them because it was the winds that drove him further and further his entire life, in the very end making him a hostage of a certain small country in which, after the collapse of the empire, no one would have lived of their own volition. The cold northwestern mistrals drove him out of Geneva, where he had spent a year studying sociology; they, together with the mighty western winds, chased him out of Vienna, where he had been an ambassador of the Ukrainian State headed by Hetman Pavlo Skoropadsky for almost a year; and they later became the reason for his departure from Berlin, where Lypynsky, convinced that an "enlightened monarchy" was the only viable form of political governance for Ukraine, was attempting to mitigate court intrigues and remind the exiled candidate for the Ukrainian monarchy of the principle of "hetmans' honor." Geneva, Vienna, Berlin. Listening to his lungs, the doctors would shake their heads every time and advise leaving. The winds expelled him from his life and condemned him to eternal imprisonment in those beautiful and at once detestable foothills of the Austrian Alps. Styria. Three kilometers to the railway station. Half an hour by train to Graz. Five hours by train to Vienna. Post Office Tabelbad. Badegg.

The house in Badegg or, as he himself called it, *das Sterbehaus*, "the death house," didn't cost much at all—a total of 5500 shillings, or 800 dollars—but for Lypynsky, who had long since made do on twenty dollars a month, even this sum was sky-high. A certain philanthropist from Canada and Lypynsky's brother Stanislaw helped. In exchange Lypynsky renounced any claims whatsoever to their parents' estate in Ukraine, in the village Zaturtsi not far from Lutsk. Stanislaw, a successful agricultural selectionist, lived there now (he mainly bred new types of wheat and potatoes). Lypynsky's older brother Wlodzimierz was a doctor and lived in Lutsk, where he owned the first automobile in the city. Though the Lypynskys—rather, it would be more correct to say the Lipinskis—weren't people of great means. They were middling Polish noblemen who kept afloat thanks only to good education and sensible estate management.

His brother Stanislaw also came when he heard about the heart attack. He had lost his shape somewhat, had acquired a paunch, and the features of his face had softened: So it typically happens with happily married good souls, which he, without a doubt, was. Carrying Lypynsky out of the house on his arms, he gently admonished him.

“I told you, Waclaw, that buying a house in this kind of backwater isn’t worth it. Why couldn’t you come to us to Zaturtsi? There’s enough room there, the nature is beautiful, there are barely any winds. Maria and the children would’ve been glad. You know how they love you...”

“Don’t call me Waclaw,” Lypynsky was rasping in response. His brother and daughter were speaking in Polish, Lypynsky in Ukrainian.

This phrase, “Don’t call me Waclaw,” Lypynsky took up as his weapon of choice back when he turned nineteen. He had just returned from the Kyiv Preparatory School to Zaturtsi for winter vacation. The whole family was gathered around the dinner table. Lypynsky listened to the local news in silence; the prep school uniform suited him particularly well, highlighting his slim, though somewhat hunched and overly thin silhouette. His hair, thick and black as tar, was combed back prep-school-style.

“Waclaw, how are your studies going?” his mother Klara Lipinski asked at last. Everyone looked at him, and the longer the silence lasted, the more the interest of those present grew. His sister Wanda, Stanislaw and Wlodzimierz gazed intently at their brother. His father Kazimierz Lipinski alone, with his characteristic insouciance, continued daintily eating the holiday cutlet. Lypynsky timidly cleared his throat.

“Waclaw?” Klara was still waiting for an answer. And then, for the first time, Lypynsky shot out of his new weapon: the illegal one, the one which he’d later end up having to pull out of his holster in self-defense on more than one occasion.

“Don’t call me Waclaw. I’m Vyacheslav.”

His father nearly choked on the cutlet. His mother squealed. His brothers and sister exchanged silent glances. To make things worse, Lypynsky was talking in Ukrainian, a language (though it wasn’t even a language, just a rural dialect, a hodgepodge of Polish and Russian) the

Lipinski family had never before heard from the lips of an educated person, only from the local poor.

“Did something happen that we should know about?” asked Klara Lipinski, trying with all her might to remain calm. She was a small woman, but an authoritative one.

“I consider myself Ukrainian,” the newly minted Vyacheslav snapped back quietly, almost inaudibly. His confidence was gradually dissipating. His stoop was becoming ever more noticeable.

Finally Klara Lipinski erupted. “What kind of Ukrainian are you?! You’re a Pole, son! All of us are Poles from our great-grandfather on down!”

Lypynsky’s head hung in silence. It was evident that he wasn’t in agreement and wasn’t planning on agreeing, but didn’t have enough of an argument for an effective rebuff yet. This is what he always did: He kept quiet, in order to have an opportunity to brace himself in the face of an attack. Klara Lipinski knew this trait of her son’s better than anyone and was now shaking with rage and helplessness. He had always been like that—unreliable, weakly, emotionally fragile—and now, if you please, he had definitively gone mad.

At that the celebratory dinner ended. Everyone dispersed to their own corners, scowling and angry. And that night an unusually large amount of snow fell. Lypynsky, lying in his room and staring at the ceiling, was scared that the roof would cave under such a load and he’d be buried under a white snowdrift, like under a mound of earth in a freshly dug grave. On more than one occasion later he will be gripped by the sensation that he’s lying at the very bottom, where it’s cold and lonely, and from there, from inside it, the bottom seems even deeper than it really is—it seems bottomless, as if it isn’t even a bottom but an eternal vertical fall downwards—and Lypynsky will raise his arms upwards in desperation in order to catch onto something—anything, some sort of invisible handrails—and steady himself.

His decision to continue his studies in the agriculture department in Krakow somewhat reduced the tension in the family. Though at the time land cultivation interested Lypynsky no more than ladies’ hat trends, for a young man of his pedigree and financial means agricultural education was a very rational choice: Landowners had to know what to do with their hectares.

And where else should a young Pole study, if not in Krakow? He'll outgrow it, hoped Klara Lipinski. Waclaw is a smart boy. He's just rebelling.

His brother Stanislaw burst out laughing when he heard the familiar and already long-belabored, "Don't call me Waclaw."

"You're right," he said. "A respectable Waclaw never actually did come of you."

Now, in 1931, the philosophical and ideological conflicts between them had lost their acuteness. Stanislaw, in calling his brother Waclaw, did so intentionally, for fun, only in order to annoy him. When everything had already transpired, all the wars had ended and all the battles been lost, names were the smallest thing that mattered. There was no more cause for arguments. All that remained were perforations in the lungs.

O-o-one, two. I-i-inhale, exhale.

They climbed into the car. Fin Yuli was going to the sanatorium too; Lypynsky couldn't imagine his stay there without her. She was supposed to adjust his pillows, make arrangements with the doctors, read newspapers aloud, serve him water at night, and place her hand on his forehead while uttering the words, "Everything's alright. There's no fever." Fin Yuli was supposed to listen to his patchy breathing and determine whether Lypynsky was still alive. At times he himself doubted this: It would suffice then to glance at Fin Yuli, and the housekeeper would reassuringly nod her head as if to say, don't fret, you're alive.

The driver started the engine. It was seven in the morning. The drive was supposed to take four to five hours. On the wooden stairs of the house, Lypynsky's loyal dog—his secretary of many years Savur-Tsypryanovych—was left standing. He waved his hand in farewell. A short red-mustached man of roughly the same age as Lypynsky. Hailing from somewhere around Kyiv, though no one will find details about his place of birth in any encyclopedia. A ghost of a man. A shadow of a man. He had lived together with Lypynsky for the preceding eleven years after fleeing Kyiv, seized anew by the Bolsheviks, by freight train to Vienna. There he knew only one address—the Hotel Bristol on Kärntner Ring 1—and the fact that the Ukrainian ambassador resided there as well. He came and positioned himself in the lobby next to the window; the porter measured the newcomer distrustfully from head to toe.

“I’m here for Envoy Lypynsky,” announced Tsypryanovych, but the porter wagged his head. The Envoy has relinquished his position and is in the process of moving to new quarters. He’s actually very ill. Give him some peace for once. Tsypryanovych was at a loss, but didn’t leave because he had nowhere to go. The porter repeated the same thing over and over: Leave him in peace. Go on. There’s nothing worth waiting for here. You all flock to him like flies to carrion.

“So who’s the Ukrainian envoy now?” Tsypryanovych asked in despair.

The porter exploded, “How should I know, good man?! As if I’m the one to ask!”

At that moment Lypynsky descended into the foyer: groomed pointed whiskers, a meticulously combed head of thick black hair, and large eyes, unnaturally lively for such a withered body. A carriage was waiting for Lypynsky at the entrance, which was supposed to drive him to the sanatorium for treatment. Fin Yuli was giving instructions to the cabman.

“Mr. Lypynsky,” Tsypryanovych called out to him, then fearfully broke off because he didn’t know what to say next.

Lypynsky stopped short and glanced inquiringly at Tsypryanovych.

“Tell me where I should go, Mr. Lypynsky.”

“And who are you?”

“Mykhailo Petrovych Savur-Tsypryanovych.”

“I already told him that there’s nothing worth waiting for here,” the porter interjected.

Lypynsky was seized by a coughing fit. Fin Yuli extended him a white kerchief monogrammed in red with *W. Lipinski*.

“And what are your skills?” Lypynsky asked unexpectedly.

“I’m a secretary,” Tsypryanovych mumbled despondently. “I worked in the administration of the Directorate, in the office of the Ministry of Education. We were evacuated from Kyiv a month ago.”

“What languages do you know?”

“German, French and Russian.”

“And do you know Ukrainian?”

“That’s my native tongue.”

“Come visit me in the sanatorium in Baden in a month. If we can reach an agreement, you’ll be my secretary. I’m looking for one right now.”

Tsypryanovych thanked him; his eyes welled with dog tears of devotion, but he brushed them away with the sleeves of his frayed frock coat. From the doorway Lypynsky added, “Do you have somewhere to stay?”

“I don’t, Mr. Ambassador.”

“I’m no longer an ambassador. Call me Vyacheslav Kazymyrovych.” He whispered something to the porter, then walked out of the hotel and climbed into the carriage.

“You’re lucky,” the porter grunted at Tsypryanovych and instructed him to follow him. “He’s just a good man, so everyone takes advantage of him. I would chase the likes of you off to hell. Flocking here like flies to carrion...”

In a month they reached an agreement with respect to everything, and Tsypryanovych immediately took up his new position. At different times he had different tasks. Besides his regular duties as a secretary, he performed the heavy domestic labor, fetched the doctor in the event of an emergency (on occasion several times in a single night), and met guests at the gate and drove them up to the house in a dray. On Lypynsky’s behalf Tsypryanovich also corresponded with those Lypynsky himself found wearisome. He composed his responses on the basis of previously written letters: He didn’t have the right to arbitrarily improvise, no matter how tempting it was. He met with Lypynsky’s old friends in Vienna, queried them about their present lives, and then relayed everything in detail to his master. Sometimes he would fib a little, embellish things; sometimes he would fail to mention someone’s death. Tsypryanovych’s wages consisted of two dollars a month plus food and a roof over his head. Now and then Lypynsky offered him additional bonuses, but Tsypryanovych usually declined them, aware that Lypynsky didn’t have enough for treatments. Tsypryanovych was healthy; he was never in need of much. His only problem were his aching teeth. Sometimes Lypynsky would cover the cost of a dentist

for the secretary because in those parts that role was performed by an ordinary practitioner who knew only that teeth stopped hurting if you pulled them out.

Their work morning looked like this. Fin Yuli would enter the room and would open the window wide so that Lypynsky could begin his respiratory regimen. His so-called “air therapy.” Tsypryanovych would inquire matter-of-factly, “Are you going to write yourself today or dictate?”

His query was pointless: It had been long since Lypynsky had picked up a pencil. No one could make out his scribbles afterwards, not even he himself.

“Dictate,” would come the response and Tsypryanovych would carry into the bedroom his idol, his deity—his typewriter. He was prepared to die for it. The typewriter nourished Tsypryanovych like a cow nourishes Galician peasants. He would place it carefully on the table, then would sit down next to it and knead his hands, like a surgeon before a delicate operation.

“I’m ready, Vyacheslav Kazymyrovych. How many letters today?”

“One. But make two copies. And I beg you, Tsypryanovych, don’t twist around what I say. Don’t correct what you think are my mistakes. Write what I dictate.”

“But the word ‘commendable’ is written with two m’s. Anyone you ask will confirm that for you.”

Lypynsky would wave him off nervously.

“Then write as you know how. To hell with you. You’ll do it your own way all the same. My friends have told me many a time already that your typed letters differ from my handwritten ones and that sometimes they don’t recognize me in my own correspondence.”

Tsypryanovych had learned to not react to these kinds of attacks. Over his years of service he softheartedly forgave Lypynsky such linguistic quirks, which no respectable secretary would have tolerated. “Hooliganish,” for example. Why, what kind of word is that?! What does it mean?! “Hooliganish danger”—and make of it what you will. Or “selfstatelessness.” That’s both a joke and a sin! But Tsypryanovych tolerated it and, clenching his teeth, typed even greater nonsense.

“To Ivan Krevetskiy.” Lypynsky would give the name of the recipient and would wait while the secretary rapped out the standard heading on the typewriter: Badegg, Tabelbad Post Office, Austria. A snowstorm was blowing in through the window; little by little Lypynsky’s mustache and eyebrows grew white.

I-i-inhale, exhale.

“*Esteemed and Dear Mister Ivan!*” slowly he would begin to dictate. “*On the occasion of the Christmas holidays and the New Year, I send You heartfelt wishes for all the best in the coming year. I thank you for your wishes and for remembering me. There is only one wish of yours I cannot understand: for a return to my native land? By whom and for what am I needed in this native land?*”

Tsypryanovych was slowing down: He too was growing cold.

“*No, I maintain hope that in the end God the Merciful will at least relieve me of any contact with the Ukrainian populace, to whom I gave everything I had and who thanked me with the gravest insult that can only exist for an honest man. Not a single voice stood in my defense when the froth that now grows into moss on the wreckage and spreads befell me. Moss with a double s.*”

“I know how to write ‘moss,’” Tsypryanovych would grow piqued. “You don’t need to tell me, Vyacheslav Kazymyrovych.”

“Forgive me, forgive me. I’m doing it out of habit. I’m continuing. *My Ukraine has perished. I have nothing and no one to return to. Signed: He who is dead to the deceased.*”

“He who is dead to the deceased? What kind of signature is that? You’re still alive.”

“Just write what I say.”

Tsypryanovych would give in, narrating aloud what he was typing. “*He who is dead to the deceased. Date: December 30. Should I write the Rusyn Detseember or the more properly Ukrainian Hruden?*”

“Write Detseember.”

“*December 30, 1931. With the utmost respect, Your Lypynsky.*”

Afterwards Lypynsky would ask to be left alone. From the corridor Tsypryanovych could hear him crying.

As he was seeing off the car packed up for the sanatorium, Tsypryanovych had no idea that he was seeing his master for the last time. Otherwise he would have somehow prepared himself. Perhaps he would have embraced him. They never embraced, only bickered, though they respected one another and couldn't get by without each other. One time, after a routine "orthographic" argument, Tsypryanovych got so angry that he even resigned and pointedly went to Vienna to look for another job. After spending two weeks at their mutual friend Zhuk's and in the end never having received an apologetic letter from Lypynsky, he returned. Lypynsky wordlessly accepted him back. He had in fact written a letter of apology but hadn't known which address to send it to.

There is one photograph where they're together. Lypynsky in his predictable Hussar pelisse with a cane in his hands, Tsypryanovych in a double-breasted baize shirt in a slanted plaid; the colors aren't visible because the photograph is black and white. They're sitting shoulder to shoulder in front of the house in Badegg. Someone else's children, possibly his brother Stanislaw's, are in the background. It's warm outdoors. The terrace is filled with blooming flowerpots. Both men are diminished in size, thinned, and narrow in the shoulders. Lypynsky is gazing into the lens, Tsypryanovych somewhere off to the side. An egg-shaped head, the nape completely bald already. His eyebrows knit. Tsypryanovych—a ghost of a man. No one will find details about his subsequent life in any encyclopedia. No one knows what happened to him afterwards. With the death of Lypynsky, he too died.

The only thing that Tsypryanovych left behind was a very short but detailed, almost physiological, account of the final days of the life of his master. A year later a Lviv magazine published it. Tsypryanovych reports that the journey to the sanatorium went well: Lypynsky was cheerful and full of hope. At the sanatorium he was immediately given an injection of camphor. The following day, after a thorough examination, Fin Yuli asked the doctor if there was any hope and he, with a shake of the head, replied that Lypynsky had come there to die. The housekeeper didn't give much credence to the words of the doctor because she had heard similar things often. The brother and daughter, after lengthy conversations with the patient, departed. Lypynsky rose only in the mornings in order to wash himself seated. The housekeeper would read him German

newspapers. The entire time he was fully conscious. He slept with his eyes open. He kept repeating that he needed to survive for a few more years, was saying something about the sea and about salt, was reminiscing about his wife, whom he never again saw after the divorce in 1919. The housekeeper made arrangements to have a priest hear his confession, to which Lypynsky agreed, but he expressed surprise, assuring her that he didn't feel all that bad. At eight in the evening, after yet another injection of camphor, he complained that he was very tired and wanted to sleep. The housekeeper adjusted the pillows. He fell asleep. He slept with his eyes open. His breathing was, as usual, short and frequent. Fin Yuli was dozing beside him in a chair. Around half past ten she heard him exhale deeply. She counted to five. He inhaled no more.

III

1903: Krakow

Meticulously dressed, freshly shaven, with well-tended nails, head to toe in black, even his necktie was black: That's how the Ukrainian Studies Professor of the Jagiellonian University in Krakow Bohdan Lepky first saw him at a lecture of his.

"Are you from Russia?" he asked. Lypynsky confirmed. From Volyn. He had wandered in to the lecture on Ukrainian language by chance because, truth be told, he was studying agronomy, but he had no regrets because the lecture had proven very interesting. He spoke Ukrainian better than his peers of Ukrainian descent. The astounded Professor Lepky immediately invited him and a friend to his home for tea.

"Thank you for the invitation. I'll come with great pleasure, Professor," he replied. "Only please, call me Vyacheslav."

"He's a marvel," the professor would tell everyone. "A complete marvel!"

The professor was an exceptionally generous and upstanding person; he was renowned for his hospitality and for his compliant wife too, who would wordlessly offer food and drink to the frequent guests of the Lepkys' apartment on Zielona Street in Krakow. Many a time this apartment served as a refuge for Ukrainian "artists and litterateurs" who would arrive in Krakow without a krone in their pockets. Suspect Ukrainian-speaking characters were perpetually milling around there in hopes of at best a roof over their heads or at the very least three meals a day. Professor Lepky's compliant wife took them all for vagrants. "I can't refuse a man in need a lump of bread," Lepky would say to her with a proudly raised head, all the while running deeper and deeper into debt. Such naïve generosity and such a romantic faith in selfless toil for the good of the idea of Ukrainianness, however, always repaid him a hundredfold. They rarely listened to Lepky, but they did cling to him. This gave him a feeling of fulfillment. From the entirety of his considerable output (Lepky wrote historical novels, composed poetry, assembled calendars, painted, published and edited), his thankless progeny will remember only a single doleful poem

about cranes that fly off to foreign lands, knowing in advance that they'll perish on their journey back. The professor indeed died in a foreign land, but did so of old age and natural causes, which for someone of his generation and lifepath could be considered a great fortune.

The family's financial situation drastically improved after Lepky was invited to the Jagiellonian University to teach Ukrainian. Though the actual inauguration of the department became an anti-academic sensation amidst the Slavists, the overwhelming majority of whom considered the Ukrainian language to be a dialect of either Russian or Polish, or both concurrently. Studying a dialect at the university level seemed like nonsense. A prohibition on the use of the "Malorussian regiolects" of Little Ukraine in print was in effect in the Russian Empire, and the concealment of a lone Ukrainian dictionary was deemed comparable to revolutionary activity and was punishable by imprisonment or exile. Routine searches had taught the custodians of dictionaries to pass them from hand to hand at the slightest suspicion of yet another shakedown. Aristocratic families could lose privileges for the use of Ukrainian in the home. Only a few such families spoke "the peasant tongue" regardless, notwithstanding the dangers.

The Ukrainian language wasn't prohibited in Austria-Hungary, but here its instruction at the university level was also an almost impossible affair because in terms of teaching materials there existed only one grammar book, published ten years earlier, and even that book was intended for schoolchildren and not university students. Nonetheless Professor Lepky managed a brilliant workaround to this situation: When he was short a grammar book he would recite Ukrainian poetry, and when he was short on Ukrainian poetry he would sing Ukrainian songs. Folklore and a love of everyday traditions—that was all the Ukrainian society of 1903 could boast of. Divided between two empires, it increasingly resembled a dust-coated stage set that someone had simply forgotten to strike. The world had jellied in its antiquated proportions, like a shallow but warm pond in which there was no room for big fish, yet frogs and fish fry felt beautifully comfortable here. The young Pole and student of agriculture Waclaw Lipinski was just such a fry. But even then it was clear to many, and in particular to Professor Lepky, that he was evolving into something completely different than had been planned.

Lypynsky swiftly became the professor's pet and often lingered on Zielona Street late into the night. Lepky's wife didn't mind at all because, in contrast to the rest of the vagrants,

Lypynsky came from a wealthy family and distinguished himself with the utmost pedantry in matters of money. He preferred to overpay sooner than eat on someone else's dime. He always kissed the lady of the house's hand politely, apologizing for the late (early, Sunday, long, short) visit. Mrs. Lepky would flush. "How droll he is," she would say to her husband. "But better droll than hungry."

Typically, Krakow's Ukrainian community, which was informally headed by Professor Lepky, would rendezvous at the Mrozinski Coffee Shop in the city's Main Square. Every day the owner of the coffee shop would reserve a little table—next to the window to the right of the entrance—for the occasion and had even agreed to order the Ukrainian-language newspaper *Dilo* from Lviv. The same discussions always took place at the table: about the lethargy of the Ukrainian community, the hopelessness of the Ukrainian situation, the illiteracy of the Ukrainian peasant and the unscrupulousness of the Ukrainian disposition. Mrozinski himself, while unobtrusively topping off his guests' cups with coffee or glasses with wine, would carefully memorize what he had heard, afterwards transcribing it all verbatim onto paper and passing neat little envelopes to the agents of the secret police every week. His informant letters were nevertheless rarely read in full. A certain measured dose of underground revolutionary activity suited Krakow as it did no other Galician town. It's no wonder that it was precisely here—in seemingly the heart of Polish pomposity—that Lipinski the student, in full view of many witnesses, transformed into Lypynsky and entered the ranks of Ukrainian community leaders. No one summoned him there or offered him a particular welcome; he came on his own. "He's a marvel," Professor Lepky would repeat.

The monument to Ivan Kotliarevsky was to blame for everything.

It was finally erected that September of 1903 on Protopopivsky Boulevard in Poltava, and the event had enormous, hitherto unprecedented resonance. The funds for the bust of the pioneer of Ukrainian literature and the father of Ukrainian light vaudeville were collected swiftly, and the design of the bust was executed just as swiftly, but the dedication ceremony was for many years postponed on account of the tsarist government's categorical disapprobation of the inscription on the pedestal: "From the homeland, to its first poet Ivan Kotliarevsky." Tsarist censorship wasn't allowing the inscription through, obviously fearing that in the wake of the first poet others would ensue as well. The compound word "homeland" also sounded suspect. The

Ukrainian lawyer from Kharkiv Mykola Mikhnovsky—a rash and unusually obdurate man, and author of the inflammatory pamphlet “Independent Ukraine” (he will commit suicide in 1924)—had even sent an angry letter defending the right to the ill-starred inscription to Sipyagin, the Minister of the Interior of the Russian Empire. The closing words of this letter, should one so desire, could have easily been interpreted as a threat: “The Ukrainian nation must secure independence for itself, even should all of Russia teeter! Even should rivers of blood spill! And the blood that spills will fall on Your head, Mr. Minister, like a national curse, and on the heads of all our oppressors.” Minister of the Interior Sipyagin, fortunately for Mikhnovsky, didn’t have a chance to provide an adequate response because he was opportunely assassinated by a member of a Russian militant organization.

Despite this, in the end it proved necessary to abandon sentimentality all the same, and the bust was underwritten with the laconic “Ivan Kotliarevsky, 1769-1838.”

The censorship approved the opening of the monument and finally, in September of 1903, Poltava was converged on by virtually every well-known Ukrainian, the active student youth from Kyiv, the editor-in-chief of the Lviv-based *Dilo*, composers, historians, Galician activists and representatives of the Viennese Parliament. The monument became a symbol of protest against the oppression of the Ukrainian people, and the trip to Poltava became viewed as a matter of honor. Never before had the Ukrainians of both empires declared their presence so loudly. For greater potency, they even tracked down Ivan Kotliarevsky’s maid, the 111-year-old Varvara Lelechykh, who, alone among the living, had seen the poet with her own eyes.

At a loss in the face of such a sweeping reaction, the tsarist censorship forbade the use of the Ukrainian language during the festivities. People were scandalized.

The evening before the celebratory gathering, in an oak forest near Poltava, the student youth held a secret meeting to work out a plan of action in response to this prohibition. In a conspiratorial spirit they sailed to the meeting in boats, and the boats were so numerous that the local Vorskla River seemed to be covered by a toy flotilla. The hotter heads called for armed action, but the majority didn’t support this idea, well aware that government troops had been brought in to Poltava from the entire governorate. Armed action would end in blood, arrests and even greater repressions. They settled on the tactic of silent protest. They implemented it the following day during the official reception in the Educational Building.

The delegation from Galicia was presenting first: As foreign guests they were permitted to speak Ukrainian. “Honor to you, oh glorious city!” a representative of the Viennese Parliament addressed the audience, and the jam-packed hall erupted in applause. After that the stage was occupied by a subject of the Russian Empire, who too—albeit very quietly—began speaking in Ukrainian. Mayor Tregubov of Poltava sprang up in alarm and, pale as death, voiced a reminder that any and all remarks in Ukrainian were prohibited. The audience let out a roar. The prominent Ukrainian writer Mykhailo Kotsiubynsky approached Tregubov and handed him the cover page of his speech (the speech itself—no, because it was written in the prohibited language), after which he left the hall in a show of defiance. The rest of the speakers did the same. The spectators joined in the protest, and within a matter of minutes the jam-packed hall had emptied.

Plehve, the minister of the interior of the Russian Empire and the author of the ban on the Ukrainian language for the duration of the Poltava activities, will be killed by Russian terrorists already within a few months of the described events—just as his predecessor had been. At the same time, the terrorist group Defense of Ukraine will attempt to blow up the monument to Pushkin in Kharkiv, but for some reason no one will discern a precise and subtle act of retaliation for his Poltava colleague in this crime.

The entirety of the Ukrainian world was gripped by agitation. The pages of newspapers teemed with the recollections of eyewitnesses. Everyone who had been in Poltava talked about unforgettable impressions, a sense of tremendous inspiration and the feeling of unprecedented solidarity. On the occasion of such momentous events, Professor Lepky hosted a celebratory dinner at his home in late November, to which he invited his closest friends and some local Poles loyal to Ukrainians. It was with them that an unpleasant argument arose after midnight, when the professor’s wife had long since been asleep, which the previously taciturn and placid student, Lypynsky, began.

“This is an incredible act of victory of the community over despotism,” he commented on the events with passion, to which someone less romantic remarked that all of it was likely not the beginning of a pattern but a mere fluke.

“The Ukrainian community is a flock of naïve sheep ruled by wolves. It’s feeble and helpless because it doesn’t have its own leaders.”

“New leaders are rising! We must become these leaders!” Lypynsky exclaimed.

“Don’t be silly, Mr. Lypynsky. You, as a Pole, will get handed over first to the wolves by the Ukrainian community. Or they’ll eat you up themselves. Ukrainian sheep are a carnivorous lot.”

Lypynsky fell silent for a while, but when the room had grown quiet again, he unexpectedly said, “The Polish intelligentsia of Ukraine has no other alternative but to support the inevitable formation of a Ukrainian state.”

The Poles present at the gathering—ripe-aged men—were dumbstruck. They would have silently smiled and nodded their heads in response to similar assertions from their Ukrainian brethren, but pride didn’t permit them to tolerate such a thing from the lips of one of their own.

“Young man,” began one of them, “you’re talking rubbish. May the esteemed master of this home forgive me, but for there to be a Ukrainian state, it’s not enough to have one monument in a provincial town, don’t you think?”

Lypynsky seemed to be expecting this.

“The monument is just the beginning. The rebirth of the Ukrainian nation is inevitable.”

“So you’re a clairvoyant?”

“One need not be a clairvoyant to foresee obvious things corroborated long ago by history. Ukrainians, split between the Kaiser and the Tsar, have ended up in a situation where they must either surrender and perish as a nation or revolt. In all of history, there is no example of some nation surrendering of its own volition. The Ukrainian people are no exception and won’t surrender without a fight. They lived through something similar in the mid-seventeenth century and were capable of a war of national liberation, which was, incidentally, led by none other than a Ukrainian Pole, Bohdan Khmelnytsky.”

“A Ukrainian Pole? Ha! That concept doesn’t exist.”

“Then take a look at me,” Lypynsky parried. “Do I exist? Because I am a Ukrainian Pole. My language is Polish and my faith Catholic. I have renounced neither my language nor my faith, nor will I renounce them. Yet in this moment of the Ukrainian nation’s uprising, I feel

compelled to take its side. These aren't romantic convictions, as many might think, but a matter of logic and political expediency."

"In Poland, people like you, Mr. Lypynsky, are called renegades."

Lypynsky flared up in anger and jumped up from his seat.

"A renegade betrays his own people, but I'm not betraying my own people, and you won't manage to convince me that I am. Was Bohdan Khmelnytsky, the son of a Polish courtier, a renegade for initiating a political revolution of unprecedented scales against the Polish crown? Was he a renegade for serving as a catalyst for the collapse of the Polish State and the rise of the Ukrainian Cossack one in the seventeenth century? Khmelnytsky, as I do now as well, understood the historical necessity of this. Your own people are those who live alongside you. Common land creates common goals for people—not language or religion."

The affronted Poles went off to their homes without so much as a goodnight. A bit of kerosene remained at the very bottom of the lamps, and an icy wind pushed its way in from outside through the chinks in the windows.

"You're a valiant man," said the professor in an effort to dilute the dense silence. Lypynsky took refuge in an armchair and didn't stir, as if fearing that the world he had just constructed for himself out of nothing might turn out stillborn. For a fleeting moment it seemed he was already regretting every word he had uttered and that right then he wanted nothing more than to clear off this thin fragile ice he was standing on. He had never ventured this far before.

"You're the first Pole that I've heard something to that effect from," Lepky said as he filled the crystal goblets with a fragrant, transparent liquid. "Marille—an apricot liqueur. A gift from friends in Vienna. It's just what we need right now."

Lypynsky pushed the goblet away.

"Thank you ever so much, Professor, but I avoid strong drinks. I'm short of breath all night after them."

He rose, letting Lepky know that he wanted to leave already. The momentary weakness had passed. Lypynsky's face now emanated a hard coldness—a dissociation, like that of a

military volunteer who by definition is not entitled to desertion. Putting on his coat, he said, “Thank you very much for the evening. I’ll likely remember it my entire life.”

“Don’t resort to drastic measures, my dear friend. That’s my advice to you.”

Lepky also rose. They stood facing one another, almost equal in height, then embraced.

“You know, Professor, this ‘don’t resort to drastic measures’ has always been rather off-putting to me. I don’t doubt that you wish only the best for me, and by no means do I want to offend you with harsh words. But I speak as I think. It’s not just the wicked and cowardly who resort to drastic measures. And a worthy man devotes himself to a cause for whose sake he lives completely, sparing neither himself nor others.”

“You’re right, Mr. Lypynsky. I beg your pardon and withdraw my advice. I wanted to ease the tension, but I see that it’s necessary to closely monitor one’s tongue around you. You, at the sound of a falsehood, lunge for the throat like a tiger.”

Lypynsky pulled on an astrakhan half-coat, bid the professor farewell, and walked out into the frosty night. He moved like a stray who didn’t belong, not noticing anything around him. During the three academic years in Krakow, he had lived in the Hotel Polski next to the city arsenal, which the Czartoryski family had acquired not long before for its prodigious archives. Wherever he found himself, Lypynsky always rented accommodations as close as possible to sources of information.

One of the three rooms in the small but luxuriant and fairly expensive hotel was at his request lined with bookcases to give him somewhere to stack the books he purchased. Lypynsky sat down at the writing desk, hoping to record his impressions of the evening in a pocket notebook, but quickly abandoned this idea, jotting down only the date and, as was his tradition in such instances, “I feel ill.” The practice of pinning down his thoughts was something akin to an indispensable daily hygiene of the soul for him; when, for one reason or another, no thoughts arrived, he would mark the date in the little notebook and place a small black cross alongside it. This absence of thoughts Lypynsky attributed to the advance of a disease still unknown to science. Another one for him to bear.

He heaved a deep sigh. He didn't undress. He didn't lie down. For the first time Krakow had bared its teeth at Lypynsky. It had shoved him out into incertitude, where it was cold and lonely, and where one had to decide for oneself what was good and what was evil. No one would counsel him there and hearten him; on the contrary, they would ridicule and frighten him just to thwart him finding his true self. But who was he truly? A renegade. A traitor. Kindred. Foreign. A Pole. A Ukrainian. Waclaw. Vyacheslav. Who was he?

The answer hid in the thickets of his mind, but Lypynsky already suspected that it was irrelevant. Who he was didn't matter; what mattered was who he wanted to become. Lypynsky had to choose someone's side, but no matter what side he might choose, he would be a traitor all the same. Traitor—that was his new name. And the entirety of his life force would henceforth go to bearing this name with pride.

IV

2000: The First Golden-Haired Man

Time is a big blue whale. It devours me along with all my thoughts, experiences and memories, but in order to satiate itself and keep functioning, it needs scores like me—billions of miniscule, nigh invisible worlds. They commingle, becoming sustenance, but don't become the one big world of the blue whale. The whale lives in its own whale-space—absolute and immutable—in which the need to think about something or remember something is absent.

I luxuriate in remembrance. I grow tense, then muddled, as if falling through some bottomless vertical tunnel and there's nothing to grab hold of: My fingers scratch against the perfectly sleek surface in vain. I fall into the past. I yearn to scream but my voice dies away in the bowels of the body that I, before long, won't be able to call my own. Only flashes of love—not of the one with which I was loved, but of the one with which I loved—occasionally illuminate the surrounding darkness.

They—the men (though I have loved not only men)—were for some reason very alike. All three fair-haired, with a roundish head shape, though this too sounds somewhat strange as it's customary to assume that a head is always round. That's not what I think. There are heads that are so sharp or rectangular or irregularly shaped that it's simply impossible to call them round. A round head is a head that will roll should it be removed from a neck and set rolling. That's what I could have done with the heads of the men that I have loved. They would have rolled perfectly smoothly and with equal speed; their golden hair would have scintillated as they rolled, were the sun shining at that moment.

All three had blue eyes. Only now do I apprehend this because I'm generally prone to not noticing the color of human eyes. I don't recall, didn't discern, and never noted the color of my mother's eyes, for example, or my father's—the people whom I've seen the most often in my life. Sometimes I get embarrassed, particularly around “eye” specialists who are impeccably versed in the slightest color variations in irises. I didn't notice the color of the eyes of the men

that I loved, but now, when I think of them, I also clearly recall that blueness into which I would plunge every time I looked at them. Blue eyes suited these men in the best way possible. They couldn't have had any other eyes—only blue ones, the color of a cloudless sky on a frosty February day. These eyes emanated elation and sorrow at the same time. Melancholy. The boredom that ate away at the men from inside. I disturbed their boredom only temporarily, like a gentle breeze disturbs a bottomless mountain lake. In protest, I craved betraying my blue-eyed men with someone whose eyes would have been black- or muddy-hued. As black as possible, as muddy as possible. In reality I was betraying one blue-eyed man with another.

The first one appeared when I was beginning my university degree. In actuality I was completely indifferent as to what to study, but I was pursuing a degree in Ukrainian studies. I would have poked around in both chemistry or jurisprudence with no lesser enthusiasm because I generally liked working out information in detail, dividing up knowledge into branches and moving along every branch into the deep, as far as my strength and memory allowed. By contrast, synthetic analysis, generalization, and the ascent by way of a few details to the very top of a tree for the sake of a sweeping panorama didn't come easily to me. I saw no spectacular panoramas, only bizarre and captivating minutiae, which I nonetheless learned to sort and, by means of fortuitous similarities, retain in my head.

Incidentally, my own head isn't round but egg-shaped, with an elongated jaw and protruding cheekbones. It's a good kind of head to posthumously plant on a stake in a secret catacomb to scare the occasional tourists with the perfection of its skull.

I recall it being very important to me to remember as many details from Ukrainian Baroque literature as possible. Its artistic value wasn't all that high, at least for a contemporary reader's taste, but it was incredibly interesting in its historical accoutrements, in the names of forgotten and only recently rediscovered authors about whose fates nothing was known, thus nothing restricted the flights of my fancy. The refined titles of the works—generally of a spiritual and religious nature—beguiled me, a person of weak faith, with their abstruseness. And because the language they were written in was also antiquated, together there emerged a chimerical sacral abracadabra—mystical labyrinths of secret knowledge that I very much wanted to decipher and apprehend but that I wasn't managing to apprehend with my mind. I made lists of authors and the titles of their works, recorded the historical events that served as their backdrop (principally

religious polemics between the Orthodox and Catholics and, later, the Ukrainian-Polish War under the leadership of Bohdan Khmelnytsky), and studied the biographies of the professors of the Kyiv-Mohyla Academy, around which (initially as the Kyiv Fraternal School), in fact, the Ukrainian Baroque first swirled up. I reveled in the Baroque; I swooned in it. It was then already that I started sensing this irrepressible and unbearable desire to taste time, to live through something more than this one life of mine, which in and of itself wasn't all that noteworthy.

My parents, the color of whose eyes I don't recall yet whom I've always very much felt to be my kin, meddled little in the daily course of my life, particularly after I finished high school and entered university. They commemorated this stupendous event with the purchase of an incredibly expensive (for our means) computer, brought it into my room, turned it on, marveled for a moment at its sky-blue screen, and left me alone with it, closing the door behind themselves noiselessly. From that point on, my parents appeared in my room only to bring me something to eat (my mom) or to wake me up in the morning (my dad). They didn't know what was going on with me, but there was actually nothing special going on with me. I dyed my short hair first white and then a reddish color, bought a bright green puffer jacket at a thrift shop, and wore it around with flared raspberry-colored velvet pants. In school I always sat in the back row, didn't talk to anyone and didn't strike up any friendships, especially after a lush-haired Protestant classmate called me "unsaved" at the end of a brief chat and with complete seriousness assured me that I would burn in hell because I worshiped literature but didn't believe in God himself.

And that was when he appeared. At first I didn't even take any notice. He walked into the lecture hall: It was a gloomy, late-autumn day, so from my back row the golden hair of the newcomer seemed lackluster, greasy and unkempt. The man was dressed carelessly and very traditionally, in a cheap turtleneck sweater and a black leather jacket, which ninety-eight percent of the adult male population in my city also wore (the remaining two percent were in the process of saving up for one). I turned my gaze away to the window; I wasn't interested in what he would say. The man positioned himself behind the podium and began laying out the papers from which he intended to deliver his lecture. The student audience quieted down, not out of eager anticipation, but because that's what it always did before another routine descent into a two-hour lethargic slumber: First it fell silent, then it fell asleep with eyes wide open, languidly reacting only to sharp rises in the lecturer's voice. The man finished laying out his papers and too shifted

his eyes to the window. He didn't glance at us as other instructors were wont to do, he didn't seek to pique our interest or at the very least draw our attention to a new subject somehow, and that struck me as odd, even somewhat arrogant. It crossed my mind that this instructor was more apathetic toward us than we were toward him. His young face exuded some sort of unhuman fatigue in which he was dissolving with no particular resistance, like salt in milk. He didn't even take off his leather jacket, though the hall wasn't at all cold, and finally mumbled out some first sentence that I didn't catch, something along the lines of, "Today we're going to look at the creative work of so-and-so." Who-who? I wasn't sure I wanted to know. Outside the window an autumn wind was picking up and dying down again, swaying the withered browned leaves of the dwarf maples in the university courtyard and amplifying the chaos outside and within me.

"*Trenos albo Plach!*" the man behind the podium all of a sudden exclaimed so loudly and shrilly that the student audience, almost sunken in lethargy already, started in fright and pricked up its ears. No one had understood anything.

"*Trenos albo Plach,*" the voice repeated somewhat more quietly but just as shrilly and proceeded, "of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Eastern Church."

This, apparently, was the title of a work. It pulsed in my head, stretched taut like a crossbow string: Two of the first three uttered words I had never before heard, and their obscurity perturbed and at once lured me. It was only later that I learned that *trenos* was in fact Greek for the Ukrainian *plach*, "lament," while *albo* was "or" in Polish. At the time the title sounded like real magic to me—an ancient incantation that caused clouds to disperse and cows to yield threefold more milk.

The lecturer went on, attempting to recreate with his intonation the style of similar "laments," which, however, he didn't at all succeed at and only set everyone laughing: "Woe is me, poor one, oh, woe is me, unfortunate one, in my good deeds tattered from all sides, to my body's shame stripped of my robes before the world!"

A chuckle rolled through the rows of students, yet his words struck me as so erotic that I blushed deeply and once more turned away to the window. I felt ensnared. A few sunrays suddenly pierced through the gloomy autumn sky and haloed the round head of the instructor.

Wisps of his golden hair glimmered, and his face, filled with unhuman fatigue, suddenly emitted an exalted sorrow—a sorrow with which all that literature that I so worshiped was impregnated.

“Nets on all sides, pits everywhere, poisonous stings on all sides. Over there predacious wolves, and there enraged lions. Venomous dragons over here, and ferocious basilisks here. I can’t see which way to turn, I don’t know which way to head, who to lean my head against, who to ask for protection.”

After a few quotations, the lecture took on a more conventional nature: The man dictated from his notes in a monotone while the students scratched lethargically with their ballpoint pens, writing down every word they heard so that they, God forbid, not end up having to remember it. I alone sat immobile. I wasn’t writing anything down, I just listened. The instructor came to a stop and intently surveyed the lecture hall for the first time. His eyes stumbled against my suspended gaze.

“You aren’t taking notes? You know everything that well?”

I didn’t immediately grasp that these words were addressed at me.

“I’m listening,” I mumbled belatedly, so all my classmates in the front rows had time to glance back in consternation. Who is it that’s not taking notes? They likely noticed my existence for the first time then. The back row is good precisely in that you don’t get noticed by those who go rushing forward.

The man at the podium pretended to not hear my response. He didn’t need my excuses: He wasn’t asking (I comprehended this later) but reproaching, mocking, poking fun. His gibes were arousing me. He would resort to them often later on, and I would delight in them because so be it that he was making fun of me: The other seventy-some students he wasn’t noticing at all. They were merely the stagehands to his daily fatigue, the set of his world-embracing sorrow.

Each time, as he entered the hall in his predictable leather jacket and fraying pleather shoes, he would run his eyes furtively all the way to the back row and would calm down when he had assured himself that I was there too. In order to be spotted more easily, I would crane my neck, ready for the next joust.

“Should I buy you a pen so that you have something to take notes with?” he would say in greeting, smiling just barely so that only I understood that the words were addressed to me and that he was joking.

“We have our own,” some student would answer with a giggle, but he hadn’t heard already: He was spreading out the day’s stack of handwritten papers on the podium and was beginning. Under the escort of his somewhat overly high, shrill voice, the seventeenth-century Ukrainian Orthodox archbishop Lazar Baranovych would burst into our lecture hall with the Catholic poet Cassian Sakowicz, or Kyrylo Stavrovetsky-Tranquillon, whose Didactic Gospel—his *Uchitel’noe evangelie*, as it was called in Russian—will be burned publicly in the squares of Moscow in 1627 as a furious missive of the devil. Ivan Velychkovsky, the Ukrainian John Own, would stroll leisurely down the isles with his handwritten booklet *Zehar z Poluzeharkom*, “The Half-Hour Clock,” which remained unknown to his contemporaries and which will be discovered only two hundred years after the author’s death. Stefan Yavorsky—a former rector of the Kyiv-Mohyla Academy and now a servant of Russian Tsar Peter I—bid a tearful farewell to his books before us prior to his death, the poet Klymentiy Zynoviiv wove praise for all life’s trades into verse, and countless anonyms hovered over our young heads up beneath the cracked ceiling like the spirits of unbaptized infants.

The golden-haired man was no longer joking. He, a resident of a post-Soviet state, handled the Ukrainian Baroque like a sacred crystal chalice adorned with pearls and a gilded rim. Taking a sip of the life-giving nectar from this chalice was permitted only on high feast days. I would accept the gift and sip the nectar with reverence. The bearer of the gift would fill with gratitude.

For the longest time we didn’t talk in private; we just exchanged jabs during lectures. He would prick me, and I him. One time I managed to poke him in the nose with an error, and I was very proud of myself. Revenge was swift to come. At the next lecture, when my triumph had more or less been forgotten already, he shamed me in front of everyone because, as it turned out, I knew nothing at all about eighteenth-century Europe. We took turns flaunting our knowledge, though in reality we were experiencing a mutual joy of discovery. By the will of chance, two wholly unacquainted people became valuable, even dear to each other. Life gained color and

meaning. A drop of moisture had fallen on the desert. A short-lived spark had flashed in the pitch-dark gloom.

One night I was working late in the university library. It stayed open until eight. It was a quarter till and the middle of February. A mound of books that I needed to at least leaf through loomed before me. The library patrons were growing fewer and fewer; the tables were emptying. In the enormous windows that spanned almost the entire wall glimmered the well-lit university yard with its frozen dwarf maples: An unease wavered in the air. All at once, thunder rolled and lightning flashed outside. Winter thunder is a very uncommon phenomenon. I cowered in a premonition that the end of the world was approaching. From the celestial clap, the windowpanes let out a jangle and the electric light in the library's lamps flickered. It dawned on me that I had never before experienced thunder in February. I evidently voiced this thought aloud because the golden-haired man, as he walked past with an armload of some sort of broadsheet newspapers, stopped alongside me—very close to me, in fact—and said, “Yes, me too.”

That was the first thing that he said to me face to face. Yes, me too. His voice was serious and warm. I got the urge to muffle myself up in it, to become a word that he would utter.

I glanced around: Only the two of us remained in the reading room.

“What is it you're reading so late into the night?” he asked, this time enjoining a response, waiting for it expectantly. Now his interest was piqued. Actually, his interest was always piqued, but only now did he allow his interest to be revealed. I turned the books around so that he could see their spines. I was unable to speak either way. He leaned in to peruse the titles.

“Mikhail Bakhtin. That's good. Aleksei Losev. That's good too. You like literature.”

“I'm unsaved,” I squeezed out of myself for some reason, and he laughed.

“Let's go grab a drink?”

XIII

0000: Sonia the Strongwoman

My third and final golden-haired man was off meeting with a friend to invite him to be a witness at our wedding. I had stayed behind in the apartment alone and prepared a pail of hot water. I learned to wash floors from my grandma Sonia, the one whose own father had left her on the steps of a children's home in order to himself die of starvation in a factory gatehouse. Grandma used to say that the important thing when washing floors was to not leave dirty streaks. "When I see," she would say, "how some housewives think they're washing a floor but are in reality only swishing mud from outside all over it, I lose my shit." You have to wash a floor twice: the first time without wringing out the rag too much, so that it's even dripping a little, and the second time washing it clean, with the rag wrung out well. If you wash it only once, assume that you've spent yourself in vain; the floor will be just as dirty as earlier. Then you need to leave the front door open—and it's better to create a draft by opening a window as well—so that the floor dries quickly. And no walking on the washed floor. If you really must, take off your shoes.

Her theory Grandma had polished and perfected over decades of working as a cleaning lady in a music school—the one that was attached to the Polish church and had once been a Catholic monastery. Grandma would head off to work as it was dusking already. In the more far-off cells Solfeggio scales were still being practiced, somewhere someone would be clumsily clacking at a piano or squeezing a few final tears out of a violin, and Grandma would exit the service room, toting with vigor a giant pail of water and an enormous mop with a three-meter handle—a mop that more closely resembled a cross awaiting a crucifixion. Dragging the cross on her shoulders, Grandma traversed from one building of the music school to another. She scrubbed until midnight, and then would open the windows and wait till it dried.

I too opened a window. It was the cold middle of March. My life was falling into place: I had published my first novel, which proved more popular than my stories, then moved from Kyiv back to the provinces, news of which my parents accepted relatively calmly, with only Mom saying in a fit of pique, “You know, I never did understand you.”

Grandma Sonia had been her mom. The two of them differed only in their quantity of facial wrinkles and stature. Mom was tall and slender, while Grandma Sonia bowed closer and closer to the ground with each passing year, as if wanting to pick something up from there but unable to find it. Her ability to bend down had on the whole amazed me since early on. When, for example, the time arrived to dig up the onions in the teeny garden outside of town that Mom had been issued in the final year of the Soviet Union’s existence and lost in the first year of independence, Grandma Sonia volunteered to go and took me with her so that I be “predisposed toward work from a young age.” That little garden was also home to cucumbers, zucchini and one large pumpkin that someone later stole. Grandma Sonia sat me down next to her and herself deftly leaned down over the onions with a small hoe in hand, not bending her knees in the process, only planting her feet a little past the width of her shoulders. The corresponding pose in yoga is called Prasarita Pada Uttanasana. Later, whenever I had need to bend down, I always saw my grandma, an onion in her large rough palms, before me. Sometimes the image would dissolve in my mind and I was no longer sure if I was seeing Grandma or Mom. I’m third in line—just as tall and slender as the second and as had once been the first.

This resemblance troubled me. I hardly felt happy in it. When I baked my first *pampushky* with plum butter and brought them to my parents to try, Grandma Sonia, who was living with them already at the time, swallowed one in silence, while Mom twiddled another in her hands, poked it with a finger to check the richness, and placed it back on the plate with the pronouncement that she would taste one later because she wasn’t hungry at the moment. She would have never admitted that my fritters, though I had never specifically been taught to fry them, had turned out precisely the same as hers or Grandma Sonia’s. We all had a common *pampushky* gene. And also a common forefather, who had left his daughter on the steps of a children’s home.

I often heard this story, which, quite possibly, it wasn't worth believing in its entirety because Grandma Sonia, per my calculations, had been three or four years old when it occurred. From my own age three I remember almost nothing.

In any case, little Sonia was led to the stairs of the orphanage by her father and he was running off to fetch some plum-butter *pampushky*. Sonia waited a few hours, without budging; she sat quiet as a mouse, so the grim housemothers of the establishment didn't notice her right away. "Come inside," one of the called out finally, but Grandma Sonia shook her head as if to say, I'm waiting for my dad, they're supposed to bring jam-filled *pampushky*. The housemothers lost patience and set about dragging her into the orphanage because it was growing dark already, but she resisted and screeched with all her might, "Let me go! My dad is coming any minute with *pampushky*!"

Every time I listened to Grandma's story as a child, I would burst into tears at this point. Grandma Sonia, in telling her tale, never forgot to mention the *pampushky*, as if they were the main protagonists of the whole story—they, and not the little girl in her first hours of orphanhood. It was then that this little girl and, by an automatic process, all of her progeny developed a protective *pampushky* gene. It pulled and still pulls attention over onto itself in those moments when something so horrific is happening that one could die from a surplus of emotion.

Grandma always said the exact same sentence about her mother, never supplementing it: "They had a grand voice and died when I was eight months old." That's all. Not a single word more. What's strange is that Grandma spoke a western Ukrainian dialect and referred to her parents in the third person plural, though she herself had come west already after the war as an adult. Her homeland was the most central part of Ukraine, the dialect of which became the literary language for the rest of the territory. On occasion, very seldom, it broke through in her speech, and then I would fish out those unknown words and expressions with my bare hands like golden minnows out of a pond: I would try to remember them, some I would even write down.

The *dyetdom* alone, which is what she called the children's home, invariably remained the *dyetdom*. The rest of the details would change. The time spent sitting on the stairs changed. From a few hours to an entire day. The seasons changed. Sometimes it was warm, other times it was snowing and the little girl was numb with cold. The housemothers addressed her variously: one time with sympathy or, conversely, with indifference another because the orphanage was

bursting with kids similarly dropped off whose parents had run off to fetch some *pampushky* and were “coming back any minute.” What I know for sure is this: It was still only 1932, because it was already after my grandma’s escape from the children’s home that people were truly swelling from hunger and lying unconscious beneath fences. She and one other little boy (in some versions of the story, he was her brother) decided to run away when the orphans started receiving a bowl of water with three beans for the whole day. Their survival instinct whispered that out there, among the people, their chances of surviving were greater.

They fled by night through a window. There was no specific search for the children subsequently. At the local bazaar, those who still had some money or something to sell would give Grandma Sonia and her friend morsels of bread. People were bringing everything out for sale that wasn’t fit for dinner but that could prove of use to someone who also barely had enough to eat. Kerchiefs, worn undergarments, sheepskin coats, boots. Whoever brought out books to sell went home hungry. There were days when no one handed Grandma anything. She and her friend (or perhaps it was her brother?) would gather plum pits off the ground, crush them with a large rock and eat out the little seeds.

I pushed my head out the window and watched the pigeons on the building across the street. They were weaving nests for themselves on the neglected open balconies and laying eggs. Once in a while the building’s owners would toss the eggs off the balconies onto the asphalt. The pigeons would then sit on the roof and cold-bloodedly observe the destruction of their offspring.

In the building facing mine, on the floor level with my apartment, an elderly little couple had a shaggy little white dog. The couple used to spend the entire day boozing in front of the TV. The husband, thin as a rake, would shuffle from the living room to the kitchen for his next serving of alcohol in long johns and with a bare torso. A few times I saw him without the long johns too, completely naked. The woman moved rarely. She lived on the couch and was unbelievably fat. I made note of the fact that alcohol sucked some people dry and inflated others. The woman I too saw naked a few times. The little couple had no curtains on their windows. I didn’t have any either, but neighbors took no interest at all in my life. The light of day seemed to concern only their light-haired shaggy dog, who hung out all day on the windowsill, his nose shoved up against the pane. He stared outside apathetically but immutably, in order that nothing escape his attention. He couldn’t miss something. On occasion our gazes would meet.

That time the doggie wasn't in his customary spot. A spring wind gusted into the room, but I didn't at all get cold in my short-sleeved T-shirt, as if my sensory organs had been shut off by someone. Mechanically, I set to washing the floor. Water dripped from the mop onto the parquet. I added essential oil to the water but caught no whiff of its lemon scent. The world contracted to the dimensions of my body; beyond it, nothing more existed. All the sluices through which contact with my surroundings should have been transpiring had shut tightly. I struck myself as a scarecrow that could nonetheless move as if it were alive. Shut off, confined, restricted by my own body. "I'm walking through myself as through a prison too large to cross." I began washing from the far right corner of the room.

"Why are you washing as if you haven't eaten in three days?" Grandma Sonia was exclaiming while keeping an eye on how I, as a child, executed her detailed directives. A few times she snatched the mop out of my hands in order to once again, for the hundredth time, show me how to do it right. With each freshly rinsed rag, you needed to catch the last third of the washed area in order to wipe the dirty streaks from the previous washing session.

"Don't be scared of the mop! Give it more muscle!"

Grandma Sonia herself was very strong. At age sixty she could carry a hundred-kilo sack of grain thirty meters on her shoulders. I don't know how she managed it. I wouldn't have been able to even budge that sack. My parents either. Only her incredible innate strength saved Grandma Sonia from premature death.

She, for example, should have died back when she was husking plum pits with a big rock. Or when she found her way home from memory. Her friend was already missing.

"The chances of him being alive are practically nil already," she said one day at age eighty. "He was older than me." The entire preceding time Grandma Sonia had imagined her friend living somewhere safe and sound: that he had successfully made it through the famine and was named Roman, and that he had grown up, gotten married, had children and not died in World War II.

"Was Victor his name?"

"No, Victor was the son of the milkman that you worked for as a hired hand."

Grandma Sonia would weigh my words mistrustfully.

“Ah, yes,” she would say at length with uncertainty.

She had found her way home by accident. Some man at the bazaar had recognized the little beggar-girl and led her as far as the fork in the road, beyond which began the gardens of Sonia’s father. My great-grandfather had a large farmstead, a pond of fish and two very long barns of hay. Grandma Sonia bathed, as she had done in the past. Now the pond was completely overgrown with rush and the little girl almost drowned, entangled in the roots. The barns also stood empty. Yet their house was freshly whitewashed, its door wide open. Grandma Sonia joyously ran inside but encountered no one she knew there. Someone had outfitted the bright room with shelves of household goods for members of the Communist Party. This was now a general store for the elect. An elderly man in a coverall was puttering behind the counter. Grandma Sonia pressed her back against the wall and kept quiet as a mouse.

At this point in the story I too would always burst into tears. The expression on the salesclerk’s face was warm and sympathetic. He walked up to Grandma Sonia and she squeezed against the wall even more, as if wanting to grow into it, embed herself in it forever. Sometimes the room would be empty, other time a few neighbors—newly-minted communists—would be waiting in line, clenching lifesaving coupons for bread in their fists.

Someone noted calmly, “This girl lived here once.”

It’s possible the name of Grandma’s father was uttered then too because it would have been logical if, upon recognizing the girl, someone had voiced the surname of the whole family. For instance, “This is the daughter of So-and-So. They once lived here.” But Grandma Sonia was never able to recall more than I’m describing. Her father forevermore remained nameless. And she herself was always nameless: merely “that one,” “the one from there,” Sonia the Strongwoman. A dove egg tossed out of a nest that by some miracle didn’t break.

The man in the coverall cut off half a loaf of white bread for her and led her outside. I think he even stroked her head. He seemed to genuinely feel bad for her. The strongwoman bit off a hunk and hid the rest of the treasure in her bosom. She was heading somewhere—she didn’t know where—but found herself at the cemetery where her mother was buried. The one who sang very well and died when Grandma Sonia turned eight months old. According to some tellings of

the story, a grave marker covered the grave; according to others, nothing did—just a mound of bare earth and an iron cross. Not far away members of the Sanitarian Service were digging a large pit into which they were piling locally gathered corpses of those dead from starvation.

Grandma Sonia lay face down on the nameplate (or on the bare earth) and, if I recall correctly, was screaming very loudly. They didn't bother her because anyone who still had the strength the scream was of no interest to the sanitarians. Grandma Sonia screamed so hard that she forever strained her voice, which must have been just as pretty as her mother's. From then on she spoke softly, almost inaudibly, her voice more like the rasp of an old wooden door. As a child I was scared of her voice.

"If I hadn't screamed so hard back then, I could've sung like her," Grandma liked to repeat, turning the radio playing the songs of her idols Anna German, Anatoliy Solovianenko or Nina Matviyenko up all the way.

German's ballad "The Echo of Love" began to rise from the depths of my body, trying to break loose outside me. In order to distract myself, I obdurately scrubbed the parquet with the mop, not forgetting to catch a third from the preceding sweep. "We're a lo-ong echo of one ano-o-ther" sang Anna German to me, and my heart clattered in time with her polished voice. Harder and harder. As a matter of fact, Grandma Sonia only once let slip that it was possible she wasn't screaming then as she lay on the grave, but singing. She knew a few songs from somewhere and had wanted to sing herself to death with them in order to finally unite with the mother she had never known. In the evening a pack of hungry dogs appeared and tore open Grandma Sonia's bread-filled bosom. The half of the white loaf instantly vanished in the jaws of the main she-dog. Why hadn't she torn apart the little girl after the bread? Could she really have felt some pity for her?

An entire day passed. Then a second. Then a third. The sun rose and set behind the poplars, but Grandma didn't move from the grave because there was nowhere to go. That's how she would always say it, trying to rationally explain the behavior of a child only a few years old: "There was nowhere to go." When I would ask if it had been cold and scary at night, Grandma would reply that she didn't know.

“I remember that I was screaming really hard,” she would recall time and again. “And that the sun would set behind the poplars. And so it went on for many days. I ate nothing. I just slept and screamed.” And then a little girl she didn’t know appeared from somewhere and took her away from that cemetery. This friend in need was still a child herself: She was twelve years old. Hand in hand they walked away, and Grandma Sonia time after time glanced back as if regretting to leave such a cozy and homey spot.

In ten years’ time, during World War II, Grandma’s house, the very long barns, the orphanage, the bazar, the graveyard—all this the Germans would burn down. Absolutely nothing remained of the settlement, the name of which I don’t even know, save for the incongruous recollections of one orphan. And now she was lying in a room that once belonged to me, in my parent’s apartment, in a state of delirium. Thoroughly wasted away, Sonia the Strongwoman clung to life with desperation because that was what she knew best: Surviving had been the point of all her ninety-shy years. Having enough to eat. Having a roof over her head. Doing everything in her power so as not to be tossed into a pit and buried along with everyone else. Washing down floors taught you that washing yourself clean from tragedy your whole life was pointless. Dirty streaks would emerge regardless.

“Just imagine, she doesn’t remember anything anymore.” Mom said to me in amazement because it was genuinely difficult to imagine Grandma Sonia without her reminiscences. “She calls your dad Roman one time, Viktor the next. Me she doesn’t seem to see at all. But she eats a whole lot and her strength hasn’t left her yet. When we left Sonia on her own for a few hours, she poked out a hole in the front door with her cane... We need to pull on her diapers for her.”

Then I asked Mom, “How did what happened to her affect you?”

Mom looked at me guardedly.

“What do you mean?”

“The *pampushky* and the *dyetdom*.”

Mom shrugged her shoulders.

“What was there to be affected by? That’s how it was and that’s all there is to it. She wasn’t the only one. Such were the times—horrifying. But she survived.”

“But she was crippled.”

“Why in the world crippled?! How can you talk like that?” Mom’s face even flushed.

“I bet she never told you that she loved you.”

“She did.” Mom turned away. “It’s just, who thought about love then?”

“But you never told me that you loved me.”

Mom’s face reddened even more; she exclaimed something indiscernible and, infuriated, ran out of the apartment. She had come to size up my new place. I didn’t set out in a run after her: I prepared a pail of water, opened the windows and began washing the floors. Water (to wash, to wash oneself, to wash away) was always my greatest need.

And somewhere in the middle of the floor, between the sofa and the bookshelves, it finally happened. My heart suddenly relocated into my throat and began pulsating with unfathomable strength. My chest clenched so tight that I was no longer able to fill my lungs with air. The fear of a previously unseen strength gripped and paralyzed me, and my mop fell to the floor with a clunk. I went down in its wake. I saw nothing, heard nothing, felt nothing—only the pulsating of my heart in my throat. Time had stopped. The end had arrived and begun to stretch into eternity. I couldn’t breathe, couldn’t scream. Grandma Sonia had screamed everything out before me. Her tragedy hung on to the living and refused to reach its end. It refused to let us, its prisoners, go.

“May she die already,” flashed through my head but I didn’t understand whose death it was I was wishing for. Hers or my own. And whether this death would bring some sort of relief.

My third golden-haired man returned from his friend’s house and joyously announced from the doorway that everything was ready for the wedding. We’d have a modest civil ceremony in the company of our closest friends. Just us and two witnesses, as had been planned. He grew seriously alarmed upon encountering me sprawled in a puddle of dirty water.

“We have to go to the hospital immediately!”

I got up as if nothing had happened. Only an unbelievable weakness in my entire body corroborated that the attack hadn’t been a fabrication of my imagination.

“Everything’s fine already.”

“Nothing of the sort. We’re going to the hospital.” The man took bribe money for the doctors from our hiding place in a book. “Throw on some sort of sweater.”

I stared imperturbably out the window. The shaggy little white dog from the apartment across the way didn’t appear. Where was he? Why wasn’t he here when he was so needed?

“I’m waiting!” The man was losing patience. “It’s imperative that you be seen by a specialist.”

He grabbed me by the arm and pulled me—not forcefully, but insistently—toward the door. I resisted, wanting to shout, “They’ll come at any moment and will bring *pampushky!*” The man wouldn’t have understood: I had never told him my grandma’s story. Nearer the door my heart once again began to creep up to my throat.

“What’s the matter? You can’t really not care at all about your health!”

I wrenched my arm free and returned to the living room to the pail and mop. I wanted to fill the pail with clean water and rewash the floor anew. To put in more essential oil, to pour in the whole bottle. For a few minutes the man watched everything, offended. Finally he asked, “Can you tell me what really happened?”

In the window across from mine appeared the apathetic little muzzle of the shaggy little white dog—my comrade in misfortune. Now we had both become prisoners of large architectural structures and would see the world only from the dirty windows of our respective residences.

“What happened is that I’ll never again go outside,” I said.

The man stood stock-still. He didn’t know if I was joking or telling the truth.

But I wasn’t joking. I was finally at peace. The mop moved forward and backward, to the right and to the left.