

Lunar Pain

by
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People are amazed that a basilisk
can kill a man with a single glance.
But it is even more amazing, that
with his eyes a man can kill not only
the body, but the soul as well, and
not only temporarily, but with
eternal ruination.

Ivan Velychkovsky¹

Studiosi

Grey clouds churned about in the heavens, as if someone had tossed up some inflated, dishevelled heads, which now spun around like wheels trying to make their way through mud.

I walked alongside Vittorio and we could barely make our way through the mud. We walked past closed shutters and the rain, which drizzled intermittently from those wheel-like heads, doused us from head to foot, making us shake like wet chickens.

'The weather is fit to hang dogs!' I growled.

'What did you say?' Vittorio piped up behind me.

'I uttered some words about the weather.'

I glanced up at the sky and my gaze wandered among the clouds. As I stood here, in this small dirty street in Bologna, a great longing engulfed me. Suddenly I saw a road generously flooded with sunlight, to the left and right of it walls of unripe grain rocked to and fro, my father was driving along the road. My younger brother and I were sitting beside him. In the heavens above us an irrepressible skylark continued to warble away, as if suspended from a thread...

'I remembered my native land,' my wet lips uttered softly. 'Do you like to recall your native land, Vittorio?'

'Oh yes!' exclaimed Vittorio. 'I come from a small town among the cliffs. My ancestors' castle is there and I often ramble through its rooms at night. In my dreams, of course!' he chuckled.

'Vittorio...' I said in a melancholy tone, for I could not shake the strange mood, which had suddenly taken hold of me. God knows why, but I suddenly wanted to be in this street all alone, to head off in a direction other than the one we were now taking — something not quite fathomable was happening to me: large breakers were washing at my feet, as if I was standing on the seashore. They beckoned me, these waves, and tempted me to step upon their unsteady backs.

'You wanted to say something?' Vittorio turned around.

I stopped and admired my acquaintance. Thin and slender, with an aquiline nose and radiant dark eyes which seemed to gleam in the grey light — he was my kind and trusted comrade, in whose company I always felt at ease. The words fell from his lips like delicate

¹ Ivan (Ioann) Velychkovsky (d.o.b. unknown - 1701) - Ukrainian poet and translator, representative of the baroque style. Later in life became a priest. Theoretician of visual poetry. Author of panegyrics, epigrams, curious and lyrical poems of lay and clerical content.

petals and his eyes were born to sweep beautiful women off their feet. I admired my acquaintance, since I myself was different. No stunning woman had ever lowered her gaze before me: I was as grey as a piece of tin. However, I did not envy Vittorio and treated him with love.

'I've no desire to visit the tavern today,' I said softly. 'For some reason I feel restless, my friend. All night long I've had bad dreams...'

I had dreamt of my native land. I was looking at it from a height, as if I had become a bird and was gliding along, barely flapping my wings. The moon brightly illuminated the town below, which was surrounded by a wooden palisade. The town was divided down the middle by an internal fence, separating the areas ruled by our clan from those of the Sokolskys...

'Which is exactly why I'm taking you to the tavern,' piped up Vittorio. 'I want to make merry! When I'm feeling uneasy, my friend, I partake of wine or try to fall in love. At least for a day or two, sometimes even only a night.'

He laughed, flashing his teeth.

'I love to carouse too! But as for beautiful women...'

Vittorio slapped me on the shoulder and embraced me.

'You're being tormented by anxiety, my friend. The tone of your voice... yes, it sends shivers down my spine.' Vittorio's resounding laughter somewhat unnaturally filled the long and empty street along which we were walking.

'I expressed myself thus,' I answered in the selfsame tone of voice, 'because shivers have been crawling all over my body for quite some time now.'

The Fugitive

The filthy, overgrown fellow was making his way across a fallow field. All around him swayed weeds, wet from the recent downpour. The fellow's bare feet had grown numb, his clothes hung in dirty shreds, his eyes burned with a feverish fire. The surrounding scrub was already bare, as was the sky, even though it was swathed in clouds. Driven by boredom, the man stopped from time to time, as if seeing a mirage before him. In fact he did see a mirage, a play of multi-coloured banners and circles, which changed and moved, and the man received pleasure from watching them. The months and seasons changed before his eyes, at times he saw the field heavy with golden grain, the blue skies showered him with the pure silver peals of birdsong. He spied a cosy white house with a straw-thatch roof, and on the threshold stood his father and sister; while both his brothers were in the doorway. He made his way toward them and they smiled warmly, waiting for him to cross the field and reach the gate. His father would then rise to meet him and his eyes would shine a blue colour.

On the far side of the field a tall dark woman was loudly sharpening a scythe. She was dressed in colourful clothing and her plait swayed black in the sun.

A dull fatigue was racking the traveller's body, he yearned to sit on the ground, even though the small white house and the figures which were so dear to his heart were nearby.

The woman with the scythe turned to face him and watched with a long unblinking stare.

'I shall be at ease in that squalid dwelling,' mumbled the man. 'I've long dreamt of a serene refuge, the light of the hearth and the warm aroma of cooked food. A man perpetually gravitates toward this and there always comes a time when he must knock at a door...'

It appeared to the fellow that the world into which he had transposed himself had been reduced to two large spheres. One was filled with rain, damp wind and bare bushes, the other brimmed with golden grain, sunshine and the silver pealing of bells. The woman in the colourful clothing was inside the second sphere, where it was harvest time. She was cutting

the wheat with a scythe, although this was normally done with a sickle. The small white house with the kindred figures was also in that other sphere, but it seemed to him to be still a long way off.

He pursed his lips so hard that his teeth grated — fresh images were already floating through his tired mind. Vittorio was walking at his side and his innocent laughter now warmed the traveller...

Thin as a rake, a horseman bounded across the field. His eyes were ablaze, but his arms were flailing about. He had forgotten about the reins...

The fugitive stopped. His eyes narrowed with effort, he rubbed his forehead with dirty fingers, as if trying to remember something. But to no avail. Then he reached out, like a blind man, but immediately withdrew his hand — it had come upon a tree trunk.

The tree stood alone and bare in the field. Beneath it lay glistening wet leaves. Yellowy-brown and already half-dead, they shone with peaceful decay, permeated with canker. A small blue bird flitted from a black branch, which looked as if it had been polished, and disappeared into the grey air.

The man began to rake the leaves. Scraping them up with contorted fingers, raking them as if his hands were rakes. He tossed armfuls of them under the tree. Having expended all his energy on this, he settled down under the oak, his eyes already asleep.

It was then that he heard the clatter of horse's hooves. The distant, somewhat muted sound overwhelmed the fugitive's senses and forced him to open his eyes. A cold fire streamed from his eyes, like a gust of wind rushing across a bare field.

Vittorio

'Then I saw a man looking at me and smiling,' whispered the fugitive. 'But when Don Carlos vociferated his fanfaronade, the fellow burst into guffaws.'

I can picture it even now: a young lad, thin as a rake, looking on at the carousing studiosi, eyes burning with a delirious fire.

'That's the wealthiest person in Bologna,' one of the studiosi whispered to me. 'It's him, Bontevoglia!'

Don Carlos was screaming something, the girls were hollering, the musicians were straining hard, and I felt a joyous tremor, which always took hold of me when I launched into a jolly bit of merrymaking.

The banquet was only beginning and we were expecting some splendid recreation. Giordano was already yelling out indecent poems, and my dear friend Vittorio was clamouring to dance on the table. A place was cleared for him and he began to spin like a top. He screamed and whined, while we clapped and called out. Bontevoglia also clapped, although he had a contemptuous smile peeled to his lips; the girls who were sitting near us were laughing. Some of them were already sitting on the knees of our brethren, drinking with them. I too plucked up some courage and tugged one of the girls by the arm. She playfully pushed me away, but nevertheless quaffed the wine which I offered her, merrily upending the chalice into her mouth. When she burst out laughing, red liquid dribbled onto her chin, but it seemed to me as if a long invisible arm had suddenly reached out from the dark of night through the black windows, entering my chest and firmly squeezing my heart. I froze, and even my girl stopped laughing, her eyes growing wide with amazement and her lips parted, wet with wine.

'Hey!' Don Carlos called out. 'Who's taking me on?'

He put his arm behind his back and, grabbing the chalice with his lips, adroitly tipped it

into his mouth.

This brought me to my senses and like everyone else I lunged for my chalice — we merrily began to douse ourselves with wine. Giordano sprayed wine straight into Don Carlos' face and then Don Carlos solemnly placed a platter with meat condiments firmly upon his head. Everyone roared, the musicians strained and we twirled away with our girls. Green smoke hung all around, we became more boisterous in our merriment, enthusiastically twirling our ladies about and stamping our feet. Sweat rolled down our red faces, mouths greedily swallowed the air and exhaled hoarse yells. The girls shrieked, the clamour and stamping made the tavern walls seem to shake. Bontevoglia looked at us with feverish eyes and tapped his hand in time to the music. The scoffing smile had disappeared from his face, there was rouge in his gaunt cheeks.

Suddenly I had the urge to commit something riotous or funny in this hellish uproar.

'Hey!' I called out to Vittorio. 'Want me to kill you with my gaze?'

Everyone laughed, I laughed too, so did Vittorio, Bontevoglia chuckled in the corner. Everyone pressed toward me and hollered:

'Kill him with your gaze! Kill him with your gaze!'

The girls were yelling the same thing - it was a weird mixture of shrill and deep voices. Incited by the waves of smoke and intoxication, I proudly stepped forward. Everyone surrounded me, expecting some kind of miracle.

'Just wait,' I said, swaying drunkenly. 'I'll kill him with my gaze now!'

'Hah-hah-hah!' everyone roared and clapped their hands.

And once more I had the feeling that a long invisible arm had reached out from the night, entered my bosom and firmly squeezed my heart. But it was too late to retreat now. Vittorio was placed before me, he kept bursting out laughing, and I became sad.

This lasted only a moment, for suddenly a dark force overwhelmed me, as if night had fallen upon my head, and I began to go numb.

'Kill him!' the irrepressible brethren roared. 'Don't just stand there!'

I didn't know what was happening to me. A hot ball rose up to my throat, a red fire exploded in my brain; something split, for I heard a dull sound; my breath stopped and I became even more numb. My gaze radiated a mortal aureole, I was burning like a torch - a furious whirlwind rushed across the tavern, everything turned grey, and I saw the frightened faces of my acquaintances, the faces of the girls being ripped apart by screams, the contorted and horrified face of Vittorio, my dear friend. I could no longer stand the tension, I took a step to one side and suddenly — wonder of wonders! — I froze, transfixed by waves of incomprehensible horror. Vittorio was falling.

Everything around me was lit with a deathly pale light and I realized immediately that something weird and frightening had taken place. A silence filled the tavern, everyone turned their frightened faces, white as snow, toward me. A whip seemed to crack above my head. I yelled in astonishment, like a wounded bird and, covering my face with my hands, made for the door.

However, I did not reach the dark alley. Someone's strong arm gripped me and I saw Bontevoglia's pale, desiccated face.

'Come with me!' he commanded in a feverish whisper. 'I'll hide you.'

I acquiesced, having nowhere to flee, and followed him obediently. The horses stood nearby and, mounting them, we galloped off along the dark, seemingly dead streets of Bologna.

The Fugitive

'This is what upset my life,' whispered the fugitive. 'Back then in the summer of 1592 the world indeed changed for me.'

He was sitting under a tree on a pile of wet leaves and a distant illumination opened up before him again — a bright sphere flooded with sunshine.

The sister made her way to the well with two wooden pails on a yoke. She stopped at the well and began to lower a stake with a bucket attached to it between the planks covering the well. The shadoof creaked loudly, its tail end, with the heavy rock, rose into the air.

The father was sitting on the threshold, while the two brothers were sawing a log, holding onto the handles of a shiny blue saw. Golden sawdust flew out from under the saw; peacocks wandered near the brothers, their sumptuous tails spread out, and they called out in their thin sharp voices, as they pecked at the sawdust. Meanwhile, the sister was already pulling out the second bucket. It sprang up from between the planks, and several sparkling tongues of water broke off from it.

The sister fixed the buckets onto the yoke and returned to the house, her body beautifully arched. The brothers turned to watch her, but did not stop sawing. The saw moved lethargically in their hands, alternately shifting from one sawyer to the other. The golden sawdust had covered the immobile peacocks at their feet, while the father rose to make way for his daughter, who made her way toward the door with full buckets of water...

It was cold and wet. Summoning his strength, the fugitive got up. He moved away from the tree, barely able to shuffle his feet, and walked for quite some time. Finally an unseen force stopped him again. Once more he stretched out his hand like a blind man and touched the fence, which had materialized in his path.

His fingers were still sullied by the moss, which had covered the tree. He looked intently at his soiled digits and then, supporting himself with his open hand against the fence, he shuffled off toward the gate. The gate was dilapidated and lifelessly dipped inwards. The fugitive stepped into a yard overgrown with grass and tottered off to the porch. The door to the house had dipped inwards also and he stepped inside. A few rats scurried off.

'Aha,' he mumbled. 'Someone must be here!'

There was an air of desolation about the place, but he was glad even for this shelter: his clothing was soaking wet and, besides, he was succumbing to sleep.

He entered the guest room, which smelt of clay and rotting timber. There was a stench of dampness and mouldy leaves, however the traveller was grateful to be able to inhale even this aroma. He sank heavily to the rotted floor and stretched out.

A fern was growing at his head and he heard its dry rustle. It had hundreds of tiny little eyes under its leaves and they all watched him with compassion. The fugitive began to smell a thin, calming fragrance of flowers. He could barely hold up his tired, spinning head. A mist spread before his eyes, black damp tree trunks glistened before him. Squirrels gazed from those trunks — there were as many squirrels as there were tree trunks. He saw them as his interlocutors, realizing it was not yet time to fall asleep. He had to find the strength to tell these squirrels what was torturing him. But would these strange interlocutors believe him?

Eventually the fugitive did not care whether they believed him or not. He lay back, the sky above was blue and transparent. What a strange association: this deserted settlement, the mist in a forest crowded with trees and squirrels, and up above a blue infinity, an azure serenity and warmth.

"May that sky become my parchment," he thought, "with my eyes I will write my ludicrous story upon it."

He squinted, but the sky did not disappear. The squirrels were whispering in human voices and he felt progressively being lulled to sleep, swathed in warm clothing. Beside him stood a yellow, almost golden fox which suddenly began to bark. Again he saw Vittorio's eyes.

'Look how beautiful it is!' whispered the fugitive and Vittorio nodded in affirmation.

In a clearing sat an old man in a strange thick jerkin. He had a rat's muzzle for a face, but he was reading a book. An enormously thick book, which probably contained many interesting stories.

The fox ran off toward the old man and the squirrels began to nervously bite their nails. The mist swirled and the old man entered the mist with the golden fox, which continued running toward him, tottering. The fox was quite close now, almost upon the old man, who had already lifted his rat's face, however suddenly a dry crackle rang out and the fox burst into a high, even flame.

The Confession

The monk managed to find bailiff Kunatovsky without anyone's assistance. He arrived in Bar as they were about to close the city gates. Even though his appearance was quite bedraggled, he was allowed to enter.

The bailiff met with him in his own home, for the nature of the monk's testimony had alarmed the entire community. He made his inkwell ready and bade the monk to begin his account.

In the depths of the room a pile of rags stirred. The twilight swirled about and the heap of rags appeared chimerical and mysterious. At first the bailiff spied a dry, awkward hand and then a grey dishevelled beard materialized. The old man was dressed in appalling rags, which now barely resembled a monk's habit. His head was bald, his face drawn and yellow. His long protruding nose was bathed in the candlelight. A deep shadow was cast upon his eyes and sharp flecks sparkled in their black puddles. The deep furrows of his wrinkles filled with red shadows, while his mouth gaped with a dark void. The monk cleared his throat, coughing sickeningly for a long time, and then dry rustling words fell from his lips.

Killers

I sat on the threshold of my abandoned house while more than a year, perhaps two whistled by overhead. I prayed fervently and zealously, read the scriptures; a deep sky rose above me and I loved to gaze into its immeasurable depths for hours at a time. I whispered holy words and my soul rested peacefully.

Nearby was a clearing in which some partridges lived. They were white as milk and tender as the grass. I had grown fond of them and when I watched the partridges feed, a quiet serenity descended upon me. In the evenings, when the sun set and its golden ribbons were suspended among the tree trunks, my partridges went to bed too and I prepared for evening prayer. This continued until a fox stumbled upon my clearing. Yellow and moth-eaten, it attacked one of the partridges without warning, sending feathers flying. I dashed out of my refuge and ran off to save the unfortunate bird. However, by the time I reached the clearing, neither the partridge nor the fox were anywhere to be seen, only white feathers lay strewn across the grass.

Like an icy wind, a cold chill overwhelmed me. I stood looking at the pitiful feathers and said a prayer. "Oh gracious Lord," I prayed, "deliver this place from human passion. Allow me to lead a simple life, oh Lord!"

And then it all began. First an overgrown fellow entered the clearing. He was carrying a dead body on his shoulders and was bent double under the burden. Dropping the body onto the ground, he looked about and dashed off. I watched him from behind the bushes and his

face became indelibly imprinted upon my memory. He was still young, with broad cheekbones and was overgrown with a reddish stubble. I stood hidden in the bushes for a long time, until the stranger had disappeared into the forest. Then I left my refuge and approached the body. A frightening wound made me shudder: the poor sod had been shot with an arrow and the arrow had then been pulled out, creating a dreadful gash. I fell to my knees again. "Oh gracious Lord," I prayed, "deliver me from these dark passions. I left the world in order not to know or see them. Lord, bring me peace and fresh oblivion." But the heavens remained silent, even though the prayer had settled me somewhat. I returned to the refuge in the knowledge that the white partridges would no longer return to my clearing and I would no longer be able to sit peacefully on the threshold watching the sun set. Horror crawled into my soul and I again succumbed to prayer, irrepressibly beating my head against the ground. My forehead was already aching from the countless times it had struck the ground, my tongue was stiff from the endless words and supplications which I had directed at the heavens. However, this placated me only for a short time: horror had killed the enchantment, which had been with me for so long. A human body was lying nearby and I had inadvertently become a participant in a very hideous incident. My first reaction was to bury the stranger, but I had no spade. There was only the large knife with which I fossicked for edible roots, but it would have taken half the night to dig a large enough hole with it. Which is why I abandoned the refuge. I hoisted a bag with my chattels onto my back and shuffled off in search of a quieter and more auspicious spot, where there would be a clearing with virgin grass upon which white partridges could safely play.

At first I walked slowly. But the further I went, the more I was driven by despondency. Soon I was practically running, escaping from that unfortunate spot.

On the edge of a clearing I spied a man and wanted to pass around him, but the fellow noticed me.

'Hey, reverend,' he called out. 'Come here a moment!'

I was forced to succumb to the order, but when I drew near I was struck by the exhaustion in the man's face and his peculiarly delirious eyes.

'Have you seen a young lad somewhere here, reverend?' he asked and painted a picture of the ruddy-haired fellow with the broad cheekbones.

I grew frightened.

'No!' I answered the man with the delirious eyes. 'I haven't seen anyone nor do I wish to see anyone.'

He nodded and I continued on my way. I walked for a long time until I suddenly heard something akin to crying or moaning coming from behind some bushes. I made for the moans and when I parted the bushes with my stick I stopped in awe: there lay the red-haired killer. He was dying. I bent over him and realised that he had only a few minutes left to live.

'He killed my brother,' whispered the red-haired fellow, and I bent further down to catch his whispers.

'And who did you kill, my son?' I asked.

'I killed his brother,' whispered the poor sod.

He stretched out and let out a soft exclamation. I knew that his soul had departed for the nether kingdom.

Again I prayed to the Lord, for around me things were occurring which were strangely interconnected. "Oh gracious Lord," I said, "You are taking me along this path after all. You are visiting passions upon me, from which I had escaped. These are very difficult trials, my Lord. Deliver me from this path and let me experience true peace."

But this time the prayer had no effect. I was filled with an incomprehensible terror. Tears streamed down my cheeks, I looked back morbidly at the body and raced off. I had neither

the years, sir, nor the strength to run like this. But I raced though the forest, as if I were being whipped. Dashing out into a clearing, I fell exhausted onto the grass.

At this point a mounted detail came upon me. It was led by an aged red-haired fellow, who also had wide cheekbones.

'I haven't seen anyone and have no desire to see anyone!' I shouted, falling to my knees before these people. Then the red-haired fellow ordered that I be flogged several dozen times. I didn't last even a dozen lashings and told these people everything I had seen and what I had been running away from. They immediately left me behind and galloped off to collect the dead fellow, who had possibly been their relative. I hid in the forest again and only toward nightfall managed to come across a cave and hid inside it. I was so frightened that I forgot to pay my respect to the Lord. I sat in that hideout and trembled like an aspen leaf, afraid that when I left there, I would again be pushed onto that path and once again be forced to drink a bitter cup.

At night, however, I became consumed by such fear that I dashed out and raced through the forest as if I had taken leave of my senses, not knowing where I was headed. I kept tripping over fallen trees and continued to run. I ran and howled like a wounded animal, but when daylight broke I saw to my surprise that I was standing in my clearing near my deserted refuge. All around me there was silence and serenity, the sun was shining and the white partridges were grazing. I suddenly dashed to the spot where the dead man had lain, but saw only trampled and blood-stained grass. I dropped to my knees and looked up. "Oh, Lord," I said, "You are leading me back onto the same paths. Has this strange and unfathomable dream of mine finally come to an end?"

Lunar Pain

The fugitive lay spreadeagled on the rotted floor of the deserted dwelling and seemed to be rocked by giant waves. The first wave was the hailstone-like rain beyond the window; heavy, cold drops fell through holes in the rusted roof, but even though the fellow had found himself a dry corner, he was showered by the damp sparks of the shattered drops. Beyond the broken windows there was a ceaseless rustling and it seemed to the fugitive that a thousand water spirits were hopping about. The second wave was the evening stillness and the lilac-coloured sky, to which the fugitive peeled his eyes. In the clear lilac waters of that sky lithe white animals melted, swayed and appeared to swim. Finally, these animals dissolved away completely and the sky became clear and unbelievably deep. The fugitive lingered there with his tired gaze and seemed to dive ever deeper into it; he flew for an endlessly long time, incapable of fathoming how it had happened, that he was feeling so calm and collected. He still had the strength to sit up, resting his back against the wall. For the first time the fugitive's face softened, his muscles relaxed as the generous light of the sky inundated him, making him feel even more at ease.

He sat immobile, afraid that at any moment his small rest would end, that the hue which had so suddenly invaded his heart would perish, as do ears of grain when they are mown down in the field by a sickle or scythe. He closed his eyes and disappeared from this world, but when he floated back into it, he was overwhelmed by a third wave. Everything around him was shimmering and changing, thickly bathed in a green aura. A large white moon hung in the sky and the radiance emanated from it in waves, like a stone dropped into still water. Having wandered about the neglected abode, the fugitive's gaze rested on his own feet. His

feet seemed to be carrying him along a moonlit road. He stopped in a field in which a woman was tying sheaves. The scythe lying at her side glinted coldly in the lunar radiance. The woman twisted wisps of straw with her strong hands, drew the mown grain together and tied it firmly. Like a thousand yellow bodies the sheaves lay all over the field. Near the house with blinding-white walls the brothers continued to saw logs with the same measured strokes. These were the older and the younger brother. Meanwhile their third cousin placed the sawed logs on end, raised an axe above his head and brought it down noiselessly. Two old women gathered the split logs, which, like everything else, emanated a yellow light, and stacked them into armloads. Then they carried the split logs into the shed. Their grey father sat immobile on the porch, while the sister spread a piece of white linen and set out bowls upon it. A large pot was smoking away, filled with a broth or gruel. The sister suddenly stood to her feet and froze, gazing into the distance flooded by the moonlight. And so they stood there looking at each other: the fugitive, who had paused on the linen-white road and the beautiful young woman standing beside a piece of real linen, preparing dinner. The walls of the house beamed mutely, the saw moved back and forth, and sparkling sawdust was winnowed from under it. The youth with an intelligent pale face raised the axe above his head and slowly dropped it onto the log. The log split into even billets and these were gathered by old bony hands. The sister uttered something, sharply turning her face toward the sawyers: momentarily the saw stopped and the third cousin dropped his axe with a ring. The two old women straightened their backs and firewood came tumbling to the ground from their arms. The tall, thin and white father rose to his feet — they were all looking in the same direction, to where he was standing, and the fugitive could not help but look back at them — the lunar pain had entered his bosom...

The fugitive opened his eyes. The moon burned in his pupils, the moon agitatedly pounded in his breast, as if it were an empty tree hollow. The fugitive's chapped lips parted, his teeth flashed and a hoarse groan emerged from his black cavity.

Again the clatter of hooves sounded. Closer this time, so that the snorting and neighing of the horses could be heard, and the riders calling out to one another — the fugitive anxiously looked back at the empty windows.

Bontevoglia

‘All the same, everything began back there in Wallachia,’ the fugitive whispered. ‘I had taken quite poorly after what had transpired in the tavern. Vittorio's image stood before me, I felt his reproachful gaze upon me, and in prayers and dreams I begged his forgiveness, as much as I could — after all I had no evil intentions toward him.

Bontevoglia treated me like a sick child, I was waited upon by diligent servants, who performed my smallest whim; finally the time came when my pain and desperation stopped unnerving me so acutely. Then Bontevoglia began sending me girls and all kinds of witty people, in long conversations with whom I forgot my anxieties. At times I would spend hours wandering the gloomy chambers of my benefactor's palace. During the day I hardly ever dwelled on my misfortune or Vittorio; the nights, when I had no meek comforter at my side, still filled me with horror.

‘It's the devil's power!’ I mumbled, ambling through the castle. ‘The devil has seized my soul.’

For entire evenings I stood on my knees before the crucifix hanging on the wall of my room.

‘I have no desire to cause people suffering,’ I prayed fervently, ‘I do not wish to carry

misfortune with me. Liberate me, Lord, from the force bestowed upon me by You, let me banish it from my memory. I can already hear the sweet whisperings, I am becoming overwhelmed by that terrifying thing, against which man is so base. I wish to live a simple life and have an ordinary destiny. There is more than enough evil in the world without me, save me from damnation!

I whispered these words and slowly began to feel more at ease. After all, everything depended on my strength of will. Conscience would become my helmsman and sin my admonisher.

Bontevoglia seemed to understand me. I liked this aristocrat with the swarthy, sharp face and sad eyes, in which an insane flicker would occasionally flare. When we met, he looked at me much too intently. Patiently he waited for me to come to my senses, however he was obviously keeping me in his castle for his own reasons. A strange fear possessed my soul when Bontevoglia sunk his ink-black eyes into me: there was something in that stare which I could not quite fathom.

One warm evening, when the stars began to appear in the sky and seemed wondrously large, we paused before an open window and gazed upon the nocturnal city.

'I believe in a secret force,' Bontevoglia uttered suddenly. 'But I must ascertain without fail whether it actually exists. If it were not present,' he added in a low hushed voice, 'human life would appear useless. Man cannot be satisfied by carnal pleasures alone, he must have something higher within him — the spirit is multi-faceted and transitory. I'm convinced,' he said fervently and his gaze seemed to imbibe the cold glint of the stars we had been observing, 'that my soul is alive not only in my body, but also within everything I touch. More so, my spirit must live in my close friends and their spirits must live in me. I want to understand this law, this language of things and the secret of subliminal association... I have not long left to live and yet, my friend, I have still grasped nothing.'

Stars twinkled in the sky, illuminating everything all around in a chimerical, somewhat eerie light. One star broke loose, streaked through the sky and fell, the moon was suspended above the hill, spilling its pearly radiance all around.

'I think a lot,' Bontevoglia said. 'My body is growing ever more useless and only intense stimulation helps maintain its strength.'

As if to prove his words, Bontevoglia broke into a fit of coughing. He coughed and in the moonlight his face took on a sallow hue. Having cleared his throat, he continued breathing with a wheeze for some time. His mouth was open, revealing dark, decayed teeth. I suddenly felt pity for this man and his debility, and these strange thoughts of his. His eyes burned with an unusual, almost ridiculous green light. 'I am not keeping you here,' he said, having caught his breath. 'You are free to stay or leave, as you wish. I will let you go any time you want to leave, but, to be completely frank with you, I rest special hopes on you.'

Fervent black eyes filled with a somewhat insane light were watching me. While looking at him, for some reason I imagined a large field and upon it a tall woman dressed in colourful garb. She was moving along, swinging a scythe. The grain ears fell at her feet and her lips smiled. From time to time she would begin singing, and this sounded like the singing of sand or snow. Night was falling behind her back and in the field thousands of tightly tied sheaves burned in the moon's radiance.

'You have a strange face,' said Bontevoglia. 'In any case, when I begin to observe you, I am sometimes overcome with fear. So how about it then, shall we form an association.'

I hesitated: I could not simply leave. Nor could I stay. That evening my soul strangely resembled the sky with its continuous flashes of stars, and sadly I buried my gaze in it. All the same, Bontevoglia expected an answer. He clenched his fists, pressed forward, his thin, sharp face was wary and sad, his lips barely parted by a wan smile.

'I can't linger too long in your parts,' I said slowly, my gaze still peeled to the sky strewn with large stars. 'My fatherland is beckoning. But until... until I leave I offer your excellency magnanimous friendship.'

... We set off on horseback into the mountains and the whole time remained mostly silent or made small talk. At the time I had no desire at all for conversation, thinking only about my home and those who were near and dear to. I breathed the fragrant air of my homeland, saw my native landscapes and native paths. I was moved by the smells of thyme, marjoram and clover. Here a skylark warbled above my head too, here I also saw the precipitous flight of an eagle or a falcon, but this only agitated me even more. From afar I heard soft voices: I heard my native tongue among these foreign landscapes.

Now and then Bontevoglia would dismount to pick some flower or herb. He told me about the plants and his voice sounded like flowing molten glass. Sometimes he would dash off, limping, chasing after some butterfly or lizard with his net. He knew this land well, its flora and fauna, and I alone wandered upon it a sullen foreigner. I watched, unsmiling, as my companion raced along the paths, as he fell happily onto the grass and laughed nervously. I helped him to his feet and he squeezed my hand firmly.

'Look at that butterfly over there,' he would whisper. 'What lovely colours it has on its wings!'

A zealous fire would flash in his eyes, he would grab the net and chase after the butterfly. Then he would examine it for a long time in his hand: the butterfly beat its wings and left iridescent scales on his fingers.

'It's like a living flower,' whispered Bontevoglia. 'And its scales are like the pollen of a living flower. How strange the world is! Why did the Lord create all this...? Hey, hey!' he would call out unexpectedly and rush off into the grass, jumping awkwardly. He would suddenly grab some lizard and raise it triumphantly in his hands. 'Will you look at how beautiful this green animal is!'

I would sit down on the grass, while he continued playing with the lizard for quite some time.

'I can feel its heart beating,' he would say. 'Look how its eyes glisten, by God, it's no more stupid than us...'

I nodded in agreement. In the corner where we had stopped I liked to sit and watch a copse from afar. For some reason the copse painfully reminded me of my homeland.

'It has a soul too,' Bontevoglia expounded meanwhile. 'It is futile to suppose that it doesn't. No animal with a beating heart can be without a soul. Listen,' he would become joyous and jocular. 'Perhaps it is my grandfather or great-grandfather, huh? Passed away and come back as a lizard. Signior,' he called out to the lizard. 'Does your excellency desire a good drop of wine? Signior, don't be afraid — this is your insane grandson, who can just as easily strangle you, as let you go. You are saddened, signior? But signior, we could exchange a few words... You are still petrified, signior, hah-hah!'

He held out his open hands, the lizard remained there a moment or two longer and then rushed headlong into the grass.

'Listen, my friend,' Bontevoglia said seriously. 'Would you be able to kill it? I am dying of impatience to see once again what I witnessed in that tavern. Forgive me, but I want to be convinced, that it was no dream!'

'It *was* a dream,' I replied sullenly.

Bontevoglia smiled mysteriously.

'People speak far too much of the miraculous and enigmatic,' he said. 'But there is far too little of it in reality. All this is so sad and boring. Except for that one time... Listen, you must be the only sorcerer in the world, eh?' He laughed. 'Know why I think that? Because you

have no desire to deceive and stupefy me. Why?'

'I want to lead a simple life,' I replied. 'There is enough evil in this world without me.'

'But,' he paused and turned to me, an insane flicker in his eyes, 'back in the tavern, that was no dream!'

I remained silent. I had no desire to hark back to that time. I walked in silence beside my companion and thought that memories of that tavern would haunt me for the rest of my life...

A great sadness suddenly overwhelmed Bontevoglia. A great sorrow rocked his feeble body — something I found distasteful was being born inside him. A wind, which would bring about a drought, causing everything all around to perish. My mouth went dry and it slowly began to dawn upon me why this eccentric fellow was keeping me at his side.

I gritted my teeth and stared at the ground. Nimble colourful little grasshoppers jumped out of the grass and glided along on spread-out green wings. Birds flitted among the bushes and grass, then flew off, splashing through the air. The world blossomed joyously overhead — it was superfluous at such a sublime moment to look at Bontevoglia. All the same, I stole a glance at him and spied something which utterly disturbed me.

In his eyes I saw the dark of night. An ink-black night without a single ray of light, without a single glow-worm. In that night, bats dryly rustled their wings and squeaked, communicating sorrowfully. In that night frogs came of age and set off on endless journeys, splashing through puddles with heavy feet. A dark wind rushed past me from the green world. Again I experienced the same feeling as I had on that unfortunate evening when Vittorio and I were on our way to the tavern. Thin and slender, with sparkling eyes and an aquiline nose, my companion glowed in the spooky twilight.

'I feel like a candle,' Bontevoglia said hoarsely, without looking at me. 'Do you understand... Fear is creeping up on me, for each day is being wasted and I do not have that many left at my disposal. I am burning up, afraid that I will not leave behind even a candle-end.'

We were in the mountains when he uttered these words.. The morning sky was aflame in the east and I watched the fire with unfathomable pain. Among the clouds I saw a strange piece of land - upon it stood a white house with a straw-thatch roof. A girl or woman was moving away from the house, carrying wooden pails on a yoke. An old man stood beside the house and watched the woman as she walked. Something suddenly tugged at my heart and I lost my breath before that transparent vision. The woman turned around and looked in my direction: it was my sister. I looked at the man standing beside the house and tears involuntarily rolled onto my eyelashes — it was my father...

... The horses moved along noiselessly, tiny rainbows played in the grass; a still-pale sun was peering above the horizon. It was suspended like a kettle-drum, waiting for morning to bathe the earth, performing its daily ritual. Then it could toss off its veil and roll off into the sky, radiating golden juices, imbuing all things living and inanimate with them. Meanwhile everything about us was speechless; I glanced at Bontevoglia — his face was ensnared in tranquil peace, his eyes resting on a spot somewhere far in space. He was barely holding the reins, the horse was left to its own devices. I did the same and we rode along for a while, luxuriating in the unusual wealth, which the dawn had bestowed upon us. We lived it with every atom of our bodies; in my mind I prayed to the Almighty for this grateful gift, for there would probably be few such moments during our time together.

This was indeed true, for a moment or so later his face contorted and he convulsively grabbed at the reins. He even swayed in the saddle, so that I was about to come to his aid.

It was then that we saw the fox. A red ball of fur, which appeared from God knows where, dropping like the kind diurnal tribute of the sun. The fox raced away from us, weaving its fiery body through the grass and, upon seeing it, Bontevoglia shuddered. His face lit up and

his eyes burned. Waving his arms about, he struck his horse with his stirrups and hollered joyously and happily:

‘Hey, look! The devilish animal has appeared after all! Kill it, by God! Hurry, my friend, before it gets away!’

We galloped across the field, which stretched flatly to the horizon, the yellow ball before us was speeding along at breakneck speed. Bontevoglia laughed and wept, he drove his horse with a wild and happy abandon, with a strange and fortuitous joy.

Suddenly I succumbed to his urging. This really was an innocent diversion, I forgot about the sad face of my dear Vittorio. It seemed as if he had become reincarnated in the form of this madman galloping insanelly at my side. Bontevoglia turned his face toward me and it was just as olive-skinned and gaunt as my good friend's. I was struck by the amount of light streaming from him.

‘By god!’ he yelled passionately. ‘By god, don't let it get away!’

Something contracted inside me, the already familiar numbness overwhelmed me. I pulled on the reins and stopped my horse. My body suddenly turned to iron, my eyes burned with a steely flame, I seemed to be pouring out into the ether, as if I had turned into a taught bow. My back hunched over, my eyes popped from their sockets, I heard a fierce gust of wind rush through the field. Bontevoglia went stiff, the happy madness gushing from his face turned to ice, he raised his arm and his horse turned its big eye toward me. White waves descended from the sky — up ahead the fox was already lying dead and the dust raised by the gust of wind was slowly settling.

I dismounted and went over to the fox. My legs seemed to be made of wood, it was as if they were not my own. Tears streamed from my eyes. All around everything had indeed died. Wherever I looked through the teary film, which covered my eyes, I saw dead birds and dead lizards, dead butterflies and bees. But I continued walking, till I reached that worthless dead yellow ball. Tears covered my face, I forgot about Bontevoglia and the whole world. The sun scorched the back of my neck, the grass had no dew upon it and I realized that once again a very great misfortune had occurred. I looked at the animal's stiff body, its muzzle turned up toward the sky — the fox's eyes were dead, while heavy burning tears continued to flow from mine.

Bontevoglia slowly rode up to me. He dismounted and fell onto the ground before me. He crawled along the ground till he could embrace my feet. He pressed his face against them and either burst into tears or guffawed happily. He was like a large dark beast, his hair scattered over his shoulders, his hands trembling spasmodically.

‘Get up, sir!’ I said in a soft exhausted voice. ‘I should not have done this.’

He raised his contorted face to me. Like mine, it was drenched in tears, however a triumphant smile shone upon it. His black hair was tossed back, his decayed teeth bared, and his insane eyes looked at me with boundless rapture and a canine devotion. I shuddered in disgust.

‘It's a miracle,’ he said hoarsely. ‘A real miracle — something of which I've always dreamed. We are birds of a feather, my friend, and it's time we stopped playing games.’ Nervous chuckles gurgled in his throat, like water. ‘Both of us have the same calling,’ he tossed back his head and predaciously bared his teeth. ‘I have something in my castle which I have shown to no one. But I will show it to you, my dear friend. There is an old fellow sitting there — he does similar things to you. These are terrible poisons from which people die like flies. But he's nowhere near as good as you.’ Bontevoglia laughed again, as if he was gargling his throat with water. ‘You are a true miracle, and I subserviently fall at your feet. You and I will do such deeds, ha-ha-ha, that the whole world will shudder. We will be entered in black letters into mankind's book of life...’

He roared with laughter, writhing at my feet, dark and small, with rotted teeth. He flashed his narrow eyes at me, which brimmed with tears of happiness, and doubled over with laughter once more.

Finally he abruptly quelled his mirth. He rose to his feet and stretched his legs along the path covered with gravel. His chin was turned up and his lips contorted with repugnance. He kicked the dead fox with his foot and turned toward me:

`Carrion!' he said, smiling sardonically. `A heap of dead meat, nothing more. I always thought that all the proud and haughty were nothing more than carrion, the rich and mighty as well, while the lowly and those who prayed were all sacred... Yes, I've thought extensively about it: all geniuses and all artists are carrion! There is only one thing in this world worthy of adoration. Miracles!' He narrowed his eyes and looked at the distant peaks swathed in soft pinkish light.

I remained standing in the same spot near the fox, totally devoid of any strength. The pink light I saw on the horizon poured into my empty soul and gradually satisfied its thirst. But a grey cloud grew in my bosom and my heart floated between these grey-pink clouds — there was nothing settling about this. Bitter wormwood grew on the surrounding cliffs. I became overgrown with the wormwood too and slowly turned to stone, as if this was my fate — to turn to stone amid the wormwood.

Bontevoglia watched me. The gloom of a night sky filled his eyes, a sky from which the moon and stars had been pilfered. A dry wind was blowing. Everything became parched in that wind, curling up and disappearing. Herbage and trees wandered about the earth like people, while people stood like plants, glued to the earth by their sins. The grasses wept mutely; this was the weeping of those, whom no one remembered and never would. Gallows and crosses floated about in the deep chasm of this night, people were hung and crucified upon them. Severed hands glimmered through the air and dismembered feet wandered along the roads. Chopped-off heads rolled along like tumbleweeds and above them rose a glassy sky from which peered the eyes of the murdered.

Bontevoglia was already growing smaller before my eyes — a black dwarf amid bitter waves of wormwood. I stood drenched in an unusual sweat and my eyes were burning from the tears, which would not come forth. They had congealed, just like my heart, which was swathed in grey clouds.

I examined the small man who had stiffened before me, and felt lonely and sad. I understood: the clouds on the horizon were my sorrow. Vittorio and I used to see these clouds differently: we discovered in them the secrets of peace and equilibrium. “No,” I thought, “this dark fellow has not replaced my friend!”

Bontevoglia, this gnome at my feet, suddenly recoiled. He backed away from me, but his gaze remained fixed upon me. Our gazes were the only thing which held us together. He quivered before me like a blade of grass and grey sweat streamed down his pale face.

`Have mercy!' he exclaimed thinly and desperately, like a squawking fledgeling.

I remained silent. Under the influence of this wave I felt rock-hard and only the congealed tears burned me like hot coals. I wanted to say something to this useless sod, who was fearfully backing away from me, however my tongue froze in my mouth. “’Tis not for me,” I thought, “to lecture and to issue instructions, for my soul too bears an indelible sin!”

Bontevoglia could no longer take the tension. He swung around and suddenly dashed off. He ran, furiously throwing his feet to the sides, with a quaint hare-like gait, while I sadly watched him go. I felt alone and uneasy amid these mountains. It felt strange seeing this queer land and that chimerical hare, which kept jumping in fright as it dashed down the road. He had forgotten about his horse, relying instead on his ailing legs. He was like an enormous cricket, whose sole calling was to keep fleeing...

I dropped to my knees and looked to where the pink clouds had recently been gathering. The white house shone there with its bright walls, my sister was carrying water from the well and my father was sweeping the yard. A pink dust hung over the yard and hid him from view. Once more I looked at the retreating Bontevoglia. The small black clod rushed headlong down the distant path and occasionally turned its face toward me. I felt sorry for that useless small clod, for it didn't have the strength to escape after all, I thought.

Beside me grazed a pair of horses. I accepted this gift: before me lay a very long road and I had to embark upon it now — I would find true peace only in my native land.

There on my native soil I would breathe differently, I thought, my native air would fill my soul like matured sparkling wine. I dreamt that I would find the peace I desired — I wanted to reach that white house and to drink from the pails my sister was carrying.

The Fugitive

The fugitive appeared to have fallen asleep. He was in the forest and above the trees flew a bird, flapping its black wings. He glanced up: the bird was like a cloud, covering the sky, it was like the night and its eyes were two stars. A shiver went down his spine, he fearfully crossed himself and plunged into the primordial forest. He saw the still faces of his brothers coming toward him, their eyes squinting, and behind them he could just make out the dark figures of his mother and aunt. He was afraid of the gloom, which was creeping in from everywhere. Among the yellow tree trunks floated the yellow bodies of cows, led by people looking very much like him and his brothers. He seemed to be floating above the ground, not touching the earth with his feet. Ferns swayed at his feet, among them flashed strange flowers looking like thalers overgrown with petals. The bird above descended into the treetops and it had a hundred legs. Its legs were in fact the yellow trunks, among which he was walking or floating, and the legs of the cows were turning into trunks too. The horses became transformed into bandy-legged bushes, while his brothers slowly dissolved into the air, becoming ever more transparent. Then he realized that they were floating along too, but that he could never catch up to them. They were travelling the same path, he realized, and in the end they were doing the same thing, endlessly sawing trees, while his mother and aunt were carrying the sawn logs...

The fugitive's head spun, sparks flashed before his eyes, the ferns burst into flame. It seemed as if he was walking along snow as white as cream. The forest seemed to part before him, the trunks scrambled away to the sides, making way for him. The forest was filled with human shadows, like transparent white snow.

He felt like a shadow here, becoming like a tree himself, for all these shadows were trees and everything was whispering, like leaves rustling in the wind. Everything seemed to be in a mist, in which all the human faces he had seen in a lifetime were swirling about. He was drowning in that milky fog, at this moment he was a centaur, striking sparks with his hooves. Somewhere far behind he could hear the sounds of a pursuit party: heavy horses galloping along, striking the earth with their hooves. Upon the horses sat warriors encased in armour and they rode hard, relentlessly, day and night...

Sometimes it appeared to the fugitive that he would never emerge from this devastation, that the Lord had brought him here to free him of the rain and his burdens. The fugitive was cold and again he heard the whispering of the rain through the open door. Dampness crept into the abandoned shack, drops fell from holes in the ceiling, smashing sonorously against the rotten floorboards and pricking him with a cold drizzle.

'There are human laws,' he mumbled, 'and there are the laws of supreme justice...'

He looked out the window and leaves dislodged by the rain blew in through the broken panes. They slapped wetly onto the floor and adhered to it.

'Who can comprehend true justice?' he mumbled. 'Who can tell what today's actions will be transformed into the following day?'

The fugitive was burning with fever. He tried to wrap his chest with the rags, which his clothes had become, but his cold fingers refused to contract.

'All right!' the fugitive barely moved his lips. 'You probably didn't understand who that red-haired fellow was... He murdered our sister. My old man wanted to seek revenge... But he was too late. The Lord saw to it that everything was placed squarely upon my shoulders...'

He closed his eyes and his face became serene. As if he was busy listening to the day's sounds, the rustle of the leaves and the ringing of the droplets.

'It was a moonlit night then,' he said wistfully.

The Mother

I rode up to the city gates. Before me was indeed our city. Yes, a city in two halves: one was ours, the other belonged to the Sokolskys. The elder Sokolsky was my godfather and my sister had married one of the Sokolskys; perhaps one day our city would be united into one.

The gate was closed and I had to persevere with knocking for a long time. Finally the gate-keeper peered out of the tower; he could not have recognized me in my Spanish outfit, which was unusual for these parts. I identified myself and only then was the gate opened.

'We are beset by misfortune, sir, that we are,' grumbled the gate-keeper, but I could not make out what he was talking about. Impatience was whipping me along, so rather than fall into conversation with the old fellow, I pressed my stirrups into my steed's sides.

I looked about. In my absence everything had become overgrown with trees and weeds, the houses had settled into the ground and the fences had become more decrepit. Here and there I came across people who, upon seeing me, took off their hats and bowed.

I made my way up the hill toward the castle, my horse wheezing heavily. The gates, however, were firmly closed and I began to pound them for all I was worth. A nasty foreboding squeezed at my heart: something had indeed happened here. Somewhere from the depths came a barely-audible voice, asking me to identify myself. Nervously I called out my name, my voice becoming lost in my throat. The voice behind the gate asked again and I repeated my name more loudly. A peephole slid open before me and I saw a wary glistening eye examining me intently.

'Please don't be angry, sir', the eye said. 'I'll go and let madam know.'

It disappeared and I dismounted. From the top here I commanded an expansive view flooded with sunlight. The grain and lush grasses rolled in waves. On the distant road loomed a one-horse cart and beside it someone was slowly riding horseback.

The gates laboriously creaked open and a warrior bent double appeared in the opening. He was in full battle dress. I looked at him in surprise but said nothing, driven by impatience. Entering the yard I practically ran across the spacious square to the porch of our home. My mother was standing on the porch, beside her stood my aunt and several youths.

We fell into each other's embrace and tears rolled from my mother's eyes. I caressed her grey hair and placated her.

'Misfortune is upon us, dear son, that it is,' my old lady muttered. 'That Sokolsky attacked us unexpectedly in the middle of the night. The servants managed to put up a defence, but the enemy was three times superior in number. Now we must be vigilant...'

I exchanged kisses with my aunt, who like my mother, was also weeping. Near the doorway stood my two brothers and cousin, as if hewn from stone. I rushed up to them and we embraced warmly.

'The Lord has brought you to us at this evil hour,' said my mother. 'They beat us fiercely,

but thanks to the Mother of God we remained alive. I hid your brothers, and they bruised my ribs and those of your aunt very thoroughly.'

'What did they want?' I asked hollowly.

'They demanded Halshka's estate. May the Lord have mercy upon her, they tortured your sister to death.'

My mother became silent and began to sway with despair. It was like a bolt from the blue, I stood before her pale, almost white.

'Halshka?' I mouthed. 'Our Halshka?'

'Our Halshka,' mother's lips trembled.

Gradually my head began to clear. So this was what the vision I had had in Vlokyh was about. This was it: the white house and my sister walking along with a yoke and wooden pails, as if we had no servants for that. I looked around baitedly. Here they were, those dearest to me, whom I strived so hard to reach: my mother, who kept whispering the frightening news, the whisperings of her extinguished lips like the rustle of leaves; my prematurely grown brothers were staring at me as if I was a ludicrous apparition. The raging fire in my bosom grew: another figure was missing.

'And where's father?' I asked hoarsely.

'May the Lord have mercy upon your father,' mother crossed herself.

'Dead?!' I shrieked, and again that chimerical vision appeared before my eyes: my sister carrying water and father waiting for her on the porch of the house. He seemed to have heard our conversation, for he looked in our direction and there was sorrow in his eyes. An excruciating pain whipped me awfully hard. The world around me began to sway and shimmer. Red flowers bloomed in our spacious yard, people and things became overgrown with them, together with the roof and the porch. They protruded from the windows and burned on the fences and towers. These flowers seemed a kind of warning to me, however I could not regain my composure, for everything inside me had become so strangely entangled. I looked into one and then another face, as if expecting one of them to tell me that all this was falsehood. But I saw mournful stony faces and realised it was small wonder that I had such a wet face, that my fingers were squirming in spasms and my soul was being seeded with ashes. The ashes were raining down from the sky, like snow; grey snow in the middle of summer. The faces around me seemed even greyer and it became impossible to tell them apart; they looked at me without blinking, as if seeking shelter.

But this was not why I had returned to my native land, this was not why I had sworn not to spill even a drop of blood.

'Have you instituted proceedings against them?' I asked, nursing a frail hope of restraining myself.

Mother's face became completely dark.

'Do we have the means to prosecute such an adversary?' she asked. 'We don't have the strength to launch a defence either...'

'Blood has raised its voice here,' my aunt piped up. 'And the Mother of God has sent us you.'

At this moment mother was not looking at me. Her gaze lay somewhere to one side, a gentle sorrow had ensnared her face..

I sat down on the porch and dropped my head.

'Tell me everything,' I requested softly.

'There's not much to tell. Your father wanted to avenge your sister,' my aunt said, 'but he met with no luck. Although he organized an ambush against Demian, they were victorious...'

A fiery red fellow suddenly entered the yard. A sword hung at his side and he had a quiver of arrows behind his back. He had a pistol and a red mane of hair. "Blood has raised its voice

here," I mumbled under my breath, slowly examining these most dear of faces.

Mother was crying. Dark tears rolled down her dark face, her shoulders quaked. She stood supporting herself with a stick and her black clothing had almost removed her from this world. My aunt watched me with small unblinking eyes: in each burned a thin and needle-sharp spark. These sparks burned into me and I could not bear their uncharacteristic glimmer. Three youths stood on the porch, two of them full-grown, the other small. The younger one met my gaze and took several steps toward me.

'Brother,' he said sonorously, 'we are ready to carry out each of your orders!'

I smiled and pressed the light head of the small fellow to me and my gaze suddenly swept up. My soul shrieked desperately and above me the silken tent of the sky seemed to be torn asunder.

A drop fell onto my cheek and I looked at my kin through tears. They stood bathed in bright light, which made their faces completely flat. Then I looked above their heads — the white house was shining upon the hill. My father sat down to rest on the porch, while my sister was milking a cow. The milk was squirting from between her hands into the pail and was steaming. A white mist was consuming the entire yard. Father struck some fire and lit his pipe — I was amazed that this modern-day custom had reached here. Blue smoke wafted out of father's pipe, blue smoke emerged from the summer oven on which dinner was simmering. My sister filled a jug with milk and offered it to father. Father took the jug, put his pipe to one side and slowly began to drink the milk. A thin wisp of smoke from the pipe rose beside him, my sister approached the summer oven and, removing a lid, stirred the pot. She glanced in my direction and I saw the most beautiful smile I have ever seen...

Someone touched me.

'They don't know that you've returned, son,' mother whispered. 'And don't you go out in public much either. They seem to be consumed by rage, even though we haven't spilt a drop of their blood. Look after yourself, my son, and take care of us all...'

Then I saw the birds in the yard. They screamed and beat their wings, they wanted to fly, but I smiled wistfully and indulgently, for their feet had grown into the soil. These birds were very strange. They grew like trees but they were living beings. They flapped their wings about but looked with human eyes.

'Come inside, my son,' mother said, 'for we are receiving you on the threshold like an unwanted guest.'

My brothers moved away and suddenly a heavy solemn feeling came over me. I was like that red-haired warrior: a sword at my side, a quiver behind my back and a pistol in my hand. I could not but be the son of this exhausted woman in black and I could not but be the brother of these aged and petrified children.

The Confession

Bailiff Kunatovsky had already taken an interest in this story. He had decided to travel to the small town, although his position demanded this of him anyway. He took with him two servants and set off at dawn.

They reached the small town only toward evening. A sad and horrifying sight forced the bailiff to stop in his tracks. Yes, the town had indeed been razed to the ground.

In his time the bailiff had seen quite a few ruins. But this one left him awestruck. Not a single building in the town remained standing and there was not a soul to be seen anywhere.

They rode along deserted streets strewn with burnt logs and ashes. The horses kept tripping and the bailiff ordered everyone to dismount. The younger servant led the horses away

beyond the town's limits, while the bailiff and the older servant went off to inspect the incinerated town. They walked in the direction of the Stankos' administrative buildings — the bailiff knew the place well and had visited here many a time.

As the sun set in the west and it drenched the ruins in a quivering light. The bailiff looked around and involuntarily recalled the story told by the monk. A blind fear crawled into his soul, even though he had often been forced to go through hell and high water — many a time hostility had inflamed one clan or another.

They approached the castle. Or more exactly, what had once been the castle. They entered the courtyard — the building, like everything else, had gone up in smoke. The yard was trampled and strewn with burnt logs. In the middle two graves stood out with mounds of fresh earth. On one there was something akin to a cross — two burnt logs hammered together. Nearby lay a barrel. This was the only thing in the yard which had not been incinerated. The bailiff peeked inside: there was a rusty incrustation on the walls.

'Looking for something, mister bailiff?' a voice suddenly uttered and they grabbed at their swords in surprise. A strange apparition was staring at them: upon the body flapped rags, the face was youthful, but exhausted. The nose protruded far too sharply, while the parted dry lips revealed yellow teeth.

'Who are you?' the bailiff inquired sharply, still holding onto the handle of his sword. 'I am the bailiff of his royal majesty.'

'Don't worry, I know you, mister bailiff!' the man smiled a inanimate smile. 'Which is why I've come forward. Come here to take a look at all of this?'

'Yes, we've come to take a look!' the bailiff exclaimed.

'There's quite a sight here!' said the man and sat upon the barrel. 'And stop holding onto your sword, mister bailiff, I'm not about to attack you. With what?' He stretched out his burned palms, covered in blisters.

The bailiff scrutinized the stranger more closely.

'I don't know you,' he said.

'And nothing strange about that,' replied the stranger. 'You know the nobility, and I was only a henchman. I served under the Sokolskys, your majesty...'

'Did you know a person who went about in Spanish garb?'

'The elder Stanko? He indeed went about in Spanish garb,' the stranger said sullenly. 'He had a camisole with a row of buttons, a stiff high collar, stockings to the knees and narrow pants. His footwear had slits and was pointed at the ends. A cloak hung behind his back and on his head he wore a beret.'

The bailiff was overjoyed. The Lord Himself had sent him this man.

'In the name of the king...' he said.

'Hold on there with your king, mister bailiff. Don't forget that I myself volunteered to tell you this. Which is why I have come...'

The bailiff looked questioningly at the man.

'I have been waiting for you since yesterday. Would you have a drop of vodka, sir, to bolster my soul?'

The bailiff unhooked the flask from his belt and handed it to the man. The fellow hungrily pressed the flask to his lips. His overgrown throat fluttered spasmodically.

Finally the man tore himself away from the flask and caught his breath. He looked at the bailiff and his servant with feverish black eyes.

'Had you sirs experienced what I experienced here... The hell knows what happened here!'

What Happened in the Square

I was in no hurry to punish Demian Sokolsky, I had time enough for that. I wanted to fully experience my meeting with my native land and to recover my senses from the emotion I had experienced after crossing the threshold of my own home. So I wandered the streets in our half of the city, against my mother's wishes, and recognized cherished spots from my childhood. People looked around at me, for Spanish clothes were still uncommon here. I greeted many people and everyone bowed respectfully before me — the news of my arrival had managed to reach everyone. Some of the nobility invited me into their homes and I did not refuse their hospitality: they had all been in father's service and now passed into mine. Many of them had frightened eyes, they cautioned me against going about without servants, but my certitude and sagacity gave them courage too. In any case, during the Sokolskys' attack on our castle many of them had not been at home in order to defend their principals. But at the moment I had no desire to think about such things. I immersed myself completely in this aimless wandering about the streets, off which lay houses and yards. The sun generously strewed its rays, geese grazed on the grass, slovenly young boys and girls darted about; seeing me, they seemed to freeze, as if turning to stone, and opened their mouths in awe. Sparrows bathed in puddles and in the dust, pigs black with mud lolled about in pools of water; as I approached, the sparrows broke into flight, raising small clouds of dust, while the pigs lifted their large snouts and watched me. I suddenly found the peace I had sought in these streets, even though I was deeply troubled by the misfortune which had fallen upon our heads; with all my heart I recognized this land and its people, inhaled the smell of straw and trees, herbs and fences, even the sun looked at me differently here in my native land. I recognized the paths along which I had run as a boy and remembered my old childhood hideouts. The summer ovens were smoking away, women were cooking lunch, sour cherries hung red and the pears stood out green, heavily covering the branches; men pottered about in their yards; up ahead a cart was bumping along the road, dragging behind it a long tail of dust; further on the city fences stood out blue, and beyond them were the great open spaces making a saw-tooth forest profile on the horizon. Filled with agile bird life and insects, a multitude of chafers, butterflies and throaty crickets — this was my land, and I joyously gave it its due, even though at the bottom of my heart there still lay a grey bundle — my family grief. I walked along as if intoxicated, remembering the names of flowers and grasses — these grasses and flowers spoke to me, as if to their own kin. Everything greeted me, breathed in my face with a strong infusion of smells and the grey bundle at the bottom of my heart slowly began to melt and grow smaller.

I stopped at the fence dividing our part of the city from the Sokolskys. The fence was flimsy, in places palings were missing. I crawled across to the other side: there were the same streets and the same people here. I roamed across a spacious meadow thickly strewn with flowers and overgrown with lush regrowth. Here and there tethered goats and calves were grazing; they would stop upon seeing me, the calves mooing invitingly and the goats monotonously chewing on their grass.

I came out onto the square, still feeling the excitement provoked by my meeting with my home town. In the square there was quite a crowd, the shops were doing a brisk trade, outside the open taverns stood several city folk drinking vodka. From time to time one of the nobility would pass: the dust would then rise behind the horses and the young city girls would dash away with joyous screams.

I looked warmly at all these people — back in Bologna I had often dreamed about this square. In the church the bells rang for noonday service and only then did I realize that all these people had noticed me too. The city menfolk drinking vodka stood facing me, beautiful city girls opened their mouths in surprise, several peasants with whips in their hands had stopped; sumptuously dressed men and women on their way to church suddenly forgot where

they were headed and stood watching. A passing nobleman stopped his horse too; he scratched the back of his neck with the hand from which hung his whip, then sharply turned his horse around and galloped off into one of the streets. I raised my head: the crooked-mouthed Yosyp stood on the bell tower. He was striking the bells, tugging at the ropes, and the wind played with his long thick hair. In the middle of the square stood the tall naked pillory, darkened by the elements, but there was no victim beside it on this day. Figures appeared on both porches — on one a younger woman, on the other an older woman, their eyes round as buttons with curiosity. The crooked-mouthed Yosyp suddenly stopped ringing the bells and hung off the bell tower.

And then I saw the horsemen riding across the puddles. The front one smiled boastfully and I recognized him immediately. He had wide cheekbones, a red mustache above thick lips, his hat was pushed onto the back of his neck and he had a low forehead laced with wrinkles. He stopped his horse and boldly placed his hands on his hips.

'So it's you, you scoundrel,' he yelled from afar, 'daring to appear before my eyes?!

I looked at him, the horseman was making straight for me, his face ablaze with uncontrollable rage and I finally began to comprehend that his shouts and rage were directed at me. I looked at our present enemy — hey-hey, my poor hapless sister! This was your tormentor and executioner, until recently our friend and relative? Grief knocked at my heart, bitter as wormwood. The sky above became incinerated and grey ashes began to fall onto these people and this square, onto the bell tower and me. Somewhere above these buildings, beside that white house my sister suddenly wrenched her hands and dropped to her knees. I looked at the man; he seemed to be yelling something; how strange and funny his rage seemed. But it was him. A scream suddenly pierced me, yes, it was him who had destroyed all my dreams. The Lord be my witness, this was not what I had returned to my native land for, I wanted peace and joy. The hand with the whip was already raised, all around it was so quiet that one could hear the crickets chirring beyond the city. I became tense — everything was starting again. My sister was sobbing and tearing out her hair up above there beside the white house, my father rose and shook his fists above his head, my body became as taught as a bowstring; a cold fire flashed in my eyes like a sword; people all around froze like frightened dolls — take a good look at all this, my hapless sister! I saw before me the face with the wide cheekbones and red mustache. The hand with the whip hung lifelessly above me (the same whip which had streaked your beautiful white body, my sister!); a cold whirlwind rushed across the square and I turned completely to stone — I became an idol on a steppe grave many thousand of years old and only your beautiful body, my sister, floated before my eyes, minced by this whip. You stood up above there and sobbed, your eyes weeping tears of ice, cold red ice. Your shoulders, my sister, were still covered in red ice, your pain was like a dead bird. I wept with you here in the square, my sister, my tears were of stone — like all mortals, I could not remain indifferent to your snow-white body streaked by the whip. I was ignoble, my dear sister, and two crows which settled on the belltower called this out to me.

Sokolsky's arm was suspended lifelessly above my head, his brother looked awestruck from behind that arm, people watched me wide-eyed from everywhere (were these, perchance, your eyes, my sister?) — my gaze was already pouring forth molten metal, a fire burned within me, a black fire. In the azure light of day my enlightenment was being born (it is your clothing, my sister, strewn like scattered clouds), I hung in the air amid that azure trepidation and kissed your lifeless eyes, my sister, for you were my affectionate, gentle and kind turtledove. What was this worthless fool with wide cheekbones and red mustache in comparison to you? Once more have I stepped upon this frightening path, despite having sworn an oath not to do this anymore, and only you, my poor and hapless sister, can

understand me.

'Demian, you have committed many an evil deed,' I said calmly, peering into the stupid face of my adversary suspended above me. 'And 'tis not for me to count them, the Lord's judgement will be for that. Now you are being judged by my father and my sister — they are your mortal judges and I say to you in their name: prepare for your journey!'

Horror was spreading throughout the square. Yes, it really was horror. All around everything seemed to have gone insane; the frightened city folk suddenly began to run away, the crooked-mouthed Yosyp bawled furiously on the belltower, the women on the porches disappeared and everything became transparent and empty. Both my pain and my sister's tears, and this square — everything had become empty and transparent! My enemy's face, which was white as dough, and his eyes which burned and begged — everything was empty and transparent! Demian's mouth contorted and he looked as if he was about to topple onto me like a sack of old rags.

My lips became contorted also, for you, my poor and hapless sister, wept before me, you wrenched your hands and I could not look at your tears, for you were not yelling to me about revenge and were not begging for revenge.

I turned around and walked away. Your azure clothing was scattered all around, my sister, and my pain became like ice too. I wept just like you, my sister, and walked away, away from here — leaving this anthill — away from the terrible screams of the crooked-mouthed Yosyp on the belltower, so that he could resume his daily music. The bells wept for you, my poor hapless sister, and my present tears were in your memory...

I crossed the dusty street, ahead moved a cart with a well-fed horse harnessed to it. On the cart was a man who didn't care less about what had happened in the square and I stepped in the tracks of his peaceful cart. A guard stood at the gates, he too couldn't care less for the moment — he would learn about everything that had transpired later. I walked past him and he looked at me as if I was a centaur. A centaur dashing out into the steppe in search of stone graves with stone figures upon them.

I went beyond the gates and lifted my face to the sky. The sun was shining: it hung above me, above the entire city and spread so much light, that my head became overwhelmed with silver peeling.

I walked briskly through the lush-green meadow, my shoes with their upturned toes and thin soles were of little use in this grass, so I took them off and tossed them away. My bare feet stepped upon the cold grass, flowers swayed about me, before me loomed the forest and grasshoppers fluttered out from under my feet. Well, what could be finer than this meadow, my poor sister with your streaked white body, what could be finer than these flowers and this sun?!

But all this was like a short-lived apparition; the bundle at the bottom of my heart was now like a grey cloud. It was growing from the inside and consuming me — I was floating in a thick and bitter milk. There was a rock in my soul, shattered into pieces, and each piece was a thought about you, my sister!

Tears streamed from my eyes, I did not know where my bare feet were taking me. There was no sense and no calculation — I was being rocked and rocked. Borne along on grey waves — the milk was thick and bitter, and I abandoned myself to them. I was running like a baited beast, powerless and exhausted. There was only one road before me, stretching to the horizon, and beside it shone the house with its white walls under a straw thatch, beside which you were standing, shielding your eyes with your hand and beside which our father too cupped his face in reverie.

The Fugitive

In a corner of the hut lay a pile of brushwood brought by someone and the fugitive began to make a fire beside it. His hands were trembling, but he kept striking — the sparks fell onto the damp straw, unable to ignite it. The moon poured waves of tremulous light into the hut and, having lost all hope of starting a fire, the fugitive began to crawl about the corners seeking something drier. Although his body was racked by a tremor, he kept crawling from corner to corner, until he found a handful of dry powdered straw. Sparks fell onto the powdered straw and finally ignited it. He lay down on his stomach and began to fan the fire. A few timid flames danced across the powdered straw and then he added the damp straw. Smoke spread throughout the hut — a hollow coughing shook the fugitive's body; he coughed hoarsely for a long time. Finally the straw ignited and the fugitive placed some thin twigs onto the fire.

He lay beside the fire, breathing heavily, his head spinning. But the flames were already merrily consuming the small branches, grabbing them with red teeth — and before him bloomed a large red head. As he watched the head, his strength returned to him by the minute. He became young and strong once more — soon he would be able to leave this hut.

The sun was already shining in the sky. It was big and red too. It chewed on the clouds and sent down warmth. A white road flooded with bright light stretched before the fugitive. It went up and he knew he had to ascend the mountain. Only there would he find true peace, for it was there that the whitewashed house stood, with its yard and well. A white piece of linen lay spread on the green grass there, bowls were set out and the bread was cut. The pot of kasha was steaming on the summer oven, mother was standing at the gate looking out onto the road. He thought that there was not much left to go. He had to make his way up the steep slope, no matter how steep it was. He would then sit beside the linen cloth and they would assemble for dinner.

There was a white cow in the yard too. Its head was like a horned moon, and its lowing was like a hunting horn. Ringing hooves struck sparks somewhere, but the fugitive no longer cared.

The large red sun rested on the hill with the house. The house became immersed in the red disc, while all the figures in the yard stood out like the trunks of trees. The trees rustled with leafless tops — only one of them stood motionless. The mother alone placed her palm to her forehead and was incapable of moving away from the new gates of planed yellow wood with gold brackets.

The Confession

They made a fire here not far from the small town and while his servant cooked up a meal, the bailiff scrutinized his interlocutor. Yes, the Lord wanted this story not to be forgotten — even though that monk had lifted the curtain a little, it was not much. Now fate was being kind to the bailiff and he even twirled up his mustache.

The servant served dinner and they drank some fine wine. The stranger must have taken a liking to the wine, for he looked appreciatively at the bailiff.

‘He looked like a great nobleman,’ the stranger began. ‘And the fact that Sokolsky attacked him so suddenly, amazed everyone... He had no servants, true, but what need does such a man have of servants? It seemed then as if a giant shadow had passed over everything or maybe the sun was covered by a cloud. My tongue went numb in my mouth, my feet became glued to the ground and my arms were shaking, although I'm not one to be easily frightened. Sokolsky then yelled out and toppled to the ground like a sack of old rags. The stranger

disappeared, as if into thin air, and everyone rushed over to Sokolsky.

`After him, after him!' the younger Sokolsky yelled frantically, but no one lifted a finger.

The younger Sokolsky however lacked the courage to pursue the stranger, even with his own servants. His elder brother was dead. The people turned his rigid body over in awe: there was not a scratch upon it.

`It's the work of the devil!' yelled the younger Sokolsky. `Dear people, the devil himself has killed my brother!'

Old prince Korytsky, who was visiting the Sokolskys on business, was a witness to everything which had transpired.

`Quit blabbering nonsense,' he cut the fellow off abruptly. `The devil doesn't punish people for their sins!'

The words fell like a rock into the crowd. The square quickly began to empty, until only the younger Sokolsky and his servants remained.

The younger Sokolsky ordered the servants to pick up the body but they only exchanged fearful glances. Then he snorted contemptuously and lifted his brother's body himself. He placed it carefully on the horse, tied it to the saddle-bow (I saw everything from the street, where I was pressed firmly against a wall) and, raising his chin haughtily into the air, he led the horse across the square. The servants remained in the square, as if set rigid with tetanus. A wind rose and covered the doleful procession in dust. The younger Sokolsky wiped his eyes, bent double and tried to drag the horse along faster. Its arms and legs hanging limply, the corpse flopped about mercilessly. The wry-mouthed Yosyp seemed to wake up suddenly and raised the alarm.

I followed Sokolsky. Some unfathomable force drove me after him: my heart was thumping and the tops of my fingers were turning numb from excitement. It appeared to me that some great order was on the descendant in this land. I didn't wish to remain in the sidelines, and God only knows why I wanted to partake in it. This did not resemble the nobility's swashbuckling escapades, and even though revenge played a part, some unknown forces had intervened in the affair. This is what had enthralled me and, without a second thought, I decided to join the Sokolskys.

And so we proceeded: up ahead Sokolsky teetered like a drunk, behind him came the horse, with the body upon it. I brought up the rear, while quite some distance further back the servants trotted along timidly and guiltily, still afraid to draw closer.

We turned into a small street and the younger Sokolsky looked around. A strong wind was blowing in a single continuous gust. We stood in the middle of the deserted street. The horse reached out to nibble on some grass at the side of the road, grabbing at it with its teeth, and began chewing; the younger Sokolsky looked black, deathlike.

`What do you want?' he asked hollowly.

`I want to speak to your majesty.'

`What is there to talk about?'

`I know certain things.'

`What do you know?'

`There really was no devil.'

`How do you know that?'

`There was no devil,' I repeated. `It was the elder Stanko...'

`We knew that,' Sokolsky said exhaustedly. `That's why we stood up to him.'

`It was all magic tricks,' I said. `He spent a lot of time in foreign lands. I'm a sorcerer myself...'

`Do you know how it's done?'

`No,' I confessed honestly. `He learnt that overseas. The sorcery is not of this world.'

'Come with me,' Sokolsky ordered. 'Out of all of them you are probably the only one who is not afraid of him...'

The forged gates of their domicile were opened and we entered in silence. The whole family stood in the middle of the yard — all red-haired and broad-cheeked. A blackened old woman dashed toward us with ear-piercing screams, wrenching her hands — it was the cry of a raven or a badly-wounded animal. The elder Sokolsky wept like a child. He came up to his son and embraced his head and shoulders.

A moment later he drew away and peered into his son's eyes.

'Was it the elder Stanko?'

The younger Sokolsky nodded sadly.

'These are all magic tricks,' I said. 'He learnt them while he was abroad.'

The old Sokolsky threw me a heavy gaze, but said nothing. He helped his son remove the corpse and carefully laid it out on the grass. The old woman pounced like a crow upon the body and the air was filled from time to time with hoarse throaty shrieks.

I watched all this calmly. But a strange fire burned within me: what I had seen in the square had truly impressed me. There was no way I could match my strength with that sorcerer. This was what worried me. I went over my herbs and invocations — they were frail and powerless against his frenzy. My soul began to whimper, I wanted so much to play with fire. I knew this path was very prickly and thorny, it was bloody and frightening, but it was not without good reason that I had taken the side of the weaker party.

I knew the power of this land and the strength of its herbs. Which is why I was more attracted to that sorcery, rather than being afraid of it. An evil black ball settled in my bosom, devouring me, and I was seeking a cure.

The servants brought a blanket from the house, placed the corpse upon it and carefully carried it indoors. The old man and the son lifted the mother off the ground, her head and shoulders were shuddering.

'End this affair,' she said in a hoarse, but firm voice. 'They've paid us back for the blood, don't spill any more...'

The men said nothing. I glanced at them and a dark string reverberated in my soul: I saw immobile fixed masks. Their eyes peered from small cracks, they were screwed up and steel streamed from them. Pressed together, their lips were white, their cheeks sunken. The wind played with their red hair and it appeared as if fires were burning atop their heads.

The old woman moved along and wept. Large dark tears rolled down her cheeks, while her eyes became two blue brands of pain.

The Fugitive

The fugitive was breathing heavily. A heavy dew-like sweat covered his forehead, his parched lips grabbed at the air — he was obviously hallucinating. There were drafts everywhere, the earthen floor upon which he lay was damp and wet leaves rustled across it. Before his eyes everything became fused into a whirlwind of colour — the merry-go-round spun him around, bearing him along; he was also swinging on a swing: the sky spun about, a red snow and a white rain were falling, someone yelled somewhere and he shuddered.

He sat up abruptly and looked about with unseeing eyes.

'Is there someone here?' he called out.

But there was only silence and he ran his hand across his face, as if removing an opaque film from it. Squeaks and scurrying came from one of the corners. The fire beside him had already died down, but the embers were still glowing. With a bony hand he reached for some

brushwood and added it to the fire.

The horses' hooves could be heard clearly now. Each minute the sound grew louder — a party of men was pursuing the fugitive.

The Forest

'I could not remain at home,' whispered the fugitive. 'The Lord be my witness, I could not... I forgot about time and did not understand where I was. It was as if only a shadow remained of me, a shell of a human being — at that moment I was like a dandelion seed, driven along relentlessly by the wind. I knew only how to move forward and I pressed on, forsaking everything. The wind lashed my back, occasionally I looked back, but not to recall my kin, whom I had left behind unprotected; the wind seemed to have been specially sent to drive me on. It raised its whip and struck my shoulders, driving me out of my mind with the savage pain piercing my body. My mouth was open and moans emerged from within. My legs ran again and again, again and again I fell, got up again and ran, until all the strength had left me, until I had become like a branch broken off a tree — I fell to the ground then and the dry ferns crackled under my hands.

'The wary silence went deaf all around, even the birds did not sing on that day. I lay on the ground, barely able to breathe, completely exhausted and limp. Everything inside me groaned and churned. I pressed into the earth, as if wanting it to accept me.

'Once more I succumbed to that force,' I said or rattled, and a hollow despair shuddered through me.

My gaze was fixed in the fork of two large trees — the slender figure of a youth glimmered among the tree trunks. It stepped over the fork in the trunk and squatted beside me in the ferny undergrowth.

'I know that this force is destroying you,' my unfortunate, dear acquaintance uttered with his lips.

'It is destroying me,' I rattled. 'But I want to fight it.'

Vittorio did not answer. There was actually nothing to say. He smiled wryly and rose to his feet. Shaking my hand lightly, he returned to his fork. As he stepped over it, he looked back at me from the far side. His smile was still peeled to his lips, but his eyes made me bolt to my feet.

I moved about the clearing collecting twigs. There was something monotonous and learned about my movements, I bent down, picked up a branch or twig, and tossed it onto a pile. Only when there was a large pile of brushwood did I squat and strike some fire. Slowly I began to remove my Spanish clothing. My fingers were numb, as were my arms and legs. My face looked as if it had been carved from wood and a wooden heart beat in my bosom. The fire burned beside me with a high bright flame. I felt disgust at the thought of touching my clothing and tossed it into the fire with a stick. For a long time I remained beside the fire, which consumed my past. But an unfathomable pain awoke within me: all this is has a point to it, I thought. My future is like this fire too, shaky and ablaze.

I sat there without a thought in my head. I was wooden and growing over with moss. This moss was the forest, its air and the songs of its birds, this moss was a fire in which something of mine was burning — perhaps my past or my aspirations.

I was seized by a strange unworldly desire. I wanted to stand in the fire myself, so that its flames could lick my heart. Somewhere behind me, past the forest, out of which I knew not the way, a small town beyond the field was now disturbed. I was even amazed that I still remembered about the town: around me yellow pine tree trunks swayed and danced, there

was not a single path in sight, and I knew not in which direction to head.

Meanwhile the fire began to die down. I sat beside it, staring insanely into the glowing embers, and regained my senses only after the last ember had died in the grey ash. I stirred the fire with a stick — the grey ash rose in a small dust-like cloud.

Only then did I sense that my body had been bitten all over by mosquitoes, it was burning and aching — I was only dressed in my underwear. I stood up and looked about. The hairy twilight breathed threateningly. I stood amid a lifeless, strange forest, in the bowels of which lurked many dangers. A small, sickly fear flashed inside me like a spark.

I walked numbly through the forest into that awfully thick twilight between the tree trunks. Tree crowns swayed up above and I walked along aimlessly. Somewhere in the forest depths an owl kept calling out, and near one of the pines hung the pale sickle of the moon. I kept walking. It seemed to me that I had been walking a whole lifetime and there remained another lifetime to walk. My numb feet were crushing twigs and my arms subconsciously pushed away the branches of bushes and small trees from my face. Only when a damp and cold pre-dawn breeze began to blow, when the sky above me lit up with a washed-out blue, only then did I stop and sense that I was burning with a cold flame. My arms were shaking and my bare bloodied feet were burning. I emerged into a clearing and found myself in a small settlement.

A hollow echo resounded when I struck the nearest gate with my numb fist. Dogs began to bay, at first in the yard where I had knocked and then everywhere else; I stopped knocking and stood before the gate like a swaying white apparition. My eyes were screwed up and my fists clenched. This was how the head of the household found me — I felt the touch of someone's hand and saw before me a tall mustached fellow.

'Why are you troubling the dogs, fellow?' he hummed.

'In God's name,' I said. 'Take me in, because I'm falling off my feet with exhaustion...'

The fellow looked at me intently, eyes wary, then let out a sigh and turned to face the open gates.

'Come inside!' he grumbled and headed off toward the house.

The tethered dogs squealed and thrashed about in their collars, a sleepy woman stood on the porch with a cloak tossed over her shoulders, while a young lad peered from the doorway, the spitting image of the woman.

'What's the matter?' the woman asked.

'Some good-for-nothings have robbed this fellow. Go on inside, there's nothing to gawk at here.'

The woman indeed became embarrassed - I was only in my underwear - but she stole an interested glance at me and darted off with a flutter of her nightshirt.

'Get the man something to wear,' the farmer said to his son.

The four of us sat at the table and I avidly consumed some thick gruel. I was dressed in loose-fitting peasant garb and felt at peace in it. Swallowing spoonful after spoonful, I managed, between mouthfuls, to tell these kind people a fairy-tale I had heard as a young boy, and they listened in rapture. The tale was about me and my adventures, nothing of which was true.

For some reason I had imagined that with my aristocratic upbringing, my whims and past adventures, I would feel totally alienated from these people, but I had missed something simple and important in my life. The wooden spoons and earthenware bowls appealed to me immensely; it seemed that in some other world and in another life I had lived just like these people. A squalid clean house, simple food, stern faces with kind eyes, a quiet harmony filling the house like air; this was real living, it occurred to me. To have a wife and a child and one's own bread.

However these thoughts and the hot gruel exhausted me completely, I could no longer battle the sleep. And so, directed by the owner, I crawled onto the hay.

I was immediately rocked by a sweet wave the moment my head touched the coarse cloth and I sensed a deep, satiated and pleasurable gratification. I relaxed and let go. My fate seemed a lot less murky; there was the morning, the silence, the scent of hay; beside me nuzzled a large white cat and my dreams were soft, like the whisper of leaves. He flew to me from where the leaves and trees were, the moon and the drowsy grass. I saw a sweeping field and upon it ricks of hay, and among them walked Vittorio and beside him like a dog, ran the fox.

'Well, then?' I asked. 'Have you returned to question me?'

Vittorio sat down on the hay and bit into a grass stem. The fox pressed against his feet. From time to time he glanced at me, but said nothing. As always, he was my dear Vittorio and his gaze shone with unusual gentleness.

'This is so extraordinary!' I said. 'Who knew that that stupid joke would backfire like that? Who knew that I wouldn't be able to contain my power the second and third times...'

Vittorio kept chewing on the grass and wordlessly nodded.

'And then?' he finally asked, and I choked, so languid and kind was his gaze.

'Then?' I repeated. 'How should I know? Can I know anything, now that it's all so confused?'

I had lunch with those kind people and then set off into the forest again. The farmer gave me some bread and salt and I gratefully kissed his hand.

'Who knows,' said the fellow, deeply moved, 'perhaps one day I'll meet such an unlucky fate myself...'

I walked through the forest and the trees rustled above me. I still couldn't come to my senses and settle down after what I had done. I was still alarmed and seemed split in two: one half of me was walking through the forest and humming a song, while the other rambled behind with a wounded body. In such a state I would have been of no use at home, so I decided to spend some more time in this forest. Only after the two men had fused into one, after the wounds of the second man had healed, could I return to my kin.

And so I made my way through the forest, plunging ever deeper into its wilds, into the songs of the birds and the crackle of brush underfoot. I wanted to become a part of it, like the grass and the birds, to become its child; this is the life, I thought! It was easy to find an abandoned house or hut in the forest, my gift would aid me in hunting and I could exchange the game for bread and millet.

I partook of the air with full lungs and my soul became more peaceful. Warm idylls became intertwined in my tired mind, disturbed only occasionally by a blast of sharp wind; my mother and brothers surfaced in my thoughts, together with the apparition of the armed ruddy fellow, who had entered our yard. Would those damned Sokolskys really start an uproar after what had happened, I thought? We had settled the matter with them and I didn't want to enter into a new confrontation.

I walked for a long time. Until evening, it seemed. Finally fate took pity on me: I came across an abandoned house. Perhaps some hermit monk lived here, for it looked lived-in and was hung with icons. I fell to my knees and prayed to the Lord for a long time. He seemed to bless me in my peaceful thoughts.

After that I sat on the porch and watched the sun set behind the trees. It became impaled on the tips of the pines and wounded, shed its evening blood. Heavy reddish strips of sunlight hung among the trees and where they fell the grass turned gold. I sat bathed in light and must have appeared like an old hollow stump. I felt truly great, although the feeling of numbness had still not left my body. At this moment I refused to know anything about the terrible world

which sucked people into its whirlpool. I wanted to breathe this forest and sun, to become a bird or an insect within it. Yes, overcome by such feelings, I had a wholehearted desire to settle here. The evening sun blessed my decision, so that when its bright strips became extinguished among the yellow trunks, an appeased and kind smile illuminated my face for the first time in a long while.

Lunar Pain

A small black figure resembling a bird appeared on the crest. Its body was semi-transparent and it walked along with a hood over its eyes, its long extremities hanging to the ground.

The fugitive looked through this figure: a red mist spread behind it, horrible apparitions, like endlessly churning clouds, a mass of stretched-out and bloated faces and torsos. The bridge of the fugitive's nose experienced a sharp pain and he firmly closed his eyes. His eyelids clung together like the shells of a clam, a red darkness enveloped the fugitive; in this darkness he could make out clearly and distinctly the yellowy-white disc of an unsteady and quivering moon.

'I did not call you!' the fugitive said softly to the stranger.

The fellow had squatted beside the smouldering fire. He tossed some brushwood into the fire — red reflections danced all around him.

'I told you, I did not have long to trample the earth. After you scared me so badly and drove me from you, I did not make it home... I now fly about at night and frighten the faint-hearted. I remember so little now of my former life, but I have not forgotten you and probably never will. An eternal riddle gives me no peace: I don't understand you, fellow!'

'We are not birds of a feather,' the fugitive said hoarsely. 'You wanted to do what I was forced to do. Except for back then, with Vittorio... that was a misunderstanding: back then I was still unaware of my powers...'

'This is all lunar pain,' the stranger piped up, after a silence. 'Anyway, we experience the same things. Whether you are wearing black or white clothing, it's still clothing. Hey-hey, there, fellow! It's a pity your power was wasted so terribly: we could have accomplished some great things! The moment I first saw you, I realised you were born to commit great deeds. And I was so attracted then to the dark side. When the moon rose I was drawn away from home, for only at night did I truly live. It was the same powerful force which still drives me about the world. I had been the black sheep in my clan: I was dreaming of dictating my power to the oligarchy with your help. We could have seized one of the largest thrones and the people would have come to like me: the people love those who whip them while smiling benevolently. I would have led that nation to conquer the world and with your help we would have outshone the exploits of Alexander the Great. I would have managed to hold the world in my hands, for I would have gotten to know it well. This is not a complicated science, playing by the rules one can easily draw excess blood from their noses. You would have experienced the glorification, which would have engulfed us and seen the countless sycophants, who would have licked our feet!'

The stranger laughed and his semi-transparent body shuddered. He shook his head and wiped the tears with the back of his hand.

'Eheh, hey!' he continued. 'Now I shall never achieve this! Alexander's fame will remain with Alexander. He was so naive, that Alexander. I wouldn't even have removed my sword from its scabbard, although, where required I wouldn't have sheathed it either. I wouldn't have wandered across deserts on camels and I wouldn't have drunk semi-turbid water from semi-dried rivers. Utilizing an invisible destructive force, I would have only laid countless

corpses at my feet.'

Then he burst into guffaws, his whole body shaking.

The fugitive found it hard to talk, but he hoisted himself up on his arms and leaned back against the wall.

'I find your speech strange,' he said, barely moving his lips. 'I find it strange that you come to me and start this conversation as an equal. I find it hard to imagine that I too have fallen so low, that I now stand on the same level as you. But the Lord is my witness: my evil is involuntary. The Lord can see - my soul is not black, evil has merely made me giddy.'

'Whether your clothing is white or black, it is still clothing,' the stranger said, joyously squinting. 'People are judged by their deeds and your deeds are just as black as my thoughts. Which is why I have flown so long to cross this last threshold of yours. The only thing, which separates us in this world is your feeling of guilt, a threshold I shall never cross. Which is why I have been sitting here so long, imploring you. I want to resurrect your powers. Hundreds of horsemen are pursuing you, seeking you out. What are a hundred horsemen to you - transform them into rock or ashes. Arise from this abhorrent bed and lie in a royal berth. Do what I have dreamed of doing, before this feeling of guilt consumes you!

The stranger leaned over the fugitive and breathed anxiously in his face. And although he was a shadow and his body was transparent, even though his arms were like wings, and his head under the hood was frightening and bug-eyed, like that of an owl, an unusual melancholy rushed into the fugitive's bosom, like a warm spring breeze. It seemed to him that the smell of mouldy leaves had disappeared from the hut and that he could see a pale-blue sky among the dark branches swollen with sap. He could hear the singing of the tomtit, a faint smile touched his greenish lips — there was that sky about which the stranger had spoken.

'And if you can't convince me?' he asked with the same smile.

The stranger moved away, then rose to his feet. He loomed above the fugitive with his black, semi-transparent body, raised his arm-wings and turned the world black.

'Hey-hey, fellow,' he said forcefully. 'I pity you. This world is like two giants locked in a battle to the death. Perhaps the one in white will win, but this will in no way decide anything. Once a man has been born, he must die. Once the world has been born, it must die too. When the fellow in black is victorious — that will be the death of the world. And the black fellow has a better chance. For if they choke each other to death in their deathly embrace — the black one will win too. Remember this science!'

'The white one will win,' the fugitive said, and his lips were again touched by a smile, causing the stranger to clench his semi-transparent fists with a crackle...

The fugitive opened his eyes. Through the broken windowpanes he could see that it was raining. Somewhere far away there was a rumble, followed by a mighty flash. The fugitive looked at all of this with an almost reasoning gaze. A serene, beautiful smile illuminated his lips, while a tear glistened in his right eye.

He saw a real owl in the opening of the window. Completely black, it flew like a rock tossed into the sky. It hooted loudly and the fugitive noticed that despite the rain and thunder, despite the flashes of lightning, a moon was shining in the sky. Having girded itself with a giant yellow belt, the owl was flying straight for the moon and that glimmering golden disc.

The Sorcerer

'I conjured spells that first night,' the sorcerer told the bailiff. 'Only after that did we leave with the younger Sokolsky for the Stanko household.'

'We approached from the meadow so as not to rouse the dogs, our feet slipped noiselessly

across grass wet with dew; in the moonlight the dew appeared intermingled with precious stones. Heeding my advice, the younger Sokolsky armed himself with a bow and in his quiver lay several dozen poison arrows — this was my work. As we walked along, both of us must have felt the tremor, which you always experience before a hunt.

‘We roused the dogs a little when we were in their half of the town, however we reached the fortress fortuitously and entered through the secret passage. A hollow silence bristled all around, a bright white moon floated in the sky, and we sat for an hour or so beside a lean-to structure against the fortress wall. Somewhere far away we heard an owl, a large black shaggy body flew over us, Sokolsky's face twitched. I placed a reassuring hand upon his shoulder. He removed my hand and squeezed it amicably.

At that moment we froze in our places: a white figure was climbing out of a window. I already knew that one of the sorcerer's brothers was a sleepwalker. He walked across roofs and the yard, spurred on by a full moon. He never left the fortress, for inside it he was master. It was I who had cast this spell upon him.

He loomed in the window, his arms spread out, raised his deathly-pale face and seemed to drink the moonlight. The younger Sokolsky trembled at my side, as if in a fever, while the sleepwalker prayed to the moon and the prayer was accepted by the owl, which again appeared in the air.

‘There he is, the devil!’ I whispered into Sokolsky's ear. ‘Your excellency can rest assured that you are executing a sacred deed!’

At this moment the sleepwalker moved and rested his foot on a ledge in the wall. His arms grabbed hold of an overhanging roof and he easily made his way onto the roof. He walked along the edge, placing his bare feet evenly and assuredly, as if he was walking along a straight path. Once more the owl rustled its black wings, the sleepwalker stopped and turned to face us.

‘Shoot, your excellency,’ I whispered and Sokolsky hastily grabbed an arrow from his quiver.

However the sleepwalker turned away and crossed to the opposite side of the roof. We crawled through the grass, our faces and clothing becoming drenched with dew. Sokolsky was breathing heavily, he had already calmed down and was slowly becoming overcome by the fervour of the hunt.

The sleepwalker stood on the edge of the roof, bathed in moonlight. His white clothes glistened and shimmered, and his face was a pale blue. Sokolsky took aim with his bow, but before he could pull it tight, the sleepwalker had swaggered, lightly grabbed at the eaves and a moment later was on the ground. He looked over his shoulder in our direction and disappeared around the corner of the building.

‘He's seen us,’ whispered Sokolsky.

‘Stop talking nonsense!’ I cut him off abruptly. ‘How can he see anything with closed eyes?’

The sleepwalker appeared at the opposite end of the building and, stopping again, turned his blue face in our direction. He swaggered and began moving toward us — at this moment the arrow rushed past me with a whistle: Sokolsky sat trembling beside me, his bow already empty.

The arrow whistled over the head of the sleepwalker, who had stopped again, as if deciding whether to keep walking. Sokolsky took aim with a second arrow and it left his bowstring as the sleepwalker passed behind a tree.

At this point I laughed softly and my laughter was so scathing that Sokolsky grabbed me sharply by the shoulder with an iron hand.

‘Shut up!’ he whispered threateningly, so that my innards froze. ‘Or I'll bury a knife in your

throat before I finish him off.'

The somnambulist again made his way toward us. He kept walking, as if wanting to catch us in the execution of an evil deed. His face was radiant, illuminated by a not too comprehensible frailty, his eyes were still closed and his chin raised. We sensed a menace in that raised chin and froze.

Sokolsky was no longer afraid. He took out another arrow and took more careful aim.

The arrow whistled shrilly, the somnambulist stopped — the arrow had entered his body with a crackle. Sokolsky let fly another arrow, but the deed was already done: the sleepwalker jumped up, grabbed hold of the arrow and tore it from his bosom. A shriek or rattle emerged from his throat and at this moment a second arrow pierced his neck and he collapsed, bathing his night clothes in blood.

'Shall we leave him here or take him with us?' I asked Sokolsky.

He looked at me, grinning.

'Let's take him,' he said almost out loud. 'Let them search a little...'

Sokolsky had even forgotten that he could have utilized my strength as a servant. He walked up to the corpse and hoisted it onto his shoulder. We stole up to the exit, removed the corpse from the fortress, and then I transferred the dead somnambulist onto my shoulders. And so we walked, exchanging our terrifying load and overhead the black bird jingled its wings from time to time. We did not want to pass through the city, so we went beyond the city fences. Here three horses were waiting for us. Sokolsky dismissed the servant who had been guarding the horses and whistled to me. I dragged over the somnambulist and together we hoisted the corpse onto the horse's croup.

Hooves resounded, Sokolsky turned a joyous and predatory face toward me:

'Well then, sorcerer, we succeeded, eh?' he called out loud.

'That we did,' I replied in the same tone and we spurred the horses on.

The Forest

I awoke with a premonition of uncertain alarm. For a long time I could not make out where I was. There were wooden black walls, depictions of saints on icons, a rudely constructed table and cheap crockery upon it. I was barely able to sit up in bed, bitten all over by fleas, which swarmed in the neglected bed.

The sun had already risen. I left the deserted hut, the forest birds trilled melodiously and I went for a little walk to admire the wonderful morning. At this moment I heard footsteps and an overgrown and apparently frightened monk dashed into the clearing. He rushed into the deserted hut and emerged a minute later, holding a small bundle. Looking about fearfully, he raced off.

I wanted to give chase to the monk, for I had spent the night in his hut, but I tripped over a log of some sort and crashed to the ground. Involuntarily I turned around and my eyebrows rose in surprise, my heart suddenly began to beat very fast. I crawled closer to the log and suddenly my entire body began to shudder. My hair stood on end and my mind seemed to grow dim. A grey cloud enshrouded me, ensnaring me, and an insufferably bright bolt of lightning flashed within the cloud.

I could not stop myself from weeping and the tears just rolled down my face. I collapsed groaning within and in desperation began to pound my head against the ground with all my might. Then I rose to my feet and again glanced unwittingly at the grass. There was no doubt - my brother was lying dead before me.

I sat senseless in the grass, feeling like a stone idol. I was destroyed and shrivelled up. It was as if a blind hostile force had been visited upon me. Was it a stupid coincidence, the

mind games of my turbid brain? I was at a loss to find an explanation for what had occurred. I knew nothing, neither did the forest, for it too was dead and dry. The songs of the birds had grown silent and the leaves overhead no longer rustled. The flowers had wilted, becoming extinguished, and the grass became like dry reeds. At any moment this unusual deadwood would burst into flame, to burn away and turn everything into ashes. Inside I felt the same way. I was much too dry and ready to burst into flame. I forgot about everything in the world, about my worries, doubts and pain. I was ready to uproot the entire forest to find the person who had done this. For a moment the agitated face of the monk running in fear from the clearing materialized before my eyes. I jumped to my feet. My soul was burning, my mind worked feverishly, I was no longer rational and careful. The lunar pain crackled inside me, even though the sun shone overhead. I was the flame which had ignited this tinder-dry forest and I was already on fire.

I only managed to catch up to the monk on the edges of the forest. My first instinct was to strike him down and incinerate him. But something stopped me.

'Hey, reverend!' I called out and he glanced back at me in fright.

Then I realized that he was not my brother's killer. The killer was somewhere close by, but it was not the monk. So I asked the monk about my brother. Had he seen the person who had brought the body to the clearing near the deserted hut? I even described to him whom he should have seen: the thickset red-headed fellow.

'No,' the monk said fearfully. 'I saw nothing and have no desire to see anything.'

I studied this ragamuffin more closely. He began to shake under my gaze, so despicable, dried to the bone, with matted hair and a child's running nose. The eyes, set far apart, looked somewhat squinted, and I suddenly felt sorry for him — I saw some kind of bloody mist behind his back. I nodded barely noticeably that he could leave. I even wanted him to leave, refusing to waste precious minutes.

Once more I set off at a trot. I ran, as if I was flying, at this moment I was in fact a bird swooping around the forest. My cheeks burned and my fists were clenched of their own accord: I had to find my brother's killer, no matter what, I had to look into his eyes, otherwise I could not live peacefully in this world.

And I did catch up to him. The red-headed fellow was making his way through the forest. He was walking along and humming a song, as if chewing on something with his large jawbones. I knew him very well, this red-headed fellow. As boys we had played together, we had learned to break-in horses together, we had once been good friends, this red-headed fellow and me.

A joyous tune emerged from under his red mustache. It was some playful song and suddenly everything became clear.

I jumped out to intercept this evil cat: the cat arched its back and screamed — the cat was ginger-red, like a flame; it screamed, making my blood curdle in my veins. Then he drew a knife and lunged at my bosom. The knife whistled past my ear, but I didn't even wince. Then he fell to his knees — how funny and strange, a cat on its knees! — and suddenly vomited at my feet.

I gradually stiffened. He was writhing at my feet, no longer whistling his song or chewing away; this flaming ginger-red cat was shaking at my feet like an aspen leaf, and he was breathing, as if he had imbibed some poison. A wind gusted, a violent storm, tears gushed from my eyes, the trees and the earth groaned, I groaned myself from the despair I had to suffer. Dead birds fell out of the trees like pears — the tears of this forest, the pain of my heart, despair and exhaustion.

I turned around and left. I felt nauseous. Falling to the ground, I dug my fingers into the ground and buried my face in the pile of old leaves, pierced here and there by the odd blade

of grass.

I was so exhausted that I barely made it on all fours to the deserted hut. Sipping some water, I lay down and crawling beyond the threshold, stared into the heavens. The evening sun had already settled onto the spikes of the pines and had laid down its slanting strips. I looked at those strips and they seemed to me like a road to the sky, which I too would have to travel. Up above there, at the end of that road was a house, its white walls shining, and beside it stood my sister and father. Another fellow was walking toward them, moving slowly and exhaustedly, and he had a wound in his chest. He had his hand on the wound and was smiling at his kin. They wept and embraced, my father and brother, while my sister stood next to them and sadly shook her head.

I felt pain watching all this, especially since my brother was nearby. Suddenly I dashed off to where I had left him — he was lying there, looking into the sky with open eyes. I fell down beside him and began to shake his body violently.

'Get up,' I whispered. 'My dear little Ostap, my flesh and blood, get up! I don't want you to be dead, brother, because I didn't even have a chance to talk with you.'

The moon shone down upon us and I didn't even notice when night fell; this was it — lunar pain! I suddenly realized bitterly and plainly: lunar pain is a dead brother in your arms, with whom you have not had time to speak after a long journey. I understood why someone overcome by such pain wanted to escape to the ends of the earth.

I left my brother near the deserted hut and walked away. The lunar pain almost destroyed me. No longer a human being, I was simply a bundle of taught sinews — screams occasionally escaped shrilly from my bosom and died amid the dark tree trunks. I could not see the path, but where did I need to travel anyway? I could not be rational this night — I was senseless and blind.

I walked about like this for god knows how long. Eventually I stopped, exhausted. The forest loomed black around me. I sat down on a tree stump: mosquitoes buzzed in a cloud above me. They stung my face and arms, but I did not move. I wanted it to hurt, for what was this paltry pain compared to the one in my soul? So I sat as if hewn from stone and there was not a drop of light within me. My face became an engorged mask, my heart stonily hammered at my stony bosom. My brain was being flattened under the pressure of grief and darkness.

All the same I had to get up and keep moving. The moon attached itself to my neck, imbibing my strength and light — it had become a bat, which had entered my alarmed brain. This bat was the night, I thought, and a strange, unfathomable, fierce amazement leaked from me: it was impossible for the human mind to imagine something like this!

I was woken by the dawn. Pale and barely alive, I rose to my feet — thousands of needles sunk into my heels. I looked up: there above the horizon a small cloud glowed crimson. Slowly I wandered along the forest path. The deserted hut turned out to be nearby, my brother was lying just as I had left him, ants were swarming all over him.

I looked at the deserted hut, not without some pity: I would no longer be living in this forest as a hermit, nor would I become a placid beggar. I would leave here, never to return.

Hoisting my brother onto my shoulders, I left. The ants which had covered my brother's body crawled onto me, biting me. But I felt no pain. When I became short of breath, I carefully slipped my brother onto the grass and sat down beside him. Above me the peaceful and pacified heaven bloomed. Like white ships, lumbering cumulus clouds sailed along — I had once dreamed of taking wing into the distant world on these ships.

Now I no longer looked at them in reverie. "People should have limited powers," I thought, "otherwise they will suffer misfortune!"

The clouds kept sailing past. And I watched them, exhausted and despondent. "People should not venture outside their own selves!" I said neither to the sky nor to my dead brother.

Again I struggled on. Ants crawled over me and stung me. Flowers and ferns, grasses and small bushes flickered before my eyes. I kept going. My heavy burden dragged me to the ground, as if I had the sky on my back. The birds gave my brain no peace. Their singing pecked at my head like a woodpecker. I could not drive the woodpecker away — my dead brother was on my shoulders. I was making my way home, where I had been expected for a long time. I would not bring them joy, oh, that I would not!

'You were very weak,' I said to my brother. 'You wanted to go away like me, to secure the knowledge of the world and waited for me. Now I am returning with you. Having attained the knowledge of the world, I have lost you.'

Tears streamed onto my cheeks and because of them I failed to see the world.

'My brother, I am ready to abandon all my knowledge, if only you would get up and walk this path alongside me. I am an unfortunate sorcerer, my brother, forgive me please.'

The woodpecker kept hammering at my head, a cuckoo wept in the forest depths, and where my tears dropped, yellow flowers grew — my grief and sorrow. And so heavy was the burden upon my shoulders, so much did it press down upon me and bend me double, that I fell into despair — would I make it out of this forest?

Finally the forest finished. I laid my brother down in the clearing and sat down beside him. Yellowy-red circles floated before my eyes until I regained my senses and before my eyes appeared that piece of landscape flooded with sunlight, which I could gaze at. All around stretched a treeless plain. Here and there small fields were sown with grain, but it was predominantly tall drooping feather grass. It flowed like a green sea, splashing waves against the verdant cliffs of the forest.

Above my head skylarks sang joyously, while my body ached painfully. I already knew that I would not make it home — I had placed too heavy and too large a burden upon my shoulders. And so I remained sitting on the ground. Dozing or drifting into oblivion. I stiffened and became unfeeling like a rock. Looking at my brother's face, I was amazed at how serene it appeared. And when some horsemen galloped up to me, I saw only the muzzles of the horses, all else was lost in a mist. I felt total indifference toward the horses and toward the people shouting at me.

Finally I spoke to them in Wallachian*. Slowly and incoherently. I told them the story about my brother, that I had found his corpse in the forest and was carrying it home.

One of the horsemen dismounted and came up to me. I saw a face with an enormous mustache, both ends of which were tucked behind his ears. He gave me a sip of vodka and then leaned over my brother.

'What happened here?' the fellow asked.

I was beginning to regain my senses. Throwing a glance at the dismounted horseman, I removed my hat. The wind slowly dishevelled my hair and tears rolled from my eyes.

'This is my brother,' I said in my native tongue. 'I am taking him home to our mother.'

'What is your surname?'

'Stanko.'

The man let out a whistle and looked in amazement.

'Why is your grace dressed like that?'

'I have been robbed,' I said and this was true to some degree.

'We will give you a hand.'

'The servants were already strapping my brother's body to a horse. I got to my feet, the world reeled before me, but I mustered the strength to walk up to a horse and hoisted myself onto it. After mounting the horse I looked about. Green waves of feather grass rolled along and for some reason I wanted to bring my heels together hard and to dash off into the steppe.'

* Romanian

Once more my head spun and I grabbed the reins. Apparently they asked me something, but I heard nothing, save the tolling of a bell, monotonous and irritating. Multicoloured circles began to spin before my eyes and I rested my head on the horse's neck and breathed in its warm smell. Again I heard a voice beside me. Although I could understand each word separately, I was unable to tie them in together. My heartburn stopped me from replying to the kind fellow, there was an unbearable pain in my temples. With a final supreme effort I sat up, pressing my hands against the horse's croup. Two horsemen came up on each side of me, grabbed hold of me and we set off, moving faster and faster.

The Sorcerer

The sorcerer took out a pipe and placed it in his mouth.

'Do you have any tobacco, sir?'

'I don't use that devilish weed,' the bailiff growled.

The sorcerer nodded, as if expecting the answer, sucked on his pipe and gazed into the fire.

'You went off into that forest,' the bailiff reminded him.

The sorcerer glanced at him and removed the pipe from his mouth.

'I remained at the edge of the forest to guard the horses. The young Sokolsky didn't want me to see where he was hiding the corpse, and I stretched out on the grass with a clear conscience...'

I let the horses graze freely and the morning sun bathed my face. The warmth let me relax and I soon fell asleep. I dreamt an owl had attacked me. It beat me with its wings, its claws and beak. I woke up: the sun was shining directly into my eyes. The horses stood motionless, lazily shooing away the flies with their tails.

I jumped to my feet. The young Sokolsky was nowhere to be seen: he must have ventured deep into the forest. Something made me feel uneasy and I suddenly guessed that the dream with the owl had been significant.

I dashed into the forest, but an inexplicable force drove me back. Then I bridled the horses and waited in readiness. All around me it was quiet and deserted. The forest breathed creepily and it became clear to me that something had happened there.

Without mulling over it, I mounted a horse, forgetting about my magical powers, and galloped off toward the city. The old man was pacing to and fro outside their household, nervously glancing at the road. Spying me, he came running up and I, stuttering and swallowing words in my haste, voiced my suspicions. He frowned.

'Two boys is too much,' he said tersely. 'But we'll have a go at finding him.'

His face was green with grief.

We immediately left in a detachment for the forest. Until evening we dashed about the forest paths and roads. Finally we found him. He was lying in the bushes and his face was relaxed and calm. Dead birds lay scattered in the grass, and the trees near which he lay were completely leafless.

Our hair stood on end - we immediately surmised what had transpired. The old man was deep in thought, bent over his dead son, the blue vein on his temple bulged more than usual and throbbed quickly. I was the only one in our group who displayed any curiosity. I lifted several birds from the ground - there was not a scratch on them, as was the case with Sokolsky. I picked up a leaf - it was twisted and barely singed. I had found a dead snake earlier under a tree and tossed it up with my boot, then suddenly glanced back involuntarily.

The forest was rustling all around us. A heavy, sullen, wary rustling. As if forewarning us about something, cautioning us.

A slight shiver ran down my spine: for the first time I thought that I had become

unreasonably involved in this affair.

Lunar Pain

The fugitive saw the moon so suddenly, that he shuddered. There it was right before his face: its dead rays streamed forth, drenching the earth in a cold radiance and it took away his breath. There upon the moon he spied two brothers. Cain had lifted his brother on a pitchfork and the brother was bleeding. Bleeding a cold lunar blood, which had been flowing many millennia. The fugitive saw Abel's face too: a mask of suffering, which had lasted many millennia. In any case, Abel had not sought salvation from his brother, he was merely suffering. Cain was suffering too and blood flowed from him also. Only now did the fugitive notice that Abel had grabbed his brother by the throat. Blood flowed from the throat, and this too had lasted millennia.

Once more he heard the distant clatter of hooves. His eyes strained: in the soupy fog galloped a detachment of horses. The horses had flared nostrils, they railed, but the horsemen mercilessly whipped them along and dug stirrups into their sides. Horses and riders were enveloped in a cloak of fog, hairy and unsteady like the bushes and trees. In front rode Bontevoglia, his arms raised and waving about like wings. A ray of light seemed to strike him, distinctly illuminating a hooked nose or beak. Wild screams emerged from hundreds of throats. Horses' hooves struck the earth hollowly and it groaned from the dull pain. Disturbed and agitated too, the trees swayed their crowns at the horsemen.

The fugitive ran his hand over his face. He sensed that it was dripping wet and where his heart was beating there smouldered an unextinguished fire of pain.

The Mother

'You had no right to leave home,' aunt said. 'Had you been at home they would not have dared attack Ostop.'

'He had been ailing of late. When the moon appeared he would walk about the yard. They must have spied him at such a moment...' There was pain in mother's voice.

I sat in the empty room, where my brother had recently lain in his coffin. There were still flowers strewn on the ground, a table still stood in the middle of the room and there was a smell of pine needles and wax.

'Nobody knew that he walked in his sleep,' aunt said. 'It was a well-kept secret.'

'It wouldn't have been difficult to catch him at it,' mother sighed. 'And we couldn't have defended him.'

'I paid them back,' I said, looking at my feet. 'I didn't let them get away with it, mamma. Demian and Danylo are no more...'

A hollow silence filled the room. It seemed as if they had left, leaving me on my own. I raised my eyes. Two women, very much alike, were looking at me and their gazes shone with a similar light.

'Your father wanted to pay them back too,' aunt said. 'But he couldn't manage to...'

Tears glistened in mother's eyes. She rocked sadly back and forth, and her lips trembled.

'He said your sister was calling him in the night. That she was calling for revenge...'

'The two of them called me too,' I said hollowly, no longer looking the two women in the eye. 'I continually see them beside some house. Halshka is carrying water and father is sitting on the porch. Halshka is carrying water and forever looking back...'

A heavy silence again settled upon my words, we seemed to turn to stone. Ostap's shadow crossed the room.

'What happened in the square?' mother asked.

I couldn't look them in the eye. I couldn't explain things simply and clearly, it would have required too many words. Telling them all about Vittorio and Bontevoglia, about my curse; a silent longing grabbed hold of me here in this melancholy room filled with half-wilted flowers and the strong smell of pine needles and wax. Ostap's shadow paused in the middle of the room - he turned toward me, pale, almost transparent.

'People talk about it so much!' aunt said.

'Where did you get your powers?' mother asked.

'I don't know, mamma,' I exhaled.

'You haven't sold your soul to the devil, have you?'

'No, mum,' I shook my head.

'There has been a lot of blood shed between us,' mother said. 'Will it continue this way until we all die?'

'It's hard for me, mamma!' I said almost in a whisper. 'My soul aches and I am afraid that I cannot become your defender. I need to pray, mamma...'

Mother nodded. I looked into her clear, elderly eyes. We seemed to understand one another.

'Can't you pray at home?'

I shook my head slightly.

'It's worth hiring more people to guard the place,' I said finally. 'We have to guard Ivan.'

'I'll take care of myself,' the young fellow lifted his head.

I smiled and a strange sorrow overwhelmed me.

'And what about you?' mother asked. 'Aren't you afraid?'

I shook my head.

'You've changed so much,' aunt said, thinking her own thoughts. 'I was frightened when I saw you... You must take care of yourself.'

I looked at them lovingly. A strange sense of grief took hold of me.

'I guess they've received a pretty good fright' I said, faking a matter-of-fact tone of voice. 'All the same we need to hire more guards without delay... Without delay!' I repeated, feeling blue waves of grief rolling over my heart.

Mother was looking at me and I could not stand her gaze. But then I could not explain, or rather tell them everything. Ostap's shadow again moved across the room, this time making its way toward the door. It stopped in the doorway and glanced back one more time.

'The wisest thing to do would be to make peace,' mother said, dropping her gaze. Her lips were trembling. 'They've lost fewer people on their side than ours, but I'm ready to forgive them. Because if this continues...'

This frightened me too. I looked at the wilted flowers on the floor, one of them crushed by a heavy boot. The trampled petals were practically pasted onto the floor; the crushed stem had been broken down into fibres.

'Things have gone too far,' aunt said. 'You cannot stop this... Blood is crying for revenge...'

My younger brother rose to his feet and his thin nostrils trembled. He was thinking something, but did not voice his thoughts. I understood him: the wrong had been done by us.

Mother wept. Large granular tears rolled down her immobile, stony face. Once more I looked into her clear elderly eyes.

'Do something, my dear son, do something!' she implored plaintively.

'Blood is crying for revenge,' aunt seemed to say to herself. 'Who knows if things can be halted now.'

Wiping her eyes, mother said: 'I would rather that you left us once more, you have brought them much too much grief. Return to Wallachia and when the dust settles, we'll let you know. My heart aches for you, my dear son.'

'I'll try to make peace with them,' I said, continuing to examine the trampled flower and the damp clay around it.

'Blood spilt for the honour of the family is not spilt in vain,' aunt said firmly. 'But we won't be able to stand up to them.'

'Are you going there on your own?' mother asked, watching me closely.

Ostap's shadow crossed the room again. It stopped beside the crushed flower, knelt and touched it with its fingertip.

I sat unable to move. The smell of pine needles and wax was becoming unbearable. Grief was engulfing me like a wind. It flowed through my eyes and filled the whole room. Outside the window hung a branch heavily laden with sour cherries. The red berries burned against the pale background of the sky and my eyes stung looking at them.

'God help you, my dear son,' said mother. 'Sometimes it seems to me...'

'You shouldn't assume anything,' I cut her off. 'I want to help. All of you and myself...'

Mother placed her hand on my knee, glanced at my younger brother, who dropped his head, then stood up and made his way toward the exit. He closed the door behind him and it slammed shut with an unexpected loudness. Mother looked at auntie, but she was leaving too. Only Ostap's shadow remained hovering near the crushed flower. My brother was touching it with the tip of his shoe.

Again the sound of the door closing reverberated through the room and I felt mother's burning hand against me.

'Tell me about it, son,' she said.

Tears gushed from my eyes. I looked at mother through a watery haze and her face floated before me, dear and compassionate. Great love flowed from her dark eyes and it was this which loosened my tongue. I began my account. My voice flowed like melancholy water and this water filled the house. As I spoke, I looked out the window. The sky was blue, without a single cloud. The cherries glistened like rubies and a dishevelled sparrow jumped about among the cherries. The cross of the window frame stood out black against the immaculate blue background of the sky. The sorrowful water of my words gurgled on and on. Occasionally I would stop to catch my breath and my gaze rested on the black cross. I imbibed a little of the blueness and the ruby redness. Once more I recovered my strength and the sad water began to gurgle again.

Mother sat opposite me without moving. Ostap's shadow loomed on one of the chairs. There was a smell of pine needles and wax, and I could hear a rattling exhalation – mother's breathing. She had become even thinner and darker, shaking her head sorrowfully, and two grey tears trembled on her lashes.

'Take care, my dear son,' she said remorsefully. 'You must take greater care than the rest of us...'

Toward a Truce

The family against whom we had rebelled was not hostile toward us, in fact old man Sokolsky was my godfather. While travelling through distant lands I had thought about them: the boys with whom I had grown up and their sister, now married, who had once really excited me. But all this was back there, in the impenetrable mist: it was I who had contributed most to the hostility. Which is why I had decided to visit them and resolve our

disagreements: there was no use crying over spilt milk.

Darkness had fallen when I set off. I was frightened by the moon suspended in the heavens. It was so cold and distant. As always, two brothers were locked in an eternal duel upon it, and I watched their struggle for a long time.

A heavy rock weighed down on my soul. I felt uneasy, something gnawed away at me, I even lost all desire to go there, because I wasn't sure whether it would end well. But I needed to go.

I made my way along the meadow, trying not to disturb the dogs. The dew glimmered silver underfoot. The fence, which divided the town into two halves, meandered like the body of a long and dead snake. The dogs bayed loudly, my boots were already wet with dew, and I figured that such heavy dew was a sign of fine weather to come.

Finding a large hole, I slid underneath to the other side. As I passed a partly-fenced yard, I chanced on some bad luck - two fierce dogs dashed out and charged at me, baying loudly. I did not want to raise an uproar: the dogs fell dead at my feet, their tongues still hanging out.

I continued on my way. The yellow moon blazed away, while the dogs barked even more loudly. It seemed they could sense the impending danger, as if a wolf had entered the city. I shuddered at the thought and quickened my step.

The gate to the Sokolsky household was locked and I walked past it, looking for the stile. My memory told me that it had to be on the north side: we had used it as boys. Although I located the stile, it proved to be too small for an adult to use. So I scraped away some earth with my bare hands and squeezed through it.

It was quiet all about me. The windows of several houses were burning brightly, servants still traipsed about the yard, so I decided to wait. Then I stole across to the storehouse. It was daubed with white clay and covered with shingles. The narrow windows shone with glass panes set in tin. The building itself stood on high foundations and I had to raise myself onto them to look into the window.

Old man Sokolsky was sitting on a bench, removing his boots, preparing for bed. I raised my hand and tapped softly on the pane. The old man shuddered, as if someone had struck him and, still holding one boot, came up to the window.

'Who's there?' he asked mutely.

I pressed my face against the pane. Placing my lips to a crack in the window, I said:

'It's your godson. I've come to talk...'

Terror spread across the old man's face. He screamed and jumped away from the window. Still holding onto the boot, he crashed through the door, and I understood that my plan was in vain. My peaceable intentions and disposition were all merely lunar pain.

I jumped down off the foundation ledge and backed away like a baited beast. Suddenly I wanted to scream, to frighten them with my yelling.

Crossing the yard, I imagined it burnt to a cinder. Flames licking at the buildings, everything illuminated by the light of a raging fire. People and animals, buildings and trees - everything was burning, turning to ashes.

But this was only a hallucination. The next moment I saw two of Sokolsky's sons rush out onto the porch. They were waving torches about and raising the alarm. Doors were creaking open everywhere, armed servants came rushing out. They lit torches, ran about and screamed.

I retreated further and further. Tears froze on my cheeks and I decided resolutely to cut myself free of the knot binding me. I was nothing here. I had only one surviving brother, the old man had two sons. But the die had already been cast, the boulders had begun to slip. I knew the laws of the mountains, for I had wandered through them many a time with Vittorio and Bontevoglia. Boulders dragged along with them everything that could move. The rock fall rushed down headlong with a loud rumble of thunder.

Suddenly an arrow whizzed past my ear. I smiled. It was strange that they weren't afraid of me. This was foolhardy - I could have burnt the household and the people to a cinder. The unleashed dogs were barking. People milled about with torches. "Like small children," I thought bitterly and pressed my back against the fence.

After leaving the yard, I stopped. The moon was shining. Two brothers were fighting upon it, their struggle as eternal as the passage between day and night.

Beyond the fence people were running about and shouting. Dogs were going mad and people had completely forgotten about the possible danger. They were merely hunters, inflamed by blind fire and therefore foolhardy. "Give them insight, Lord," I whispered. "Enlighten them with your righteous fire, awaken them and placate them!"

On this troubling cold night, when the moon above so unsettled me, when my sortie into enemy territory had ended so infamously, I yearned solitude once more. I knew they were expecting me at home, but I would arrive there only at dawn. I wanted to leave this circle, if only for a short time, to forget myself for a while. To collect my scattered thoughts and arrive at some decision.

The road before me shone white, deserted and liberally bathed in moonlight. The crickets chirred away, a broad silence swathed the entire world. The bushes and trees were asleep, the fields of wheat and feather-grass on either side of the road slumbered away and I dissolved into this silence like salt. And I wanted to return to the spot where I had recently found my unfortunate brother, I wanted to prostrate myself before the icons and pray.

"When all this is over," I thought, "I shall return to live in that deserted hut. I shall watch the rising of the sun and the moon, watch the herbage and grass grow. I shall listen to the chirping of the birds and the language of the leaves. I felt like bowing my head before the great silence of the forest and the sky, and to pray in whispers. I wanted to tread partly overgrown paths so that they would not become completely overgrown..."

I sat on a stump on the edge of the forest. My hands were on my knees, I was stiff in the moonlight. The White-Haired Pan had lost his severed head amid the heavens a long time ago and departed for other worlds in his search for it. This head migrated from one end of the sky to the other, seeking its master, just as he was seeking it.

The grass rustled nearby. A golden-eared adder raised its small black head. Moths circled around me and the adder's head was ablaze in the moonlight. The blue lights of glow-worms glimmered all around me; they would become moths the following night. To fly off and dust flowers with pollen, so that they would set a firm fruit in their inflorescence...

A great silence was descending upon me. A landrail was screaming somewhere far away, forgetting that it was time to sleep and from everywhere floated the warm fragrance of dried grass. Weeds and herbs hung their heads, heavy with fresh seed. The time would come and these heads would fall to pieces in fear of the screams of a distant solitary horned owl - and then the whole earth would be sown. I suddenly felt my heart whimpering: I loved this land and everything living upon it. Frail tears bedewed my cheeks and a warm hairy fatigue slowly slithered into my chest, like a golden-eared adder.

The Monk

'My peace was completely shattered,' the monk was saying. 'At night mysterious faces appeared before me - the faces of killers.'

I prayed for them and for myself, begging the Lord to lead me out of that bewitched circle, for I was not to blame for what was taking place.

I didn't even want to know what had happened to them: human bloodletting cannot be condoned. Woe to those who transgress the lofty commandment "Thou shalt not kill". I had had personal experience of this once before.

But he came to me again, the fellow with the exhausted face, whom I had met on the edge of the forest. Back then he had been dressed in simple clothes, but now he was dressed like an aristocrat. I understood: he was no simple bird, but then aristocrats were always like this. And I refused to see him. I yelled at him to go away, I became so overcome with rage and indignation that I almost struck him. He only glanced at me askance, saying nothing.

His face was truly exhausted. And he had weird eyes. I have never seen such eyes. I could not stand his gaze - everything turned to ice inside me and an unfathomable fear passed through my body. I kept yelling at him, berating and scolding him, but everything inside me suddenly went numb and I became silent, my mouth still open: I could no longer yell or be angry. I was under his spell. Then I fell to his feet and bedewed his boots with my tears. I implored him obeisantly to leave my deserted hut, to go away.

'Don't be afraid, father,' he said calmly, 'I will do you no harm.'

I stepped back from the doorway. He came inside and sat on a bench rudely constructed from sticks. I remained standing near the doorway, still unresolved to enter my own domicile. Then he threw me another glance and smiled. I plucked up the courage:

'Who are you, strange fellow?' I asked with trepidation in my voice.

He looked at me again with those weird eyes and I felt as if my heart was about to pop out of my chest, and I dropped my gaze.

'Who am I?' he asked in amazement. 'Do I know? Probably a pathless fellow like you...'

This was a strange word to use and I dared not question him further.

'Don't be afraid, father,' he repeated. 'I'll stay this night here with you and then I shall leave...'

He was sitting on the bench. A fire was burning in the fireplace and he pensively kept throwing logs onto it. Smoke curled across the ceiling and seeped out the door. I noticed a deep crease between the stranger's eyebrows.

'You seem a little sad, sir,' I remarked, having completely regained my composure. 'If you are striving for absolution, I can take confession from you.'

'No!' he said tersely, continuing to stare into the fire.

Then I left the hut, not wishing to be in his way. Outside, under the trees, I prayed ardently to the Lord. I said to Him: "Lord, why are you directing me onto this path once more? Are you testing me, or this fellow? If you are testing him, take him away from before my eyes, because my soul cannot stand him. I want to trust only in You, otherwise who knows if I have the strength for salvation?"

'I did not seek salvation in vain, sir,' the monk told the bailiff. 'I had many a sin in my heart. But I decided to repent and accepted to do penance. God's spirit entered into me in that deserted hut, sir. I lived peaceably and nicely in that forest, no one bothered me and I pestered no one. But the Lord's paths are difficult to predict, for everything was suddenly turned upside down...'

The moon was burning much too brightly in the heavens then. I got up and looked in the direction of my deserted hut. All was quiet there. I carefully made my way back and heard him snoring. Yes, the stranger was asleep. He had collapsed onto my bed, not caring whether I had somewhere to sleep, and was snoring.

I felt an utter emptiness in my chest. I saw his bared throat and an insane desire welled deep inside me. This would have crippled my life again, but back then I was boiling over with indignation. After all, the intruder had come along, pushed me out of my domicile, and was now stretched out in my bed like some aristocrat.

His throat stood out white before my eyes and I tried to forget where my knife was lying. "This is a new test for you," I heard a whisper behind my back. "Release yourself. You shall destroy a vile criminal and thus fulfill God's will."

Removing the pot from the fire, I stepped outside and began to eat my gruel. I ate for a long time, thoroughly chewing every mouthful, as if I was eating badly-cooked meat.

I thought everything over for a long time. I thought about the whispers: were they from the Almighty? Or perhaps this craving and desire of mine were of those selfsame devilish origins?

I returned to the refuge. But the stranger was no longer asleep. He was sitting up in my bed and looking intently and strangely. I became frightened. Who knows how it happened, but I again dropped to my knees before him and stretched out my hands. He burst out laughing. Hoarsely and sadly.

'Leave my domicile,' I implored him.

'Are evil thoughts visiting you, father?' he asked, without showing any respect for my advanced years.

I nodded.

'Afraid to live with people?'

'Yes,' I squeezed out.

'Why?'

'Tis not my will to say,' I said obediently. 'Leave my domicile, please.'

He glanced at me in such a way that I was almost pushed into the earth and said, slowly squeezing out the words:

'You will not be able to kill me! Do you hear that, father?'

I froze. My thoughts had become revealed to him through some unknown means. I fell at his feet, but with a swift blow of his boot he propelled me to the far wall.

'Perhaps we are being pursued by the same destiny, father?' he said tersely. 'For you, like me, are a pathless fellow.'

'I trust in the Lord,' I muttered.

He rose. Gave me one more glance and then stepped toward the doorway. I was pierced by a cold fire. In the doorway he stopped and turned around.

'Not easy to fool yourself, eh father?' he asked 'Or do you somehow manage?'

"May you be damned!" I said under my breath and crossed myself.

He left. But for the rest of the night I could not close my eyes. I was afraid he would return and then I would not be rejoicing. I fell to the floor and burst into tears. I begged for mercy, but such a deafening silence filled the room that bells began to toll in my head. I became scared of this silence and left the refuge a second time.

On the Road

'Hey, Vittorio,' I said, walking along the deserted road. 'Can you see how complicated everything is? I can't find a spot where I can be cosy, not even this one night. I must return again to the world of passion and pain.'

I walked across a field, the road shone in the moonlight, all around there was glimmering silver, everything was frozen in the light, seized by a great lethargy. Occasionally bats passed overhead and I heard the dry creak of their wings. As if the sands of night were sprinkling down upon me; the cold spilt silver, or actually tin, swamping my brain, and I too turned to tin on this road under the moon. I no longer felt exhausted, I wanted to keep walking forever.

I looked around. Vittorio was walking alongside me and to one side ran a fox. In this light its fur shimmered with silver sparks, its eyes shone red. The road and grass on either side of it

filled with a glow: the phosphorescence of rotting wood or marsh fairies. The fairies jumped all around me, and several of them settled onto Vittorio's outstretched palm. He was scrutinising them and his face showed surprise.

'I want to escape all this,' I said.

'Look,' Vittorio said. 'These are the lights you were seeking.'

'Who knows how this will all end when I return...!'

'These lights keep beckoning,' Vittorio said in reverie. 'You can't go against the force...'

'Strangely, I'm not drawn to go home. I can sense that I will have to start life anew.'

'Extinguish these lights,' Vittorio pleaded. 'They're burning my hand. Extinguish the moon - the earth doesn't need the moon, it needs only the sun...'

'But if I don't return, misfortune will be visited upon them.'

'Perhaps it already has,' Vittorio smiled mysteriously.

'Nothing has happened yet!' I shouted.

'Nights need the Earth, not the moon. The moon only dilutes the night, imitating day. It wakes murderers and the blissful.'

The fox was running behind us. It raised its muzzle and let out a shrill bark.

'I can't cut this knot,' I said.

'Each of us,' Vittorio was already whispering, 'secretly believes he is immortal. But everybody's time comes and then they think about the two brothers who belt each other up there on the moon. It's strange, for if you think about it, neither of them is to blame.'

'I don't want to go there, but I can't not go,' I said, quickening my step.

The road took me further and further ahead. It was white and flooded in moonlight. A road paved with rotted wood, which glowed no less brightly than the moon.

The Sorcerer

'I saw him when he knocked on the old man's window,' the sorcerer said. 'I became quite frightened then...'

Fear took hold of me when I spied him at the window. I thought he was planning to harm the old man. Something had to be done and I dashed to far side of the storehouse and knocked. The face of the youngest Sokolsky appeared in the window.

I entered the house and at that moment we heard the old man's screams. He raced out into the hallway, his face a mess - his eyes were bulging and froth covered his lips.

'He's here, he's here!' the old fellow yelled frantically.

'Who's here?' the youngest Sokolsky failed to understand anything.

'The killer of your excellency's brothers,' I said.

'You saw him too?' the old man asked, short of breath. 'I thought I might have imagined it.'

I nodded. The entire house was already awake. The youngest Sokolsky went into such a rage, that it surprised me. With his brother he lit some torches and ordered the servants to hurry and arm themselves.

It was all a little funny, watching their ardour – for what were their weapons against someone with superhuman powers. But they all seemed to be raging mad. They dashed out through the door: the yard was empty and peaceful. The old man could still not regain his senses. He stood on the porch, while his sons and servants rummaged about in every corner, and his lower jaw was trembling. The dogs were let loose and I too joined in this uproar.

The youngest Sokolsky seemed to completely lose his mind. He was firing arrows in all directions. There was no need for this, as the magician was nowhere in sight. And he had obviously not come to kill the Sokolskys. I told the old man this.

`What did he want?' the old man asked coldly.
I shrugged. Obviously he had wanted something.
At this moment the youngest Sokolsky came up to us.
`Find him?' the old man asked.
`It's as if he vanished into thin air!'
`He couldn't have flown over the fence, could he?'
This made me laugh.
`See,' the youngest Sokolsky said irascibly. `He's not such a frightening devil!'
`He's my godson,' the old man told me, wiping the soot from the torch off his forehead. `He wouldn't have raised a finger against me...'
"The devil isn't that frightening, after all!" I thought and smiled.
A large full moon hung over the yard. I gazed at the moon and slowly my head cleared.
`And what are your thoughts about this?' the old man turned to me. `You must know more than us.'
My face blushed - the old man was acknowledging my powers. I glanced at the moon once more - it hung in the middle of the sky, bright and content.
`I need to go into a trance,' I said, feigning diffidence, although I had long since known what I would tell them.
`You do that!' the old man agreed. `So that we don't come to grief again.'
I grabbed a torch from one of the servants and made my way across the yard. The yellow flame swayed above my head and this made my shadow jump about monstrously around my feet.
I stopped in the middle of the yard, drove the torch into the ground and stood to attention, facing the moon. I knew they had all assembled on the porch and were watching me. And I decided to show off in front of them.
Slowly my hips began to rock, I made a few small jumps and then launched into a dance. I began to move around the torch: it seemed to me as if it had grown into a large fiery flower - a fire in the middle of the heavens which consumed everything and everyone. It was like the moon, only not as cold - for this was real fire.
I grabbed the torch and swayed back and forth, as if threatening the heavens and the moon. Sparks fell all about me, glowing in the grass like diamonds. Then I hurled the torch to the ground and with a wild scream, began to trample it. Sparks scattered from under my feet in sprays and I really got carried away. A merry rage shook my body, and this was passed on to the gullible open-mouthed crowd assembled on the porch.
The final sparks died down in the grass, I fell to my knees and turned to face those standing stock-still on the porch. The torches burned mutely, and the moon burned like a torch too. I bowed to the ground several times and pressed my cheek against the grass, feeling its damp coolness. After lying there for a short time, I rose decisively to my feet. Slowly I made my way toward those curious eyes and fire burned in my gaze.
`Your excellency is correct,' I said, pointing a finger at the youngest Sokolsky. `It is truly so: the devil is not as frightening as he is made out to be! That magician has great powers, but like everything in this world, he has his limits. I swear by the heavens,' I raised my arms and shook them, `he has power over each of us, but, listen all of you!' I yelled so hard, I thought my voice would break, `he is powerless in the face of a crowd!'
A many-voiced hubbub drowned out my words, and I felt strong arms lifting me and throwing me into the air. The rush of pride which I felt at that moment shook the earth.

On the Road

I am walking along a deserted road, the silver grey fox is running behind me like a dog, and the moon is suspended above my head. The crickets are chirring, the heavy serenity of slumbering fields exhales into my face. I savour their conversation - it placates the anxiety and instils peace into my soul, which I have long since sought. This was true peace: pacing along the road of my homeland, sensing the spirit of my native land and tasting and smelling the slumbering fields. The forest rustled in the distance, on such nights it too was swathed in a strange magic and whispered about peace too. Peace was exactly a night like this. Let me have the heavens above my head any day, rather than the roof of my own home. Only the moon worried me, it was like a cataract on the large eye of the sky. Upon it two brothers were entwined in a fierce and unwise struggle. It was as if a two-edged sword had fallen into the night. Spears of cold moonlight above the peaceful fields woke the bats and crickets. From the forest came the loud call of a horned owl. The echo resounds in my conscience with a stinging pain... But I truly want peace. I even drive away the fox, as people drive off home dogs who stubbornly follow their master - I am driving away memories about my true sin. I pick up a clod of earth and toss it at the fox. It stops. It illuminates me with its red gaze and I lean over to pick up a second clod... The fox backs off. It bares its cold white teeth and I toss a third clod at it. Then it moves off the road into the thick grass. I continue on my way, attempting to perceive the harmony of the night and the herbage, but the fox does not leave me. It continues to run alongside the road, hiding in the grass. Then I bend down to pick up another clod. But suddenly I draw my hand back: instead of a clod my fingers have come across a cold slippery body. It is a toad, also woken by this moon. I am filled with horror. I run off for all I am worth, my heart beats madly in my chest, and the fox dashes after me in the roadside grass. It has red eyes and I sense that it will be pursuing me forever.

The Fugitive

The morning brought the fugitive respite: he had managed to rest. He came out of the house and saw a large morning sun lying on the horizon. The ground was covered in a light frost and everything glistened with a thousand flashes. The entire space was flickering and shining: there were silver trees, silver bushes and a silver earth.

Slowly he made his way across the silver earth and his bare feet left behind black, yellow and green tracks. Black - where there had been earth, yellow - on the leaves, and green on the grass.

He walked without looking back. He did not sense that anyone was chasing him, but he could not see the white-walled house and yard up ahead, where his family had assembled. There was only the silver earth, an empty space without wind or birds and a red sun burning upon a bright blue sky.

During this night he had changed. His exhausted face was rimmed with a short beard and locks of grey silvered his head. His eyes were sunken, but they had a soft and warm look about them. He did not feel that he was stepping on frost - his feet no longer felt the cold. His chest rose freely - the fugitive was breathing peacefully and deeply.

From time to time he paused, as if contemplating which way to go, and again wove a tangle of colourful tracks behind him. Against the background of the white hills, the flood of light pouring in from everywhere made his figure seemed to dissolve among these myriad cold sparks. One of his hands kept clenching into a fist, then opening up, while the other hung limply at his side.

He stopped beside a tree, which had yet to shed several leaves. One of the leaves broke free

and fell at his feet in a sweeping circle. It shone with an immaculate yellowishness - a tear crept out of the fugitive's eye, but immediately froze. For the first time he turned around, but not to look at his tracks. He wanted to see the sun. It was not yet blinding, still round and not very hot.

The fugitive trudged along slowly. He made his way up a steep hill and found it difficult to breathe. Stopping, he rested for a long time. The colourful tangle of tracks stretched up the hill in a meandering ribbon.

Again he continued on his way and again the glittering world rocked about him. Only at the top of the hill did he stop a second time. In all directions stretched a strangely desolate space. Covered in frost, it was aflame, changing and shimmering.

The fugitive stood stock-still. The frozen tear on his cheek thawed and rolled down to the corner of his lips. A great silence lulled the fugitive, a great peace filled his soul. Kindness and peace shone in his eyes, and all around him the earth shone coldly and majestically...

Again there was a distant thud of horses' hooves. The fugitive turned around sharply, but the landscape was deserted. A grimace contorted his face and he began to hurriedly make his way up an even higher hill. On that hill the mist had lifted, which had been covering the hilltop, and again he saw before him the white-walled house, the well and the yard. It was still early in the morning, so there wasn't a soul in the yard - only a thin blue ribbon weaved its way up and suddenly a small round window flashed at him with a sharp retort.

The Sorcerer

We marched on them that very night, having assembled a large crowd, not all of whom were very virtuous. There was a feeling of pillage and robbery in the air - half of our gang would have marched into fire for money.

We made our way to the meadow and easily crossed over into the enemy's half of town. Orders were not to raise a din and the eager dogs were to be choked with nooses. We sensed an excitement, even myself, for after that divining with the torch, certainty had cloaked me and I began to believe my own lies.

We reached the enemy fortress in silence. We were not expecting an attack here: even though the gates were closed, the guards were asleep. After we posted sentries all around, several of our bravest crawled over the fence. None of the guards let out a peep, we opened the gates and entered the yard noiselessly.

We surrounded the yard and immediately began to smash windows in the storehouse. Glass crashed with a tinkle, someone had already set fire to the living quarters, so as to smoke them out like rats.

There was a flurry of activity inside the house. I froze, powerless to contain my racing heartbeat: the meeting with the magician prophesied no good. The servants called out to those inside to come out. The building was ablaze, but still no one emerged. The old man ordered the door to be broken down.

Sparks fell all around and the flames crackled away. The servants' quarters were already burning, frantic screams came from inside - our butchers were doing their work. A wicked joy consumed me. Let them fight each other, these aristocrats, I thought, the less of them there are on this earth, the better!

The door to the storehouse was strong and we broke it down only after the whole roof was ablaze. Our desperate lads raced inside and began to drag chattels out. Everyone was dashing about, consumed with a wild passion to destroy. At last one of the Stankos was thrown out of the fire. He was waving a sword about, but several boys dashed up to him. He tottered, struck

down by a sledgehammer, and fell to the ground - this was some blood relative of theirs.

Then we saw the old woman. She stepped out onto the porch and stopped, proud and unruffled. Her grey hair was dishevelled and her soot-covered face courageous and majestic. Immediately several servants grabbed her by the arms and dragged her off to old Sokolsky.

The fellow stood in the middle of the yard, indifferently watching this carnage. The old woman was thrown at his feet and she spat out a clot of blood.

'Be you damned!' she shouted and Sokolsky struck her full force with his boot.'

'Where are the valuables?' he croaked.

'I would rather be impaled than tell you that, you murderer!' the old woman yelled fearlessly.

'The Lord shall judge who is right, and who is to blame,' Sokolsky said. 'But your nest has already been reduced to ashes. No amount of devilish tricks have helped you any. I swore that I would set you to the winds and the Lord has helped me in this. So where are the valuables?'

The old woman spat again. Bloody spittle fell onto the old man's boot and he went wild. He began to flog the old woman along her whole length with his whip, and she rolled about on the ground, but did not scream. Several servants gathered around and guffawed. Finally the old woman shuddered and went limp.

'Water!' Sokolsky ordered.

The servants raced off to get some water, but at this moment an arrow whistled through the air and became embedded in the old man's chest. He grabbed at it with both hands, but it had entered much too deeply. Sokolsky tottered and his eyes opened wide.

Everyone forgot about the old woman and dashed off to find the criminal. In fact the fellow did not take flight. It was the youngest Stanko, a lad of fourteen or so. He played the brave one, but when they began to beat him, he screamed terribly. One of the Sokolsky brothers brandished his sword and lay the lad out at his feet...

The yard was completely ablaze by this time. A bucket of water was thrown over the old woman and she began to stir.

'Where are the valuables?' the youngest Sokolsky knelt down beside her.

The old woman threw him a cloudy stare and from her chest emerged a rattle which sounded like a chortle. The youngest Sokolsky struck her with a stick and she became silent forever.

'That was a waste,' his brother said. 'You should have poured some hot coals down her front...'

We had even forgotten about the sorcerer. In our haste and the general hubbub no one had even stopped to think about his power and his revenge. I alone kept glancing about and my consternation gave me no peace. He was not here in the fortress and it was this which most alarmed me.

The dogs were baying in the town, people had already been wakened, but they were afraid to come to the fortress. We were safe, and apart from that a part of our gang had already set off to loot and burn the town. Fires were flaring up and I decided it would be worth my while to leave.

At this moment a wind started up. Everyone suddenly stood still in their tracks. A cold icy breeze breathed upon the fire and the flames seemed to die down to the blackened wood. This made it suddenly become dark, while the moonlight became so strong, that in its light we all appeared like corpses. This was when we spied the sorcerer. He stood on a tower, bathed in an eerie light and we all raced off as fast as our feet would take us.

The Blaze

Suddenly I saw a red glow flare up on the horizon. The clouds in the sky turned pink and I grew numb, stunned by a terrifying conjecture.

I was returning to my home town. A dull pain gripped my chest and I began to run. But at that moment I stopped, seized by a fit of asthma. I stood on a deserted road at night and breathed heavily. Bats leaving the city flew overhead in a cloud. I saw their glistening red eyes, heard their squeaks and the rustle of their wings.

The fox was no longer beside me. I continued walking: space and silence, freedom and peace were left behind. I would no longer return to them. Let the night live on there, let the foxes run: I could no longer live in such a world. Despair tore at my chest, bad premonitions again drove me on, and I ran, gasping for air. Weeping, I slowly became like a taught bowstring.

People were fleeing the town. They were dragging along their meagre possessions and their faces were filled with fear. The moon and the flames illuminated everything so well that you could see the glistening whites of people's eyes.

'Was it the Tatars?' I asked, stopping one of the refugees.

'What Tatars in hell's name?!' he said showing no regard for my aristocratic clothes. 'It's our own people locked in battle...'

'What's happened there?' I grabbed him by the shoulders. But he broke free.

'Leave me alone, sir!' he yelled. 'If you're so interested, go take a look for yourself!'

'The aristocrats have their skirmishes and we suffer,' added some tired fellow, as he passed by.

'Where are you all off to?' I called out in despair.

But no one listened to me. People kept coming and coming. The moon and the blaze made their figures look horrific. They dragged bundles on their shoulders or rolled small carts before them, others rode on horseback or on carts. All this floated past me, like a slow swollen river, and I suddenly felt strangely restless.

Then I called out again, wanting to stop them. I yelled that I would avenge their misfortune, their violation and tears. But my words were drowned out by the hubbub and noise. No one listened to me and I realized: a river in flood will not stop its waves, until it had swept away everything which had agitated it.

I entered through the open gates. People kept streaming past me - the blaze had engulfed everything, the entire town, it seemed. It was becoming hot. I heard the fire crackling, the firestorm breathed fiercely in my face and I was consumed by utter despair. I hurried to our home. Grey figures were running about here - I hastily made my way up the watchtower.

The entire yard was ablaze. Bodies were strewn about on the grass and I seemed to have acquired a special ability to see. I saw my dead mother and my brother. My aunt lay near the porch, and a little further away was my cousin. I saw old Sokolsky's body and our dead servants. The youngest Sokolsky stood in the middle of the yard, giving orders to several ruffians.

Then my blood began to boil. I strained - a violent wind rose and everything began anew. My body became like a sword, a cold fire flashed in my eyes; people who were running about the yard bathed in red flames suddenly stopped in their tracks, as if struck down dead, and their horses were transformed into black barrels. I saw before me the face of one of the Sokolskys, then another one - they sailed at me with amazing speed. Their mouths opened in deathly horror, a cold gust rushed across the yard, extinguishing the flames and I became completely immobile, rising higher and higher on a familiar wave. The faces of the ruffians sailed at me from everywhere, I kept them in my gaze for a moment and then let them go -

they tumbled down, like clay falling from a cliff. My eyes poured forth molten metal, and my soul was illuminated by a pale blue glow. I seemed to be suspended in the air above the ruins of my home, where the figures of the attackers were frozen in chimeric poses. The fire had almost died down, and again I saw the face of my dear mother, illuminated by a red glow; my pain became unbearable. Yes, this funeral feast is very bloody, mother, very fiery and it's impossible to stop it. An enormous red man in golden armour and with flowing red hair was walking across the yard. It wasn't me who visited this hurricane on our town, mother, this is all our work. The red man stopped in the middle of the yard, turned his face in my direction and looked without blinking. Perhaps we are not to blame, mother, but it happened that way. I am doing what your son must do. The red man knelt beside my mother, bent over her and looked into her eyes. Then he got to his feet abruptly and his hair scintillated even more brightly - the household was ablaze.

My heart thumped in my chest. Terror reigned supreme all about me. White as fire or moonlight. A multitude of faces danced all around, with countless bulging eyes. One, two, three - like white masks, flying off to scare the bats; white dough from which nothing else will ever be baked. Coals were burning in that dough, black mouths were hollering and the screams were flying up and disappearing in the heavens.

I was emptying like a pitcher, from which the water had been poured out, feeling like a hollowed-out trunk from which a swarm of bees had left, taking all the honey with them. Both the Sokolskys lay dead, their servants spread out around them. Only a small group kept dashing about the yard in fright. But a moment later these too fell down one after another...

Only after I saw the yard empty did I come down to earth. I walked across the trampled grass littered with charred logs and found it difficult to walk. I felt I couldn't stand this pressure any more, that I too would fall among these bodies and forever close my pained eyes. But I kept going. I wanted to pay my last respects to those who had been the closest to me on this earth and whom I had failed to save.

Mother was looking wide-eyed somewhere into the heavens and her face was red from the flames. "Mother," I whispered, dropping to my knees, "how did this happen, mother? It's my fault, I didn't protect you!"

But mother could not answer me. I took her head in my hands and pressed it to my bosom. Tears rained down from my eyes.

'Mother,' I said. 'The Lord is my witness, I never wanted this to happen!'

Mother was cold and I had no right to disturb her. Carefully I laid her out on the grass and covered her eyelids.

A fox was sitting nearby, howling like a dog. Who knows, maybe it was a dog, it really didn't matter to me anymore. I wanted to howl, begging the heavens for forgiveness.

With great difficulty I rose to my feet and came up to my second brother-in-law. He was lying slain by a sword, but his face was clean and untouched. I covered his eyes too.

There were no longer any tears in my eyes, only exhaustion. I got up and, shuffling my feet like logs, wandered off to take a look at the baby. He lay with his head set at a strange angle and a red puddle glistened damply beside him. His eyes were closed and his hands were clenched around a bow.

'You fought well, my dear ones,' I whispered. 'But I was too late...'

Fire crackled all around me and my face became much too dry from the flames. I felt like a hollow old tree which had already agreed to die. The fox kept following me and, grabbing a charred log, I tossed it at the fox. The log sailed past its head, but failed to scare the fox away. It looked at me with a fierce red gaze and barked.

And I imagined that from the darkness of night, from that dishevelled darkness which was marking time there above me, a bat suddenly swooped down and fell on my head. I grabbed

at it with both my hands, tearing out tufts of hair, screaming and weeping. I tore it and myself to shreds, howling at the fire and at the pain which tormented my wretched body. I tore at my clothing, my eyes became hot and empty, my lips cracked open, red streams of sweat and blood dribbled down my forehead and my fists shook powerlessly above my head, threatening the heavens or pleading for mercy.

The fox continued to bark at my side, at this moment our house began to creak and collapse, sending a horrifying shower of sparks into the sky. A fiery rain fell upon the earth and I somewhat regained my senses. The clothes on my aunt and brother had caught fire and I set about saving them. I carried them to the middle of the yard, extinguishing the flames with my bare hands, feeling neither the pain nor the heat. I only clenched my burnt fists and then shook them again.

And then that miracle of miracles happened. Slowly the moon began to fall and settled in our yard. The brothers upon it were engaged in a battle to the death. They jumped off the moon, which was smouldering amid the yard like a giant cauldron, and began to roll about on the trampled, burnt grass. They hit and tore one another, becoming engulfed in sparks, and began to burn like two torches, but continued fighting.

My screams were suspended like a steel thread incapable of becoming any finer. And I tossed the burnt log again, this time at those insane brothers. It flew through the air, tracing a fiery arc, and fell upon the fox which had raised its muzzle into the air and was howling mournfully. A high blue flame shot up and began to dance about: the fox burned before my eyes, as if it was painted on paper.

The Fugitive

He seemed to regain his senses. Looking about him with a dull gaze, he strained to recall where he was. However, his head was empty and his eyes ached - the fugitive could recall nothing.

Then he looked about. Sullen grey walls, a small barred window up above... He failed to understand how he had ended up here and what this was all around him. Once more he strained his memory: faces, a whining or whispering, flames; beside him sat a semi-transparent shadow with overly long arms and the face of a horned owl; autumn was strewing wet yellow leaves through a smashed window - all this lived in the depths of his brain, as if chimerically removed from this world... The smashed window of the refuge, rain forever drizzling; he was lying on the clay floor, dry leaves were rustling about him, a dying fire was glowing nearby, the clatter of horses hooves was growing louder and louder: they were probably pursuing him. Silent riders were furiously whipping their horses, there were many of them, the whole space was sown with these horsemen. At the head of them rode four, all with broad faces and red hair, and they were led by a big-handed black fellow. He had an owl's mask for a face and was calling out despondently like an owl.

"A little bit more and they will catch me," the fugitive thought. "I have no more strength left to flee!"

Before him stretched a narrow steep road and he was making his way along it with effort. His head was spinning, his feet were weak, but he kept on walking despite the steep slope.

Fields spread out on both sides. The hoarfrost had already melted and everything about him was grey and damp. Here and there stood empty heads of grain, but there were far more weeds and grass.

In the small depressions where the sun did not reach there were still blue patches of hoarfrost and when he crossed them the grass crunched underfoot.

The path became very steep and he now moved along on all fours. At times he stopped to rest: the sky then became covered in stars for him. He waited for the stars to disappear, at times he would rest on a rock and look down into the valley. He could see the horsemen now, shimmering in the distance like dolls. Mounted on rats rather than horses, and the fugitive found it strange that the earth resounded so loudly beneath the rats' paws.

Then he clambered again up the steep slope. Gravel slipped from under his feet and rolled down, dragging down other stones. His bare feet became bloodied, but he had long since stopped feeling the pain. He bit on his lips and kept climbing, grabbing onto sparse tussocks of weed.

The fugitive's face was covered in sweat and dust. His mouth was open wide, his eyes agog. His knees were oozing lymph, but he kept crawling up. From time to time he would collapse exhaustedly upon the earth to catch his breath. He figured that no horseman would be able to ascend such a steep slope, but he was afraid lest he was late. A rattle played in his lungs and the sun had settled onto the back of his neck, like a child upon its father's neck, tenderly urging him on with a small whip.

He raised his head: there was not much left to go. There it was, his goal - a house glowing with white walls and thatched with fresh straw. A breakfast was laid out on the verdant-green grass beside the house. At the gates stood his parents, brothers, sister and aunt - all were looking silently in his direction. A saw and an axe lay on the ground in the yard, there were sawn and unsawn logs, and near the shed were neat piles of freshly-split yellow billets laid out in several rows. He could already smell the fragrance of milk coming from the yard and the white cow was looking in his direction too. There was also a smell of freshly-cooked polenta, of sawdust and pinewood. He could smell bread too, for a loaf lay cut up on the white linen: they should have all sat down to the meal long ago. But they stood at the gate and watched, their faces tense with anticipation and with no hint of a smile, although their gazes were filled with compassion.

Having no more strength left to clamber up the slope, he fell onto his stomach and kept crawling. Somewhere far-far behind him raced the enraged pursuit party, their hooves sounding like the clatter of wooden heels. Skylarks tinkled away up above and a tall woman in a nearby field calmly tied her last sheaf of wheat.

The Sorcerer

'Yes, I saw everything,' the sorcerer said pensively. 'I was lucky to have remained alive amid that turmoil. I suffered so much, that I still haven't come to my senses. I've realized what a great scourge arrogance is. But then... then I crawled deep into a dog's kennel, and this saved me from his horrifying arrows.'

'Were they real arrows?' the bailiff asked.

'It was a wind. A wind which killed in a flash. Oh, he was a true magician...!'

'I covered my head with my hands and saw nothing of what was happening in the yard. I heard only the crackle of flames and people's horrifying screams. The terror melted me into a clod and I was ready to lay there immobile forever, rather than peek outside. Finally, I lost consciousness and when I came to, everything was quiet. It was hot inside the kennel and I crawled out. A blaze was burning all around me, even the sky seemed to be in flames. I lay open-mouthed and breathed heavily: I was choking with asthma, but it was this which had brought me to my senses.'

'When I rose to my feet, I saw him. He was walking about the yard and had such a frantic look that I became even more frightened.'

`He failed to notice me, being too preoccupied, and I said several invocations under my breath to direct his attention away from me. He was holding a spade and looking about, as if seeking an appropriate spot, and then began to dig. Everything began to spin before my eyes, so I lay down. Red circles glimmered above my head, sparks rained down everywhere, and I crawled away a little so my clothes would not catch alight.

`Finally I found a safe spot and looked back to where the magician was digging. He was already up to his knees in the hole; at first I couldn't make out what he was doing. I lay with my eyes closed and rested.

`Nearby I spotted a barrel and rejoiced that it might contain water. I crawled off toward it. In fact it was filled with a rusty-coloured liquid. I dipped my head into it, and although the water was warm and foul smelling, it made me feel better.

`However, I couldn't drink the water. I sat with my back against the barrel and tried to survey the scene in greater detail. The magician was already up to his groin in the hole, all around bodies lay in disarray, incapable of being identified. Some of them had been burned quite badly. All the buildings in the household were burning brightly. The blaze must have spread to the town, for I could see flames beyond the fortress too.

`The surface of the barrel was cold and this made me feel better. My face was drying very quickly, so I dipped my head once more into the rusty-coloured liquid. I almost vomited from the stench, but felt better.

`Meanwhile the magician continued digging. Earth flew from his spade with such force that sand fell near me. He was up to his waist in the ground and for a moment it seemed to me that he wanted to bury himself alive. Or perhaps he was saving himself from the oppressive heat, which was turning everything to ash?

`It was creepy watching him dig. True, he did stop several times, but only to toss a clod of earth. He was throwing them in the same direction, so I assumed he was hallucinating.

`The place was deserted, I even thought that he had gone insane. He was up to his chest in the hole when the earth stopped flying out. For a moment he disappeared and I thought that perhaps he was unearthing or burying their family treasures. I gathered my last strength and crawled behind the barrel, so he wouldn't accidentally notice me.

`But I was wrong. Several minutes later (he must have been resting in the coolness), he jumped out of the hole, and a moment later was carrying a dead body there. It was the old woman, I think. The grey hair touched the earth and the head was thrown back. The magician carefully placed his mother on the ground and again went off into the depths of the yard.

`He brought his brothers and cousins to the hole too, including the young fellow who had shot old Sokolsky. Then he brought another woman, whom I hadn't noticed before and laid her out carefully beside the hole too.

`Only now did I realize what he was doing. There was really no point in my staying there. I had already regained my senses, and appearing before the magician at such a time would have been dangerous. I crawled off to where I had seen the gate before, however the household was encircled by a tight wall of flame.

`At this moment the tower where they must have stored their gunpowder, blew up. Enormous logs engulfed in flames shot into the air, and I crawled back in fright.

`The magician had already placed his kin in the grave and looked in the direction of the explosion. His face was red and exhausted. He stood like that for a long time, as if frozen and meanwhile I was afraid to move an inch.

`Then he grabbed his spade and began to fill in the grave. His movements were slow and tired, he barely managed to slide the spade. Once more I dipped my face in the rusty water, for the heat was unbearable.

It was then that he noticed me.

'Eh, you!' he yelled and I was amazed at how gentle his voice was.

My first impulse was to run. But I would not have gotten far. Then I decided to lie - we were not acquainted. I staggered off toward him. He had already filled the grave and stood leaning against his spade.

'Who are you?' he asked.

'Your lordship's servant,' I said.

Flames were seething all around us. My face dried quickly, as if covered in a scab.

'What's your name?' the magician asked, continuing to look at me with the same tenderness.

I saw him from up close for the first time. I was impressed by the strange force which flowed from his whole being. And I realized how useless and foolish I had been, daring to resist him. I really was only worthy of being his servant.

'My name is Petro,' I whispered.

'You will help me, Petro,' he ordered. 'I want to find a cross.'

'A cross?' I asked in astonishment.

'Of course. It is not good to leave the grave as it is. Besides,' he looked somewhere into the heavens, where the blaze was seething and crackling away, 'I need to bury my enemies.'

'What for?' I breathed out in amazement.

'That is the custom. Bodies remain on the battlefield only if both armies perish.'

He said this in a level, dignified voice, in which I failed to notice even a hint of bitterness.

I looked about the yard and noticed a cross. Two beams nailed together were burning in the grass with a bright golden flame. I pointed this out to the magician. He understood me. For a moment or so he stood watching the flames.

'All right,' he said. 'Is there any water in that barrel?'

'Just a tiny bit,' I replied.

'You can have it,' he said and I suddenly felt a gust of cold wind. The flames on the beams were immediately extinguished. The magician came up to the glowing cross, threw it over onto the other side. He must have burned himself, for he pressed his hands against the earth.

I sensed a strange power in this man. And what was strangest, I wanted to obey him. I dashed off to the barrel and tried to roll it over to the glowing cross. But I didn't have the strength and so I dipped my head into the water once more.

Meanwhile the magician wrapped the end of the cross in a rag and was dragging it over to the grave. We raised the cross together, and it began to smoke, glimmering with golden embers and becoming swathed in blue smoke.

The magician once again grabbed his spade.

'There should be another one somewhere nearby,' he mumbled, and I saw another half-burnt spade in the grass. I lowered the handle into the barrel and the wood hissed, issuing a wisp of sickening steam.

We dug another grave. In any case I was beholden to do so, for the grave was being dug for those on whose side I had been. The earth was cool and after digging a little I greedily fell down upon it, burying my face in its soft dampness. The magician stood above me and waited.

'It really is hot,' he said in a tired voice, 'but we have to finish our work...'

Each time I didn't want to get up, feeling that my face was becoming covered in a burning scab. All the same, whipped along by that level-headed, strangely gentle voice, I rose to my feet and continued to toil.

'We won't need a cross for them,' the magician said, tossing earth over his shoulder.

At this moment the cross on the grave of his kin burst into flame. It burned with a bright flame and we stopped, gazing at the high, seemingly sacred fire.

He did not extinguish the cross. He sighed and set about digging in greater earnest.

Then we brought over everyone lying nearby. We laid old Sokolsky and both his sons into the ground, their servants and ours were also placed into the grave.

We covered the grave with earth. The cross was still burning. Then the magician fell to his knees, I did likewise beside him, and we began to fervently whisper the words of a prayer. We prayed earnestly and sincerely. And I felt at this moment that it was not without reason that I had associated with this fellow - my soul was being cleansed of great filth.

Finale

In the fall of 1592 the elder from Bar, Bukhnovetsky, had a conversation with the captain of his company. On that occasion bailiff Kunatovsky paid them a visit.

They sat in a spacious room hung with carpets and conducted an unhurried conversation. Actually, it was mostly the captain who spoke.

'We found him in the refuge,' he said. 'He was barely breathing, the soldiers were afraid to venture inside, so I was forced to.'

The captain paused to give his words greater impact. His face became dignified and smug.

'That was very risky!' the elder noted.

'Of course!' the captain enjoined animatedly. 'I took quite a risk. Considering what he had done in that unfortunate small town...'

'I've examined the ruins,' the bailiff said. 'The city was burned to the ground. The inhabitants all left during the blaze and scattered throughout the land. I didn't find anyone there, except for one of Lord Sokolsky's subjects.'

'I entered the refuge,' the captain interjected, 'and there he was, lying on the floor whispering something. I'm no coward,' the captain boasted, 'but I was consumed with fear. To be on the safe side, I struck him hard with my lance. He didn't have time to wag a finger, before he lost consciousness. That's how we took him.'

'That subject of Lord Sokolsky told me almost everything,' the bailiff said. 'I recorded his testimony and I can present it before the court. And there is another witness.'

'Who?'

'Some hermit who lived in the forest and prayed. He sought me out himself...'

'All right, and how's our man?'

'He's been securely put away,' said the captain. 'There's no possibility of entering his cell. Obviously in deference to that strange power of his.'

'Of course,' the elder agreed. 'Did he really possess this power?'

'Unfortunately, yes,' the bailiff and captain said in unison.

'He's a very dangerous man,' the captain added.

'Gave everyone a good fright,' the bailiff continued.

'He won't be leaving prison, that's for sure,' noted the captain. 'That's probably the only way we can hold him.'

'We should send a messenger to his royal highness,' the bailiff said.

'There's no need for that,' the captain screwed up his face. 'After all, that's what we've been appointed here for...'

'Of course,' said the elder. 'As bailiff you will lodge your testimony and the court will enter the story into the city's books.'

