

ROSE WINE

Vasyl Symonenko: A Brief Biography

Vasyl Symonenko was born on 8 January 1935 in the village of Biyivtsi, Lubny District, Poltava Province into the family of a collective farmer.

His mother, Hanna Fedorivna Shcherban, worked on the collective farm from the day of its inception until the autumn of 1957. His father, Andriy Leontovych Symonenko, a soldier, abandoned the family before young Vasyl was a year old.

During the years of temporary occupation by the Germans the young Symonenko lived with his mother on occupied territory. He was 6-7 years old then.

In 1942 he started grade one at Biyivtsi Primary School. After finishing four grades at this school, he studied for a year at the Yenkiivtsi Seven-Grade School, and then transferred to the Tarandyntsi Middle School, from which he matriculated in the summer of 1952 with a gold medal. At this school he took part in the voluntary Association for Assistance to the Army, Navy and Air Force, and also participated in the sporting, mathematical and literary circles. While at school he wanted to be a war correspondent.

In 1952 he was accepted into the faculty of journalism at the Kyiv State University, from which he graduated in July 1957. From 1957 he worked in the editorial department of the newspaper *Cherkas'ka Pravda* in the culture department.

He married Liudmyla Pivtoradnia in the spring of 1957, and in 1958 she bore him a son, Oles. His wife worked as a controller at a chemical plant and his mother lived with them.

In 1960 he became a department head at the newspaper *Molod' Cherkashchyny*, and in 1963 transferred to *Robitnycha hazeta* as their regional journalist. Though principally a poet, he also wrote prose and literary criticism.

Symonenko died in Cherkasy on 14 December 1963, aged only 29 years. He had been writing for only ten years. But in this time he was able to say more than some people were able to express in a lifetime.

Even after his death interest in his works continued to grow. This was aided by circulating accounts of dramatical episodes from his life: his clashes with the party bureaucracy, his connections with the dissidents Ivan Dziuba and Ivan Svitlychny, and the controversial details surrounding his final illness and death.

Upset by the discrepancies between reality and communist propaganda, Symonenko's poems took on an ever more social context. His poems recited in front of university auditoriums were copied and widely distributed through samizdat (underground publishing, which usually meant they were typed on typewriters) and also found their way abroad to the diaspora. By the time the Soviet censors realized what was happening, it was too late. All the same, to make up for lost time, all his articles & works were stopped from being published and he suffered persecution.

He wrote his last work, *A Fairy Tale About Durylo*, only three months before his death, and it was obviously not meant for publication. The tale was overtly anti-Soviet, and was only published in the late 1980s, in the final agonizing years of the communist regime.

With time Symonenko's poetry has not lost its appeal or its currency. For he writes about eternal things, such as love and honour, morals, patriotism, love and respect toward one's native language. The sincerity of his emotions has stood the test of time, and he is no less popular today than he was in Soviet times.

Although better known for his poetry, Symonenko also wrote some short stories and a novella, which have been translated for this collection of his prose. They were first published in Ukrainian in Lviv in 1965 by Kameniar Publishers under the title *Rose Wine*. His diary, which though not voluminous, provides an insight into the greatness of the man, was first published in the magazine *Suchasnist* in Munich in 1965.

In translating Symonenko, I have been able to gain a better insight into the author by spending time in Cherkasy: for a short period in Soviet times and rather more extended visits in post-independence times. I marvel that in this grey provincial centre such great poetry was able to be written, which proves once again that you don't have to always be in the hub of life to create great literature. Symonenko was later offered the chance to move to the capital Kyiv, and yet he refused and chose to live and work as a journalist on a provincial newspaper.

* Based on four brief pieces written by the author about himself and articles by Viktor Kostiuchenko & Oles Honchar

Rose Wine

Even the ancient old men stared at her, and rarely did any young fellow ever pass her by without eyeing her from head to foot. The gazes of some glowed with rapture, while others burned with undisguised desire and yet others admired her, as if she were a work of art. When she tossed her black plaits onto her resilient breasts and sailed through the village with a hoe on her shoulder, the boys went wild. They fearfully approached her gate and fervently told her of their love, but she merely listened and said nothing. No one dared touch her, as if afraid to defile her beauty. She showed them no scorn and never put any of them down, only begging them, when they were leaving:

“Please don't come to see me anymore. All right?”

And her sloe eyes brimmed with such entreaty, that no one dared contradict her. Each boy's intoxication with her beauty passed, they fell in love with ordinary snub-nosed or sharp-nosed girls, and Olha remained a pleasant memory for them.

Andriy never dared approach her. What chance did he have, a lame hunchback, when fellows far more handsome than him got the flick from her. She often caught his gaze and always beamed affably in reply, however he took it as offensive pity.

The boys became tractor drivers and chauffeurs, went off to join the airforce or navy, while he couldn't even dream of such things. He pottered about in the collective-farm orchard and grew flowers at home.

He was attracted to flowers after his mother had passed away. There wasn't a single vegetable in his yard, only grapevines, apple trees, sour cherries and flowers, lots of flowers. And his mother's grave was covered in flowers from early spring until Indian summer, like a raised flower-bed.

He gave lavish bunches of flowers to brides, and everyone was grateful to him, and everyone respected him for it, while he longed to taste at least one droplet of love himself.

“Will you give me a bunch of flowers for my wedding too?” Olha once asked, when they were picking apples in the orchard.

He nearly went numb from surprise, but nevertheless replied:

“You can choose which ones you want yourself.” Then he took courage and said: “I've got lots of them. And if you like, I can make some wine from rose petals for your wedding.”

“Wine from roses?” she expressed amazement. “What a fib.”

“Don’t you believe me?” he became agitated. “The wine is like tenderness. When you come to pick your flowers, I’ll give you some to try.”

And he hobbled off to the lean-to, to the calls of the caretaker.

For some reason Andriy believed that Olha would come for the flowers. He waited for her each evening. His anxiety was even sensed by the neighbouring boys, who chirped each evening in his yard. These were Andriy’s most loyal friends and trustworthy custodians of his flowers and orchard. Anyone who dared pick even a bunch of grapes or a flower was subjected to unmerciful ostracism. They were hounded relentlessly and cruelly, as only children can.

Each evening these shaven-haired horticulturalists mobbed Andriy like flies. He told them how he dreamt of flowers, how they whispered to the grey stars, he dreamed up fairy tales about wondrous lands, where flowers were not only fragrant, but also spoke and walked and played hide-and-seek, and wilted only when an unhappy person appeared in that land.

“Flowers love happy people. In our land they don’t wilt, but cry from unhappiness. Have you seen how much dew covers them in the morning? That’s their tears. Anyone who finds a dry flower on a dew-drenched morning will be very happy.”

“And have you ever found a dry flower?”

“No, I haven’t, and probably never will...”

A kind and sincere sky hung above them, and the youngsters felt that it wasn’t at all covered in stars, but in flowers, and that these fairy-tale flowers had been planted by uncle Andriy.

Olha came on Sunday morning. She was so beautiful, that all the flowers seemed to hang their heads, while their master felt utterly useless and didn’t know where to disappear.

“Is it true that a dry flower found on a dewy morning will bring you happiness?” she asked Andriy.

The lad’s tongue stuck to his palate, his eyes froze in wonder.

“Who... Where did you hear this?”

“I came here yesterday evening and heard you telling the children. So is it true or not?”

“No. I made that up,” Andriy buried his eyes in a paeony bush.

Olha sighed.

“It’s a pity I can’t dream up such lovely things.”

“Why do you need all this?” the lad wondered. ‘You’ve got your beauty your mother endowed you with. While I... What will I do when I can no longer make up these strange stories?’

A little while later they sat in the arbour, overgrown with hops and wild grape and tasted the rose wine.

“You’re a very nice lad, Andriy,” Olha said.

“You meant that I’m a good person?” he asked her.

“I meant what I said,” Olha laughed and began to fret for no obvious reason. “Many fellows tell me that I’m beautiful and that’s why they love

me. They think it makes me feel good. But is it my fault that I am beautiful? Is my beauty – me?”

She playfully tossed her plaits from behind onto her breasts.

“I want someone to fall in love with me and not my beauty, my black eyebrows and red cheeks.” She noticed that Andriy was trying to say something and began to speak even faster: “What good is beauty? The wind withers your skin, the rain washes away your rouge! You lug around heavy crates in the barn, bend your back double in the beetroot fields – and soon there’s nothing left of your beauty...”

She became silent and Andriy did not know what to say.

“Well, tell me, Andriy, when bad weather and work shrivel me up, will I still be loved by the one who falls for my beauty?”

“I don’t know, Olha,” the lad sighed sincerely. “I don’t know of anyone who could not love you as you are!”

“I won’t be like this all my life, Andriy,” she said sorrowfully. “So can I pick myself some flowers?”

Andriy nodded and the girl waded into the living lake of colour. She walked among the flowers and his enamoured eyes followed her. Olha must have carefully examined almost every single petal, and returned to the arbour empty-handed.

“It was a pity to pick any of them,” she admitted in embarrassment. “They’re so beautiful. I’d best come another time. All right?”

He saw her to the gate and said nothing. The girl walked out into the street and, looking into the blue unrest of his eyes, said softly:

“You must make some rose wine before the wedding...”

The Roosters Crowed on the Sashes

Onyska’s legs turned to wood whenever she heard his voice ring out somewhere nearby. She always walked past him barely alive and did not dare move even an eyebrow in his direction.

And Viktor would yell:

“Onyska! When will you tell me that I am the one for you?”

“After you’ve milked a full bucket of milk from a billy-goat,” the girl shot back in reply.

“I won’t go running after you,” the fellow sneered. “I’ll simply come to ask for your hand in marriage.”

“Come around then, we’ve had a good harvest of pumpkins* this year,” she uttered the words as if passing them through a sieve, holding both her outrage, her pain and her hope behind her white teeth.

Sometimes the milkmaids were fed up and began to defend Onyska.

“You’re not even worthy of her pinkie!” they told him.

“Oh, yeah! All I need do is say ‘chicky-chick’, and she’ll come running like a hen,” the accountant did not relent.

“Take care you won’t have to sit on the eggs yourself afterwards,” Onyska shot back to uproarious laughter.

Onyska could only confide in her father what that undue familiarity of hers cost her. Her father was still very young. He had gone off to war

aged thirty and had remained like that forever. Onyska often wanted to see him grey-haired and moustached. But it never worked. Mother had befriended old age, but father remained young. Time had lost its power over him.

“Oh, how hard it is for me, dad,” Onyska said, dropping the black sorrow of her plaits to her waist. “How I love him and how I... detest him!” she stamped her small foot. “What should I do, father?”

But father remained silent and then the arches of her girlish eyebrows slipped down to her snub nose and her eyelashes blinked ever so fast, forcing the disobedient tears back inside.

Autumn dawns are uneasy, like delirium. Onyska felt their grey bottomlessness with her sleepy eyes and dived into their unease. On the way to the farm she finished seeing her girlish dreams.

Once she was woken by Viktor.

“Why are you stumbling along, like a lunatic?” he burst out laughing right beside her ear and Onyska again felt her legs go numb. But neither her head nor her tongue ever went numb.

“Better tell me why you’ve crawled out of your diapers so early this morning?”

He said nothing and then somehow shyly took her by the hand. Onyska felt no desire to wrench her hand free.

“I never thought your hands would be so tender...”

“A peasant won’t believe anything, till he’s felt it,” she hid her disappointment in a smile.

“Will you be mine?” Viktor suddenly blurted out of the blue. “Will you?”

“Maybe I will... go to work as an accountant in your place,” she managed to free her hand and walked along, as if on sharp knives.

“Then I’ll come round to ask for your hand in marriage,” he said, as if he had not heard her words and, just as suddenly as he had appeared, he melted away into the grey transparency.

For a whole week, no matter where she went, Onyska was pursued by whispers and giggles. Under the frank curious gazes her shoulders hunched over and insult weighed heavy on her thoughts. “He’s gone and blabbed to the whole village”. Her chest was constricted with suffering.

Viktor came on the Saturday. His cap pushed to one side, in shining chrome leather boots, handsome and sleek like a poster boy. He sat down on the bench, swung one leg over the other, as if showing off his new boots.

And immediately began some idle chit-chat with her mother. He spoke a long time, boasting overtly, and then said, as if among other things:

“Auntie, I’ve come to ask for your Onyska’s hand in marriage...”

Her mother looked up in surprise and said in an offended tone:

“Do people negotiate with the parents about such things these days, Viktor? Onyska has her own head on her shoulders.” And as if emphasizing her lack of concern for what was taking place in the house, she slowly tottered outside into the yard.

For a long time the two of them sat in the house and said nothing. The roosters crowed on the sashes and their silent song made the ears ring.

“So what have you to tell me, Onyska?” Viktor’s voice splashed out anxiously.

“You haven’t asked me anything yet.”

“You know why I’m here.” He looked with such entreaty and such guilt that her entire body filled with a sultry craving.

“You haven’t even trampled a path to my gate and already you’re knocking at my heart,” she shook the languid feeling off herself.

“But you love me...”

“How do you know?” she raised her eyes scoffingly.

“The whole village says so...”

“But the one person who matters hasn’t said anything,” Onyska threw her embroidery into a corner and didn’t know what to do with her hands. Her brown eyes flashed with anger. Viktor seemed to see her for the first time.

“And you’re willing to make a fool of me in front of the whole village?” he asked and immediately realized the absurd wretchedness of his question.

“What a fellow you are, Viktor,” tears seemed to flow from her lips. “When you leave here pick as many pumpkins from the garden as you like. You can even bring a cart to collect them.” Onyska mocked her own suffering. “One won’t be enough for you, take a whole cartful and go feast your arrogance on them...”

He left doubled over, as if he was carrying a whole cart filled with pumpkins on his back.

Onyska sobbed over her embroidery.

* The giving of a pumpkin by a girl signified refusal, when the lad came to ask for her hand in marriage.

The Black Horseshoe

The clouds hung so low that passers-by emerged from them unexpectedly and just as unexpectedly dived back into them. The girl had lifted her head, as if trying to poke her gaze through their swirling sullenness. Her long eyelashes touched the edges of the clouds, while her eyes were the only blue splotches in the surrounding overcast greyness.

“I don’t love you,” the girl said, staring into the sky. “You lied to me...”

“No, I didn’t ...”

“You didn’t love me.”

He was staring at the ground, unaware of what was happening above them.

“I love you,” the lad nervously scraped his shoe on the verdant knoll and had already left the imprint of a black horseshoe in it. “I love you...”

“You’re simply afraid of losing me and being left alone.”

“Rubbish!” he suddenly burst out. “If you feel indifference toward me, then...”

She let fly two blue bolts of lightning at him.

“Why do you keep staring at the ground?”

With difficulty he lifted his eyes, as if they were heavy weights, and cast a furtive glance at her, but a moment later his eyes were again buried in the grass.

“It makes no difference where I look.”

“You never look me in the eye. You’re always greedy and impatient,” she tore his doubts to shreds. “You didn’t want to be happy with me, you only wanted to make me happy.”

She suddenly burst into tears and could barely stop herself from pressing against his chest.

“I too want to make at least one person happy,” she said, angrily pushing her heel deep into the soft earth and impetuously made off.

“Wait!” he chased after her.

The thunder had a long fit of coughing and large drops began to slap against the leaves. Two people emerged from the clouds. They were holding hands and were making a beeline for the maple tree. Drenched and short of breath, they were happy to be under its dense canopy.

“Look, a horseshoe,” the lad exclaimed.

They squatted around the black semicircle soldered into the green madness. And somehow their eyes met unexpectedly, then their hands and lips.

“Horseshoes bring luck,” her lips rustled.

Those who find horseshoes never think of those who lost them.

He Stopped Her From Sleeping

At times his chest was racked by long fits of coughing. Because of his smoking.

“Hnat, I’m sick and tired of your smoking!” she would yell from the bedroom. “You’re stopping me from sleeping.”

He would look guiltily at the brown curtains and say:

“All right, Li, I won’t cough any more.”

“You can go into the kitchen and cough there till morning, if you like!” the woman he called Li drawled sweetly.

The light went with him into the poky kitchen. Before dawn it would become exhausted and die away. He too grew tired. His short nervous sleep was filled with phantasmagorical monsters. Once he made fun of positive heroes in wretched novels. Workbenches or tractors always appeared as positive heroes in his dreams. He would dream of every girl, except Li. How he missed her, even in his dreams!

Now he dreamed of formulae, parallel bold lines and the chief designer’s pipe. Although Yakym Ivanovych had never smoked a pipe, in his dreams Hnat always positively knew that the pipe belonged to the fellow. He mentioned this once to Yakym Ivanovych.

“All right, I’ll put it in my pipe and smoke it,” the fellow said, joking. “Anyway, such dreams have some basis. You must be exhausted.”

Yakym Ivanovych liked Hnat, but he did not show his feelings, so that there would be no idle gossip. To his own amazement, he had asked that time:

“Do you argue often with Lida?”

“No, we never argue...”

“And she never snaps at you?”

“Sometimes. But only when I stop her from sleeping...”

“I suspected you stopped her from sleeping,” Yakym Ivanovych quipped, and his kind brown eyes suddenly began to turn grey. This happened each time he was angry.

“My God, what have you done to the kitchen!” Lida would be horrified each morning, when she surveyed the piles of cigarette butts. “You’ll soon become as skinny as a rake...”

Hnat loved his smoke-filled nights. He loved his cigarettes, his coughing fits and his drafting implements. Of course, he could have done without the coughing, but not without these nights! He relished his exhaustion and his wild dreams. And his wife’s sleepy mutterings.

“Haven’t you had enough of those stinking cigarettes?”

Lida failed to understand his cigarettes, or his coughing, or his dreams. And she did not like his exhaustion or his nights up alone.

When Hnat was able to gather his thoughts, when his sleeplessness gave birth to a whimsical web of drawings, he would race into the bedroom and grab Lida by the shoulders:

“Li, how great everything has turned out...”

“What are you on about?” she would ask in sleepy lassitude.

“Li, I found what I was seeking!”

“But, darling, does that mean you have to rouse the whole city?”

He would sit in the kitchen till morning and kill the taste of her indifference with tobacco smoke. In the morning he would pack his things into a suitcase and throw insults at her. She would weep and reply in kind.

And then he appeared in the doorway of the office of his father-in-law, aka the chief designer, and poured out his outrage.

“I’ve left her so she can have her beauty sleep. I’ll go up North and never come back...”

Yakym Ivanovych’s eyes were grey, but his voice sounded indifferent:

“Go and start work. No need to begin snivelling here,” Yakym Ivanovych said. And grew silent.

In the evening he turned up at Hnat’s desk:

“Lida came to see me...”

Hnat tossed back his black shock of hair and looked at his father-in-law as if from a deep pit:

“What did she say?”

“Only things that women usually say in such circumstances.” He ran his eyes over his son-in-law’s awkward figure and must have been thinking

about something very distant. "I told her that when people love each other they don't take their tears to intermediaries."

Hnat began to dress and had problems slipping his left shoe into his galosh. They took the stairs from the third floor, smoking as they went.

An autumn wind was wreaking havoc outside. They walked through its uproarious laughter.

Unexpectedly Yakym Ivanovych grabbed Hnat's shoulder and swung him around to face him:

"I told her you might return, once she wakes up to herself. Then you won't stop her from sleeping."

He went off, almost running away from Hnat.

Hnat came to the hotel and went to bed very early. He dreamed of Lida, parallel lines and the chief designer's non-existent pipe.

Opanas Krokva's Wedding

Nobody understood what the lanky and scraggly avenger was babbling about. But everyone saw snakes crawling from his mouth. They hissed for a long time in everyone's ears, and then the hissing was translated into human language by the frightened teacher from the neighbouring village:

"He says that on the outskirts of your settlement yesterday evening three soldiers were shot dead. If this had happened here, the Germans would have executed every single one of you. As it is, they want to hang only those with partisans in the family. If you don't name the families of partisans, you will all be killed."

Two hundred grandpas, grandmas, women and children stood in the insanely hot sun, but they were cold. spurts of frost squirted from the black barrels of the automatic rifles and machine-guns, aimed at everyone and at no one in particular. A pre-harvest sultriness and a pre-death silence hung over the crowd. And then snakes again issued forth from the SS officer's mouth.

"He says you can remain silent for another ten minutes and then he'll give the order to fire."

For ten minutes wrinkles played on foreheads, for ten minutes the sun dripped silence, for ten minutes people stared with numb eyes at the deformed knot-grass, as if seeking salvation in it. Then the crowd began to stir and a small aggregation of people regurgitated the thousand-year-old Opanas Krokva. He even forgot to bow before the people and made straight for the teacher.

"Tell this boar that my sons killed those bastards. And tell them also not to dare beat me, because I've got the mange. Let them simply hang me."

"How many of your sons are in the forest?" the teacher translated the SS officer's question.

"Every single one of them."

"Who is left at home?"

"There was the old lady, but she passed away."

"May your tongue wither!" a grey old woman's figure emerged from the crowd, looking perhaps a century younger than the old fellow.

“Placing me alive into the grave and in public too. You won’t escape me, you devil, not even into the next world!”

The SS officer guffawed long and hard, when the teacher translated the old woman’s monologue to him.

“Is she your old lady?” he asked Opanas.

“Aha. Mine. Whose else.”

“Is it true, what grandpa said, that your sons are in the partisans?” he quizzed the old woman.

“It’s the truth. Would someone like him lie? All our falcons are roosting in the forest...”

They were hung on a giant elm next to the small former church. With amazed eyes they looked at the people they had saved and poked out their bitten blue tongues at the German avengers.

Opanas Krokva had never had any children and grandma Orysia, who had tied the knot with him through the hangman’s rope, had never been his wife. People said that when they were young, they were very much in love and wanted to marry, but her parents would not let them. They married Orysia off to a richer man.

Maybe this was true, or perhaps people’s fantasies were creating a new legend about true love, which had manifested itself on their deathbed.

A Ballad About Grandpa

I was sitting against the barn while grandpa was competing with the sun in the meadow, to see who would be the first to complete their daily chores. A long shadow from the hill was already licking at his left foot, while his right one was still stepping along a ribbon of sunlight. The sharp scythe was whistling away – grandpa was impatient to finish mowing the last bit of meadow and finally rest. The shadows reached his knees, then suddenly jumped to his waist, thereupon making their way up to his chest.

I rose to my feet and stood on my tippy-toes.

“Ivanko!” grandpa’s voice reached me. He was now up to his neck in shadows and wiping the scythe with a handful of mown grass. “Can you hear me, Ivanko?”

“No,” I yelled, cupping my hands around my mouth.

“So why are you answering me then, you lazybones?” Grandpa’s voice was calm and I knew that he wasn’t at all angry with me. “Fetch my tobacco pouch, else the mosquitoes will eat me alive.”

Grandpa was obviously trying to frighten me. The mosquitoes could never have gobbled him up, because grandpa was very big and a hundred times stronger than all the mosquitoes in our marsh. I really enjoyed doing things for grandpa. I dashed off across the vegetable patch to grandpa’s jacket and fetched the tobacco pouch from his pocket, ran out onto the mown meadow and, jumping over the neat rows of mown hay, raced off toward him.

“Watch your feet,” I heard grandpa’s instructions. “You’re belting along like a frightened hare.”

“Are frightened hares really fast?”

“Of course they’re fast.”

“So that even you couldn’t catch one?”

“Don’t know, never tried.”

“Why didn’t you try?”

Grandpa licked his cigarette and a sly smile appeared under his moustache:

“Because they don’t give you workdays¹ for that.”

“And if they did?”

“Wouldn’t do it, all the same. Don’t like doing stupid things.”

The answer failed to satisfy me and I unleashed a torrent of questions on grandpa.

“Hey, hey!” laughed his creased lips. “Better grab the scythe and take it into the barn.”

We walked across the mown meadow and the sky darkened above us, the earth buzzed in a thousand different ways and I listened to grandpa’s words. An invisible force poured into my heart, which would tie me down for ever and ever to this land and to this melodic peaceful language.

... The more grandpa’s hair was peppered with frost, the more he loved me and the more he revealed his spiritual treasury to me. He grew old before my eyes and it seemed to him that his strength and even his very life were flowing into me, for grandpa had no sons – they had been mowed down by plagues and bullets...

“You’re my snub-nosed little immortality,” grandpa would whisper when I fell asleep to the music of his words.

They were very nice words, for grandpa never used bad words with me.

I often insulted and offended grandpa either because of my ineptitude or cruel childish egotism. But grandpa magnanimously forgave me, as great people are able to forgive. And grandpa was great both in his frankness and in that he didn’t wheedle more than he deserved from life.

Grandpa loved to read history and geography books, as well as Shevchenko and Gorky, because he considered Shevchenko a peasant writer, while Gorky was an urban writer.

“No one else writes the truth like they do. Others are clever too, but not as good. They don’t have the intelligence of either a peasant or a working man. If I didn’t understand them, then ask them to forgive me, when you grow up.”

Forgive him, then, Count Tolstoy and Anton Chekhov, don’t take offence at him, mighty [Ivan] Franko and gentle Lesia [Ukrainka], don’t be angry Alexander Blok, Vladimir Mayakovsky and Oleksandr Dovzhenko. And many more of you. And those who saw, how he tore food from his own mouth, having given every last grain for the war effort, how he fed his grandchildren on 300-gram working days¹ – those who saw this and remained silent or chirruped rhymes about love, let them visit his grave and ask his forgiveness. They failed to fathom either

his strength, or his beauty, or his work. And if he doesn't forgive them, then let them burn their books and take on other work, so their old age is not squalid.

... I was in grade eight then. It was a nine kilometre walk to school. For my fourteen years, it wasn't all that close.

On Sunday grandpa read all day long. About geography, probably.

"Ivan, go and split some firewood," mother said.

"Why me?"

"Because I can't any more."

"All you do is read books!"

"Stop mouthing off, Ivan!" mother shouted at me. "You're only good with your tongue."

I hacked at the green osier near the woodpile. Grandpa walked past me to the barn. In his hand dangled a stiff hemp tether. I hacked at the osier, while everything was quiet in the barn.

Suddenly it was as if someone had struck my heart with the butt-end of an axe. I tossed the axe into the snow and dashed into the barn.

"Grand-pa!"

He was standing and mixing some mash for the cow. And from the manger Lyska the cow was greedily following his every move, bound with the stiff tether. Grandpa looked at me and, seeing the fear in my face, became worried himself.

"What's wrong, Ivan?"

"You took the tether and I thought..."

I pressed against his ancient sheepskin coat, howling like a small child, and asked his forgiveness.

In the evening grandpa said:

"Hanna, let Ivanko stay home from school tomorrow."

"Why?"

"If I'm asking you, then there's a reason."

"All right. Ivanko can stay home," mother shrugged her shoulders.

But it was no whim. On Monday grandpa was no longer with us. Stern and beautiful, he lay in a coffin on our ancient oak bench. And outside the sun was shining, the snow was squeaky and the roosters were crowing, predicting an approaching thaw.

... I love old men more than anyone else. They are the living wisdom, the unwritten history of our nation. On their hunched shoulders they bear so much beauty and tenderness, that everyone envies them.

And when I see some grey-haired old fellow on the bus with a bundle of bagels, I immediately imagine him coming home, getting out his simple gift and saying to his small grandson, Ivanko:

"Look, what I brought you from the bunny..."

He sits his black or blond-haired little immortality on his knees and it will listen open-mouthed to his ingenious grandpa's account, which will be a wickerwork of reality and fantasy. And one day his grandfather's beauty will inevitably awaken in him too, and he will feed on his grandfather's wisdom and language.

1. Villagers were often paid in grain, calculated at 300 grammes for each day they worked in the collective-farm.

The Incredible Interview

That morning Shvoren was woken by the telephone. Opanas grabbed the receiver.

“Yes.”

“Shvoren? I’m calling from *Poetical Miscellany*. Our correspondent will come to visit you shortly. Meet him in full kit.”

Opanas threw down the receiver and loaded his pop-gun.

Soon an awkward and greasy youth burst into the room. His ruddy face was scratched and covered in pimples. He looked timid, but insolent.

“Good morning! Time to face the music. Didn’t expect me? So here I am – crawled in through the window with my delicate body and standing at attention before you.”

“Who are you?” Opanas yelled out wildly, bewildered by the appearance of this total degenerate.

“I’m a reporter. A hybrid of poetry and prose, the newspaper’s illegitimate son. Clear? I think in images. Everything I have said to date can be found in my book *Lacquered Dirt*. Try to understand.”

“So are you from *Poetical Miscellany*?” Shvoren finally chose a pause in the tirade.

“I besprinkle the poetical palette there. My first question is: where, when and how were you born?”

.....

(to be finished)

Smiles Never Offended Anyone

(To be translated)

The Grey Package

(To be translated)

The Psychological Duel

(To be translated)

White Apparitions

White apparitions entered the lobby, stamping their awkward feet, clapping their hands, and milky flakes settled to the floor.

“What a winter!” some exclaimed, lacking the imagination to utter anything more original.

“Greetings from Father Christmas!” others tried joking, as they tossed their moist coats across the cloakroom counter.

Lina smiled at them superficially, for she had to be courteous. ‘They’re all so boring and uninteresting,’ the thought kept spinning about inside

her head. The nonentities and the bores ascended the stairs to the dance hall and set about monotonously polishing the parquet floor, flirting with equally boring and dull girls. Or else they coalesced into groups and chattered away light-heartedly about goodness knows what.

No, Lina felt no disdain toward them. She merely felt sorry for these haughty turkeys who, day in and day out, squandered their time and energy on these fandangos. Yes, fandangos, for she dared not call that shuffling of theirs dancing.

“What are you thinking about, milady?” an exceptionally wheedling voice upset Lina’s composure. Aha, this was the same fellow who had tried yesterday and the day before that to enthrall her with his witticisms and impersonations taken from Indian films.

“Forgotten your cigarettes again?” she asked, evading his sugary sweet smile.

“You hit the nail on the head, m’am.”

“Number?” And armed with this information, Lina extracted a tattered packet of *Kazbek* cigarettes from his imported coat. There was no doubt that this gallant gentleman smoked ordinary roll-your-owns, which he made himself each night using cheap tobacco. But how pompously he tapped his cigarette holder against the packet! How majestically he struck his match!

“Perhaps you’d like to come up with me for a dance?”

“No, I wouldn’t stoop that low.”

“Oh, the angel is baring her teeth! Come on, how about it?”

“Listen,” she said irritably, “this is a cloakroom, not some collection point for compliments gleaned from last year’s films.”

“Citizens, let us be mutually polite,” the courteous ladies’ man flung the slogan into her face.

“Visitors, please do not hinder the workers in the execution of their official duties,” Lina retorted with an ultra-polite smile.

“Perhaps the lady will tell me her name?”

“Macbeth.”

“I’ll be waiting for you at the exit, then.”

“If twinkle-toes has any free time, he should squander it in the company of one of the ballerinas,” Lina ventured, pointing her finger upwards.

“You don’t love me, you don’t feel sorry for me...”

“The Society for Expressive Reading meets on Tuesdays and Fridays at three in the afternoon,” she said, offering him some free information. Thank the Lord, they had begun to play the foxtrot and a string of people appeared to collect their coats.

Lina abhorred her “profession”, but she dreadfully liked to dress and undress people. There was something magical and yet incomprehensible about this, and when she finally found herself a proper job, these bouquets of human faces would continue to appear before her, eyes laughing, grieving, begging. Apart from the professional scrapers, quite a few nice boys and girls ended up here for want of something better to do. The places a person was driven to because of boredom! Perhaps some day

she too would be forced to waste away her evenings in such dance halls, dying from her partner's empty, boring conversations, hanging out for those dished-out compliments of his and dancing "led by him"...

At last!.. The final coat handed out, the final "good evening" said. She could leave for home now, but there was still so much work to do here at auntie Pasha's. The people had trudged in snow and mud, carelessly dropped butts around the urns. Lina flitted about the foyer, while auntie Pasha grumbled and tried to bundle her off home.

"Perhaps somebody is waiting for you..."

"Then they can wait." Lina answered, rattling the dustpan, running to and fro with the broom and machine-gunning auntie Pasha with bursts of her impressions of the evening, while the latter reproached her for being so unreasonable.

"One day you'll be itching for someone to court you, but there won't be any takers... Your maiden years will have flowed away, like the waters of spring..."

Lina dressed hastily, at the same time convincing auntie Pasha that she would never in her life even think of marrying, since all you ever heard these days was talk of divorces and there were so few decent young men left out there.

"Ah, go home, you sharp-nosed bundle of trouble!.. You know about as much about young men, as a goat does about bulrushes..."

A white apparition was indeed waiting for her outside. He walked by her side without a trace of his previous gallantry. He mumbled something about the weather and joked clumsily. Lina's exasperation meanwhile dozed in the most secluded corner of her heart.

"I like the fact that you don't grimace and put on airs," continued the white apparition.

"Then why are you playing the dandy yourself?"

"Because..."

"Did you wait for me *because* too?"

"A wee bit *because*, and a wee bit not."

"I don't need your wee bits!"

"I do."

"Listen, are you a scoundrel, or what?" she asked, putting the question to him point-blank.

"Perhaps I am, but not too much," the fellow sighed. They became silent, walking along side by side, each with their own thoughts.

"Perhaps I'm a fool," the not-too-much-of-a-scoundrel uttered suddenly.

"That's very likely," Lina agreed.

"Are you intelligent?"

"Who knows? Mum says I'm a shrew."

"Your mum's a great person!"

And they continued walking. The city was asleep and the snow kept falling in thick flakes. The street lamps looked quaint and fairytale-like because of the snow. It seemed to Lina that she was on another planet.

How many riddles and surprises were awaiting her in this strange, unfamiliar, white home town?!

He didn't even dare take her by the hand and said goodbye near the doorway without begging her, like the others, to stand around with him 'for just a minute longer'.

Lina fell into her snow-white sheets, sighing anxiously and easily. In her dreams violet flowers grew out of her eyes.

Banquet on the Barn Floor

(To be translated)

Naïve Young Girl

The wind gently nudged her in the back. She swung her handbag about and flirted with the wind – offering it her red cheeks or suddenly twirled about on one foot, so that it playfully outlined her virginal figure. The girl sensed the curious looks of the passers-by and she obviously enjoyed this. Perhaps yesterday, or even only this morning, she had discovered the woman within her and was experiencing her discovery in trepidation.

She seemed to be born into the world a second time. Her large greyish eyes suddenly sparkled with a glistening damp languidity, her hempen strands of hair seemed to grow softer and hugged her forehead, and her body became so light and obedient, that she herself was amazed that the wind was unable to lift her up on its light capacious wings and carry her off somewhere far-far away.

The girl was at that age when one is attracted to something mysterious, unfathomable and secretive. She was not yet aware that it was a normal need of youth to fall in love and to be loved. She only sensed that she craved someone very beautiful and as yet unknown, someone without whom life was not even worth living.

The girl was on her way to work. All evening long and in the morning her mother had pumped her full of instructions and fed her advice, while she only listened to the incomprehensible agitation of her inner self. So what, if it was her first time walking to work? Once before she had walked to school for the first time too, and later she had repeated this so many times that she bored doing it.

"Dad barely managed to find you this place," her mother exhorted. "Watch out, you hold onto it. It's clean work and the people there are nice."

Who cared that the people there were nice! As if there were no nice people elsewhere. She was standing inside the bus and everyone was watching her with such kind eyes. Could bad people have kind eyes? And would a bad person look at a good person?

She flitted out of the bus and, flirting with the white snowstorm, ran off to the plant administration building.

"Where is the plant committee?" she asked the janitor.

"On the third floor on the right, love," he said to her in a stern voice, as janitors are wont to address adults.

"I've come to start work here. My name is Oksana Oryshechko," she reported in complete seriousness to an elderly fellow with dark eyes and a clearing in his black shock of hair.

"Aha. Very nice to meet you," the fellow retorted and measured her with a lazy gaze. "I'm the head of the plant committee, Krekoten's the name – Mykola Panasovych to you."

He lit up a cigarette and asked not very much to the point:

"And where did you learn to type?"

"Mum taught me. She's a typist."

“Sit at the typewriter.”

He dictated some forty metres of thoughtless text to her from some protocol or newspaper and then cheered her up in a lacklustre voice:

“Good girl. Occasionally this will come in handy.. And now file away the newspapers, because they’re in a real mess here.” And he made off for his office.

Oksana hummed a song about the snow and the wind, the newspapers flapped their grey wings in her deft hands and obediently fell into place. With a deft twist she passed around the desk with the bound newspapers and entered his office.

“Mykola Panasovych, the newspapers have been filed.”

“Good.”

For a moment or so only his heavy breathing could be heard.

“If there are any visitors, tell them I can see them from two o’clock onwards. I’m busy right now.” On the desk before him lay an open magazine, his voice oozed laziness and lassitude.

“So what am I to do?” she blurted out.

“Don’t put the cart before the horse!” he said unexpectedly. “I’ll let you know when I need you.”

For want of something to do she flipped through the bound newspapers, typed a letter to her girlfriend in the village, peered with a long face into her small mirror.

Occasionally she was summoned by Mykola Panasovych:

“Type up a list of the correspondence course students.”

“Make a copy of this letter. In duplicate.”

The day passed. The week dragged on. Monotony and boredom were wound on to the invisible reel of time. Papers rustled, her heart beat away.

“When will I start doing something?” she asked one day.

“You’re managing your duties perfectly.”

“Won’t I have a real job in the end?”

“A real job?” Mykola Panasovych even managed a smile. “You’re a naïve little girl. Each task you do is real. That’s what we are taught.”

Passionately she tried to prove something to him, but he only nodded his head indulgently and reproachfully. He found her arguments ridiculous. He was a son of his time. Somehow he once rose up the ladder, being dragged up and dropped into this chair. And he remained sitting here. And would remain sitting here without any complaints, until he was moved into another chair. As was always the case with people of low culture and wretched soul, he was never bothered by conscience. He even looked patronizingly at people, especially the restless ones, and considered himself irreplaceable. Emptiness was indeed difficult to replace with something.

“Know what, Mykola Panasovych,” Oksana said to her own amazement, “I won’t be turning up to work tomorrow...”

She did not listen to what he was mumbling behind her back. She was already hurrying down the stairs, her handbag tracing circles in the air, and in her bosom something immeasurably dear and gentle was awakening, wrestled from indifference.

Once more Oksana wanted people to look at her. And she indeed caught someone’s eye in the bus. Aha, that black-haired fellow. He rose from his seat and offered it to her:

“Have a seat, please.”

“I’m about to get off,” the girl made her way to the exit, feeling his unusual gaze upon her. Before getting off, she turned around, suddenly showed the lad the end of her tongue and hopped out onto the asphalt.

The wind picked up Oksana on its white wings, she flirted with it and did not worry at all that her mother would be fretting because of her unreasonable actions.

Ohyda (Ohydych)

(To be translated)

The One-Armed Forester

He returned from the war with a party card, four medals and twenty ribs. After the drums had stopped beating in the house and the ancient accordion had run out of breath, and the guests had drunken and eaten everything the war had not managed to swallow up, and had then left, Petro said to his mother:

“Tell Motria that she should get married...”

His mother clapped her overworked hands together:

“But she’s been waiting for you all this time, as if you were God Himself!”

“What of it? Tell her to get married,” he repeated with a voice brimming with gloomy disappointment and astringent bitterness.

“You think she doesn’t know... the state you’re in?” his mother almost sobbed.

“Your warm grey turtledove loves you all the same...”

“No, mum,” the son brutally cut her short. “I won’t hear of it.”

Motria dashed in the next day. Her large eyes, filled with grief and insult, looked into his blue ice-chests and she asked:

“Why, my love, why? Don’t marry me then, only don’t loathe me, as if I was some damned bitch.”

“I don’t loathe you, Motria. It’s just that...”

“Then let’s simply be friends...”

“That’s impossible,” he forced the words stiffly from his mouth, staring into space somewhere past her.

“But why? Tell me why?”

“It’s impossible,” he replied, clenching his only fist. “It’s utterly impossible, because I love you...”

Their conversation was lengthy, weighty and depressing. At midday the teacher walked away with her burden of troubles and undeserved shame, moving past the inquisitive dull windows facing the street. She wept as she went, without bothering to hide her tears.

And three days later another bombshell struck the village. Petro came to the office of the village council and said to the chairman:

“Give me a job.”

“Come on, lad,” the fellow practically recoiled. “You’re a teacher, we haven’t got anyone to teach the children how to write properly.”

“I won’t work in the school.”

“The Lord preserve you, Petro,” the old chairman said, rising from his ancient stool. “Why don’t you want to teach?”

Petro stared past him with terrifying empty eyes. His jaws were tightly clenched and it looked as if they would crack at any moment.

“I hate children,” he groaned. “I don’t want to teach in the school. If you’re a true man, appoint me forester. Because I can only find a common language with the she-wolves.” And he suddenly burst into almost hysterical sobs and squatted faintly onto the bench against the wall. Petro became a forester. He shied away from everyone, especially the youngsters, and lived and slept in the forest. And although he became a very able forester, everyone in the village was afraid of him. Some said that during the war he had lost more than his arm, he’d also lost his marbles. Others said that it wasn’t his ribs that had been removed, but his heart.

Petro didn’t listen to this twaddle. He was completely engrossed in forestry matters and only dealt with people when his job necessitated it. In two years he had replanted nearly all the collective farm’s barren clearings and gullies with oaks, maples, lindens and willows.

Who knows what had brought them together, him and old man Omelko, the one everyone in the village had nicknamed Kheteze. Possibly because he had received four death notices from the front, the old man began to shun people and even avoided appearing at home, where his half-dead wife wasted away. The one-armed chimera

and mangy old Kheteze, scoured by age and insufferable grief, roamed the village and the forest like two enamoured apparitions. Whether they ever spoke to each other – no one could say for sure with a clear conscience. Maybe they did, maybe they didn't.

However, after Petro and the old man had a glass or two of alcohol, hordes of children would gather about them. The old man became a veritable factory. In no time at all he was able to supply the silly barefoot fools with linden whistles, hazelwood trumpets, elderwood syringes and annoying rattles. Then the children whistled, trumpeted, chirred and rattled away in every house. The mothers did not know whether to thank the old man or to curse him.

While old Kheteze was thus engaged, Petro told the kids such stories and tales, that they no longer noticed the merciless mosquitoes. But the queasiness passed and everything returned to its boring and grey state. Once again something inexplicable drove them away from human conversation, laughter and song, and they rummaged about the forest like doomed souls, looking for something to do, or possibly sought out herbs to assuage their crucified hearts.

I was only a nipper then, but I can still recall clearly the taste of acorn bread and pancakes leavened on bran and young linden leaves. That frightful spring hunger did not pass by a single honest household in our village¹. When the harvest began, we ran over the stubble with our reed baskets, collecting wheat-ears, rubbing them between our hands, extracting the golden grains of wheat. Emaciated mothers would then grind the grains into handfuls of flour and treated us to improbable flatcakes in the morning.

But one evening mother told me:

“A fatso in underpants has arrived from the centre. He told people to stop collecting wheat-ears or they'd be prosecuted. So don't go into the fields tomorrow, Hryshka. Let them choke on those awns.”

But how could we stop collecting the wheat-ears. We wanted to eat. And we ventured out into the fields. Everything went well, but then just before noon the patrolman Pryvitny came across us. The older lads dashed off to the gully, but he blocked my way with his stallion and swore:

“Come on, you bastard, off to the village council with you. We'll find out whose son you are and put some sense into your mother.”

Swearing and cracking his whip, he drove me across the stubble toward the road. I don't remember how long I ran. The stubble stung my bare feet, the sweat poured into my eyes, the basket struck my legs, my body filled with an animal fright and exhaustion. I ran and felt that I would collapse any minute and be unable to get to my feet. The horse wheezed behind my ears and vulgar curses hung in the air.

“What are you doing, you skunk!?” Words from outside somewhere suddenly burst into my consciousness. I stopped and tore my eyes away from the stubble. Before me pranced Petro astride his horse, looking like some devil, terrifying.

“Un-cle, I won't a-ny-more,” I whined.

But Petro was oblivious to my plea. He surged past me. As I jumped aside, tripped and fell backwards, I saw him bring the whip down violently on Pryvitny's head.

“You mad or something?” the fellow shrieked. But Petro brought him down off his horse with a second violent lash and continued to flog him at length, savagely and mercilessly. At first Pryvitny called the forester a one-armed Satan, then he pleaded with him to stop and eventually he went completely quiet.

When Petro brought me home I was unconscious. Afterwards mother took me to all kinds of grannies for over a year to cast the fright out of me. What happened next I can only recount from the words of others, for the rest of that year I vegetated and little broke through into the secluded corners of my memory.

They wanted to put Petro on trial for cruelly assaulting a person in the performance of their official duty and for aiding and abetting plunderers of socialist property. But

¹ Reference to the forced famine of 1930-33, when millions of Ukrainian peasants died.

prior to that, they decided to publicly expel him from the Party and the collective farm, as a lesson to others.

The meeting was conducted on the village common and everyone who could walk came along. Women wept, the war cripples wheezed silently, even the teenagers did not get up to their pranks, as they were wont to do. The head man from the centre, the one in “underpants”, got down to business straight away:

“Petro Pidoshva must be tried as a bandit. He should be thrown out of the Party lock, stock and barrel. It’s a disgrace that in our exemplary time such degenerates should still exist...”

“Only who’s the degenerate?” a voice burst from the crowd and immediately became silent. The head man gave the anonymous anarchist a fitting rebuke and suggested they listen to Petro.

“What can I say?” Petro began, rising to his feet. “If the Party supports mistreatment of children, then throw me out. Before I leave of my own accord. I didn’t fight for this. I’m missing an arm and I’ve got four ribs less than other people. The war also killed my unborn children,” he uttered the last words in a whisper, but everyone heard. Suddenly Petro turned and called into the agitated crowd:

“Motria, are you here?”

“I’m here,” the girl answered, as if from the other world.

“Then in front of all these people I beg you to forgive me for my injustice. Now you know why I turned you away...”

He practically collapsed onto the grass and a weighty silence fell with him. The head man from the centre in white pants tore it into shreds:

“Tempting us with your deserts? Want to wash away your crime with a tear? It won’t work! We’ve seen the likes of you! We will mercilessly sweep away the rubbish from our ranks.”

“Bite that tongue of yours,” old man Kheteze jumped to his feet. “Let me have a word.”

“You’re not in the Party, old man, so you’ve no right to speak...”

“So I’ve no right? Do you want this?!” and he thrust his paltry fico into the air.

“I’ve held four funerals and my sons were all communists. So I’ve no right?”

“Let the old fellow speak! He’s held his breath for long enough,” the people buzzed.

And the old man continued:

You can’t humiliate me with debts, for you won’t find humbler ones than mine. So listen then and don’t interrupt. I had four sons: Yakiv, Ivan, Vasyl and Prokip. The people won’t let me lie to you. Hitler has orphaned me and now there is no one left to bury me. But then a fifth son appeared – Petro. The Germans hadn’t quite finished him off, so now our lot have decided to sink their teeth into him,” the old man suddenly let fly at the visitor. “Are you worth even an ounce of him? Perhaps you want to throw my dead sons out of the Party too, you carrion? Eh? Well, you yellow chicken? Tell me the truth, or I’ll pull down those underpants of yours and whip you with nettles. Since nothing will get through your thick skull, maybe it will get through your arse!”

It took a lot of persuasion to calm down the old man. Petro was told to be steady with his hands, while the white-trousered fellow was asked never to venture into the village again.

Motria came to Petro’s house after the meeting. She is still living with him to this day.

Balm

Suddenly the pain burst its way into their honeymoon. With a swollen cheek, with bleary eyes filled with powerless despair, he rambled about the room all night long, unable to find any peace. His jaw seemed to be shattering into a thousand shards. A dull, monotonous, unending pain. And the most frightening part was that nothing

would stop it. Neither gargles nor lotions, nor the most ardent oaths to take no notice of this “zoological nonsense”.

“Don’t worry about it, go back to sleep,” he tried to reassure Tonia. “Everything will pass soon.”

But nothing passed and the intellectual being continued to go mad from the primitive animal pain. At times he felt like applying some electromedicine, like knocking out his teeth with the nickel-plated, invidiously cold iron.

“Go on, sleep, baby, sleep,” Mykola implored her, as if wanting be rid of a witness to his suffering.

But the baby would not sleep. Under her six-month-old perm new ideas kept being hatched every few minutes. And then the light would flash on, Mykola saw himself in the mirror and quivered with hatred, while she practised her witchcraft with some home-made remedy.

“Just try to put this on your tooth. Auntie Nata says it’s a balm.”

The balm obviously made no difference and he wanted to feed it to Auntie Nata, who had dreamed up this useless filth.

The pauses between the ticking of the clock pendulum were possibly a little shorter than whole milleniums. In this time mighty empires had probably appeared and disappeared from the face of the earth. In short, Mykola lived through all the geological ages, traversing the evolutionary path from bacteria to cognizant being. He was ready to repeat the whole process of evolution a second time, when – at last! – morning rolled out its red hoop from behind the hill.

But Tonia had not yet exhausted her arsenal of home remedies. The more he suffered, the more fertile was her imagination. She was once more in the kitchen cooking up some new concoction. The door to the neighbouring room banged shut and then Mykola heard the landlady yawn loudly and ask:

“What was all that clatter during the night? And the lights going on.”

“We have a toothache,” Tonia replied innocently.

‘We,’ Mykola thought ironically.

And suddenly the pain stopped. Only his head continued to buzz from the lack of sleep.

“Tonia!” he yelled out, collapsing onto the bed. “Forget about your witchcraft. Our tooth has stopped aching!”

27.11.1962

A Friend of the Family

For three months I sighed over an individual of the fairer sex. The love was so electric, that my friends prophesied a quick and easy death. This really alarmed a colleague at work. He decided at all costs to wrest me from the embrace of the bony reaper and toss me into the arms of a platonic mistress.

“Forget about her,” my anxious friend begged me.

I groaned silently and continued to die a protracted death. My colleague wiped his damp eyes with the palm of his hand and made a final attempt to avert my demise.

“Listen, unlucky lover boy,” he whispered sympathetically, “let me act on your behalf.”

I agreed to this.

My friend began his activity very simply. Each day he would send her my jottings, accompanying them with his own witticisms.

“How are things progressing?” I would ask him every half an hour.

“It’s all plain sailing,” replied the colleague and asked for some paper to take notes.

Each evening he would present me with a broad overview of events of the previous day, telling me in detail how she blushed at the mention of my name. In a separate notebook he recorded her every sigh and smile.

“Another day or two, and she’ll be all yours,” my heart’s representative assured me, beaming with happiness.

You won’t be surprised, of course, if I tell you that several days after this my loved one and my colleague got married. Smitten by grief and weakened by love, I wanted only to die. However, in a flash I had changed my mind and decided to become a close friend of their family. Now we are all in heaven. Although lately my friend has completely lost his mind. He keeps threatening to divorce her. Just let him try! At the trade-union meeting – and nothing will come to pass without it! – I will get up and declare what kind of a person he is. And I won’t take into consideration that he is a close friend.

A Conversation Overheard

Opanas Shvoren knew that all moralists were like parrots. Even in antiquity people asserted that it was dishonest to listen in on other people’s conversations. That was a long time ago, for even Opanas’ grandfather could not recall those times. However even in our times moralists have not tired of repeating such primitive truths.

Opanas Shvornia’s grandfather agreed with him, for he had never been a poet. But people’s psychology was most fully revealed during intimate conversations, and what poetry could there be without psychology?

Each evening Shvoren would conceal himself in the thickest bushes of some park and become all ears. Couples in love walked to and fro. They spoke in whispers and mostly nonsense. Before dawn, bitten by mosquitoes, his face scratched all over, Opanas would return home from his quest. Only a lucky incident saved his talent from inevitable demise.

A young couple once stopped beside the bush from which the talented poet was studying life. The girl was pretty, but heartless, the fellow – dour and frightened.

“Oh, don’t devastate me,” the lad begged in a snivelling voice.

“Quit grimacing,” came the implacable reply.

The lad could not hold back his tears. He tried to get down on his knees, but his legs would not bend.

Overjoyed, Shvoren jumped out of his hide, energetically shook each of their hands and raced off home.

By morning the poem was ready. When Opanas recited it to the plump check-out lady in the shop, she wept and said:

“Beautiful. Especially the last lines: ‘My life is not worth a penny, you’ve butchered me without a knife.’ There’s the smell of blood there.”

A month later the poem was published in a magazine.

Future events developed at breakneck speed. The heartless beauty thought that the author of the poem was none other than her unlucky lover. She immediately returned his love.

“Oh, my Ovid,” she pressed herself to his chest.

“What Ovid are you talking about?” the lad looked wide-eyed at her.

“But didn’t you write this?” the worshipper of muses opened the magazine.

“No... It’s the first time I’ve seen it...”

“Why, you...”

And she hit him on the bridge of the nose with the heavy periodical.

The female criminal was detained at the inquiry office, where she was attempting to obtain the address of Opanas Shvornia. And thus the police rescued his unique talent for posterity.

Student Years (Diaries)

A week before my departure I was relieved of all duties about the house. Mother tried to keep me close to her as much as possible and occasionally cried when she thought I couldn't see. But I had itchy feet. I wanted to go somewhere far away into the unknown. Dashing off to the club and I pranced about doing the *hopak*, danced the "apple" and various polkas *ad nauseum*. At night I scribbled rhymes and gave free rein to my imagination.

For days on end my friend Hrysha and I disappear down by the river. We would return just before sunset, hungry and exhausted. Then followed evening parties, laughter, more laughter, dancing and the accordion. And after all this I would stand next to Mariyka's stile and tell her stories about the constellations. Everyone thought I was "keen on her", but I was simply settling affairs of the heart for my bosom buddy. I have no idea, whether Mariyka realized this.

And several days later our house filled with commotion – people came to see me off, they brought bottles, stuffed with corncobs. The smell of bootleg vodka pervaded the air, people were drawn to song – and things went into a spin. Everyone envied me a little and at the same time they pitied me. Their respect and love for me was expressed in their desire that I drink a glass of spirits poured by them personally, and I obliged them. I drank and somehow remained sober. Obviously I was nervous. Then we went about the village, yelling and chattering away, teasing the dogs and kissing girls goodbye.

Hrysha kept a tight hold on me. Probably because he could not walk on his own two feet. And my cousin Alyosha – a hulk of a guy and a very strong fellow – playfully pulled fence posts out of the ground and smashed them in a business-like way against the telephone poles. Actually I was more worried that in a sudden display of affection he might want to embrace me. I was afraid, not because I had no faith in doctors, just that I didn't want to set off for Kyiv with broken ribs.

Everything was as if in a dream.

* * *

A day later I got off the Kharkiv train at Kyiv Railway Station. Up until then I had never believed that a person could become so hopelessly lost in a crowd. In the village I had learnt to remember every new face. But here there were such a sea of faces, that I soon had a splitting headache.

I entered the university carrying a large wooden suitcase, valiantly withstanding the doorman's contemptuous gaze. I remember the first friendship I struck up. A young fellow came up to me – for some reason I took him for a senior student – and he said to me very unceremoniously, with a hint of arrogance:

"Greetings, brother! Come to university?"

His gestures were jerky and nervous.

"Aha. Greetings!"

"Which faculty?"

"Philology."

"Ah, a colleague! Which department?"

"Journalism."

"Bosom buddy! And which year?"

"Well, first year," I blurted out mechanically by now.

There followed several heartfelt exclamations, an attempt at embracing me and a long, pompous tirade, from which I understood that the "bosom buddy" still wasn't sure whether he had been accepted into university.

"Do you write poems?" the bosom buddy suddenly asked in Russian. "Yeah, I forgot to introduce myself – Vladimir."

"Vasyl. I've written a poem or two. And you?"

"Of course! I made a fool of literature," he continued in Russian.

This was V.Krinko, my future fellow classmate, a poet who was rather more funny than he was interesting. These self-deprecating words of his were the first and last

ones which I heard uttered by him. Later on he only boasted, although awkwardly and stupidly.

* * *

Room forty-four, to which I was assigned, turned out to be occupied. So the superintendent squeezed me into room fifty.

“Stay here a few days. Then we’ll transfer you elsewhere.”

I was afraid to contradict him. In the evening all my room mates assembled – there were about a dozen of them. It turned out all were literateurs. Volodymyr, whom I had already met, opened a notebook as thick as a Bible and began to yell out poems with pathos. His namesake, a playwright, rambled on about his connections with writers and savoured his own plays. Vania, a tall and thin fellow, and an even greater “hick” than me, read his epistle to President Trumann, challenging him to a duel. Everyone was enthusiastic, yelling out, trying to prove something.

This spectacle shook me up. I saw that their poems, just like their banter, were worthless. This was clear as day to me. And I decided that my writing was also stupid, except that I hadn’t realized this, the way they had. That evening I promised myself never to show anyone my poems.

Such was my first step toward civilization.

* * *

My acquaintance with the students in my year left me even more anxious. I understood that there would be no frank and easy-going relationships with anyone.

In the evening I dived into bed, buried my face in my pillow and bit my lips to stop myself from crying. Now I was inexorably drawn back to the village. I wanted to drop everything, to dash back home, to go off with Hrysha to collect acorns, to rummage about in the dry autumn leaves, to bake potatoes in a fire and chase after girls in the bushes. And in the evenings...

Eh, those autumn evenings in the Poltava backwoods! How I missed them!

* * *

I never did become close friends with anyone in first year. I liked Yacheikin, but I was scared of him, since he was a Kievite, after all. And back then we were very different people.

I remembered the two Perepadia brothers fairly well. But only because I didn’t like them. [Mykola] Som evoked nothing but contempt in me.

I could only chat more or less openly with “tiny” Kiporenko. But the only thing we had in common was the saucepan in which we cooked our meals.

All the same I did have some friends. A warm, semi-jovial relationship survived with my former classmate Andriy. We engaged in laid-back banter with Kolomiyets. There was something familiar and close about them. But the class as a whole remained distant and alien.

* * *

Second year at university was ill-fated. I became close with K. Everything turned out somehow plain and primitive. It began with poems and finished with kissing. Then there were many disappointments and perhaps hore. Her dull attempts at annoying me merely provoked pity in me. At such moments there were waves of some idiotic kind of tenderness, and for some reason I figured this was love. She was obviously drawn to me because of my rebelliousness and facile pessimism. The denouement of this love affair was sustained in a tragi-comical way/plani.

Now it all seems so funny and superfluous.

* * *

Once Kalikhevysh sat down beside me by chance. I looked at him askance – I was a little mistrusting of him, somewhat afraid. Oles was an intelligent lad, and what’s more important, an original fellow. Even his face, hands, gait and gestures were unusual and a little strange. We began talking about poetry. I showed him two of my poems. Oles praised one of them and berated me over the other. Thus the satge was set for our acquaintance.

My friendship with him resulted in many good things. We spoke rarely, but I think always frankly. And I soon came to like Oles – both for the fact that he liked my poems, and for his criticism and his simplistic, somewhat romantic nature.

I awfully liked to hear him speak about love, about people, even when he accused me of non-existent sins.

Crusts of Thoughts (Diaries)

“Reading other people’s diaries is the peak of villainy.”

(Simpleton Wilson’s unknown aphorism)

18.09.1962

I am beginning this diary not because I want to play at being great. What I need is a friend with whom I can share every single one of my doubts. I know of no more loyal and honest a bosom buddy than paper.

Planet Earth has been bearing me along for twenty-eight years around the sun. There are very few wonderful and good things, which I have managed to achieve in this time. However, I have learnt to stay silent and to be vigilant, when I should have been screaming out loudly. And what is even more frightening – I have learnt to be insincere.

Lying must be my profession. I have an innate talent for lying. There are three categories of liars: one type lie to obtain moral or material advantage, the second type lie for the sake of lying and the third type serve lying as an artform. They, in fact, invent or conjecture logical ends to truth. These liars, from my liar’s perspective, appear to be honourable. They are literature’s reserve. Without them life would become boring, without them truth would become scant and dreary, nauseous and petty. As it is, honorable lies ennoble truth.

Guided by this, I have most often resorted to the third type of lying. People like me are also needed in literature – with our weak thoughts we will fertilize the ground out of which a giant will grow. A future Taras [Shevchenko] or [Ivan] Franko. I await him, as a believer awaits the coming of Christ. I believe I will be lucky enough to hear a joyous hosanna in honour of his coming. I only pray that he does not demean us, small unskilled labourers of poetry that we are. For he will grow out of us.

I could have served literature better, had nature not endowed me with a poor musical ear and defective sight. I cannot see all shades of colour and cannot hear all sounds. Music is my torment. I shall never develop enough to be able to deeply fathom it. I shall never attend that festival of hues, from which Saryan returns a happy man. I can’t even truly envy the Saryans and Shostakoviches, just as an illiterate man cannot envy Leo Tolstoy. But he can envy his neighbour, who is able to sign his own name.

19.09.1962

Children sometimes unwittingly say great things. I remember: a year ago my young son, Oles, and I were out walking near the Kazbek Market. Spying the despot’s statue, he asked me:

“Daddy, who’s that?”

“Stalin.”

“For a moment he looked at the statue and asked, as if absent-mindedly:

“Why did he clamber up there?”

That’s true, Stalin did not walk up onto the pedestal, people did not place him there, he clambered up there himself – because of treachery and villainy he clambered up bloodily and insolently, like all executioners. This tiger, who subsisted on human flesh, would have died of rage today to learn what a great find his primitive mass-produced statues have become for collectors of scrap metal.

It is frightening when idolization and fame turn to posthumous shame in one's lifetime. It is not in fact fame, but merely a toy for adult children to enjoy. The only ones unable to understand this are those, who are weak in mind and spirit.

27.09.1962

The writer Mykola Vinhranovsky flashed through our city of Cherkasy today. I first met him in 1958. Probably in September, for the following day we sat in a small room he had rented on Kalinin Square and relished some grapes. We almost became close friends, but then followed years of separation. In four years he had managed to completely forget our meeting. I hadn't. For he had made a profound and strong impression on me, even back then. I believed in him from our very first meeting and consider that I was not mistaken.

Be you damned, worthless money! You turned me into a slave of the newspaper and I couldn't go with Mykola to Kaniv back then. I had not experienced such personal loss for a long time, since there had never really been anyone to lose.

8.10.1962

Three days and a hundred impressions later. Vinhranovsky, Pianov, Kolomiyets and your sinful servant launched a cavalry attack on the cities of Kryvy Rih and Kirovohrad. Although I was unable to read my poems even once before the crowded auditoriums, I was left satisfied. Mykola [Vinhranovsky] is undoubtedly a tribune. The words of his poems burst with passion and ideas. Beside him one's soul became deeper.

We argued with Pianov about my poem "Roses in Mourning". In my opinion, one can't confuse the Madonna created by artists with the inherently religious Virgin Mary. Hypocrites dressed in the robes of the illustrious Christ and His Mother have become violators of human flesh and spirit. When even the most wonderful legend (and I consider Jesus and the Virgin Mary creations of genius) becomes a means of spiritual repression, then I can't even begin to judge the "dramatis personae" of the legend, without reference to what fanatics do, cloaking themselves in these names. No highly honourable and highly obscure edicts of any teaching can serve progress when they become a reference standard. The immaculate Virgin Mary is worthy of eliciting rapture, but, frankly, not emulation. The renunciation of carnal joys is unnatural and therefore cruel and reactionary.

Besides, in my poem "Roses in Mourning" I had no intention at all of "toppling the gods". I am merely coming out against the new religion, against those hypocrites who, not without some success, are attempting to convert Marxism into a religion, into a Procrustean bed for science, the arts and love. Sad examples have appeared in the fields of cybernetics and genetics, there are tumultuous flushes of toadstools in literature and art, unending calls for sacrifices and endless promises of a "future paradise" – is this all not a far cry from the tragedy of Bruno and Galileo, from the writing of psalms and iconography, from monasteries and the Lord's hereafter?

If Marxism is unable to withstand the violent onslaught of dogmatism it is doomed to become a religion. No teaching should monopolize humanity's spiritual life. Even though Einstein made discoveries, which shook the foundations of science, he was nevertheless not a political adherent of mine.

16.10.1962

There is nothing more frightening than absolute power in the hands of narrow-minded people.

The head of the collective farm in the village of Yeremenkove yelled at the meeting in impotence and rage:

"I'll give you another 1933!"*

Of course no one even thought of grabbing the ratbag by the collar. And with this single phrase the idiot will destroy the results of the work of dozens of intelligent people. If our leaders had more sense, brawlers such as this would be gazing up at the sky through iron bars.

*In reference to a forced famine in Ukraine in that year (transl.).

21.10.1962

I simply can't stand bureaucratic, patented, satiated wisdom. Whatever quotes dullards might use to prop up their intellectual ceiling, it will still be too low for normal people. Just as space is unfathomable without movement, so poetry is unfathomable without ideas. What kind of space is it, if you can't move through it? What kind of poetry is it, if it doesn't think? Poetry is beautiful wisdom.

How shallow our humour has become, how squalid our satire has become! Rockers, flea-market traders, tight pants and trendy haircuts – does this warrant the attention of serious people, wasting words and emotions on such rubbish? And how much we've already grinned at bad literary consultants! I have never even tried to write any deep and meaningful replies to shallow literary works. You can't dive too deep into a puddle, even if you are a Japanese pearl diver.

I know so little about genetics. The few booklets that I have come across are far too superficial. Who can advise me what to read?

I must write a poem about Herostratos. It would be very apt right now. Earth is teeming with Herostratoses.

09.11.1962

The holidays have ended and I am ashamed to recall my behaviour yesterday. I acted like a real ratbag, even insulting people. What a pity no one was moved to punch me in the nose! I must learn to control myself and wag my tongue a lot less, instead using my brain more.

Belated remorse is always such a pose, but I have no other avenue. I must learn to see myself from the side.

21.06.1963

I haven't opened this notebook for almost half a year, although some of the things, which have transpired these last six months need to be recorded.

I almost became asphyxiated by the powdery smoke of the ideological battles. Realism has won yet another victory, not through artistic works, but through administrative measures. In general, I think the danger of formalist insanity was trumped up. At least in Ukraine I haven't come across a single fan of abstractionism or neo-futurism. As always there is the real danger of formalist stupidity in literature. Is this not formalism, when hundreds of half-baked writers suck at a dozen or two so-called eternal ideas according to previously prepared plans: things such as love of labour, respect for parents, love for your neighbour. Formalism begins where ideas end.

If a poet does not produce new ideas and emotions, he becomes a formalist, no matter how much he advertises his so-called allegiance to realism. There can be no grovelling realism. There is the realism which Shevchenko served and then there is the realism which utilizes the services of Dmyterko. These are two different things! The dmyterkos are not the heirs of our long-suffering Literature. They live off it, not for it.

I can hardly be accused of formalism, yet they refrain from printing anything.

06.07.1963

I don't know if everyone has this problem or it's only me. Often doubts destroy any certainty I might have in my fortitude. I have no idea how I will bear up to real trials

and tribulations. Will I remain a human being, or will fear blind not only my eyes, but also my brain? The loss of fortitude is a loss of human dignity, which I place above all else. Even above life itself. And yet so many people, intelligent and talented, have saved their life by foregoing their dignity, and turned life into a useless vegetative state. That is the most frightening thing.

The soul craves upheaval, while the intellect fears this.

Last Sunday we were in Odesa where the local blockheads entertained us with their idiotic horror: lest something should happen. In fact we were forbidden to take the stage at an evening to commemorate Shevchenko. It seems some people are still afraid of Taras [Shevchenko]. Philistines of the revolution.

22.07.1963

I must have started to fade away. In actual fact I am physically practically helpless, although morally I am not yet quite exhausted. I feel no fear when I think of death. Perhaps, because it is still far away? It's a strange thing: I don't want to die and yet I have no special thirst for living. These last ten years have been more than enough for me.

Ironically I look back on my life: soon I will be twenty-nine, but what have I achieved, what have I begun to do that is significant? I haven't lived a proper life, only experiencing a string of petty troubles, petty failures, petty disappointments and petty successes!

No, I had imagined quite a different life for myself. Those who want very little from life are so lucky – they will never be disappointed by it. The simplest and shortest path to so-called happiness is to become a philistine. A brain capable of giving birth to thoughts is incapable of making its owner happy.

03.09.1963

Summer, brimming with physical and moral exhaustion, is now behind me. Autumn is on the doorstep, and I am looking with hope into its crystal-clear eyes. It has been a meagre, miserly autumn this summer! What can one expect of such a beggar-woman? She is lying just to get a crust of bread.

I spent the whole summer on a deserted island. If it hadn't been for the trip to Kaniv to the *Zhaivoronok* (Skylark) festival, there would have been nothing to remember it by. In Kaniv I met the artists Alla Horska and H.Zubchenko. I got on especially well with Alla Horska.

My friends are lying low, I haven't heard a word from any of them. The printed media has become even more dull and audacious. The newspaper *Literaturna Ukraina* has castrated my article, the magazine *Ukraina* is making a mockery of my poems. Each lackey does whatever he pleases. How can one fail but to radiate gratefulness, how can one fail not to pray each evening and each morning for those who have given us such freedoms. To this I can add that in April my poems were pulled from *Zmina*, butchered in *Zhovten'* and then I received refusals from the magazines *Dnipro* and *Vitchyzna*.

Ay,ay,ay, such joy! We're all under the press.
All this is necessary for our progress.

05.09.1963

Yesterday I wrote *Kazka pro Duryla* (Fairy Tale About Dupe). It was written in one breath, though some parts were penned earlier.

Now I feel even more solitary in Cherkasy, for the collective I worked with at the newspaper *Molod' Cherkashchyny* is no more. My friendship with Nehoda and Ohloblin has cooled irreversibly. I was needed by one of them as long as I could help him, the other turned out to be nothing more than a weathercock. I have no doubt that he will now attack me with the same vigour that he previously praised me. He has in

fact already demonstrated this from several podiums at various meetings. However – we must get on with our own life.

20.09.1963

When I talk of a “desert island” and my solitude, it has nothing to do with contempt toward other people. The fact that I have hardly any friends in Cherkasy doesn’t mean that I consider everyone to be duds, undeserving of my attention, etc. (my wife keeps telling me this). It’s just that I haven’t been able to find kindred spirits among them, and friendship, of course, cannot survive on rationality alone.

I recently met Bohdan Horyn.

I think my writing has become worse, than it was a year ago. My mind and my heart have become lazy.

Interview given by Symonenko after the publication of his book *Tysya i hrim*

What can I say about myself?

That I have lived so little and done so little. That I want to be a human being, to do wonderful and kind things, to write poems, which can be rightly called poetry. And if I rarely manage this, it’s not because I don’t want to, but because I have insufficient skill and scant knowledge.

Most of all I like my land, my people, poetry and... the village of Biyivtsi in Poltava Province, where mother gave birth to me.

I detest death.

Most of all I fear insincere friends. I have nothing more to say about myself. I am presently working on another collection of poetry. I very much want it to be better than the first one.

1962