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HOTEL BUKOVYNA

By

Rebecca Bosshart

Bachelor of Arts in Journalism

University of Nevada, Reno

May 2002

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

Master of Fine Arts - Creative Writing

English Department

College of Liberal Arts

The Graduate College

University of Nevada, Las Vegas

August 2014

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THE GRADUATE COLLEGE

We recommend the thesis prepared under our supervision by

Rebecca Bosshart

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Department of English

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August 2014

ABSTRACT

Hotel Bukovyna

By Becky Bosshart

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This collection of short stories and first chapter of a novella take place in the historical area of Bukovyna, the beech tree land, partly located in Chernivetska region, western Ukraine. On the edge of it, or under it, or traveling to and from it, in contemporary time. I've been occupied with "the outsider," represented here, and where the seven stories reside, by the giant grande dame tourist hotel on Main Street, across from Shevchenko Park, in Chernivtsi, the region's city center. The occupants: the outsider looking in and around. Outsiders looking at other outsiders. An outsider being welcomed in. Most of these stories are realistic, concerned with the development of democratic Ukraine and the preservation of its people and culture. I've pulled poetry, song, fabulist elements, and characters from the national literature and folklore, all in a quest to convey this complicated region.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This collection was written while I was a Peace Corps Ukraine volunteer from 2012 to 2014, and directly after our evacuation in late February 2014, with the support of the UNLV Master's International Program, the Peace Corps Ukraine TEFL Project, Chernivtsi National University, all its professors, staff and students, and my advisers Douglas Unger, Richard Wiley, Dr. Maile Chapman, and Dr. Paul Werth.

No one stands alone in *The Process*. This thesis is no exception. I was inspired by the works of several great writers, including (but not limited to): Mark Twain, particularly *The Innocents Abroad* and his short story "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County"; L. Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*; Nikolai Gogol's "St. John's Eve," from *The Collected Tales of Nikolai Gogol*, translated from the Russian by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky; Bukovynian native Maria Matios's *Sweet Darusya: A Tale of Two Villages*, translated from the Ukrainian by Michael M. Naydan with Olha Tytarenko; and Oksana Zabuzhko's *Fieldwork in Ukrainian Sex*, translated from the Ukrainian by Halyna Hryn.

This thesis was reworked and edited while I was living off the kindness of family, Robert and Dee Bosshart, and friends, including: Amy Kingsley and Justin Yurkanin and their sons Ike and Will; Jamison Crabtree; Mary Martha and Charles Morton and their children Owen and Clair; Ashley Siebels and Matt Hayes; Desiree Belcher; Aurora Brackett; Tia Taymar and Mark Danner and their son Zenn; Cindi Reed; Molly O'Donnell and David Hardy; Gina Quaranto and her son Gabe; Brittany Bronson; and Doug Unger and Carola Raab. With much love and gratitude.

You'll find words here from Chernivetska natives, including iconic songwriter/composer Volodymyr Ivasyuk and distinguished poet Mykhaylo Tkach. Translation assistance was provided by Anastasiia Karalash, of Kelmentsi, Elena Novosadska, of Chernivtsi, and Tamela Sotula. Help with cultural understanding came from Iryna Krupska, Volodya Kondratyuk, Lena Nastenka, and all the Peace Corps training staff in Kyiv, and Michael Lukashchuk and Kateryna Kurysh, both of Chernivtsi. Many friends contributed anecdotes and ideas to this manuscript, or just simply were inspiring: Mary-Kathryn Hart, Nathalie Hanlet, Dan Thompson, Erin Martin, Stephanie Harp, Allie Holtzer, Suzanne Gaboury Norman, Paula Adams, Mary Miller, Sandra Joy Russell, Anna Goss, Kristen Nesbitt, Kathyne Delcarpio, Zoe Astrid Wyatt, and Erica Anzalone.

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NEW TALES FROM THE OLD COUNTRY AND THE ANCIENT CITY

Kolobok¹

In the country, in a region far from the capital live a granny and grandpa. We can't exactly call them poor because they live in a red brick mansion with a pink basilica dome, a silver plated spire, turrets, and their own chapel. But we couldn't call them rich, either. They live off money sent to them from their daughter, who works in Italy while they take care of her children. She's been sending euro back home to care for the family, and to construct the big shell of a manor into a home, bit by bit, for all the family. But recently, costs are growing more and more and the money covering less and less. In the meantime, her children are growing fast and eating a lot. So *babucya* and *diduyc* go hungry.

That morning *dida* comes into the kitchen, one of only three rooms of the big house they use, with buckets from the well. He pours the water into the chrome sink for his wife to clean the dishes. In the sink sit the *kasha* bowls from the boy and girl, now away at school. His hairy brow wrinkles even more.

“*Baba*, can you at least make us one bread roll?”

“With what should I bake it?” *baba* asks with consternation. The smooth skin and plump red cheeks of her pretty maiden days have long since turned wrinkled like a

¹ Translated and adapted from the Ukrainian fairy tale. The word *kolobok* has no translation except to say that it means the little animated bread roll from this tale, which strikes cords of similarity to our little gingerbread man. I wanted to practice translating fairy tales featuring animal protagonists for several reasons. First, to get as far away from reality as possible. Nothing's more happily detached than the wonderful world of fabulist creatures. I also wanted to translate stories I thought would be more manageable since my language skills were elementary. But even with these motivations in mind, nothing is ever as easy as you think it will be.

balled-up newspaper. Her dark, glossy hair has thinned to wisps she hides beneath a floral headscarf. Her petite hands are now as wrinkled and spotted as *dida*'s jowls, but her sweet melodic voice hasn't changed one bit. Her every phrase sounds like a song, a deep and melancholic tone that stops animals in their tracks, ears perked to commiserate with *baba*'s plight, as if the pigs and chickens could sit at the table sharing their troubles over dill-flavored vodka. But of course, they'd already sat on the table, which *dida* remembers with a wisp of longing for long-ago eaten meals. *Baba*'s songs bring back bittersweet memories of youth and gaiety to the old grandfather — especially when he's hungry.

“Oho, *baba*, did you scrape out the flour basket and sweep the bottom of the grain bin? Maybe you will get just enough to make one bun.” He expels a great deal of energy in saying this. He plops down at the table and leans over his rickety knees. His joints make a sound that reminds him of cracking chicken bones.

Just so *baba* can say that she's tried everything (and grannies do like to remind others how much they endure), she does exactly this. The old woman scrapes out the flour basket, her nails catching every speck. Then she gets down on her knees — she thinks of the sound of fat crackling in an oiled pan — and sweeps the bottom of the grain bin with a short bristled brush. To her surprise, she manages to collect two handfuls of flour. She looks at her husband and wonders what magic he's hiding. But this isn't the time to think about supernatural forces, not when there is something to eat. She kneads the dough with sour cream, bakes the roll and puts it on the window sill to cool.

The bun sits and sits and sits...and then it starts to roll all by itself. *Dida* and *baba* jump up and run to catch it in their outstretched hands, but the bread acts as though it is alive! The roll escapes through their fingers and out the open window.

“Look at that,” *dida* cries. “Bread is life!”

They both watch the little bread roll across the wide dirt lawn, the only sound in their ears the hollow grumble of emptiness.

Kolobok rolls through the family’s upturned potato and beet rows and up to the iron fence circling the house. He looks up at it and around himself in wonder. He feels he’s entering a wilderness he only dreamt about from his window sill. *Kolobok* squeezes himself through the bars — which isn’t too difficult because he’s still soft. He looks down the street at all the other homes owned by families who have children working far away. Each home looks like a *pysanky* egg² — every one colorful and different from the next, yet made with the same materials. *Kolobok* looks back at his home, where he started out as just a bit of powder scraped from the bottom of a basket. He feels fear, but also excitement. *Kolobok* is proud that he has just finished cooling, and look at him now! He’s already leaving home all on his own. On the country road he begins to sing:

“I was scraped from the basket,

I was swept from the grain bin,

² The root verb *pysaty* means to write. Ukrainian Easter eggs are a revered folk art in which the ends of the egg are punctured so the yolk and egg white can be blown out. The artist then uses a wax pen to decorate the shell with geometric patterns, symbols and pictures before dipping them in progressively darker dyes, depending on the color palette the artist is trying to achieve. Essentially the artist is “writing” on the egg. To preserve them, the eggs are often cracked open and reinforced on the inside with papier-mâché.

kneaded with *smetana*³, and cooled by the window,

where I could see this beautiful land!

I fled from *baba* and I fled from *dida!*”

The bun sings and rolls out of the neighborhood.

Soon *Kolobok* comes to a wide green meadow dotted with bird cherry trees, which seem to float over the rippling grass. The bun stops and teeters back and forth, in awe of the beauty of the land that had once been so distant from him. He swears that the hungry *baba* and *dida* will never catch him. He’s finally free to see the world. No more basket. No more bin. Nobody will catch him! Then from the billows of meadow grass, a hare jumps onto the path. The hare is finely dressed in a lavender gown, Geox suede sneakers and many glittering gems about her ears. She is as beautiful as the countryside. She sings her own song so sweetly it takes *Kolobok* a minute to digest her words:

“Little bun, little bun, I will eat you.”

“Don’t eat me, little hare, I will sing you a song!” *Kolobok* says frantically.

“I am scraped from the basket,

swept from the grain bin,

mixed with *smetana*, cooled by the window!

I fled from *baba*, I fled from *dida*, and I will flee from you, hare!”

The hare jumps in front of the little bun, her sharp nails out, but only one chips his brown crust — he’s already speeding down the path.

³ Sour cream is often homemade in country households.

“Why does everyone want to eat little me?” *Kolobok* wonders. He has little time to relax before a greater danger presents itself. Out of the wilderness comes a wolf with thick, dark fur. The wolf seems so gangster, so much cooler than the bun could ever hope to be. The youngster slows his roll. The wolf gazes down at the bun, his eyes aloof yet interested, his teeth long, white and pointed. “I can tell there are many things you don’t know, little bun,” the wolf says.

“I know who I am,” *Kolobok* says.

“But you are so small and weak,” the wolf growls. “If you join me and my pack, you will be strong.” He pulls his cigarette from his black lips and blows smoke over the bun. *Kolobok* rolls back from the smoke, which makes him cough. *Kolobok* sees his reflection in the wolf’s orb eyes.

“First, you should hear my song:

I’m scraped from the basket,

swept from the grain bin,

mixed with *smetana*!

I fled from *baba*, I fled from *dida*, I fled from hare and I know another thing, from you, wolf, I’ll also flee!”

The wolf leaps at the bun, but the bun is so small he easily dodges its big paws.

Kolobok is safely away before he starts to sing his song again. He thinks: do I attract so many hungry animals because I smell like sweet *smetana*? Or is it because I look so content? *Kolobok* doesn’t know.

The bun continues rolling down the road and singing his song. He sees new things. He passes a beech tree with an owl sitting on a low branch, staring with its wide eyes. The owl reminds the little roll of *dida*. *Kolobok* tries to think only about his future, but it's hard because he knows so much more about his past: granny and grandfather and the basket and the bin. *Kolobok* hears a strange noise in the forest. It's a loud, roaring scream. A bear sits on a stump in a forest clearing, issuing a challenge to all the animals around him — daring them to take on the king of the wood. The bear wears an unmarked military uniform with a tall hat. The little bun isn't just watching in amazement, he laughs at seeing this beast trying to go to war with the whole forest.

The bear is not happy at being laughed at.

“Little bun, little bun, I will eat you!”

Kolobok wises up quickly, for he's starting to get used to this.

“Don't eat me, bear. Instead, let me entertain you with a song!” *Kolobok* tries to make his voice as big as possible, for he's a little bun, and there isn't any more yeast to come.

“I'm scraped from the basket — swept from the grain bin — mixed with *smetana* — cooled in the window! I fled from *baba*, I fled from *dida*, I fled from hare and I fled from wolf, and from you, bear, I'll certainly escape!”

The bear is huge, the largest thing the bun has ever seen, and its breath smells of boiling oil. *Kolobok* spins under the beast's legs, though he feels the snorting inhale as the bear takes away some of the roll's sour cream smell, like his very soul is being sucked into the bear's moist nostrils.

The little bun gets a safe distance before he ponders the murderous intention of the bear. *Kolobok* wonders why the massive beast is not satisfied with the abundance of food around him. Look and see! The bear has the honeycombs in the trees. He has the flopping fish in the stream. He has the cherries and apples heavy on the branches ready to fall into its paws. Why should the bear have need, or even want for more? *Kolobok* doesn't know and it does trouble him. He figures then that this is going to be his life, forever running from those who live in a forest of plenty, and also those who live in want. He must always be quicker than everyone else. He wonders how he will do this. But then *Kolobok* remembers his success in escaping *baba* and *dida*. They were so hungry, yet *Kolobok* rolled right through them. Then he thinks of the hare. She had such beauty and so many fine possessions — but she was no match for the bun. Then he escaped the mightiest beasts in all the land, the wolf and the bear. They were slow compared to the swiftness of *Kolobok*!

It's in this state of mind that the little bread roll comes across the fox.

The fox skips down the path, smiling sweetly, seemingly surprised by the presence of the bread roll. She holds her paw in the air, which *Kolobok* thinks is a greeting, and eyes his height and girth. Her russet fur shimmers in the sun. Her wide blue eyes laugh, tempestuous and crafty.

“Why, hello there, little bun,” she says. “I have heard of you.”

“Oho, have you?” *Kolobok* is very pleased. “What have you heard?”

“I heard from the owl that you are so attractive. I heard you have ruddy pink cheeks.”

“See for yourself.” *Kolobok* smiles.

“I heard that you smell like sweet *smetana*.”

“Smell for yourself.”

“I heard that you are the most desired in the forest. But I think this cannot be true! I don’t see how such a little roll has been able to escape so many strong forest animals.”

The bun throws out his chest and settles into the ground. “Everything you hear is true, and I have this scratch upon my crust to prove it!”

The fox inspects the scratch. “So you have.”

“It is true that all manner of beast chase me for a bite to eat, but I am running for my life, so I will always be able to escape. It is also true that I am the best at singing for my life, fox-sister, and I will prove it. I will sing you my song. You will see that I am the bravest in the land.

“I am scraped from the basket,
swept from the grain bin,
mixed with sour cream! I fled from *baba*.

I fled from *dida*,

I fled from the hare

and I fled from the wolf, and from the bear

and from you, fox, I will also escape!”

The fox laughs, her paw to her wide mouth. “You are correct. It’s a nice song, perfect for this land. Can you sit on my nose and sing it louder so I may hear it more clearly? I’m old and I would like to hear every word from such a brave bun.”

The bun jumps on the sly fox’s nose and as quick as shutting a window — bam!
— she swallows *Kolobok* whole.

The Rooster with the Golden Cockscomb⁴

It’s here in the forest where we find a cat, a thrush⁵ and a rooster, who could also be called a cock or a cockerel, living together in a cottage.⁶

“These animals are living in a *хатинці*,” my language tutor Anastasia said. “In English, a hut.”

Ukrainians used variations of the word *xam* to mean any small habitation or place of business. In Ukraine, there was a popular fast-food chain restaurant called Potato Hut. Incidentally, this was where I met Anastasia every week for tutoring, and definitely not a place I thought of as a “hut.” So I, in turn, couldn’t agree with this translation. In English, huts are, you know, a hovel or a shack. Survivalists build huts as temporary shelters when they’re living off the grid. Thankfully, when it comes to fairy tales, you don’t have to just rely on the words. The artist illustration for my version shows the animals living like furry lumberjacks. I asked Anastasia: “Can I use the word ‘cabin?’” It turns out the

⁴ The title of this tale could be more literally translated as “The Gold Cock,” or “The Cock With the Gold Comb” since word order isn’t restrictive in Ukrainian. I decided against both of these titles because in English they could so easily be misinterpreted.

⁵ A thrush is a type of songbird with a particularly loud song — though it be but little it sounds fierce. Ukrainians are proud to invoke the melodic nature of their language, often referring to famous singers (and beautiful women) as songbirds, such as Sofiya Rotaru as the Nightingale from Bukovyna.

⁶ My tutor disagreed with this word choice because Ukrainians don’t think of a cottage the same way as Westerners do. Anastasia told me the animals are living in a modest home in the country, something small and quaint. In her country, cottages are *really nice, big houses*.

closest word to “cabin” in Ukrainian is the name of the space used for the shower. We compromised on “log cabin.”

As I was saying, here we have found ourselves deeper inside the ancient forest,⁷ tempted by plot to follow the foolish bread boy as he got deeper and deeper into trouble. And no doubt there’s still danger here. Hardy weeds stand blackly against the dense oaks, willows and fir trees. Breathing is stifled in this thickness. Moss grows upon the remains of an old settlement, lavender and hyacinth sprout from its skeleton. Ferns grow so giant here, one can mistake them, from a distance, as the heads of giant extinct reptiles. We find a cat, a thrush and a rooster living together in a log cabin. As the days start to turn cold, Cat and Thrush decide to leave the home to go into the forest to cut fire wood. They ask Rooster to stay and guard the home, ordering him to beware of Fox.⁸ It wasn’t a matter of *if* the Fox will come, it was *when*.

“Don’t even talk to him, don’t let him know that you are alone,” Cat says. “Don’t even look out the window.”

Rooster reassures them, he will do exactly as they say. And with that, the stronger members of the little family are off to do the hard labor. These creatures share the household duties, keeping it warm and safe from evil. The three animal friends live so well together that all of the other forest animals are jealous of their harmony. Though it

⁷ In Ukrainian this is *старий ліс*, transliterated as *stary lis* but sounds like “starry lease,” as in, I have rental property in the celestial realm. Or perhaps when a celebrity has a short-term tenancy on fame (and isn’t that every celebrity, really?). As it happens to be, this fairy tale is involved with the precarious nature of habitation, particularly when the home is beset by a predator, and if (and how) salvation is achieved.

⁸ Why is it that these tales always have a fox as the antagonist? I guess that’s the moral the kids must learn: always be on the lookout for the one who is smarter (i.e., quicker *in wits*), and hungrier.

already seems to me that Rooster is the weak link, what with his pea-size brain, therefore the perfect victim for a cunning fox.

Sure enough, Fox learns through her⁹ forest network that the Cat and the Thrush have left the cabin. Perhaps the other forest animals, green with envy of the hospitable trio, watch from the tree line with glee as Fox runs to the home to tear apart this family. Fox seduces Rooster by entertaining him. She sings under the Rooster's window:

“Півнику, півнику,¹⁰

Золотий гребінчику,

Масляна голівка,

Buttery head

Шовкова борідка,

Silk beard

Визирни в віконце,

Дам тобі горошку.”¹¹

⁹ Shocked by the pronoun? I'll get to that later, but you can see in the previous quote that even Cat was expecting a male fox.

¹⁰ I was quite surprised to find that Pages transforms Ukrainian print into italic cursive just how it should be. It took me months of study to remember Ukrainian cursive, and even now the cursive *м* and *т, в* and *б* still throw me. The cursive *м* stays looking like an *м* but is more pointy on top and the cursive *т* is a more rounded *м* (you can see it in the word “hut.” To make it even more difficult, the lowercase Ukrainian print for D (д) is a *g* (though it looks like a *d* in this word processing document), and the vowel *и* in print is the *u* in cursive, which makes the *й* a *u* with an accent mark above it.

¹¹ I was eager to save the songs in this fairy tale — the intertwining of narrative and melody is such a strong part of Ukrainian folk life. Sort of like how American children grow up with Disney animals singing along with our beautiful cartoon heroines. Except Ukrainians do their own singing and all sound and look like our beautiful cartoon heroines.

Anastasia and I had a good laugh about this funny little song. The fox is calling out to the rooster with the golden cockscomb, saying he has *such* a buttery head, *such* a silk beard, wouldn't he stick his head out the window to get some peas? Anastasia was delighted by the phrases "buttery head" and "silk beard"; they made her laugh, which may be the reason children enjoy this tale so much: like most fables, it's ridiculous. Many old tales such as this one have words Anastasia has never seen in Ukrainian except in these stories.¹²

In Fox's song, she calls on Rooster by appealing to his vanity. She throws out descriptions that wouldn't tempt me, but then again I don't have a pea-size brain. We know this is exactly what Fox hopes, because if Rooster does stick out his head, Fox promises to reward him with peas, *zopouky, horoshky*. Rooster is alone the whole day, so upon hearing the gentle voice, he sticks his head out the window. It seems for Rooster, boredom is more of an agent than self-preservation. Fox grabs and carries him away. Rooster, in his own defense, cries his little head off, beseeching his friends for help:

"The fox is carrying me
Beyond the dark forest,
Beyond the rushing river,

¹² Ukrainian is Anastasia's native language and she prefers to speak it, though she can understand Russian. She was studying for her master's degree in English philology, with French as her secondary language.

Beyond the high mountains, Cat and Thrush, save me!”¹³

Apparently, Rooster learned a little something from his friend Thrush. Cat and Thrush hear him, overtake Fox and steal back their feathered-brained friend, who seems to be as valuable to them as gold.

It was at about this point I realized Anastasia was using the pronoun “she” in reference to the fox.

“Just look at the pictures,” Anastasia said. “She’s wearing a dress. And in these tales, it’s just commonly accepted that *лисичка* is a girl.”

This whole time, I’d been looking at the pictures for help, but the long garment on the fox I’d interpreted as more of a poncho (but with frilly sleeves — what was I thinking?). It’s clearly a dress with a shawl, a very typical accessory for older Ukrainian women. This fox I’d first interpreted as looking like a Western movie bandito was actually more of a *babucya*. So here we have an animal wizened by age and experience expertly using her “gentle voice” to coax the young cock to let down his guard.

Time passes, and again Cat and Thrush decide to return to the forest to gather wood. They order the rooster:

¹³ It’s interesting for me as a writing instructor that Rooster’s plea for help reads like a poem. Poetry is a national pastime here. I was shocked upon attending my first poetry reading at finding a large room at capacity with people from all walks of life (not just the literary types you’d see in America) sticking around as a reading went well past midnight. Anastasia was there with me and she said this is quite common, particularly when you have so many local readers and national names at a popular festival, such as the Meridian Czernowitz. Consequently, I even found my students blending poetry into essay writing, to my bewilderment. In one such instance, I had to explain to a student that her flowery prose, though very Ukrainian and beautiful, would not help her in an American scholarship competition, since Western academia is hardcore on delineating between poetry, prose and nonfiction, perhaps to the detriment of scholastic achievement and the art of all three.

“Now Rooster, we will go even farther,” Thrush says. “Don’t look out the window, because we will not hear you if you cry for help.”

Rooster promises he will not. Cat and Thrush seem to doubt this, and they’re hoping to save Rooster from himself because they ask next:

“Maybe we should cover the window with burlap?”

“Please do not!” Rooster cries. “I want to see the sun!”

I wonder if a burlap curtain would’ve kept out our cunning Fox anyhow.

Fox’s forest network is at it again, because no sooner do Cat and Thrush depart that Fox is at the cabin window again, using the same song as before:

*“Півнику, півнику,
Золотий гребінчику,
Масляна голівка,
Шовкова борідка,
Визирни в віконце,
Дам тобі горошку.”*

This time, Rooster doesn’t bite. Fox tries again:

“Бігли діти,

The children were running,

Розсипали пшеницю.

Scattering wheat.

Кури клюють,

Hens are pecking,

Півникам не дають..."

They do not give it to roosters...

Rooster can't resist. He opens the window and asks: "Ko-ko-ko! Why do they not give some to the roosters?"

And just like that, Fox grabs Rooster and runs.

She used a story with a cliffhanger to interest the rooster. What a storyteller! I think all of us who stream episodic melodramas in whole seasons online can sympathize.¹⁴ Why didn't the hens share with the roosters? And perhaps does this prey on the Rooster's fear? Maybe at that very moment, Rooster himself was scared that his pals were out enjoying the bounty of the forest (wheat and peas for the brave!) while he was alone at home caught up in his own paranoia. We don't know exactly what Rooster is thinking, but we know the result.

Again Rooster cries his little head off, and again he calls out his poetic appeal:

"The fox is carrying me

Beyond the dark forest,

Beyond the rushing river,

Beyond the high mountains.

Cat and Thrush save me!"

¹⁴ Melodramatic cliffhangers are just as beloved in Ukraine. My host mother got me hooked on the Turkish drama *Roxolana: The Magnificent Century*, which she'd first read as novels. I watched the dubbed Ukrainian version, but that did not satiate me. During my first year in Ukraine I watched entire seasons of *South Park*, *True Blood*, *The Vampire Diaries*, *Game of Thrones*, *Doctor Who*, *Downton Abbey*, *Upstairs Downstairs* and *Sherlock* in binge sessions, sometimes over and over again. I read *The Hunger Games* books in a single day. I read eleven books in a series of vampire romance novels over my first summer. The trashier, the better.

Despite the warning that they would not hear him, Cat and Thrush seem to anticipate this progression of events. They catch up with Fox and take back their friend. This time, after bringing him home, they severely scold him: “There is never any peace with you!” Thrush cries.

Perhaps this loving yet exasperated relationship between the parental figures of Cat and Thrush and the inexperienced Rooster mirrors the frustration parents feel with their children as they grow into adulthood. Rooster is right on the edge, where he’s afforded some responsibility (stay home and guard the house), yet he can’t quite leave the home yet, or seem to make the right decisions when he does try. Rooster is a teenager.

Anastasia and I have different concepts of maturity. I’m surprised to find that my university students haven’t left home yet, either literally or in the rite-of-passage metaphorical meaning. She says most of them are not going to until they move permanently to the city (or abroad) for work. Or first get married, but probably not even then. Most young couples live with either a widowed parent or their grandparents even after marriage.

“The students who live in the dorms, or even apartments with friends in the city, will go home to family every weekend. I do. I prefer to go home.”

My American version of maturity is impractical in Ukraine. For example, the cost. Credit and debt are relatively new concepts in Ukraine. Food and housing were expensive. Why not go home to your loving mother who will cook you plates of it? Also, there was running hot water at home (not in the dorms or even most small apartments in our city). The extreme weather is also a consideration. Most parents will have heat and

air-conditioning, the dorms and cheap apartments will not. And, what with the high unemployment rate in the cities, it was difficult for students to find work that fit into their grueling class schedules, even part time. Parents often needed help back on the farm.

I grew up in Las Vegas, in a culture where a single woman could work as a cocktail waitress (like my neighbor) and put her children through college just on her tips. I have friends who started waiting tables at 17 and still do it because \$60,000-\$80,000 a year is too good to give up. I feel I was partly raised by Sam's Town Hotel & Gambling Hall, since my mom often left me there to my own devices while she played the machines. I'd follow the curving and swirling carpeted paths of primary colors and shapes and tip-toe jump from diamond to spade, to heart to club, memorizing the suites in black and red like multiplication tables *clink, clink, clink*, alarm bells and sirens, if you're lucky. Many (highly educated) Ukrainian parents travel to Italy and work in hospice care or house cleaning to make enough to pay their children's education costs, leaving kids to be raised by extended family. In Ukraine, the local mafia keep their own order. All the Vegas mafia have long since been imprisoned — or buried in the Mojave.¹⁵ Then to be replaced by mega-entertainment and hospitality corporations — the next evolution of gangster capitalism. So, I was teaching students who had a distinctly different experience of maturity than me. They were being shepherded longer and to a greater extent than I ever was. This was something I had to keep in mind when my students gave excuses for being late to class (the bus broke down or was overcrowded). Or for not turning in

¹⁵ Though the mafia never forget. My grandmother lived down the street from a stoolie shot execution style — and this was in the late '90s in a middle-class neighborhood.

assignments (no access to a computer).¹⁶ *I had to go home early to help with the canning.* Of course, perhaps they were all hoodwinking me. When it gets down to it, teens are pretty much the same everywhere: full of hormones and good intentions.

The seasons slip by and winter approaches. Cat and Thrush again set off into the forest to collect firewood. Rooster promises them he'll sit quietly. Perhaps time has made our young Rooster wise? Maybe these two kidnapping experiences are ingrained into his pea-size brain? Perhaps he's now secure in his place in the family, knowing he'll never be left to starve.

Cat and Thrush chop their wood. Cat and Thrush slog home. Cat and Thrush find Rooster gone. They don't have to think long before they figure out who stole him. Cat and Thrush decide then to turn the tables on sly Fox. They run to the fox's den. Cat plays his psaltery¹⁷ and sings. Fox listens. Thrush joins in on the melody. Fox emerges from her den to get closer to the music. Cat and Thrush grab her, and though she manages to escape, they are able to free Rooster.

"What did she tempt you with this time?" Cat asks.

Rooster protests. "If you had been in my place, you wouldn't have been able to resist either. She sang about delicious nuts and I just wanted them so much!"

Cat feels offended. "So why didn't you tell us about this before?"

"We will bring you a whole sack of nuts!" Thrush tweets from her branch.

¹⁶ After my first semester I learned to accept handwritten essays and responses. Cursive is an essential communication tool in Ukraine.

¹⁷ A medieval stringed instrument set in the lap while the strings are plucked.

It's inside the quaint cabin, in the ancient forest, that the animals live in harmony, eating their delicious nuts, content with their friendship and their comfy log cabin.

They are content, oh, how content with their peaceful, quiet lives.

The Firebird and the Wolf

The first odd thing I noticed was that the soda machine at my bus stop had been toppled over onto the sidewalk. I boarded the no. 2 trolleybus, the last stop on the edge of my city, and easily found a seat in back.

This fairy tale starts with the Russian king, *Цар*, allowing his sons to pick their own paths to start a great journey. *Шлях* translates as “path or way.”

As I got closer to the university, I saw that the streets were mostly deserted. The shutters were pulled down on all the businesses. We clunked passed Central Square, where the Taras Shevchenko¹⁸ statue was surrounded by a small group of pro-European Union and opposition party supporters. Ukrainian and EU flags flanked the bronze figure. Political booths lined the square. Home-made posters and printed signs were plastered on the base of Shevchenko and around the bordering fence. Just that past weekend in Kyiv, on Independence Square (called the *maidan*, hence the term Euromaidan), the government had pushed back against the growing pro-EU movement with violence. Millions of Ukrainians had been protesting peacefully their frustration with the government for

¹⁸ An iconic Ukrainian poet and artist who advocated for the rights of serfs, himself the child of serf peasants, and a greater independence for Ukraine. He was imprisoned and exiled by Tsar Nicholas I, finally succumbing to illness before he could see the emancipation of the serfs and his own Ukrainian language reach wider literary acceptance.

turning away from an EU association agreement in favor of forging closer economic ties with Russia.

The beautiful *Жар-птиця*, Firebird, is most desired by the Tsar and his two intelligent, older sons, *розумний сини*. Clever, but cruel, as the third and youngest son, the *Дурень*, or Fool, will come to see.

The government militia beat hundreds of citizens, young and old. This was upsetting to Ukrainians, who considered themselves a peaceful people. There wasn't a single casualty caused by violence even during the Orange Revolution of 2004/2005.¹⁹ Everyone had such hopes back then — only to see them all crash and burn with continued corruption and kleptocracy. Though I think we cannot really be surprised about the state of the country — the mismanagement, the economic stagnation and currency devaluation — when the same political structure was put in place to benefit the Soviet elite.

Дороги сходяться — roads converge.

I arrived at Chernivtsi National University to find about a hundred students gathered at the front entrance. The main campus's historic red brick building shined in the morning sun. I found a group of my second-year students locking arms across the gate. The flapping blue and gold of the national flag framed their enthusiasm. They were barring the gates so that all the students arriving for classes that morning would turn and

¹⁹ The Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, once again making Ukraine an independent country, yet retaining many of the worst aspects of the highly centralized state, and now adding to the chaos, the republic's adaptation to capitalism and re-entry into a modern world economy. The Orange Revolution was a democratic revolution of nationwide protests, but with the greatest gathering of people in Kyiv's Independence Square, against massive government corruption following the 2004 presidential election. I had many Ukrainian friends — young and old — who traveled to Kyiv just to sit in the square to protest.

protest the violence against the peaceful Euromaidan supporters in Kyiv. They told me they were also showing support for a more Westernized Ukraine. Hundreds more students soon arrived from other schools to continue the protest march, chanting, waving their EU and Ukrainian flags. It wasn't long before the campus security officer swung shut the great iron gate and padlocked the entrance normally used by students and staff.²⁰

Everyone cheered. I collected my students' papers due that day there on University Street and stood with them for a few hours. I felt a sense of excitement for them, but also incredulity. I knew Ukrainian history, and the disparate feelings in the country for Western alliance. Ukraine is in an advantageous position (the center of Europe), but also one rife with ideological division, a frontier state. A large portion of the eastern and southern parts of the country favored a return to the Russian policies. Some would even say they yearned for the Soviet times. Many western Ukrainians say they're brainwashed by corrupt Russian influence, and don't know what is truly the best thing for a united country. Many eastern Ukrainians would say something similar about the West. A colleague stopped me on University Street. "What do you think of our revolution?" she asked.

"I don't know. I've never seen one before," I said.

Given everything the developing country had been through, I saw it as a miracle, *duro*.

Our young Fool will make many mistakes

²⁰ Another relic of the Soviet days: only one public entrance and exit. Since Chernivtsi is located in the West, many staff and administrators were in favor of the EU agreement, particularly since CHNU is an international institution.

on his journey to find the Firebird.

But even in his foolishness, he is granted miracles.

Фрази з казки	
Вибирайте собі коней і їдьте куди хочете	Choose your horse and go wherever you want, the King says. The third, foolish son chooses the broken-down horse for some reason
Хто поїде цією дорогою, у того вовк коня з'їсть	The sign says "If you pick this path, a wolf is going to eat your horse"
Злазь з коня, я його з'їм	Told you. "Now get down from your horse. I'm a gonna eat it," the wolf says
Сідай,— каже,— на мене і кажи, куди тебе везти	"You gave me a horse to eat, so now sit down on my back and I'll take you where you need to go"
посеред того лісу стояла хата велика	They come to a big house in the forest
у тій клітці сидить птиця така, аж сяє.	where they see a shining, beautiful bird sitting in a cage.
Це не проста птиця, а жар-птиця.	It isn't just a bird, it's THE Firebird, stupid.
приведи нам коня до половини золотого, до половини срібного.	The men holding the bird captive won't let the fool have it unless he brings them a horse that's half gold and half silver.

I waited for the trolleybus to come back up Ruska Street, named so because it was the street the Russian army took to march out of Chernivtsi following World War II. My language tutor Anastasia was getting off as I was getting on. She took one look at the front gate and joined me back on the bus. Anastasia looked like an *au naturel* country maiden with her long, thick blonde hair, plump cheeks and robust figure. I knew she loved her home *oblast*, but I also knew she longed to travel more and live in a big city, like Kyiv or Lviv.

“The students see the EU as representing more freedom. Freedom from corruption, a brighter future with better wages here and more opportunities with reforms supported by Western partners. They know of the better quality of life in Poland and think — why not us?”

“And Russia represents the opposite.”

Anastasia smiled. “What do you think?”

“It doesn’t matter what I think, it matters what you think.”

Chernivtsi was a calm and intellectual city. While other Western oblast centers exploded (like Lviv, Ternopil, Ivano-Frankivsk) only some students took to the streets then. The regular people mostly stuck to business as usual after those first few days. By Wednesday, my students were back in class.

The foolish son doesn’t know how to get the horse in order to obtain the Firebird.

He becomes depressed, thinking about how his foolishness always leads to bad decisions. *Ничого побуму*, nothing in life can be changed!

“It doesn’t matter if we protest,” said Oksana, one of my second-year students.

“Things won’t change anyway.” I knew Oksana to be a competent leader for her group,²¹ which was ranked second, therefore always striving to get out of the shadow of the first group (many in that group had studied in America, and would later be awarded with scholarships to study for a semester at a Polish university). Oksana looked like she could be leading a small corporation in her spare time. She had straight, even-edged blonde

²¹ Students at the university level are organized into small groups of up to fifteen. They all take the same classes together and have one designated leader who keeps track of everyone’s progress and all their performance records. These groups are typically ranked and organized by test scores.

hair, big green eyes expertly lined in Revlon black. All her clothing probably was bought at the local bazaar, but she made it look like it was imported from Italy. At that time, Oksana’s class was determined: They would stay in class, she told me. Practicing English with a native speaker was the most important thing to them.

There is always more demanded of the foolish prince
at each step in his quest. In his melancholia, he questions
why he even started to search for the caged Firebird.

New regulations passed in the Verkhovna Rada, submitted by the ruling party and signed into law by the president on Jan. 16, 2014	Punishment for violation
Outlawing cars driving in a line of more than five	Confiscation of driving license and vehicle for two years
Disseminating information without state permit	Confiscation of equipment and product, heavy fine
Violators of rules for peaceful assembly	Identification by authorities in less than a day, unknown retribution
Participation in a gathering, wearing a helmet, or uniform	Arrest and jailing for ten days
Setting up tents, stages and sound equipment without police permission	Arrest and jailing for fifteen days
Disrespect of court	Arrest and jailing for fifteen days
Internet restrictions violated; the government can prohibit access to the Internet	\$850 fine
Violation Ukraine security “legitimate orders”	Starts at \$250 fine
Defamation	Two years imprisonment
Distribution of extremist materials	Three years imprisonment
“Mass disruptions”	Ten to fifteen years imprisonment. Peace Corps restricts us from participating in any political gathering, but what does that mean for my students on University Street?

New regulations passed in the Verkhovna Rada, submitted by the ruling party and signed into law by the president on Jan. 16, 2014	Punishment for violation
Riot police and officials who committed crimes against protesters are exempt from punishment	How can this be?
“Foreign agents” (NGOs) which receive financial assistance from abroad will pay taxes on their “revenue”	That’s us.
NGOs and churches cannot take part in “extremist activities”	What qualifies as extremist?
State permission required for financing of NGOs’s “political activity”	We’re apolitical — but who decides the criteria for political activities?
A person can be determined guilty without being present in court	What brought it to this?

That winter, Anastasia and I attended the Peace Corps Ukrainian language refresher camp in Chernihiv, a city in northern Ukraine about two hours outside Kyiv, to teach a workshop on Ukrainian fairy tales. The staff knew I loved fairy tales and was working on a translation project. Our class read “The Firebird and the Wolf” aloud in turn and translated the difficult phrases and idioms. Our classroom was packed — twenty Ukrainian learners came to our session and all of them spoke fluently. I fell into a stupor of awe in which no true insight could be produced. I thought of a Christian tenet I’d learned during my more devout years, many moons ago and half a world away: *The student shall surpass the teacher*. I wondered if the “surpassing” would involve exile from the community. Would they spit on my stupid head, my lolling tongue of Babel, tear my clothes, muddy my boots? a severe punishment indeed in Ukraine. If I didn’t have Anastasia’s translation graphs I would’ve been completely lost. That week, she was my wise Wolf.

Фрази з казки	
Їхали, їхали, от вовк і привіз його у ліс, а в тім лісі стоять усе кам'яні конюшні	Wolf and the fool travel for a long time until they come to an ancient forest and stone stables housing the gold and silver horses.
Й забув знову, що йому наказував вовк	Wolf gives the Fool specific instructions on how to steal the horse without getting caught by the guards, but somehow, the fool forgets and fucks it all up. He is a fool, after all.
Коли дивляться — аж по горі ходить панна з дівчиною, своєю слугою.	More is fucked up. The guards order the fool to kidnap a beautiful maiden for them. “Give us the girl, we’ll give you the horse,” they say. That’s pretty fucked up. I feel bad for the maiden.
вовк став та й каже йому. Я ж перекинусь панною. Так і зробили.	Wolf is smarter. He conspires to shift into the form of the maiden. The fool brings the wolf in lady form to the guards. The fool takes the real maiden upon his gold and silver horse. He saves her. Wolf shifts back and the guards have nothing.
Дурень так і зробив, як казав вовк	The fool actually does everything that wolf orders him to do this time! Perhaps having the woman on his horse has finally cleared his mind!
Не засни ж, будь ласка, а то брати уб'ють тебе і мене.	No, it doesn't. The Fools falls asleep on the road, leaving the goods unguarded, even though the maiden warns him that his clever, cruel elder brothers will kill him if they find him asleep.
вона зараз до дурня — аж він уже спить. Давай вона його будити: будила-будила — ніяк не розбудить	The clever, jealous brothers arrive. The Fool is fucked.

At the language conference, all the volunteers gathered in Wi-Fi areas of our hotel to share news of the revolution. The violence on Hrushevskoho Street had intensified. It was frightening to see a beautiful area of the city transformed into to a war zone. Just that past summer, I'd had a cappuccino with my father, who was visiting for two weeks, at a cafe on that corner near the park. We'd also stayed in an apartment overlooking the maidan. Tanks were ordered from Chernihiv to help the government effort to suppress the revolution in the capital. One of my roommates spent most of the night Skyping with her

boy friend back home, hypothesizing what would happen next and what would happen to all of us. I could hear the panic in her voice. There also was an excitement: something was going on, something we'd never expected. My other roommate watched a live stream of Euromaidan on her laptop.

“I need to be distracted from all this horrible news,” Anastasia said as we sat on my bed, barricaded in by the news of the revolution. “Isn't there something else we can watch?”

I opened up my favorite exotic art porn website. I introduced my Ukrainian friend to a tasteful, yet sexy, bondage video. With the hotel's inconsistent Wi-Fi, the starting and stopping was more comical than erotic. She covered her mouth with one hand and giggled. Her round cheeks were turning as pink as *Kolobok*. “Are those two married?” she asked me.

The volunteer who was Skyping with her boyfriend stopped in mid-sentence and looked over at us.

“Are you guys watching porn over there?!”

Wolf returns to find that the foolish prince

has been murdered by his elder brothers.

They've also taken the maiden and the Firebird.

The Fulbright scholar traveling with us was evacuated first. Our conference ends that next day, and we're all put us on a bus back to the capital. We're ordered not to stay long in Kyiv, but to quickly make our bus or rail connections back to our homes all over the western part of the country. We saw the tanks rolling ahead of us. They looked like

army green buses. We passed them, swinging erratically because that's how Ukrainian bus drivers roll. I watched as the winter scenery passed by: homes with false fronts and church's with cupolas of silver sheet metal rising high above common wood chicken huts and household shrines dusted in white.

Loyal Wolf implores a magpie that is pecking the skin from the dead prince's cheek. "Please, bring me the healing water that will save this foolish prince from death's cold grasp." The magpie takes off with a cup made from oak leaves.

When classes started again that spring, the university and the streets felt more tense. And it wasn't just because all us volunteers were debating via social media when and if we'd be evacuated. My students seemed more engaged. One student in my top class spoke of spending part of her Christmas break in Kyiv at Euromaidan, and even visiting the standoff at Hrushevskoho Street. In my daily commute, I noticed a protester had affixed a Ukrainian flag onto Statue Shevchenko's lowered left hand, as if he was beckoning the masses to follow its billowing gold and blue. In Chernivtsi, the protests looked better organized. The seasoned opposition party rulers were now running the grass-roots effort that had broken out nearly three months before. This included a nationalist party with fascist leanings. The black and red-clad men reminded me of the singing Fox beneath the window. Her song, their song, was intriguing to the young and inexperienced.

The life-giving water revives the foolish prince, and he wakes as if from a long sleep. He jumps on the back of Wolf and they run back to the King, where his evil elder brother is about to marry the miserable maiden.

Berkut riot police moved in on Euromaidan the week of Feb. 19, after a warning was issued to clear out the elderly and the young. Tens of thousands had been camped out on Independence Square. In the government's attempt to eject protesters, they killed more than ninety people, most of them shot from roof tops. These citizens became known as the Heavenly Hundred. The nation was in mourning. Finally, all the national TV news networks were covering the chaos in Kyiv. The pro-Russian channels couldn't ignore it anymore, though their rhetoric was decidedly different. The citizens shot down were "terrorists," and they called them all fascists.

My next class day, I snuck in with another teacher through a maintenance entrance, since the students had demanded that the front gate be closed indefinitely. I received a call on my mobile phone while hunkering down in the English department office with other professors to grade class work.

"We will not have class?" asked the leader of one of my second-year students.

"You cannot get in the gates."

"We cannot get in the gates. So we will not have class?"

"I'm here but you are not. The dean has not officially canceled classes, he just told us we have to be here, but you are not expected." It seemed like such a strange conversation to have.

"We have our essay due today."

This is the same class that had turned in their work to me out on University Street when the revolution first broke out, back in early December.

I found the whole class waiting for me in front. Ebullient, they passed me their workbooks and essays through the bars of the university's front gate. They were going to Central Square next. I wanted to go with them. I wanted to stay. I don't know the language well. But I know a lot of words. Some of those words I can put into sentences. Despite the political turmoil, I wanted to go on with my life as normal. I wanted to be here, and the more erratic things became the more it was true that my life wasn't normal and I would no longer be here. That's the way it worked if you were an American. They got you out before communication and transportation completely broke down, and before you could possibly be used to create an international incident. It was so strange how most of the time citizenship mattered very little, but then it could mean everything. But who am I kidding? It mattered all the time, I just didn't have to think about it.

"None of us will be attending class tomorrow," Oksana called me that evening.

"I still want you to turn in your workbooks. I don't want you to get behind."

I was proud of the curriculum I'd worked so hard to put together. I wanted to stay on schedule and see if my course work improved their writing. I could do that at least.

"But it is very important for us to show support for the Heavenly Hundred who have been killed, so we cannot come."

I hung up. I pondered it all. I called her back and told her they didn't have to submit their assignment on Friday. *Go*, I said.

And we would go.

I waved to Anastasia as the bus rumbled down the cobbled street away from her. She was smiling for us. We softly sang "Do You Hear the People Sing." Our final

destination was the Lviv international airport. Many of the American volunteers took pictures out the bus windows of the barricades erected to keep *titushki* out. I wondered how the local governments picked these men to protect the roads leading into every village, town and city. Did they worry what they would do if armed thugs did show up? Did the village men do this without any hope of compensation, or was the democratic cause payment enough? We heard on the radio that President Yanukovych had fled Kyiv. We were leaving, though many of us preferred to stay. Upon entering the city limits of Lviv, our bus was stopped at the barricades. We all looked up over the seats as a man in military camo boarded the bus and conferred with our Ukrainian staff member. The Lviv man looked up at all of us. “Slava Ukraini!”

“Heroyam slava!”

The foolish prince had a good father who believed in justice. After hearing his youngest son’s tale, he was amazed. The King then asked his son what he would have him do with his treacherous brothers. The young prince, saved by the loyalty and wisdom of a friend, spared his brothers. The King declared that though his son never lost his naivety, he had remained compassionate after much hardship. The King granted him lands and the beautiful maiden to marry.

FRONTIER STATE, UNDER

To reach the underground cathedral, we crossed the plaza of World War II monuments and hoofed it up a steep hill, our backs bent forward toward the tall birch trees — we felt envious of them for having made it to the top already, and looking so unimpressed with our effort. The mist crepted maliciously over the sacred religious site, and with the anonymous throng of tourists and pilgrims, we chatted amongst ourselves that this would be the perfect scene for a murder. What better place to witness malevolence than an ancient Orthodox Christian necropolis? Along with interpreting the historically significant Ukrainian sites, we occupied our tongues by engaging in jocular asides such as this. Our experiments in humor as a tour group were actually inspired by the Blogger, though he didn't know it. We watched as our Blogger, who was part of our group yet seemed to deem himself separate from us (perhaps above?), pulled out his gold iPhone and absorbed himself *yet again* in the digital content thereon. His companion, referred to as his bestie, travel aide or fuck buddy, depending on whom you asked, was liked by many of us because of her great love of challenging the veracity of our tour guides' stories. She seemed to especially love debunking the myths of locally enshrined relics attributed to the great evangelists (Mark's pelvis, Luke's carpal, John's embalmed heart). We weren't sure what the Blogger loved. Probably just his online identity and that gold iPhone, the digital wire holding him to relevance like a leash. Honestly, we didn't care much — he was only a catalyst to us. We knew more about her — that she only read nonfiction, and was quite proud of this (some of us said smug). *I only have time to read things I can learn something from.* We wanted to say: *Anything a person choses to write*

down, to “record,” is a construct, and you’re fooling yourself to think otherwise, but instead we kept quiet, kept the peace. Others in our group admired her astuteness, no matter how misplaced her attention in the realms of fuck buddy or reading preferences. Though we all envied how she hiked up that hill, not even breaking a sweat, with a *nonfiction* guidebook in her face.

Our tour guide, who for our purposes we named Ferguson VI, though we think his name must have been either Dima or Sasha, with seven or eight other syllables following in that Slavic manner that makes a name a tedious phonetic mountain. So, Ferguson let us tarry at a shrine to a Ukrainian orthodox pope who once fell asleep beneath one of those birches and had a vision of the Virgin Mary. Marking the sacred place was a garden house sheltering a lifesize mannequin of the holy man in the throes of his miracle, kneeling before an altar and golden icon of the Virgin. Ferguson instructed us to write wishes onto scraps of paper and then push them through a slot on the side of the shrine. One of us saw our Blogger write: “EXCEED MY EXPECTATIONS.” The pilgrims then kissed and touched the glass, leaving behind bacterial smears that concerned some. Ferguson educated our group about the city when it was a glorious ancient capital and birthplace of the great steppe mounted warriors, of which Kyivan Rus claimed the honor: subjugated as Russia’s borderland, abused as a satellite nation, to rise again as the largest European country still holding close to its own customs and traditions, unlike the hulking neighbor mighty in the East. Ferguson flourished his arm over a winterly vista.

The Blogger looked askance and asked: “Can we see Russia from here?”

Ferguson was accustomed to the murmurs of admiration at the picturesque scenery, or the prostrations and kisses of devotees to the religious humbuggery. He probably didn't even know the vocabulary of American English indifference, he was all too familiar with ignorance. Perhaps the befuddled look on Ferguson's face was him working out one from the other, or one from himself. Ferguson's passion was, no doubt, his own presentation of history and the subsequent orgasms of appreciation from strangers. Tour groups encouraged a quick familiarity by association, something found nowhere else in the civilized world, except perhaps a drug-fueled bacchanal. Most of us had decided that these guides got off on our enraptured O faces of cultural discovery. As soon as we figured this out, we swore never again to give any of *their kind* that satisfaction. We would take the satisfaction for ourselves.

"Russia is looking a little rundown," our Blogger said. "Like it stayed too late at the party, if you know what I mean." He winked at Ferguson.

Perhaps it was then that Ferguson got a hint of what was to come, but his brain couldn't quite wrap itself around the Blogger's idiocy while also trying to nudge the group into the most impressive panorama.

"It is not Russia! It is Ukraine!"

Our Blogger looked over the flatness speckled with modest homes, trees, shrubbery and shrugged, as if to say, "What's the difference?"

Ferguson then looked as if he might throw himself over the side. Or maybe the Blogger — we all hoped at least for an attempt. In our minds, the game was afoot. If not for our trickery with tour guides I-V many of us would've keeled over dead from

extraneous information and enthusiasm fatigue a week ago. For our spiritual well being as a community, the guides had to continue to suffer. Especially the jumpy nationalistic ones, the ones who were more erratic than a two-year-old on crack. We looked at it this way: We paid for an enjoyment *their kind* likely had no idea we were exacting. We planned to vanquish Ferguson VI by a strategy of framed indifference and idiotic questions, the Blogger was genuine in his idiotic humor, therefore he was the perfect unwitting accomplice, and we took our cues from him. Most of us were on something of a familial pilgrimage, retracing the tracks of our exiled ancestors, collecting the memories our grandmothers and grandfathers didn't have time to pack. That was not our Blogger's goal, we knew. We believed his goal was purely to be an average-American-off-in-the-world blogger. We all wondered how the bestie/travel aide/fuck buddy put up with an average American. She continued to be politely enthralled after nearly two weeks in the company of Fergusons I-V, us and the Blogger. To her credit, she was never complicit in his idiocy. But she was perceptive enough to leave us to it, which increased our general enjoyment, as I've so described.

We went down into the hill, and after some queuing in passages meandering down two levels (Ukrainians enjoyed visiting their sites, pausing inside them and then walking back and stepping on foreigners, it seemed to titillate them they did it so often). Our group soon emerged beneath the impressive dome of the underground cathedral.

"Tis monastery here was founded by Anthony Pechersky, who also founded famous Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra," Ferguson said.

"What's that strange echo?" We looked around warily.

Ferguson explained that the acoustics were adjusted only to the sound of the male voice since the monk choir would have deep voices.

“How typical,” said the bestie/travel aide/fuck buddy. “I have no voice because I’m a girl.”

She did have a formidable bang that cut a shadow above her scowl, creating wrinkles on her precious countenance. Perhaps this was when it all started to go wrong. We’d previously thought her concerned only with the *nonfiction narrative print* voice describing the Ukrainian travel experience, but now that she wasn’t invited to the choir, that she didn’t have the option of *anything*, engineered out of her chance to create the story of her own passage underground as loudly as *The Other*, considering the locals valued music as the supreme method of recording history, romance and philosophy, i.e., *everything that was the stuff of life*, she shut her tour book definitively.

Ferguson said the underground cathedral was the tallest in all of Ukraine, possibly Eastern Europe. Built into the hill, it was nearly the size of a three-story building. Ferguson’s eyes grew moist as they adjusted to the magnificence of his own story. We all gazed up at the cupola, the interior form of the hill’s smooth, expanded belly, and felt we could all reach and touch the iron chandelier swaying above our heads. One of us did raise our hand as if to do this and we thought Ferguson would fall over in ecstasy. But then, unconcerned, examined her manicure in the brief light.

“Ah — Ferguson — what did you say this was?” we asked.

“Tis here is most interesting site — St. Theodosiy Totemskyi Temple. These walls and ceilings are in style of Ukrainian *broke*, I mean to say, *baroque*. Tis interior resembles great St. Trinity Cathedral.”

Taking cue, another deliberate examination of the other hand, but more of us together this time.

“Ah — you say this is an underground temple in honor of a saint?”

“Yes, yes! Saint Theodosiy, a martyr!”

We looked around, ostensibly confused.

“Well! I hope the saint didn’t live to see that the fools built it underground! Who can see the brilliance of its construction if it’s inside a hill? What’s the point of a cupola if no one can see it?”

“But it was for the monks!” Ferguson cried.

“I don’t care who it’s for, it’s a damn waste of energy and time.”

“It was for acoustics, for melodic tones when singing praises!”

As Ferguson’s voice got higher, we became more serene. “I don’t think it works well because your voice doesn’t seem to hit the acoustics as it should. Do you notice that? I can barely hear anything he’s saying,” we noted.

“Now what’s up with that, Ferguson? Here we pay you a good wage to keep us up on the architectural mythos and we’re straining to hear you.”

The Blogger continued: “Maybe the monk choir was full of eunuchs, *hahaha*.”

Barely imperceptible in our mix: “Maybe it’s because *you* only want to hear yourself,” the banged bestie/travel aide/fuck buddy said.

We were shocked. Until now, we'd experienced nothing but tolerance from her. Before we could really digest this, the whole crypt got a loud lecture from Ferguson on the architectural wonders, which was how we managed to run his voice out by the time we entered the light again. A feat we'd managed to accomplish only once before, with Ferguson III during the Jewish cemetery tour of western Ukraine.

But I've gotten ahead, rather, behind us.

At about the time Ferguson started to yell his stories at us, a more interesting thing emerged on our monastic path: a subplot. It wasn't the murder we had hoped for, that was still waiting for us in our mystery novels, but a contemporary melodrama, which didn't need a museum placard, since romance is always so much easier to follow. As Ferguson spoke louder, so did the banged one, perhaps thinking her voice was somehow covered by our tour guide. Or maybe she thought she had to compete for her lover's attention — her berating versus Ferguson's stories of bones and stones, since we had to hear the tiresome history of every bone and stone. Either way, we could hear her between Ferguson's monologue and we decided the subplot was far more interesting. We worried at a few points that she would gain social couth, or realize her error in volume, but, thankfully, she was fully taken with asserting her right to be heard in the act of chastising her companion. In our quest to unhinge Ferguson, we'd manage to stir upon something far more thrilling — quite accidentally — we'd like to add.

“And your hat looks stupid,” said the Banged One, whom we deemed as coming into her own with a capitalized appellation.

The Blogger was indeed wearing a ridiculous fur ear cap, and from the edge of this hat came red and gray whiskers, though he looked younger than the Banged One — another characteristic of these girls with Eastern European heritage. We knew because some of us had it in ourselves. We seemed to turn from lithe maidens to doughy matriarchs to stiff crones in a single moon cycle.

Our Blogger shuffled his feet in the close corridors and once or twice hit the back of our heels, which annoyed us. He was trying to tread carefully in his Timberland boots, making short strides too cramped for his height. We thought that he had the sense of pace which came with guilt.

Ferguson continued: “Let us descend to annex cave where we will see crypts of monks who lived and died here! The temperature is constant 12 to 13 degrees! Tis most ideal place in whole city since it is 30 degrees cooler here than above in summer! You will see here and...there a crack in the ceiling which occurred because Russians installed heating, and what they did caused damaged integrity of construction and artifacts located in tis site. So, from tis we can learn lesson you should not mess with a perfect Ukrainian architecture!” Our tour group chuckled kindly. We’d enjoyed walking Ferguson into the place many Americans occupied: those who screamed at foreigners to make sure they were understood.

“You first chose a girl other than me and I cannot forget that. Trust me, I’ve tried.” The Banged One hissed so harshly our ears felt the sting. A few of us felt embarrassed and moved to inspect a dark concrete slab over the remains of a monk (though not as far away to miss what happened next!). A light aimed into the small space

near the floor in the room reflected off the relics. The Chapel with the Bones, the sign read in Russian, Ukrainian and English. We wondered if this poor son of a bitch would've ever guessed that hundreds of years in the future, ancestral tourists would be standing over his bones hashing out their relationship problems.

“Do not say you are sorry.”

Our Blogger must've apologized, but we'd missed it in the echoes of passing Ukrainians, so intent were they on appreciating their history.

“There is no forgiveness needed because she was a sweet girl. Of course you wanted her. But you obviously didn't know much about yourself then, or you just didn't care about her feelings in the long-term.”

But then again, what did it matter to the monk? If you're dead, you're dead. Bones were a poor reminder of a life lived. Books were far better. Libraries were the tomb and womb for collective memory. Emotions, feelings and imagination left no trace on the world except on paper or digital media, if one chooses to except narcissistic blogging and Tweeting as legitimate media of record keeping.

“You dumped her after stringing her on for years and then hooked up with me, breaking her heart. But at least you made the split because she was never going to do it, she was in love with you. But you took two years to let her go! I mean, what is *wrong* with you? That was quite cruel. You knew all along she wanted to get married and have children — everybody knew but her, apparently, that you never would. Why the hell did you hold on to her for so long?”

Ferguson orated, gesticulating to get our attention; we pretended to be interested. He told us there were fifty crypts here plus four underground churches. All the heaps of bones we were seeing were the ones considered righteous enough to be entombed in this holy site. It was a practice in those times to wash the bones of the monks after they had died. If the bones came out white, then the monk would be seen as righteous, and he was allowed to be buried in these holy crypts. If not, the bones were buried again for one more year. If they were still not white after being dug up again and washed, then the man was no longer considered holy and he was buried somewhere else outside, which possibly was not sacred ground since the men had no money. They had already given all their worldly possessions to the church. We thought this story to be quite spectacular.

“Tis is how we get Ukrainian expression to *wash someone's bones* is to talk about a man when he doesn't know about it! It is like English idiom how gossiping makes a man's ears ring, yes? So, was monk righteous or was he unrighteous? The bones say! That is a living saying! It tells us language is unique and how we preserve such things in words though we don't know why or where they came from, but if you dig deeper you find out why we say such things! Language is a memory of our history passed down through ages! So, if I say that tis man here is *washing his friend's bones* then he is gossiping about him behind his back!” Ferguson was screaming now since we'd distanced ourselves as far from him as we could in such a confinement.

We asked, “What are these, you say? Monk bones?” Though Ferguson was trying to hold it in, we were determined.

“Yes, monk bones!”

“Why are they yellow? I thought bones were white.”

“No! No! They are white! These are holy monks!”

“Don’t look so white to me. Listen, we were told we would see the remains of holy men. But instead here you give us the yellow bones of everyday average sinners. Well, I could kill a few people in this group right now and find that.”

Ferguson turned away and smacked himself in the head — we felt pleased now. It was at this point we noticed our Blogger attempting to occupy (or hide?) himself in his iPhone. The Banged One snatched the gold phone and smote him on the head with it. We were extremely fascinated with this development, since the phone’s ubiquitous nature had become such a joke in the group. We’d started to take pictures of ourselves with our Blogger in the background, staring down at his phone. We didn’t care as much for the sites behind us anymore, only if we could get him in the frame holding that gold phone. Needless to say, we all had pictures of ourselves with the oblivious Blogger at the Hutsul heritage museum. On Mt. Hoverla. On the Black Sea. At the Easter Egg Museum. At the museum for the prisoners of foreign wars on native land. Some of us would stand at such a distance and angle to look as if we were flicking his head with our thumb and forefinger. Many of us deemed the Banged One’s action as a prophecy fulfilled.

“I really cannot see us staying together beyond this trip,” the Banged One said. “I mean, even with the great sex.”

An elderly Ukrainian man tried to get between us and them. We pushed him into a damp wall.

While all this was going on, others in our group kept up the game, asking Ferguson: “So, what sinful things had the monks done to turn their bones yellow?”

Ferguson perked up a little. He bellowed that for many years visitors had witnessed the ghost of a man with a long gray beard in a monk’s garment hovering in the back corner of the crypt. Ghost specialists investigated, including geologists with special devices, and when they came to that corner their devices went bonkers, detecting some energy anomaly. Ferguson attested that he himself had seen a “serious” of pictures taken in the 1960s (with a very fast shutter speed) showing a monk slowly taking off his robe until he was naked. Ferguson said a historian at the national university investigated and found there was a tale of a monk who dared to fall in love with a nun at a nearby convent. The monk was so conflicted, he hanged himself there in that corner. Suicide was a “serial” offense, so his soul was not allowed to enter heaven. The ghost monk was believed to still be there, his yellow bones cast out in unconsecrated land, his soul admonished in the corner. We found this story to be so fantastic we couldn’t help but believe it.

“A ghost monk?” we asked.

“Yes, yes! A ghost monk!” His voice was starting to squeak like a pubescent choirboy.

“How did he die?”

“He —ahem, excuse me — (cough, cough) committed suicide! He hang himself!”

We kept at him: “But still, to live your whole life devoted to god and then have true love condemn you from entering heaven? That doesn’t seem very fair.”

Sides were being drawn. Our group was splitting. A few decided to move closer to the Blogger and stare down at their cell phones, too, showing support for the Blogger, sharing their digital content with him.

Many allied themselves with the Banged One. We managed to form ourselves around her like an entourage. We wanted to glory in her fierceness. We wanted to steal her words and call them our own.

“How can I trust your judgment?” the Banged One said. “I mean, a man who wears that ugly hat shows that he will continue to make unwise decisions.”

A few of us stuck out our chins at the Blogger. Others echoed with a “*um hum*, that’s right,” though that side was all women, so the sound didn’t travel far. None of us had ever been in a melodramatic relationship battle, some of us were drawing on Social Security and pensions, but we seemed to somehow dig up from collective memory the appropriate ’tude for the occasion.

Those on the side of the Blogger (numbers dwindling) kept defensive posture. We wondered if this would come to a scrimmage, or a bone and stone fight.

“One of scientists (cough, cough) who visited ’ere told me per-per-personally about Gereman theory of memory, that information is not contained in flesh or computer but in water. Sc-Scientists believe that tis energetic anomaly holds image, the image of water memory (cough, cough) and monk and his turmoil in death was imprinted ‘ere in water drops of humidity. It has been seven hundred years and tis ghost still existing and being seen, telling us his sto-story revealing his body to us as he would reveal his bones,

removing garment (cough, cough) of monk because he no longer could be considered holy.”

“A naked ghost monk,” said one of our group, the last one still able to follow Ferguson, not distracted by copping a ’tude because he hadn’t yet decided which side to join.

Ferguson nodded enthusiastically still. We had to give him credit. This Ferguson was the best to date — none had such enthusiasm lasting so long under our torture.

“Why was he naked?” tis last one asked.

“To show his humility before god!”

“I think he was trying to show us something else. You must think all Americans are sick if you want to tell us a story like that. Disgusting exhibitionist monk.” The last one chose the Banged One’s side.

A few more then defected to her. The cultural criticism continued in this vein. Their voices were little, but fierce. Ferguson’s head, which had been swinging back and forth like a pendulum, stayed firmly to the banged side now. It was dark down so we all couldn’t see the Blogger well, but we thought we saw him shiver. His deathly pale cheeks beneath that funny hat colored crimson in two spots like what might have been applied in a mortician’s salon. He sent a glance in our direction so we quickly looked away.

Ferguson changed to acting out his stories. Some of us were able to understand that many historians believed the monastery was once connected by a tunnel (hands making an O, under the ground, which was his hand flat and horizontal) to a convent on the other side of the hill (long hair with what we thought was a nun’s habit). He mimed

digging in the ground and then pointed to several ladies in our group wearing fashionable earrings, which we purposefully misunderstood. Then Ferguson grabbed at the Banged One's long silver earring and threw it in the dirt. He made kissy noises, rubbed his throat — a bit too dramatically, we thought — then shrugged and pointed back at the white bones.

“The monks cross dressed,” we concluded.

Our group took in the fresh air when we emerged in the copse of birches. The late November sky was threatening. The Banged One came up into the light and continued her story.

“Of course, the monks who lived down there would've depleted their bodies of vitamin D because of the lack of sunlight. Their bones would naturally have been more yellow. The men lived down there their whole lives in the hope that they'd be considered holy, and that very act of sacrifice damned them.”

Her story was the most stirring of all, and we believed it with all our heart. Our appreciative murmurs were so strange and prolonged that we all looked quickly over at the Blogger to make sure he caught them, and thinking he had retreated too far, increased them even more in volume and duration. We watched him slip off that furry hat and hold it like a beggar at the crossroads. This is the first time we'd ever seen genuine emotion from him, humility mixed with confusion. Such a poverty of spirit! A few of us had flashbacks to elementary school, and quickly quieted out of shame. Others smiled gleefully at the memory. The effect on the Blogger was appropriately derivative of our

recent environs: his jaw dropped and his teeth showed like a dead man's. It was then that we seemed to recognize him for the first time in this land, our frontier state.

KAPUT MIST

The election observers captured the week of the early presidential election were branded spies and beaten by *titushki*. A dozen others were kidnapped. The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe sent Amelia's Ukrainian working partner to an eastern city to continue the work of the monitors. Their military escorts had also been sent from the West to support security efforts. Amelia had become like a Ukrainian, answering her cell phone on the first ring no matter if she was in the middle of a conversation or a training session with poll workers. She pressed her ear against the receiver, it was like trying to hear someone on the other side of a wall. She saw but wasn't really watching a group of kids playing soccer in an overgrown field beside the culture palace she was touring with other monitors. One kid scored a goal. His team cheered, she moved farther away. Amelia wanted to see how democracy would unfold in the most desperate places in the East, where the ideal was harder and closer to an *idea* than reality. Particularly in a place where people sold their votes, thinking their pensions and wages would be better if Ukraine's experiment with independence could end with a Russian incursion.

"I want you to wait a few days, then I can bring you in an unmarked van," Yura said. His smooth accent — she'd mistaken him for an American the first time they met — dipped suddenly lower. "But the roads are bad right now — particularly the ones coming here."

Yura was a Chernivetska man who knew regional politics as well as a granny knew the best vendors at the village bazaar. Amelia had learned a lot from him just during their time in Chernivtsi.

“I can make it by myself, on the next train leaving Khmelnytskyi.”

Khmelnytskyi, a larger regional center city, was farther north and had more trains going through it. Chernivetska was a border *oblast* of the border country.

She heard only silence and then a metallic clink. She feared the balaclava-clad men had imploded another cell phone tower.

“I’m discouraging it.” His voice was so loud now it surprised her. “Officially.”

The OSCE assigned Amelia a host granny who lived in a little blue *dacha* nestled in a grove of oak trees just outside the regional capital. The *babucya* in charge of Amelia felt useful again now that she had another mouth to feed, even if she didn’t understand most of the strangely accented Russian that came out of it, particularly when Amelia got onto her monologues about protecting voter rights and spreading democratic principles. *Babucya* Vika spoke *surjik*, a mixture of Ukrainian and Russian, peppered with some Romanian words that Amelia’s Google Translate app couldn’t identify. Sometimes Vika threw some German in there, too, thinking it was English or that Amelia would understand it as well.

Vika begged her to wait for a male escort. Amelia packed up her rucksack.

Granny stood in the doorway, arms crossed, shaking her head and violently humming.

Amelia choked down the pork cutlet, plate of fried potatoes and slice of black bread with *salo*.

“It will take you a long, long time,” the *babucya* said, “in a country that is sometimes pleasant and sometimes dark and terrible.” Vika crossed herself in front of her household gods, a small plastic statue of the poet Shevchenko and a gilded framed icon of the virgin cradling a mannish baby Jesus beneath curlicues of red guelder roses.

Vika roared out the window for her grandson. The teenager was bumming down the lane playing on his mobile phone. She yelled at him to get the car to take Amelia into town. Amelia put on her jacket; she’d been in that car already, stuffed with three aunts, and it took twice as long as public transportation.

“Put on your cap and scarf, too. The air is cold as a witch’s tit.”

Amelia pulled on her tall leather rain boots. Vika hobbled over and tugged them up over the young woman’s calves with a force Amelia wasn’t expecting.

Babucya Vika thrust into Amelia’s hands a *paket* stuffed so full with meat, bread, cheese, and hard-boiled eggs that Amelia wondered if the granny thought she would be traveling for a week. Vika then proudly presented Amelia with two foil covered chocolate bunnies.

“Save these and bring them home for your children.”

All village women over the age of twenty had children, and they routinely left their kids in the care of family while they went abroad to make money. So the *babucya* wanted Amelia’s imaginary children to find the Easter treats and know that their granny in Ukraine loved them. Vika stood on a *pufik* and planted a kiss on her new daughter’s

forehead, one that she wouldn't notice for some time, after she was deeper into the center of the country. Vika forced a furry *shapka* on Amelia's head, it wasn't her's, but she didn't have time to point this out, nor to complain. It was too warm in May to wear all these layers, but one look from granny if she were to take them off would chill Amelia to the bone. She broke for the door. She was down the front path before she felt her shoulder wrenched backward. Sun-spotted hands reached seemingly from the sky to rearrange Amelia's scarf tighter around her neck. If she waited any longer, Granny Vika would manage to get the entire extended family to trail behind, watching over her. Amelia didn't want to be so safe, that's not why she'd come here.

The Prut

Amelia walked quickly along the edge of the river to her bus stop. She noticed the water was moving faster than normal, she felt its urgency, and from it an excitement she hadn't felt since...when? It was when Yura was here with her. But then the violence in the East had increased. Amelia rounded a bend and came upon a man sprawled atop an embankment, seemingly unable to move. Suddenly the sound of the rushing current was gone, replaced by a strange crinkling sound of metal on metal. As Amelia approached she saw the man's elbow was caught in a swivel trash can. He seemed both resigned to his predicament, stuck with his arm in a metal bin, yet also trying slowly to gather strength to hoist himself up. She watched him flop back down. *Crink crink*, went the rubbish bin. He tilted himself up to look at her, the trash can swung again and he fell backward. Amelia held her arm out to him. The man grabbed her forearm with his free hand. She steadied

him as he lurched up. He swayed and Amelia realized he was drunk. She didn't know why it hadn't occurred to her earlier: Who else managed to get stuck in a trash can? The man took a step, but then realized he still couldn't stand, so he leaned heavily on Amelia. She stared at him, face an inch away; he stared at her. He said a few words, which she didn't understand, either it was slurred or because he spoke Ukrainian. She shrugged and tried to move around, but he still held on to her. The man pulled Amelia close and kissed her on both cheeks. His lips were like chilled steel. She didn't know what else to do so she laughed, her voice snapping along with the brisk, full current.

Chernivtsi, the *Oblast* Center

Amelia smashed herself onto the trolley bus going into Chernivtsi. The other commuters helped pass her bag to an empty space over the wheel hold. Half way through the ride a seat opened up in back. She was distracted for a time by a man standing next to her, pressing his crotch into her shoulder. She tried to pull herself away, but his bulge seemed to reach out for her. She leaned away and it was then that Amelia noticed through the foggy window that the trolley bus wasn't taking her in the familiar direction to the city central bus station. She'd overshot her bus stop.

“*De avtovokzal? De avtovokzal?*” Amelia called to the conductor, a red-cheeked woman changing money passed to her by the passengers.

“*Tak, tak,*” the woman assured her. She patted a man on the back who stood nearby. He wore a forest green uniform. A fleshy growth sprouting from the side of his

neck, it looked like an artichoke. “He will show you, he will take you in the right direction,” she said.

Amelia followed behind the man when they disembarked on a main street that she recognized, but not because she thought it was near the *avtovokzal*. The man cut across an auto service parking lot onto a main street running parallel to the one they’d just been on. He walked in the opposite direction up this street. He waited for her when she fell behind. She asked him how much time it was going to take to get to the station. She thought he said ten miles. She looked frantically up and down the busy street.

“*Marshrutka ou trolleybus?*”

No, no, he assured her, it was so close.

“*Nemae chas,*” she said. “*Mene treba poized. Ni chas.*”

“*Ni chas?*” he asked.

“*Ni chas.*”

The man’s girth bobbed up and down with an enormous sigh, but he didn’t stop smiling, which unnerved her. I trusted an artichoke. Oh, god. *Oh, god.* She was chastising herself aloud in English now. *At the worst possible time. Stupid. Stupid. Stupid.* She had to take a long-distance *marshrutka* into the neighboring oblast, and it left in thirty minutes.

He pointed with one hand and tugged on her shoulder with the other. On top of a big blue pre-fabricated building she saw АВТОБОКЗАЛ. She almost couldn’t believe it. She turned to thank artichoke man, but he had already started back down the road in the opposite direction.

The Bridge

No buses today to Khmelnytskyi.

Why?

There no buses to Khmelnytskyi!

There have always been buses to Khmelnytskyi!

The bridge is closed. The bridge is kaput. There are no buses going over the kaput *mist!*

Amelia wondered how often the bridge was kaput. After every rainstorm? When the sky looked ominous? Or when the local drivers needed to jack up prices even more? A taxi driver quoted Amelia a steep price just to get her to the bridge, which she would have to walk over and then find transportation to the city on the other side. Amelia was sure it was her Russian that gave her away as someone who had that kind of money. She raised her voice, as was custom in situations such as this; she shook her fist in the air, as was custom in situations such as this. The driver and all his buddies, who had wandered over and were now in on the haggle, were also adamant that the trip should cost 300 hryven, more than double the price of an entire round-trip train ticket to Kyiv. Amelia was desperate, and they could see it. It was all she had in her wallet.

The taxi driver grinned as she settled into the front seat. Amelia took no consolation in this. She said she wanted the people to be happy because she had helped in the electoral process, not because they managed to cheat her.

The driver cocked his head. “I did not ask you to come to our country and help us poor people.”

He swerved the car around an especially large pothole, banging them into a smaller one. Amelia felt like it knocked off a piece of her soul.

“You can’t seriously think it’s good to cheat an organization that’s trying to help you, even during times of political turmoil, your turmoil,” she said.

The driver nodded his head, as if evaluating a sales pitch. “It is easy to make the simple people happy with your messages and promises of unity. But it will take more than imaginings to carry us into your promised land. I don’t know how it can be done. Do you?” He avoided the large ruts by driving on the opposite side of the road, or the shoulder.

Not far outside the city, the car was waved over by the DAI.

“Don’t worry, we won’t have to pay the bribe,” he said, happy to show how useful he was. “I have my pension card from the militia. I retire police man.” He said the last line to her in English, flashing a gap-toothed smile.

By the time they made it to the bridge, Amelia was feeling cheerful again. She was impressed by the driver’s strategic maneuvering on the broken road. By then she’d even convinced herself that the high-speed navigation was worth the 260 hryven she’d managed to get him down to.

Amelia had her eyes set on the bridge over the Smotrych River. She passed a man with a bandura, picking his way through the classic Marichka folk song for *kopiyky*. It seemed the kaput *mist* was a regular thing, and a whole economy popped up around it,

catering to the parade of people crossing for business in Chernivetska or Khmelnytskyi oblasts. The Soviet-era bridge was longer than Amelia expected and nearly completely covered in pools of water. The blue paint on the iron rails was peeled and rusted. The bridge road was more gravel than concrete, pitted and cracked like the World War had concluded last week — worse even than the road up from Chernivtsi. A granny on the Chernivetska side was doing brisk business in plastic booties. Amelia stepped carefully, but by halfway, she felt the water seeping into her socks. But there were hills before her and behind her, emerald green after the recent rain. From the other side, she heard the pleasant melody of strings, an acoustic guitar and a violin blending with the bandura on the Chernivtsi side. She thought of a poem Yura had shared with her, written by a poet from his hometown.

Життя моє бринить мені струною

Між двох вершин — початком і кінцем.

І смерть моя народжена зі мною,

Як і життя — дарована творцем.

Во плоті вселюдській неперебутна,

Як антисвіт основ мого єства,

Мов тінь, вона на доторк невідчутна,

Блаженствує по праву божества.

My life vibrates like a musical string

Between summits — the beginning and an end.

*My death is delivered with me,
Along with life — granted by the creator.
For humanity, there's no ending death.
These opposing worlds are the foundation of being,
Like a shadow, death cannot be felt by touch,
It acts rightfully like a joyful god.*

At the other end of the bridge stood a great hulking machine covered by a faded purple tarp, not convincing her that it could be used to fix the bridge. The Smotrych ran brisk, not as picturesque as the Prut. Rivers always made Amelia feel like running. In every city she had lived in so far she'd found a river path to jog along. She believed rivers were the best place markers, especially for foreigners like her who moved with international conflicts, as steady and fluid as if political tribulations were steams of water.

Amelia squinted down at the digital clock on her *mobilka*. She tucked it into her pocket, it would be easier to reach it there on a crowded bus when she needed to keep track of time. She walked under a sign arching across the bridge: *Welcome to Khmelnytskyi Oblast*. She passed a giant iron urn propped up on a wheeled cart. She saw the *babucya* remove a boiled potato for a customer. Amelia felt the heat from the steamer. She smelled the smoked prune pastries on the racks. She bought a ticket on a bus set up to take people into the city.

Kamyanets-Podilsky

Amelia arrived in the small city the morning the private transportation companies changed all the *marshrutki* fares to 2.50 hryven. The managers didn't give the drivers enough twenty-five and fifty kopyok pieces to make change. This problem multiplied over the entire city, slowing everything and everybody down. But the train didn't leave until 11:30, and the train station was in sight.

Amelia figured she had enough free time to buy a cup of *chai* and entertain herself by people watching. Her eyes followed a slim woman in three-inch zigzag heels, matching the stems of her dark sunglasses. She wore a puffy black rain coat over a tiny blue furry dress. The brunette expertly darted over a feral dog sniffing at a pile of garbage, then hopped aboard a departing bus. The last thing Amelia saw was the girl's long brown braid as the bus doors closed on it.

The raggedy mutt climbed on top of the heap and delicately picked out a bag that had just been thrown there by a sidewalk vendor. The dog tried to untie the knot with its teeth. It looked over to Amelia as if saying *what are you looking at*. Amelia knew this was an American interpretation. Ukrainians stared all they wanted and didn't take it as rude. The dog's progress was interrupted by the arrival of the garbage truck. Through the windows of the truck Amelia could hear Madonna's "Spanish Lullaby." The music made her eyes glance over at the truck. Written on the door: SERVING THE TOWN OF KAMYANETS-PODILSKY. Amelia gasped. The dog jumped aboard for a free ride. Amelia also leapt up, dumping her tea on the sidewalk.

She had gone to the train station in the city of Kamyanets-Podilsky, in the oblast of Khmelnytskyi, rather than the train station for the oblast center of Khmelnytskyi.

The Road to Khmelnytskyi

Amelia huddled in the back seat of an old Soviet Lada, wondering how long the taxi with no interior upholstery or working gauges would hold together flying down the wet, pitted road. The windows were all closed but she still felt a blast of cool air against her face. This was the fastest she'd traveled in months. It felt exhilarating. She held time in her fist in the pocket of her coat — her cell phone, counting down the two hours to her train's departure.

The taxi ran out of gas in front of a petrol station. Or at least that's what the driver told her, and no one could read the gauges. He wanted more money, so Amelia guessed they weren't actually out of gas.

Cto — Ni! Devyanosto — Ni. Pyatdecat — Ni. Vocimdecat? Bahato hryven!

Amelia knew she only had about fifty hryven left. She looked suspiciously at the petrol station, dark and lonely on the side of the road, thinking she'd have to take out money from a *bankomat* and get hit with a huge fee. She sighed heavily, just so the driver knew that she knew he was screwing her. She remembered her college economy class: A product or service is worth whatever a buyer is willing to pay for it at that moment. She wrenched open her purse and found the two chocolate bunnies Granny Vika had given her. She presented one to the driver.

“Why don't you take my bunny, too? You fucking exploiter.” She was so brazen at this point that she said it in Russian, though she pulled her hand away when the man reached for the chocolate bunny.

The driver glared at Amelia with hooded eyes. He took a drag on his cigarette in a cavalier style and blew it in her face. He flipped on the radio. Loud Russian pop music filled the cab.

Where the hell had her wallet gone? In English, she whispered *fuck fuck fuck* in a calm tone of voice, as if everything was right in the world, not to alert the driver that she had somehow lost all her hryven, her Ukrainian debit card, and her American credit card in a mysterious tragedy. She wiped her sweaty palms and squeezed her eyes shut. She'd last taken money out at the sidewalk tea stand. Fuck. Well, she couldn't go back now. She remembered something Yura had said during a training meeting. He was the most experienced long-term monitor in the country. *Periods of transitions are mentally and physically fatiguing. During these times people will do things they wouldn't normally do, and make small mistakes they wouldn't normally make.*

Thankfully, Amelia still had her passport and visa, which she always kept on her, according to OSCE policy, and an expensive second-class ticket (the last left) for a train that only left the *oblast* center station once a day — in an hour and a half. How in god's name was she going to get out of the cab without paying, let alone to the train station? Amelia was slim and shorter than most Ukrainian women, and not an imposing person. But she was fast.

In the taxi side-view mirror, which was held in place by electrical tape, she saw a tourist bus, bulky, modern and out-of-place in the country. Amelia grabbed her rucksack, wrenched open the door and propelled herself into the middle of the street. The taxi driver had parked his door up against an embankment and could only squeeze out his

head and one shoulder. Amelia shut her eyes tight as she heard the bus brakes screech to a halt. She smelled the exhaust fumes hanging in the chilled air. She felt like a bad representation of her country and her values. She was embarrassed that she couldn't blend in enough so that she could avoid being cheated. She was angry at how much it had cost her to get this far, only to be stopped before she could even make it to the train station. She'd thought she could manage on her own. She'd always liked to do it on her own, before. Worst of all, Yura had wanted her because she was *good*, capable and independent. What would he think now? Amelia had been naive, and proven herself so incompetent that she couldn't even travel 700 kilometers, let alone assist in an election that would change the future of a nation, his nation after a bloody revolution that still had the country divided. Yura needed the help. She wanted the experience. Amelia had spent weeks crunching voting numbers, interviewing poll workers about missing ballots, informants about bribery, hearing about the things she'd written about in her master's thesis, and now an opportunity had come to observe in a red zone — and here she was on a country road with no hope of going forward or back since she had no money!

Amelia opened her eyes. The bus headlights glared accusingly at her. She blinked and looked away. She saw spots. A man poked his head out of the folding door. He yelled at her in Ukrainian. Another man stuck his head out the driver's window. Both men looked confused and wary. She knew why. Amelia quickly straightened her coat and hat.

“Please, can you give me a ride to the city?” she asked in Russian, then in English.

A man with a face pock-marked like the road stepped one foot out of the luxury bus. He wore a suit about two sizes too big for his frame. He spoke to her in English.

“This is a tourist bus,” he said. “We don’t just...”

The taxi driver leaned farther out the passenger window, screaming. Soon he would figure out that he could go out the passenger door. Or back the car up, if it had gas, like Amelia suspected it did. She gave the man in the bus the sweetest smile she could muster.

The Tourist Bus

“I told Michael to let you in because you looked far too vulnerable to be out there all by yourself,” said Judith. “You know you shouldn’t be traveling alone.”

“It is because one of our grandchildren has red hair and freckles like you,” said her husband, Laszlo. “We knew we had to help you.”

Judith took out her digital camera and flipped to a picture of a young woman with corkscrew curly hair filling the frame. “She lives in Paris. And our oldest son is in London and our second son is studying in Budapest.”

Judith had worked as an English and German professor and then retired from a multinational corporation based out of Budapest. Many of the tourists on the bus were either language teachers or pensioners, she said.

“Can you tell we are all Hungarian Jews together for a heritage tour?” asked Judith. “There is a memorial in Kamyanets-Podilsky, have you seen it?”

Amelia shook her head and then took a bite out of a salami sandwich. She tasted one thick slice of a tomato, the seeds squishing between her teeth. Tomatoes tasted better in Ukraine, meaning they actually tasted like something. The Hungarians forced her to take an apple and a bottle of orange juice. When she finished one thing they offered her another. She realized the way to avoid getting stuffed was not just to declare she was full, but also not to reach out to take anything. But still a pint-sized grandmother with a strong arm lobbed a packet of cheesy crackers onto Amelia's lap.

Judith flipped through more pictures on her camera until she came to a memorial with a flaming torch and an inscription written in Ukrainian and English.

“My grandparents were from this village, as was her family and their family and his family.” Judith pointed to various occupants who smiled kindly at Amelia in a way she associated with all grandparents. “My grandfather and grandmother were murdered here along with 85,000 other Jews. The Germans used the ancient town as a Jewish ghetto. My mother has a memory of this ghetto. She told me that she and her brother hid in a sauna that had once been a Turkish bathhouse in the private home of the steward of the city during the Turkish occupation. My mother and uncle swam into the old waterway, they were very good at holding their breaths because they'd played like this as children. They came out a spring that bubbled into a small grotto on the other side of the ghetto wall. This home was an ancient site that few entered. I looked for it yesterday. It had been destroyed in the air raids. Thank God. None of the people there would talk to us. We don't know why they're all ashamed of us. ”

Amelia felt impressed by the children's magic-like journey underwater and back to life. It was an enchanting survivor's tale passed down into myth, no doubt everyone on the bus had one like it.

"We visited the beautiful synagogue in Chernivtsi. Do you know it?" asked another Jewish grandmother who had a giant pink bow in her dyed black hair and pink framed glasses.

Before Amelia could tell them that she hadn't come here as a tourist, the woman had moved on.

"We visited a Jewish museum in Lviv. Here's a calendar showing the collection. This shows all the preservation of the furniture and the art of the Jews who lived there before."

Judith tapped her on the shoulder. "Do you plan on going to Budapest? You should. If you come to Budapest, I will give you a tour of the synagogue. We will go with my son and show you all the beautiful sites. He needs to practice his English."

"Judith, look here. Doesn't Amelia look like Benjamin?" Laszlo took off his spectacles, breathed on them, wiped them on a purple handkerchief he kept in his breast pocket and then replaced them again to do a tennis-match stare between Amelia and his friend, Benjamin, sitting across the aisle.

"Yes, yes, she does. They have similar facial features," said the strong-armed grandmother.

"Why look at that! Isn't that amazing? Maybe you are related. Benjamin, do you have family in America?" asked the pink-bowed grandmother.

Benjamin gazed wistfully at Amelia. White hairs sprouted from his nose and ears in an endearing way that made Amelia think of a bunny rabbit. He had the faintest tint of red at the roots of his white hair. She wished they were related.

“You look just like him, don’t you think?” Judith said. She took the handkerchief from her husband and cleaned her glasses, looking up at Amelia as she breathed on the lenses.

“Did you have any family in Ukraine, dear? Is that why you came?” asked the pink-bowed grandmother.

She told them where she was from and what she was doing with the OSCE.

“You know Ukraine is like an unmarked grave.”

“Many have been marked now, Judith.”

“Nearly all of Ukraine’s one-and-a-half million Jews died, and all of their villages. Very few protected them, I will tell you that.”

“We heard of a family in Odesa.”

“Yes, this is true, this is true. But we couldn’t go to Odesa because of the protests.”

“The Orange Revolution was so peaceful, no one was killed then.”

“More than half a million doomed Galician Jews passed through western Ukraine on the Nazi death trains. We see all that has been destroyed and nothing that remains.”

“Tell us about America,” Laszlo asked. “We have been on this bus for too long. We need entertainment something else.”

“How is the Jewish community in America?” Judith asked.

Amelia racked her brain for anything she could remember about Jewish people at home in Sacramento. Happier things.

“Wait, wait, tell us all! Michael, Michael give this lady the microphone so she can tell everyone about the Jewish communities in America.”

Amelia laughed nervously. She turned with the microphone to face the passengers. She paused after every sentence for her words to be translated into Hungarian, a language that seemed to have no cognates. She told them everything she remembered from a Jewish friend she had in school. It had been so long since she thought of home. She and her best friend, Mira, who Amelia had recently learned from Facebook had married a woman and converted to Buddhism, had run together for elementary school class offices.

“I wanted to be class president, Mira was running as my VP — vice president. Together we planned on taking George E. Harris Middle School in a sparkling new direction,” Amelia said this with a flourish of her hand, which made all the grandparents chuckle. “I made all our campaign posters with star glitter and drawings I did myself of My Little Pony. They were magical colored horses all the girls loved. They each had a different power. Anyway, I drew myself and Mira in the saddle, riding off together into a happy cloud kingdom over a rainbow. Kind of funny now, I guess. We both got into the run-off elections, but then lost in the final.” The grandparents all sighed in disappointment. “We found out later that an older girl had spread a rumor that we were gay ponies. And she promised all the boys packs of Topps baseball cards if they voted for her.”

“What a bitch,” Judith said.

“Actually it helped me later. It inspired me when I was writing my master’s thesis. I still had righteous indignation, I guess.”

Judith looked at her with curious eyes behind her spectacles. Amelia had the strangest feeling she was the one behind the glass looking out at all of them.

“What was your thesis? Tell us about this.” Judith said.

Amelia was pleased. Yura had recently read it and paid her the best compliment she’d ever received. He told her it was too close to reality to be a pleasant read. But comfort could be found in that one person cared enough to think that much about the problem.

“I studied how historically oppressed societies advance violence — a sort of ‘paying it forward’ but in the exact opposite spirit — by continuing to oppress weaker groups in their own communities, their own people. They use thug tactics in the electoral process. For instance, a ruling class arises by corrupting elections to further their own means, thus leaving the lower levels hopeless and discouraged, therefore convinced their own economic situations can never be improved because it’s in their cultural memory to equate authority with dominance and the risk of punishment if they ever happen to step out of line.”

The grandparents nodded. Judith asked if Amelia thought that was what had happened in Ukraine.

“I have a colleague, Yuraslav, who recently told me that he didn’t believe a person could analyze the Ukrainian complicity with the Nazis apart from the historical context.

Eleven years previous, about seven million of their people had been killed by Stalin's famine, a genocide called the *Holodomor*. So mass protest is not engaged in by the larger oppressed population because they know how badly they can be punished. The people learned to believe that nothing can ever change and, in fact, they must work even harder to do the only thing they can — preserve themselves and the people closest to them.

Family only.”

Glassy eyes all looked up at her. Even those without spectacles.

“What does that mean?” Laszlo asked.

“Hush, Laszlo,” Judith said. “We know what that means.”

The pink-bowed granny nodded. “They gave up their Jews.”

Amelia sat back down, feeling suddenly exhausted. “But that has changed in Ukraine. The people did rise up.”

Laszlo leaned closer to Amelia. “We’ll reach your destination in time, dear, don’t worry. Moving slow doesn’t mean we won’t get there.”

Judith touched a wet tissue to Amelia’s forehead and then rubbed. “You had a smudge of lipstick on your forehead, dear.”

After One Week In-Country

Amelia pulled up her master’s thesis when she got tired of looking at numbers. She blacked out all the [REDACTED]s so her thesis looked like a redacted CIA document. *Other days she italicized everything except the word* community. Then her writing looked like it was being swept along in a river. The Prut, she ran along it once. She was chased by a

pack of feral dogs. She had to throw a rock at one. Granny Vika hadn't let her go out alone after that.

A community is the safest foundation in the changing currents, she told Yura when he saw her italicizing her thesis. *Then she changed all 150 pages*

into Zappino and laughed at just how much of a different

feeling it gave. It seemed strangely appropriate for a girl who

once imagined political utopia as a glittering city in the clouds

reachable only by gay ponies.

Even after years of studying the problem that had so defiled her sense of justice as a child, and then another five in the field, did she have a solution? Did anyone?

Back on the Bus

Eight miles outside Khmelnytskyi, the bus was waved over by the DAI. No one had a Ukrainian police pension card. Amelia checked her phone. She stared at the back of Michael's head, willing him to just hurry up and pay the bribe.

"This is the seventh time we've been stopped," Judith said.

Amelia imagined herself running down the platform, screaming for the train to stop. *Please, please let me on! Do you know how much I was exploited to get here!* "The police don't make enough money," Amelia said, distracted. "They can't survive off their government salaries. They may say they're checking for *titushki* sent to disrupt the voting, but even they know thugs wouldn't hide in giant buses like this — they're the most likely transport to be pulled over by militia looking for bribes."

"What is this? We have never heard this before," Judith said. "Say it into the microphone."

Amelia faced the grandparents again. She looked at all of those age-worn smiles and reverential wrinkles. Yet no one knew better than this group of people, the children of refugees, how shitty people could be to one another.

"It's for many reasons, but one is that the Ukrainian government doesn't pay the service providers a living wage. Most of the police make only 300 hryven a month, which isn't enough for one trip to the grocery store for a family. Sometimes they don't get paid at all. They supplement by taking bribes. That's why, when they see a big bus full of EU tourists, they take advantage, especially since there aren't a lot of you around these days."

Amelia understood why they tried to get as much money from her as they could. If she had to live with corrupt politicians, low wages and the ever increasing gap between

what a person could earn and the high cost of living, she would probably exploit the desperate American, too.

Michael finally returned and the bus started.

“We managed to talk them down to thirty euro,” he said to Amelia. Thirty euro. About 500 hryven. About how much it cost for groceries for a family of four.

Khmelnyskyi

Amelia found a cab. She knocked on the window. He wouldn't take her for free, of course, and he refused to give her directions. She supposed it was because she was speaking in Russian. Amelia stomped her feet. She was a kid again — unable to communicate what she needed in the way that was needed. He didn't want to speak Russian. Her *mobilka* had sweat marks on it from being clenched so tightly in her hand. Amelia started walking quickly. Then she broke into a run down the *prospekto*. She slowed then stopped by a granny pushing a stroller in front of the city's Shevchenko statue. The granny gave her directions, while chuckling at the crazy foreigner's disheveled state. Amelia felt so relieved she hugged the woman. She looked over the old woman's shoulder up at the Shevchenko statue. The Ukrainian hero was striding, his coat flying out about him, a quill pen in his right hand, a stern look on his tight, mustachioed face. Shevchenko wrote in Ukrainian, a language marginalized by the Russians. He advocated for better conditions for poor Ukrainians and the end of serfdom. Eventually, he was exiled for his radical views. These were all things Amelia didn't know before she came here.

The granny patted Amelia kindly before turning back to the baby in the carriage. Farther down the walkway, Amelia could see the statue of Cossack Hetman Bohdan Khmelnytsky, namesake of the city, the great warrior of the Zaporozhians, the Ukrainian high official who allied his territory with the Russian Tsar. Two strong leaders, Shevchenko and Khmelnytsky, two different ideas, so close to each other now. They both had strong Slavic mamas, that was sure. No doubt these were powerful women who raised the children who would go on to shape and change a nation. Imagine how strong these women were if they had such children! Even little Granny Vika had the iron will to bend Amelia, in all her naiveté and stubbornness. And that was when Amelia had her best idea: They should employ grannies to police the polls. They were the only ones the *titushki* would never dare touch. The old matriarch class had always been fearless, a ruling class convinced of its right to rule. This had changed a bit with the times, but perhaps it could come again if the women were empowered by the West.

Amelia reached into her bag and pulled out the two Roshen chocolate bunnies. She placed them on the child's yellow fleece blanket and kissed the granny on the cheek.

KATYAS

After the Crimean girl left, the American was alone at the hostel for only an afternoon before a new guest interrupted her reverie on the sunny patio facing the cobblestone street. He wasn't the usual type for these accommodations — graying anchorman upsweep, leathery skin, close shave with two dried cuts on his jaw line, postured like a former military officer. His tan was offset by a pair of white sailing shorts and seersucker shirt. He intimated, gothic coast accent rolling, that he was here in Ukraine visiting all his girlfriends. She wasn't surprised by his purpose for being in the country, but was taken aback by the directness. Surely he could guess that the use of the plural *girlfriends* singled him out as a DOM — Dirty Old Man. He looked like he spent spring on the links, summer fly fishing, then wintered on a temperate peninsula, yet here they were at a youth hostel, late season, in a remote city in the upper armpit of Ukraine (as she liked to say). She guessed the DOM was looking for bargain-basement amenities and entertainment. Though, after the Crimean girl, she wouldn't be so quick to judge.

She shook the older American's hand — a pleasantry from a fellow citizen that felt more needy than pleasant. His gaze, revealing the opaque dullness of developing cataracts, hovered over her breasts. She crossed her arms. He averted his eyes down to the sunflower seed shells left cracked on the pavement. She wished he'd been here when she lost it. When she was looking for someone to yell at.

“What are you here for?” he asked, because, of course, every one else needed an explanation.

She described her job volunteering with a local community development NGO.

“I’m bitterly disappointed about this country’s development — if you want to call it that.” He complained further about the price inflation since his last visit.

She rotated her body away from him, as if orienting herself toward the blazing sun, like the head of a sunflower. He leaned still closer to her. She flicked her lighter a few times to get a small flame. The DOM grimaced at her cigarette. He said he kept fit through a healthy diet of egg whites, microgreens, lean meat, and a handful of almonds everyday. That’s what you need to do to live a balanced life: an active schedule and clean diet, he advised.

“These are all natural.”

He humphed. She smoked her American Spirit. She’d gotten them from a friend of a friend who purchased imported cigarettes on the Hungarian black market and then sold them to expats. She had smuggled in a whole carton with no intention of selling. She was a role model, after all, catering to her own vices, not encouraging them in others.

“You gotta drop those bad habits *cold turkey*.” He sat back into the shade to avoid her second-hand smoke.

The American girl tried to think of the last time she’d heard that old nonsensical idiom. Perhaps that was indicative of her generation, which could quit nothing without nine months of rehab, and sometimes not even then. Maybe if she blew the smoke around her like a windmill, he’d leave her alone, she thought.

Nope.

The DOM was an observer on all economic matters as they affected him. “These prices are not sustainable for the population. How long is this going to hold? How Is This All Going to Last?”

“I’d rather not talk about it,” she said. She couldn’t judge, she was bad with money, often forgetting how much she spent and where. Like on a carton of black-market cigarettes. And after the Crimean girl, the young American was talked out. And she didn’t feel much like listening, either.

Her response seemed to only encourage the DOM. Perhaps he got the idea that because she said *I don’t want to talk about it* meant she really did want to talk about it, but only after heightening the tension. The problem was the girl knew she *shouldn’t* talk about it. She had visited a friend in Budapest, that friend was also veteran aid worker in a former Soviet satellite country. She had shared her coping method: try not to think about it, those big problems that would overwhelm you because they had no easy solution. Currency overvaluation, declining population, kleptocracy. Otherwise, she said, you’d become unable to accomplish any of the things you set out to do, the small things that brought joy to you and the people around you. The Ukrainians lived every day with the stagnant economy, the high cost of living and the revelry of wealth seen in Western pop culture yet fewer legal means to obtain it there. *You’re going to leave someday; they will stay. You only have to live with it for a short time: Don’t be a whiny bitch.*

“The people are being exploited by their leaders,” the DOM said with exasperation.

The American girl tried to avoid political discussions with old people like this DOM, i.e., men with power and money who were part of the problem. He was intimately exploiting his Ukrainian “girlfriends,” their desperation and their hope, which he seemed ignorant of, while vociferously cognizant that their leaders yielded to corruption because they had the opportunity and no system of checks and balances, a much greater community offense than his, she admitted. But she wasn’t sharing a hostel with a corrupt Ukrainian politician. She was forced into interacting with this DOM wearing cultural blinders, distanced from a community that checked his bad behavior by the societal condemnation of gossip and icy stares, all the while inwardly acknowledging the free will of a desperate, beautiful young woman. How could the ancestors of immigrants judge others for making a decision based on economics and opportunity? Though she honestly thought it would just lead to a different kind of misery in a different miserable place. She stuck another cigarette in her mouth. *You’re too young to be this cynical.* That’s what Philip muttered before she walked out the door. She’d come here with him, for him — mostly. But she would probably now leave alone.

The DOM grumbled. “This corruption shouldn’t surprise me. Everyone does it, even the Americans. Did you know that if you want to get a visa for an adopted child it is the American lawyers who suck you dry, not the natives, not the Russians nor the Ukrainians? In fact, that’s what made the Russians so aggravated that they stopped international adoptions. It was the American legal system that was profiting from the whole baby business, not them.”

She had it wrong: He wasn't ignorant of his involvement, he was very much aware of the system. He was angry, like the Russians, that he wasn't getting a better deal.

She looked at him and thought of Philip. Perhaps it was better to embrace idealism rather than end up bitter and alone in a hostel, like this old man.

The older American pecked at the keys of the community iMac, an obsolete model with a body like a turtle shell. If only he'd known how important computers were going to become, he would've learned how to type earlier. Though he was getting faster entering WWW.UA-DREAM-MARRIAGE.COM into the browser window. He just didn't have a reason to learn computers before. He always had a secretary during his time in the Navy. He only needed typed professional correspondence. And the women always came to him. But now the business he had to do on a computer were all things he did for himself. And the women weren't as easy to meet. He threw himself into it now, taking classes at the local community college, but it was still so hard for his fingers to find those keys in the right order of thought to screen.

No message from Katya. He leaned back on the lumpy sofa and rubbed his eyes. The lights in these places were so poor, made everything look so blurry. The other American in the hostel came in the room and stopped suddenly. She surprised him, too. *Oh, boy*, he thought. The girl veered and went to the kitchen table with a plate of food and one of those electronic tablet things. He preferred to have female company, and this one had nice tits and legs. She was alone here, so he could give her a chance. She looked like she needed it. Though, he had to remind himself, American girls were too expensive

and willful. But this trip to Ukraine had been more disappointing than ever before. He'd arrived in Kyiv, saw a girlfriend there, but she'd wanted him to spend too much money on hotels. Then matches in Zhytomyr, Lutsk and now Chernivtsi. Gorgeous ladies all, but the conversation plodded (they were never as good in English as they pretended online), yet their questions still managed to be penetrating. Ukrainian gals were not shy about getting to the point: *How many girls you see here? When you will want to marry? When can you buy me ring?* At least he knew for sure this young American wanted nothing from him, and he attributed compatriots with immediate politeness and shared interest, whether it was present or not.

“Everyone tries to exploit you here, as I said earlier. But the Americans are just as bad! For example, you could buy a visa from the U.S. embassy for your fiancée for \$5,000,” he said. “They see that you’re desperate and they’ll make you pay. These things are supposed to be free to deserving, skilled people. These embassy officials exploit the hell out of you, the sponsor, because if you’re going to go through this then you’re in love with her and they know you’ll do anything.” He felt good getting this off his chest, since he had more to mull over this time. By the way things were going, this may be his last time in Ukraine. There were greener pastures, places the dollar stretched much further.

The American girl tilted her head down into that small flat screen. He rose from the sofa — knees cracking, he must be dehydrated — to sit near her so she could hear him better.

“Some years ago, I knew a woman...Katerina, she lived in Moscow. I gave her \$35 so she could privatize the apartment she shared with her mother — you see, back

then \$35 was a lot of money. It was a fortune to them. She was a good woman. I wanted to get her to America, but first they made her take all these tests and go through a physical — embarrassing stuff — and it was in that process that we found out she was real sick. I paid for her treatments, but I'm sure they made her feel lousy, in fact I know they did, because she stopped going to them. She listened to her mother — I can't begin to understand the power these mothers have on their daughters — and a shaman or whatever had Katya do some kind of folk witchcraft, something like burning a lock of her hair and then saying a prayer and then eating the ash. I mean, some crazy Third-World thing like that. Well, she listened to her mother, not that you shouldn't listen to your mother, I'm not saying that, but she wasn't no doctor and sure enough Katya was dead in a month."

The American girl peered into him. She seemed really interested, as if the somnolence had suddenly lifted. But it was under that stare that his yellow eyes grew even more still, as if he recognized in that moment that his death was imminent, and until then, he'd truly believed he would live forever because he was a white American male and immortality was the thing a white American male could buy with a young Ukrainian girlfriend and a long-lasting prescription — except the eternal life his ancestors had achieved was found in lasting relationships. He was their immortality, and it was obtained only through endurance and conception.

"But this is it," the American girl said to herself.

Suddenly, his eyes flashed around the room — and this was *it*, a hostel when the hrynya was nine to one U.S. dollar, alone, when the girl he most looked forward to seeing

had quit him *cold turkey*. It was as if he could see his own family tree and the inked-in span of the ancestral years ending at his blunt branch and an ominous blank, just waiting to be filled with a terminal year in an anonymous Transatlantic cursive. No branch beneath, none around. He hadn't wanted this for himself. He'd tried to bring a child over, too. He had wanted to sever himself from his family tree, to no longer carry that branch across his back, to create something of his own, but using nothing of his own root.

"But this is it," she repeated.

The older American snapped up, as if some ghost from the past had just gone patriarchal on him, rousing him, putting a fear in him, suffocating the defeat.

He humphed. "My girlfriend here is mad at me — she wants to marry me and I don't want to get married. I've always been able to avoid it. But I really like her, so if Katya's going to get too upset, I'm just going to go ahead and marry her."

"This one's named Katya, too?"

He could've told her that the women he met all had the same names. He kept count for a while: three Innas, seven Olhas, twelve Anastasias. But instead, he went back to the hostel computer. He'd wanted to hold a familiar conversation with a friendly person in his own language. Oh, the rare happiness of comprehending every single word that was said, and knowing that every word said in return would be understood as well. But what he really wanted was to be thought of as a man of great knowledge and experience, and instead — he sensed it in her awakened state — the young woman looked at him with a mixture of pity, like he was a dirty old man. That was even worse than the girls who saw him as an escape from an even worse situation. But wasn't that what he wanted? Hadn't

he brought himself right to this hostel — laying out the end of his life as if he were planning a vacation? He shook the end from his mind.

The Crimean girl had been exhausted after three days of wedding festivities, and still hungover from the hot spiced *horilka*. She'd become friendly with the American girl also staying at the hostel because both of them smoked and smokers acquiesced to being friendly to other smokers despite language barriers (if one wanted to easily become acquainted with other travelers, one only needed to take up the habit). Both were sure that the other greatly enjoyed the conversation, few sentences understood by either, though many words. Great handfuls of sunflower seeds were also consumed between them during these times. But when the American accused the Crimean girl of taking 100 hryven from her wallet, the girl found the words to defend herself.

“Did not take,” she said. “I do not.” The Crimean girl looked embarrassed. She was embarrassed for all of them. “I have no money.” That was true. Her train ticket was purchased in advance, and all the money she had, she'd given to the bride and groom, a distant cousin. She was a foreigner in her own land. She spoke only Russian, so the distance between her and this branch of her mother's family was more than the kilometers, the two days it took her to get here by train.

The American girl clutched her ruby red sequined wallet. She then upended her rucksack, cursing the whole while. It seemed to the Crimean girl that the American was having emotional feelings, so she left to give her privacy. But the American followed her. She was even more embarrassed then at the American's shouting. Thank goodness they

were the only ones staying in the hostel. Americans were always so loud, like old drunk Russian men, but without being drunk.

“People are always taking things from me, taking, taking, taking, and I have nothing left! Look at me — there is nothing left!” She threw her red wallet across the room.

“Is nothing left?” the Crimean girl tried to pronounce the words like the American. It was good practice, actually.

“That’s how I feel, though I guess it isn’t true.”

The Crimean girl shrugged. She made herself a cup of green tea, one also for the American because it seemed like she needed it. That’s what her mama always did in times such as these. Perhaps this American had no family to do these things for her. Families moved apart in America, she knew.

“I just thought...I just thought this would be different.”

“This would be different.”

“You know, you come to a foreign country with the man you love, you think you’re going to marry him and be happy, starting over fresh together.”

“Happy starting over fresh together?” She placed the mug of green tea into the American’s hands.

“Human nature is just the same, all over the world. And no matter where I go, I will be the same.”

“It will be the same.”

“I wanted so much more from my life than this life.”

“But...this is...it,” the Crimean girl said, struggling to put the words together. She shrugged again and sipped her tea.

They sat on the patio smoking together in a bungle of silence, understanding that best.

IHOR OF THE CARPATHIANS

Volodya, my younger friend and sometimes cultural translator, was born and raised in a small town on the edge of the second-largest mountain range in Europe, called *Karpaty* in the Slavic tongue. This arch stretched nearly a thousand miles over Central and Eastern Europe. In those days, my work as a freelance writer kept me mostly in Kiev, where I also copyedited translations of folk tales and scientific medical articles. It was during one of our weekly conversations that Volodya offered to show me real Ukrainian country life. His home was what he called “the gateway” to the Carpathians, a term I hadn’t heard since my cub reporter days covering tourism in northern Nevada, where both Reno and Carson City were “the gateway to Lake Tahoe” — meaning the place you would pass through on the way to someplace better. Staying or passing through, I was happy to pull myself from stacks of texts, where current events were blending into old world village romances and merging into new experiments in polypeptide bonds found in cancerous liver cells.

At the regional central bus station in Volodya’s home *oblast*, I was surprised when we boarded a rather large, modern bus heading to Vyzhnytsia. I thought then that perhaps he had underestimated the size and importance of his town. I felt a bit disappointed. I wanted to see a quaint village, not another post-Soviet city, but at least I was able to sit back comfortably after the overnight train. It had been an invigorating introduction to Ukrainian long-distance travel, but also a rattletrap fourteen-hour ride that irritated my sciatica. The tension eased when I breathed in the air of recent rains and blessed open space, rather than the confines of city and tiny train compartment. I found contentment

watching the countryside pass by. Hunched grannies in head scarves sold garden vegetables on the side of the gnarled road. Goats and horses tied to electric poles grazed on the new spring growth shooting through the broken pavement. I saw two aunties wearing only bras and long skirts hoeing the potato field in front of their square house. I spied a grandfather taking his cow for a walk along the road. The old man slapped the cow's side with a long reed as he typed away on his mobile phone with his other hand. I mused that all these older Ukrainians led a much more active lifestyle than me, and I probably had more pains than they did.

Our bus passed three-story houses built with red brick and other decorative rocks surrounded by tall, ornate iron fences. Still others had copper or aluminum caps on the turrets, as if the homeowners feared an invading army equipped with flaming arrows. Volodya said they were constructed by local families with children working abroad. They were attempting to re-create the majestic domiciles they'd seen in Bavaria, Tuscany or central Switzerland. The children were able to send money back home for the construction of these pseudo-castles in the hopes that the whole family would one day occupy them. So unaccustomed were the folk to the powers of new money, my friend said, and the fear they might not get the materials later, that a home was built in pieces as the money and supplies came in. He said the currency crisis had stalled many of these projects, and the country's economic stagnation did the rest. Many of the homes sat as shells, or just empty, when relatives abroad realized it was far more lucrative to stay where they were. Volodya's eyes shifted downward, crestfallen.

It wasn't long before I was looking up at what we from the Sierra Nevada would call "hills." The verdant firs covered the undulations like thick mossy paste.

"These are what pass for mountains in the Ukraine?" I asked my friend, which he took good-naturedly, as he always did with my jokes.

The ancient Carpathians seemed to be considerably more weathered compared to the new world and its alpine peaks, created by the relatively recent perambulations of our tectonic plates. Americans were as mobile as our land. The Carpathians had been worn down by nature and time — they endured just as the people did through and despite war, occupations, oppressions, and suppression of the native language. Here, geography had a longer time to settle into itself, as the new modern Ukrainian did into villages and towns now sprouting mobile phone towers, tour offices and sidewalk espresso cafes.

Volodya and I stopped beside a vibrant yellow and blue piece of graffiti painted across an old fence, a strange touch of urbanity along a dirt road. It read "Bukovyna" in stylized Cyrillic script. He said we were on the edge of the historical region famous in a bygone era. It seemed like an old historic name would be too banal for a young and rebellious graffiti artist, I added.

"Our young people are very good at history." He laughed.

I'd recently written a news story about how the rural areas were emptying out, that young adults were either getting jobs in the big cities, or just going abroad to work. Now I saw the beauty in the spaces between city civilizations, but did not find it to be empty. Children were heading off to school; old people watched from their gardens. Sure, the younguns' wanted a more exciting life for now, but no doubt many of them would

return to raise their children and farm the family land. Plaster and pastel-colored homes were arranged along the road, each as different as the next, though all contained variations of beetroots, chicken huts and patriotic trident flags. I smelled a sweet fragrance, like overgrown honeysuckle after the rain.

“I’ve never seen a town so undeserving of being called a ‘gateway,’” I said, and not at all to placate my companion.

He nodded back toward the long, gleaming bus. “Would you like to hear story of how we got the nice *marshrutka*?”

I glanced back. The bus still had German site names on its destination signs. This was a luxury coach for Ukraine, and it was used only for running between his town and the city. I was enchanted by the picturesque villages we’d passed through because I had the opportunity to observe them. Usually, the smaller Soviet-era buses were standing-room only, windows closed by old women sure we would all catch cold from a draft, curtains drawn to keep the sun from baking us like the shiny, crusty traditional Easter bread. This foreign bus had large, quality tinted windows and plenty of plush seating.

“We have Igor to thank for that bus.”

I chuckled a little at the distinctly Slavic name. In this area, it sounded like *Ihor* since the *g* sound was used in Russian, but a relatively recent addition to Ukrainian, and then used mostly for foreign words, like *Google* or *Lady Gaga*, but still then sounding to my ears like *Hoohle* or *Lady Haha*.

“But Igor did it because of my sister. She was the local beauty, you know.”

I noticed then my friend had an expression of resignation and perhaps even defeat on his gentle countenance. Despite being much younger than me, he had far more responsibility. Volodya walked me into the dirt between the road and a bordering fence and then intoned this narrative in a manner I had never heard from him. He didn't smile, he didn't quite frown, he didn't change his tone from a downcast monotony. All through the story rambled a shocking earnestness which showed me plainly it wasn't the luxury coach he wanted to talk about at all, and perhaps this was the first time he'd ever spoken of his lovely sister and the family tragedy to anyone outside his circle — he probably never needed to, everyone who mattered already knew. He regarded this and my knowing it as perhaps the most important matter that had ever passed between us, we two always kind to each other on the level of friendly acquaintance. He wished to share with me the admiration he felt for his beloved sister, and by me knowing this story I would really know him. The environment of the telling did change. In the beginning he often veered me onto the shoulder before a car sped by, which he seemed to sense before I heard. Then in his home, where it was interrupted out of care for his mother and her sensitivity. I let him take his time with the tale.

“Toward the end, we saw Vika only twice a year, if even that. It was so expensive for her to come back to Ukraine with Little Vasel, and then we always met them in *oblast* center. She could never come back here. Vika, widowed young, left her home to work in Italy rather than be forced to take up with a local mafia boss's son.”

I found that the Slavic people often started the tale with sorrow and ended it there, too.

“Vika was just a year older than me, and all my school friends were in love with her. Of course, she cared only for Vasel Victrovych since she was twelve. They married when she was in her second year at university. She still pursued her degree in translation because she knew she would have to work, and this was what she wanted. Vika was the hardest worker. Nothing would stop her from providing for her family. And she wanted to help our father buy his own taxi. Back then, he was under contract with a transportation company, which was also run by mafia, a long *ten-ta-cal*, as you say, am I right? It was a real shock and so miserable when Vasel was killed. It sort of fueled her ambition, but also handicapped her, I’d say. It was though she thought it all was up to her now and she was on her own. Of course, widows and orphaned children get some benefit from the government, but this is not reliable, and Vika wanted to do as much as she could on her own and then help the family since our two little sisters still needed to go to university. Vasel’s death gave Vika a horrible emotional despair. It put the fear in her of just how hard the rain falls on the just and unjust alike. She had nightmares. She never would get in an automobile, and she would not allow Little Vasel on roads in one of our old Soviet *marshrutky* — with our roads like they are, who could blame her? Particularly with what happened to her husband. That speeding car tore his body in two. There was nothing but two strings of muscle holding upper and lower torso together. Vasel’s liver was tucked into a pothole as if devil himself arranged it. His stomach and intestines were flung about a nearby utility pole. Can you imagine seeing that horror in your mind every night?”

By this point we were sitting at his family’s kitchen table. I set down my slice of bread slathered in raspberry jam. Volodya then stopped the story when his dollop of a

mother entered to serve us bowls of mushroom soup. She was helping her husband with the barbecue outside. In Ukraine eating was done in stages, something like the construction of houses, I guessed. She smiled so kindly at me I wanted to call her mama, too. I felt looking into her big eyes that I could see her past, present and future: her life as a young, kindhearted girl, her motherhood as a time of great sacrifice and devotion to her four children, and now a comfortable old age fawning over the next generation. Volodya and I soon went to sit on the porch to smoke cigarillos I had bought during a recent assignment in Vienna. From the back porch, I could see the garden — a mysterious corner ruled by a chained mutt the mother called “pest.” The pest ran hyper paths into the ground inside a minefield of sunflowers and riotous bushes waving their colors in the wind. Volodya’s mother gave me a stein of homemade beer and filled it up and up with no say when from me. Other than her delight in my presence, taking up the rest of the yard was the small cabin where I was staying that night. The darkness was coming on fast, even though it wasn’t long past six.

“It was built for me,” Volodya said about the cabin. “I know I have degrees in translation, but I don’t want to leave my mother. I don’t want to leave my home. I love my mother so much. Soon, after I have a bit more money saved up, Nataalka and the kids and I will move in there.”

I couldn’t imagine many Americans agreeing to such a situation or, in fact, looking forward to it. I would’ve felt such pressure if I knew my parents had built me a house right in their backyard and expected me to find a wife, have kids and live beside them for the rest of their lives. It was a beautiful spot for a week’s vacation, not for the

rest of my life. For the first time then, I realized I would never fully understand the Slavic mind, not with my mentality so ingrained in independence and mobility. I was the odd man out here, one who'd never settled, and as much as this foreign lifestyle confused me, I could see that my friend did want it, and I could see the charm.

His mama looked warily up to the sky. Her skirt and apron whipped about her knees. She spoke in Ukrainian. Her son waved her inside, we stayed on the covered porch. Mist obscured the trees atop the closest mountain, the leaves seemed a deep hunter green. Volodya continued.

“I'd like to open a little business in Vyzhnytsia. But it's hard to make it work because of mafia. An entrepreneur will find himself paying many unexplained taxes to government officials and then also fees to local mafia boss. Igor was my friend from primary school so I knew best how it worked. What stays in my mind is a time Igor and I were coming home from school — he would often give me a ride because he had a car — three German cars then and one from Japan. That day we were in his gray BMW. We sped by militia station and the officer saluted Igor! It was because his family paid their wages. But I suppose if it weren't for them, we wouldn't even have police at all. Igor and I passed a restaurant that had been up the street there and Igor says to me that they were going independent. It was brave. “They may have some problems,” I said. Igor didn't take his eyes off road, but he said he hoped they didn't, but that I was probably right. He figured they'd have problems soon enough. He was a nice guy, Igor. He rules us all now — as hard as his mother before him, like iron nails in pine coffin. He was fated to live this life. Though he tried to stop it — back then. He would come home from university in

Kyiv and we would talk in English to each other. He was really good in languages, especially German. I think he made himself good in hopes that he'd be doing business straight. Around here crooked business is in Russian and *surjik*. That empty lot we passed on the walk up to my house? Well, that was where the restaurant used to be. The fire general agreed it was the fault of the proprietor. Now who did he agree with? You can guess.

“Also that day, I told Igor that Vika was moving back with Little Vasel. I said he should stop by later, since I knew the two of them always were friendly to each other. He didn't. But later that night, I came out and I saw his BMW parked down the street. I looked back later and it was gone. It continued this way all that first summer Vika was back.

“Her fear of driving wasn't too bad at first because she didn't need to go anywhere. It wasn't until Little Vasel was older that there was a problem. He was always a bit slow so I asked a doctor I knew to come test him. This doctor told us Vasel had a developmental disorder, so we probably wouldn't find the proper schooling here in town. It was a sort of relief then to know what problem was. The government would get him a place in special class in Chernivtsi and Vika was real keen that he should have this opportunity. We all agreed with her, but there was the problem of how to get him there four times a week. She couldn't move away from our parents and she wouldn't drive in a car. She wouldn't let him take a *marshrutka*. We had no solution. So, for the first few weeks he was supposed to be at this school, she just stayed at home teaching him. It upset our mother really bad. She cursed corrupt government officials for making the trains so

infrequent and expensive between here and Chernivtsi — the rail is owned by government and various interests were trying to make it go bankrupt so country would have to privatize it. Travel options were so limited so the *marshrutky* companies could charge as much as they wanted, knowing that we had to pay it. The companies then pocketed that money and didn't use any of it to make improvements on their buses, despite the fact that more people were using them and the buses were not as safe as they could've been. We felt imprisoned by lack of transportation. It was during my first break from school that year that Igor saw me at bus stop in the oblast center and offered me a ride home. He was coming from university in Kyiv and could take me back with him. I was so grateful to him I couldn't even express. I thought I would wait for hours and still not get a place on bus. Igor asked about my family and I told him all of our troubles. Normally, I would not have done so, but Igor was an old friend and my mind was heavy with these problems. Igor didn't say anything for the whole drive. He just listened.

“Vika was outside with Little Vasel. I thought he would drive away and just watch her from afar again, but he did stop for a bit and the two of them talked and walked down the street. I saw the neighbor's curtains open and then fall back. Vika did look lovely that night. She sort of sparked up when she saw Igor. I think she yearned for intellectual conversation in those days. She didn't have any people to speak English with when I was gone, and her German, too, had been pretty good. Yes, she looked happy then. You know, the funny thing is it has been so long now...I have replaced her in my mind with the image of a glowing angel. But then she rushed in afterward, looking very disturbed. I asked her, but she would not tell me.

“I didn’t think of Igor’s visit, nor my revealing conversation with him again until my dad gave us some news over dinner, before I was set to go back to university. He said to us that we would never believe what he had heard from the transportation company. We were all ready to hear some bad news — that they were raising his monthly fee for using the taxi, or that there was a bridge being shut down for repairs that would go on indefinitely. He asked us why we all looked so grim. He said the transportation company was adding a bigger bus to the city route and it would be a German bus. Can you imagine that? And just as cheap as any other! I had to see it to believe it. I asked him if it would stop downtown. I knew that Little Vasel’s school was closest to that terminal. I looked at Vika and I could tell she wanted me to ask, but also didn’t want to know in case that it didn’t and her hope would so quickly be eliminated. And then my father said this: ‘It would only stop there!’ The next morning, Vika, Little Vasel and I waited by the side of the main road where we knew the bus would pass. Sure enough, at a quarter to eight the largest and fanciest bus we’d ever seen rolled up! Vika gets on smiling so big I thought I would weep with joy. In the belly of this monster, she said, she knew nothing could happen to them. She found a seat for herself and for Vasel. And that bus would become the one I would take home every weekend. Every year, there was a new used one from Germany, as if this company concerned itself especially that my sister would be worried about its condition.

“It was later during school break when I took the bus that I happened to look back and see Igor sitting all alone, his eyes on Vika. I didn’t mention it to her. I didn’t acknowledge him. I never did in all those times I saw him sitting in the back when we all

knew very well he had five cars in an underground garage. I'm sure he rode that bus when he was home and he knew she'd be on it. She never let on that she saw him. Vasel did once. He said there was a tall man who always watched him. He said the man had given him a chocolate hazelnut candy, his favorite.

“It wasn't Igor who made my sister leave, though that was gossip around town. His mother was the real force in the family, and she was impatient for her son to settle down and have children. But how can someone like Igor settle down with anyone else other than Vika? And she would only love Vasel and the absence of him. That old hag threatened my sister and then said something against Little Vasel. No, Vika would not stand for being bossed around. And she didn't. She left on a winter's day when everyone thought she was taking her son to school. So Igor's love for Vika was how we got comfortable, reliable transportation between here and the city. It was also her route for escape. Igor never stopped that German bus, even after she disappeared. Here it still runs as a benefit to her family and whole town. Nearly every good thing that ever come to us has been from mafia. Nearly every terrible thing, too. Igor's bus had helped her see that they could be safe on roads again. It was on a trip home from Italy to see us for Easter that the bus driver fell asleep at the wheel and drove off the road, killing five people, including our Vika and Little Vasel. I felt sorrow for my old friend Igor as much as I felt for us because I knew he loved her so. Her death ended any chance for his salvation. But it was not a very big chance. We're a doomed race, but what can we do? We still need a little plot to build our house and plant our crops.”

Volodya threw our scraps to the *pest*. The dog did not want to come from his house even for the pork bones. My friend ran back in the wet wind. I turned myself toward the blinking of the starlight so mightily I thought perhaps we were being clenched in a giant fist opening and closing for its own amusement.

A BUKOVYNIAN TALE

1. SAINT JOHN'S EVE

Outward from the Prut River, where the storks dance in the warm water, over green hills and across an ancient Austro-Hungarian city where the people speak two languages, one of their ancestors and still yet another of their ancestors, is the land for those who seek harmony. Here, the thrush and magpie eat bountifully from the cherry trees. The air smells like Carpathian firs. This is the entryway of the mountain tree land. The days are filled with many late-spring weddings, and young couples join with their families in the sun surrounded by traditional embroidered hand towels. Folk music from the mandolin, guitar and bandura floats over the land but then stops, as if dropped by the hand of God, at the edge of the forest enchanted by the witch Maryna. It is here that the storied red rue blooms, and the sun is reaching its zenith.

“Midsummer is approaching, and Ivan Kupala Day is upon us,” says Captain Grigory Vasyliovych, the hoariest of the forest gnomes. He breathes heavily through his dry, crusted nose. The air smells of fish guts and pickled lemons. His narrowed black pebble eyes sweep over the military forces of the ancient forest standing at attention in tight lines that go back as far as the frosty ferns, called this not because they were kissed by winter still, but rather a symbiotic mold that coated the fronds like a snowy down.

“This is the day of the summer solstice, and the evening before is the night of the festivities.” The captain turns and stares at a tremulous recruit. “Or should I say slaughter? Last year, twelve gnomes were blinded, one teenage village girl was trampled to death, and forty spirits died — again.”

The line of defenders doesn't waiver. Most of them are experienced gnome fighters. Most of them have heard this all before. Some of them had been there. These forest creatures are half the height of man, skinny or flabby, depending upon which angle they are viewed. From the front, gnomes can look like boulders with protruding mossy eyes. The gnome's skin is bubbled and gray, and black earth hangs on it in lumps. For humans who do happen to see them, the worst thing to behold is a gnome's horrible green eyes. If a human stares for too long, he will forget his own language. From the side, they are as thin as a twisted wattle. They reek like the soil of a battlefield fought over for a thousand years. From their backs sprout scorpion stingers, which trigger attacks in the hearts of men with just a tiny prick. From the tops of their heads project fleshy tongues to drive a woman insane with such desire that can never be fulfilled in the mortal coil. Ultimately, these weapons work perfectly to distract the mortals from their unholy purpose, that of finding and picking the bewitched red rue.

Also part of this forest army is a legion of ghosts, as horrible to man as the stare of the gnome, but not because of their warrior qualities. In these ghosts, mortals see the deathly reminder of humanity, and what a simple effect a life leaves on this earth. The ghosts besmirch the vanity of man.

This is the horde that works to keep humans from the red rue, for their own good. And it will do so again.

"Some of you return because you want to be in the middle of the carnage," the captain says, huffing in the face of a warrior gnome. His green eyes flash darker. The gnome turns up his eyelids in an ocular smirk.

“Others here are careless with their lives, or the lives of others.” He stops before the trembling gnome.

Trepeta, who has catkin ears and a bit of rabbit grass beneath his lip, haltingly raises his eyes to the pacing captain. “I’m here to do my part to prove my honor to...to a...noble family!”

The captain growls at him, a salty gruff that wilts the spring grass about the young gnome’s cheeks.

“So, our young recruit wishes to marry up!” he laughs, which is echoed by a few others in the line. He looks at them sharply and everyone quiets. The captain inches closer to young Trepeta. “Many of you are here to prove something. You’re the stupid ones.”

“Quiet!” calls a voice from above, from a nearly solid ghost descending from the edge of the tree canopy.

“Show respect for the ghost of the great Hetman General Bohdan Khmelnytsky,” Captain Vasyliovych calls over the line, reverently blinking his eyes — five times fast for a hero slain in battle. The ear is stirred by so many gnomes fluttering their eyelids at once, the dust rises up to greet the general. The ghost salute, as was customary in their human lives.

Khmelnytsky seems as real in form as the man he was nearly three hundred and seventy years ago, the original hetman, the elected head of state of Zaporizhia, the Savage Steppe, who led the uprising against the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. This brought about the dawn of the Cossack state, ultimately leading to the union with the

Tsardom of Russia. The popular leader has joked with his ghostly captains that his first trip to the underworld came when he was still human, after making this treaty. He appears before the assembled army as his younger self, slim and erect, with an iconic, long Slavic nose between two arching midnight brows and a black mustache that swooped up over his lip and pointed down at both ends, as if a painted on.

“All of these forest spirits are to be honored as courageous fighters,” Ghost General Khmel'nitsky says. His feet hover over the blue grass. “Your service here in the ancient forest is to be commended. But don't be mistaken, this place is dangerous. The magic goes beyond all of us, and it's not all in our favor.” He looks around and then settles his eyes on Trepeta. “You will help save the forest, young gnome. You will because you must. During training you must keep in mind that the ones loved by God — the mortals — are great fighters.”

The captain blows air out of his sagging jowls.

“They are, Captain. A warrior who underestimates the humans will be a corpse for the earth to swallow. You — what is your name?”

“Trepeta, sir.” His voice quavers like a plucked bandura string.

“Captain, you will take the quivering aspen as your aide-de-camp.”

“Sir?”

The Cossack hetman rises into the air, his scarlet and black robes with gold fringes do not flap in the wind. “The red rue has not been picked in five hundred years, and all of us are here to make sure it stays that way. We can't even let the mortals see it.

You know what problems this has caused in the past. This year — no mistakes. Summer has come, and St. John’s Eve is upon us.”

As the noon June sun beats down on the cobbled roads, the demon Basavriuk turns down a lane that grows dark as midnight when his feet shuffle over the pitted and jagged stones. Around his neck hangs a green glass circle from a silver chain. It looks like the bottom of a soda bottle, except the circumference is crusted in blood. He raises this monocle to his eye. He has no irises, giving the demon the look of a ravenous rodent, still focused on a bit of cheese both it. While looking through the glass, Basavriuk comes upon a tall beech tree door. He knocks upon it with the silver handle of his cane, which is carved into the head of Cerberus. Any substance other than silver would pass right through the mysterious door, and then be torn apart molecule by molecule, if not first opened by the servant of the house. Basavriuk lowers the glass from his eye and the door disappears. His thin lips curl up into a smile. He knocks again. Basavriuk hears and feels his cane tap against the wood. The door swings open with a mutinous creak. The servant of the house, a dwarf with hair blue-black as a crow, stands over the threshold, as if he had been hiding there in the darkness the entire time.

“Tell your mistress that the Devil King Basavriuk is here to give her an important message.” His nasally voice hangs in the air. It doesn’t seem to pass the perimeter of the door.

The dwarf sticks his head out. “Eh?”

He repeats himself.

“So tell me,” the dwarf huffs.

The demon looks down at the dwarf and sneers. “I also wish to thank the lady for her magnificent gift.” He holds up the green glass eye piece.

The dwarf turns, stops and then looks back up at Basavriuk. “I thought you were just a demon. When did you get a promotion?”

“Don’t you worry about me! Just bring me to the witch!”

The dwarf servant cocks his head to the side, his hair falls over his alert eyes, as if he’s listening to a whisper in his ear. “The great witch is expecting you. Please come this way.”

Basavriuk steps over the threshold and the manor materializes around him, identical to the witch Maryna’s forest home in every way, except for its location now in the ancient city. The move displaced the small forest creatures that once resided in its walls, the demon discerns with one sniff. Basavriuk will have to lunch elsewhere. He always loved the taste of her squirrels.

The demon and dwarf seem to travel down a hallway for a mile, though when he arrives, it seems to have only taken seconds. He’s brought into the library, one of only two rooms of the magical house that he’s ever been allowed to see, though Basavriuk is the lady’s oldest living ally. The witch Maryna, sitting straight in a red velvet cushioned golden throne, looks up from her computer screen, which casts a white glow over her still whiter face.

“I like the new location,” the demon says. “So much more accessible than having to travel into the country and then search for an outcrop of mossy rocks, then ride round the bend from the stinking pond and the oldest Beech in the forest.”

“I invited you to the house-warming party.” Maryna leans back into her golden throne studded with rubies and obsidian. “If you weren’t so busy messing with the mortals, you may have seen everything sooner.”

Basavriuk nods his head in her direction. “My new work has kept me occupied. But, I believe you also shall benefit—”

“I have many new things, also. Like the new Stockholm queen bed frame and Sultan queen quilted mattress from the summer Ikea catalog.”

“I have no idea what that is.”

“And you won’t. Unless of course, you have a proposal in mind.” She bats her heavy-lidded eyes. The effort is slow, as if her eyelashes really were attached to the threads of the universe. But that was a myth. The demon was sure of it. He ignores her proposition — better not muddy the negotiation — and instead casts his eyes about the room.

“You still have a few old things still, I see.” He lingers over the witch’s throne, recognizing it from the palace of Catherine the Great. The slattern Russian empress was not one of his personal favorites, mostly because of her brutal ruling of the land he favored most of all, Little Russia, as it was called at that time. But now a great Ukrainian witch sat upon Ekaterina’s royal throne. He looked forward to sharing this fact with the empress the next time he was in hell. Maryna snaps her laptop closed when Basavriuk

comes around to peek over her shoulder. She turns to face the demon, not rising. The modern witch has outfitted her golden seat with swiveling wheels.

“New to me.”

Basavriuk laughs. She always did like to steal pretty things. The only difference is now she bought them.

“So much easier just to buy,” she says, reading his mind. Her perceptions were, of course, otherworldly. “I, too, am getting old. I’d much rather focus my talents on much more productive things.”

“Such as...” He plays with the monocle in his hand.

“Accumulating money to buy things that amuse me.”

Maryna’s female dwarf servant sidles up to massage the witch’s white hands.

“Carpal tunnel,” Maryna says, sighing deeply. She leans back in her wheelie throne and closes her eyes.

The demon does a double take. Of course, the dwarf’s ebony hair is enchanted to conceal whatever is hidden beneath it, including the dwarf’s own features, leaving a disconcerting empty space where a face should be.

Basavriuk thinks to memorize the titles on the cracking spines of her spell books, seeing through the accumulation of dust. He wants to remember to note the increase in electronic equipment, mostly computers, here in her library. The first IBM computer filled an entire room, but the witch now has it shrunk into a mason jar. She seems to have every generation of the Macintosh Computer, staring big and boxy, evolving smaller, with colorful, curving bodies, and then turning gray again, innovating to bigger and bigger

screens with no connection to a console or keyboard. Some of the models closest to the end are yet to be invented. Maryna also has a fascination for old computer console games, like the Atari *Off the Wall*, various models of Nintendo Entertainment Systems and a *Pac-Man* cocktail cabinet arcade. All these things fill the spaces that seem to go on farther than his telescopic sight. But the demon knows that all his efforts to remember this will be for naught. As soon as he steps back over her enchanted threshold, any memory of what was inside, other than the beauty and words of his hostess, will vanish from his mind. That's why the idea of an "open house" was such a farce. All the guests would've exited onto the dark street and forgotten the entire experience. The witch possesses a keen paranoia and a cunning mind. She's known for her charm. But she only provides fulfillment after she's gotten what she wants. The demon knows her tactics well enough by now. And, this time, it is he who needs something. It is he who has to keep the upper hand.

"I didn't think you, of all the otherworldly beings in Ukraine, would think it odd if I chose to align myself *with* men." He puts one hand on the corner of a humming metal square beast full of holes. Fujitsu ETERNUS 8000 was emblazoned on its side. He thought perhaps it looked like a very large stereo speaker. "You yourself have always been fascinated by their magic. I hear the men of the city speak of your...state-of-the-art technology."

Maryna smiles and holds out a small hand, the one that isn't getting massaged by the faceless dwarf. Basavriuk bends and kisses it reverently, repeatedly.

Maryna is a dark-haired beauty who has never seen her equal in the ancient region. Her features are sharp yet harmonious, like the lilt in her slightly provincial yet also cosmopolitan accent. Her eyebrows are like arches of night over her ingenue eyes. Maryna's cherry red mouth is most captivating, her lips are plump, just waiting to brush against a man's neck. Her eyelashes are pointed stars upon her soft cheeks. Basavriuk has heard from lesser witches that just one of Maryna's starry lashes slipped into the tea of a young man would make him fall madly in love with the next person — or beast — he sets his eye upon. Basavriuk feels a lovely coldness touching the witch Maryna. Just to hold her icy hand is to feel his soul (what was left of it) complete again. In other words, she gives men, and even the first prototype of men, like Basavriuk, the feeling of whatever it is they want most in the world. It is not a complicated magic, but it is effective.

Basavriuk frowns, suddenly aware of his position kneeling on the floor. He steps back quickly. He feels the warmth of the hellish room now. That's the thing he hates most about hell: It's too damn hot. And in all the republic, Maryna's library is the closest place to *Ad*. Yet, she is the frost witch of Bukovyna. It's an incongruity that confuses the mind, particularly when she is waxing her charms. Perhaps her library is the only place in the world where she's warmed just enough to not freeze anything that touches her. Basavriuk bows deeply again, several paces away. The bloody green glass hanging from his neck swings and taps him on the teeth. He feels its stark coldness.

“This is an ingenious device, Milady. I thank you for the gift.” He holds up the green glass monocle and gazes lovingly at it. Nothing has felt so precious to him in a long time. Perhaps it's because he knew, with it, he's closer to his goal than ever before.

Her azure eyes bore back. “To commemorate the grand occasion of your exaltation to regional king. It’s the crushed eyes of twelve gnomes. The engineering is easy enough. What’s not so simple is catching the fucking gnomes.”

“Your ferocity is third only to your beauty and wise business investments.”

“Do tell me soon what you mean to ask, my king. I’m in the middle of a game of Minecraft.”

Basavriuk realizes he’s been gushing again. It’s so easy to do around the witch Maryna. It’s her perky tits and her thousands of charms that confound even a demon’s mind.

“I have come to receive your permission to strategize and fight from your territory in the ancient forest. And, of course, I need your support.”

“For what, do tell.”

“In picking the red rue.”

She stands and walks to one of the last books on her shelves. It’s a reddish-orange leather bound volume, newer, the cover not yet concealed in an inch of dust. She touches her fingers to the binding. “The gnomes and spirits of the forest are too many even for me. There is magic in the forest — old magic. There is a powerful ghost. Not to mention the Viy. You are asking a lot of me.”

“I wish to call on all the mortal fighters from the ancient city and villages to join together in the Great Hall. I have information that will interest them all. Thanks to you, we can win the war this time, we can get the fortune, and the power, we need to survive.”

He holds the monocle into the air, as if punctuating his point. But, perhaps, for something more. “Just tell me — can you kill more gnomes to make more of these?”

She turns and sighs. Basavriuk had crept in closer to her body — he couldn’t help it. He was giddy as the arctic blast from her breath hit his face.

“I’d say my design trumps Google Glass,” she says, pushing him away. “But I can’t see how that will help.”

He reaches to hold her hand at his shoulder, but then thinks better and steps back.

“It’ll look much cooler fitted into Ray-Ban frames. Of course, you pick a monocle. What’s this *Great Hall* you speak of?”

“The Hotel Bukovyna’s Beech Tree Conference Room.”

She opens her laptop again and Basavriuk sees an arrangement of gray blocks that look like a castle and a green clump of forest trees on her MacBook Pro screen. She swivels her golden throne away from him.

“I have a strategy to beat back the forest horde and to take the red rue that we have desired for so long.”

“Yes, a long time.” She glances up at him from beneath her dark spider lashes. “Since I was a child. You remember me well then, don’t you? Tell me, do you think much on those times? What a maiden you corrupted!” She sounded pleased.

“The one who plucks the rue flower when it turns red on the eve of the summer solstice will be endowed with prosperity beyond imagination and all-knowing power.”

“And everlasting luck in love. Don’t tell me you’ve forgotten that one.”

“It’s more than a myth, you know I’ve seen it. I’ve seen the result.”

“Why do you think I’ve been buying up land in the ancient forest? I claim more acres and my minions search it tirelessly, but nothing in four hundred years! I’ve given up my forest cottage because it’s just too depressing — faced with my failure every minute and day. It’s fucking frustrating as all fuck.”

“I know how to narrow the search — and I think you have the key to getting us there. Together, we can save the republic.”

“Is that what you want to do, save the republic? You have been hanging around the mortals for too long.”

Basavriuk believes that his country is a frontier state that fares far better under home rule. That it, ruled at home by the one he sees fit — by region and then all the way up.

“The red rue endows perfect prescience. With it, we can foresee every move the Russian rulers make. Think what we can achieve in politics! The smallest, most unimportant state will finally have political acumen!”

“I care not for who claims this patch of land over another. It is all the same earth and all men will go into it when their time comes.”

“Says the witch who owns a thousand deeds, not to mention a few patents. Says the witch who found the key to immortality. The witch who has always profited from partnership with a demon.” He waits. Soon, the sound of the clicking on her computer keys stops. She calls her faceless dwarf to her. Basavriuk wonders what her name is. He would never hear it. To know the name over a magical creature such as that would give

him power over her. His dear witch queen would never allow that. “Bring me the assessor maps of the ancient forest,” Maryna orders her magical dwarf.

“You were always wiser than all your peers, my Marichka.”

“You think I care to be partnered with you? I’m thinking of my portfolio. Imagine how much worse it will be if I’m not the one in charge.”

Basavriuk happily steps close again to feel her aura of deep freeze.

The Complex Bukovyna, founded in 1968, was the only hotel sanctioned in the city to host foreign tourists. Since foreign guests had to stay here, it was the popular choice. But after the collapse of the Soviet Union, it no longer had the competitive advantage. The number of foreign visitors, business leaders and dignitaries dropped off significantly. Meaning completely. An extensive renovation began under the wise management of Roman Volodymyrovych Chyshychuk. In 2009 the hotel won the title of “Best Establishment in the Service Industry.” Presently, the quality of services in the Hotel Bukovyna corresponds to the international standards, and the hotel itself has become the symbol of the region, the ceremonial guest room of the beech tree land. The Hotel Bukovyna, frosted in white and pink like a behemoth cupcake, is a favorite place to stay for famous guests of the city: celebrities, like folk singer Ivo Bobul (he of the black stallion mane); writers, such as Maria Matios and poet Michael Tkach; actress and pop singer Ani Lorak (Eurovision star!). We cannot forget to mention international spies, like the one who we have heard went by the name *PERCH* (though we know nothing more and you shouldn’t ask us), politicians like the (once) honored Mykhailo Papiev,

businessman Sergei Mavrodi, footballist Oleh Gusev, the ghost of the troubled poet Paul Celan (who did not die in our hotel but instead committed suicide by jumping off a bridge in Paris so blame them) and you, our foreign guests and numerous tourists, welcome for a fairy tale in your life! so says the official tourist greeting on the English-language website.

The great hall of the hotel, the Beech Tree Conference Room, is stocked with cool water from a Carpathian bottling company, endless supplies of *pechevo* and veggies sourced from local bakeries and farms all arranged in festive patterns on ceramic plates.

Basavriuk stands at a lectern before an assembly of notable and noted citizens. He clears his throat, which sounds like the strangled cough of a dying man. The distinguished guests cover their ears.

“I thank all of you for coming at my invitation. Many thanks to Sasha Romanovych Chyshychuk for this wonderful hospitality, for the cookies and *budelbrod*, and the arrangement of vodka shooters, wine and cognac, which we all shall enjoy after our meeting. You know him as Cossack Sasha, who he portrays at our many fine historical festivals. Many of you also know he’s the distinguished concierge of this hotel.”

Polite clapping continues as the main lights dim over the congregation.

“I also welcome Yuroslav Dmytrovych Winkler, who we all know as the Prince (a ripple of laughter from the crowd), and the great Lady Maryna, a tremendous investor in our region.” Basavriuk inclines his head to each of them in turn. A few of the discrete

men in back crane their necks to see her. The more provincial ones don't care and merely stand to gawk at the celebrated beauty, the one all the *babas* say is a 500-year-old witch.

To the demon's front left is Cossack Sasha, dressed in traditional costume with a tall horseman's cap on his head. He's obstructing the view of the people behind him, but they simply lean to look around it. Being the concierge of this hotel, his father is the long-time owner, Sashko is the keeper of a great many of their secrets. He's also a collector of fine traditional folk clothing. Some wonder if he owns anything contemporary at all, other than his red concierge tuxedo, having never seen him in anything else. Sitting beside him, but completely opposite in appearance is Yura Dmytrovych, called the Prince, surrounded by his retinue. A local oligarch by birthright, owner of the large turbine factory outside the city. The *oblast* administrator wears a black turtleneck, black sports coat and slacks, which stretch mightily about the middle. The silver-rimmed spectacles he deigns to wear peak out of his front coat pocket. Farther down, away from the politicians since she hates the smell of them, is the giant graphic face of a solemn woman, printed on the designer dress worn by the even solemn Maryna, who is busily engaged with her mobile phone. She sits with her knee-high green sport sock leg warmers and red wedge heels daintily crossed.

“Warriors, patriots, allies, we have fought many battles together — most recently for Ihor Ihorovych's family business in Vyzhnytsia, and before that for the family battles in Shevchenkivskiy Rayon — but soon we will be fighting the greatest war of our prosperous lives. Midsummer is coming, and the red rue will bloom.”

“It doesn't exist!”

“It’s a fairy tale!”

The lights are down, but Basavriuk sees better now than if it was light. He takes note of the critics — none are a surprise to him. “You humans know nothing. Isn’t it a demon who appears before you?” Basavriuk looks like a normal man, almost too normal. Muted brown hair, smooth, ageless skin, a medium build and height, a neutral accent with a touch of the nasal to it. The only thing different about him are those strange pupil-less black eyes, which nobody wants to look into for very long. It was odder to look upon Cossack Sasha! Who seems to have just stepped from the Old Country. But the devil carries that overly ornate cane he doesn’t seem to need, which he grasps with a hairy hand. Some of the men do look at those hands now, gripping the edge of the lectern, and the mortal men shift uncomfortably in their cushioned chairs.

“And isn’t that the witch we know whose mysterious persuasive powers are so spectacular none in the government nor mafia dare tax her, nor require her to buy their protection insurance?”

Hidden in the long cuff of her multicolored Prada teddy bear fur coat, Maryna taps her finger upon her mobile phone, opening an app she created just for this occasion. A melodious tune fills the room. All the men look up and around them, hearing the girlish giggle of their first love. Or some of the leaders discern the welcoming sound — bark or purr — of a most loved and long-past pet. Others hear the comforting words of a loving mother. The sounds curl about them and then abruptly stop when Maryna silences her phone. Basavriuk continues and the men must scratch their ears at the absence of the auditory memory.

He moves to the large projector screen. Pictures from the previous Ivan Kupala's Eve flash on the screen. "I have seen the power of the red rue many hundreds of years ago, it is real. And if we all work together, there is a way we can profit from its mysteries, and end the threat coming from the Eastern oligarchs. Moscow is rearing its many heads. You know the power of the Russian Autocrat, the one whose lands are far more corruptible even than of our own, the one who fashions himself after Peter the Great, as impossible as that may seem." A few of the men wiggle in their seats as the photos from last Midsummer Eve show hysterical women crying, hugging trees and each other for comfort. Green blood is splashed upon the ground. A host of ghostly bodies hang erratically from tree branches, soon replaced by a shirtless picture of the Russian Autocrat.

Yura the Prince stands. "We all know that Russia threatens with its own oligarchs and mafia leaders, and, we all know they are stronger than us. We need help from the spiritual realm! Perhaps the Russians will not invade this far west — even to our lands that have had less Soviet influence than others. But would we leave it to chance that the resources we've all fought to exploit, the wealth we've accumulated over the years, could slip into the hands of Russians?"

Some of the Ukrainian men grumble, agreeing, grudgingly, with the Prince.

Yura turns to the men behind him. "It is far better to partner with the devil — we know him, after all, than that which comes at us from the unknown. Yea, how the stock market will crumble then!"

“Wise words, young Prince, wise words,” Basavriuk says. “If we work together, we can grasp the red bloom, and the luck and wealth of the fortune of the ancient forest will turn history — long against us in any international confrontation — in our favor *finally*, and at a time when we need it most!”

“Our land has been the place of mass graves!” yells the town chairman from Kitsman.

“The burial grounds of Jews, Poles, Soviets, Germans, and the Turks!” cries another.

“And our own people, villages and farms!”

Cossack Sashko the concierge stands, first bowing slightly. “Devil king, there are tens of thousands of tourists planning this same quest. Not to mention all the experienced villagers, boys and girls who actually work the land with their hands and know the ways of the forest. They all plan to hunt for the red rue yet again this year. What chance do we have, city men with only our knowledge of politics, business and consumer affairs?”

“Tell me, didn’t I help you mafia families fight for control?”

Many affirmative grunts come from the middle of the assembly.

“You came to me then for help, too, with the impossible task of rooting out an old corrupt family that held too close to its money, who didn’t share it for the benefit of the town and the region, right?”

More calls of agreement.

“We didn’t know what to do then, but I found a way, didn’t I?”

The men cheered, the memory of that particular family and its ruin — brought on by a precipitous fall in the securities market and the downfall of a few politicians — fresh in their minds.

“Now you all are incorporated, right?”

A cheer again. Basavriuk pulls the silver chain from his neck. He reveals the small green glass before now concealed beneath the embroidery of his *vyshyvanka*. Maryna’s violent violet lips turn up at the corners.

“We have the advantage!” He looks at the assembly from behind the green glass. “And I will prove it now. You all cannot see it, but hovering over us is a spy. A ghost sent by the forest spirits to devise our strategy and know our strength!”

Maryna stands and turns. She shoots a bolt of cold blue light from her mobile phone. The light arches to the ceiling and strikes a ghost that cries out with an anguished bellow. The men scramble and the lights flicker on as a heavy blue puff falls into the center of the congregation, sending some flying to either side, with not a few chairs cracking in the commotion.

Maryna stalks to the ghostly outline of the body in the high-loft carpet. The men look at her in awe. “It’s my newest app,” she says curtly. “Electronic Avenger. It’s on iTunes for only \$6.99.”

The men gather around the ghost prone on the ground. It is the smoldering outline of a Cossack horseman, as if he’d just stepped out of a historical portrait on the wall. The horse cries and gallops through the wall. The witch wrinkles her pert nose and returns to her seat. The men watch her go.

“That’s a shame,” Cossack Sasha says. “I liked his leather belt.” The body disappears, as if sinking through the floor of the Beech Tree Conference Room. “That won’t stain the carpeting, will it?”

“All on our own, we have no chance! But I have a strategy of how to distract with a full frontal attack. I know where to send in a small, select team to grasp the red rue, yes, it is true, my dear.” He says the last with a heavy whisper into the ear of the witch. “And, if we plan, strategize and fight together, using this eye of the gnome to see the spirits who torment us, we can be the first to grasp the red rue and get the wealth we need to buy entry into NATO, perhaps even the EU. And the omniscient political knowledge we need to survive!”

Night falls in the forest, and Vasyliovych and Trepeta the tremulous gnome come to a fairy-ring mushroom circle in the moonlight. A snail with a pale pinkish shell chomps on a king bolete fungi, the cap of the mushroom as large as its glimmering shell. Vasyliovych plucks the mollusk from the nearly digested mushroom and tosses it back into his open gullet. He looks over at the wide green eyes of his partner, Trepeta. Vasyliovych cracks the snail shell with one of his molars and spits out half of the tasty snack. He offers it to the young gnome.

“How did it go last Ivan Kupala’s Eve?” the smaller gnome asks his partner, taking the snail half with relish. “You were a hero then. That’s what the general said, and why he partnered us together.”

“It was General Bohdan Khmelnytsky’s rise again from the underworld that saved us all. He’s quicker than the rest since he’s made the trip so often. The undead are a valuable ally. Not like that witch. She’s undead, no doubt about that, and our enemy, no doubt about that either. And you better wish you don’t come upon that undead bitch, Trepeta.”

“What do you mean?” He slurps out the snail body, but he has no taste for shells so he tosses it aside into the meadow.

“Make sure you watch your blind spot,” the captain says, searching the mushrooms for more snails. “That’s where she knows we’re weak. She’ll fly down upon your back and will blind you with her long icicle claw. She took the eye of my brother while I stood there beside him and I could do nothing to stop it. I had to take him home to his family in shame — blinded by that she-devil! She’s called the frost witch, you know. For good reason, too! Don’t you get frozen in her icy stare.”

“How will I know her from the other human females?”

Vasyliovych laughs. “You will know. She is all blue, like the undead tend to be when they don’t take on the ghostly form. Powerful witches like her have the magic to keep themselves alive beyond God-given years, like the early humans of old, the ones who were part original beings themselves, the prototype of man.”

Trepeta has read about those in the human’s Holy Book. That’s what he’s always been, a voracious reader. A lover, not a fighter. Well, love had gotten him into this mess. Fighting, and fighting to win, would have to get him out. And if it didn’t — he’d never

live to see his lady love again anyhow. He might as well die than fail. But dying was not the first option. “How does the witch endure so long?”

Vasyliovych finds a slug, smiles, and pulls it from a red toadstool. “This one here has eaten of the hallucinogenic red cap. It’ll give a nice little trip, later, after work,” Vasyliovych cackles and tucks the slug into a flesh pocket on his upper torso. He brings Trepeta around to a tinder fungus growing near the base of a mountain fir. “You see, to go on living for as long as she does and looking as *good* as she does to the human eye, the dark magic witch has to root herself to a mortal twin on earth. The mortal must give its blood, its life force, to the other, thus keeping them both alive for generations. An evil being, like this witch, must find its light-sided doppelgänger. The mortal the opposite of the monster in all ways, but the witch must persuade it to freely give.”

Trepeta shook his bulbous soiled head. “Don’t know why a human would ever do such a thing.”

“Usually, she is fooled. But sometimes she’s also promised some sort of power, usually something which she already possesses but has no training to control or understand.”

Vasyliovych squats down low to the oval-shaped fungus, so big it looks almost like an elephant foot coming from the tree. The fungi skin nearly matches the bark, and if the two weren’t gnomes with all their knowledge of the forest life, they might’ve looked right over it in the moonlight. But as it sticks out from the fir now, the fungus appears to be oozing from its side. “Take this tinder conk here. You see it infects through broken

bark. It causes rot and eventually kills its host. The parasite becomes the decomposer. An elegant dance, don't you think, Trepeta?"

"Not for the tree."

"It'll take decades — a hundred years even. Enough time for the fungus to pass on its spores. Perhaps even for it to spread to the next host."

The young gnome touches the tinder conk, inadvertently breaking off a piece.

Vasyliovych chuckles. "But even you see now, it is vulnerable. The witch of this ancient forest, she's good at manipulation — but that is all. Intrigue and charm — those things do not hold up well under God's whip, time. The night of the last battle, when I saw her blind my brother, she was the most nearly dead undead I'd ever seen. She clacked her teeth and her face twitched like all the bones were loose beneath her skin. Her true form is getting old indeed. She needs the red rue — and that will make her even more dangerous."

Trepeta opens his eyes wide. He's heard some stories, though he had to admit they didn't make sense to him. "Do you know why she left them alive like that?" he asks.

Vasyliovych turns and leans in close to his partner. "To torment him. For the rest of his life, my brother will see the last thing in his mind, the last thing he saw, the horrible visage of that frozen bitch and her wretched claw. She can't look upon us, none of the mortals can, without forgetting themselves, even her with a little bit of a mortal still in her, so she wanted to take the one power we have greater than her own."

Vasyliovych picks the holy mushroom from the ground, the one nearly digested by the large snail, being sure to leave the root in place, and smashes it between his gummy fingers.

“Sir, have you ever seen the red rue? It seems like such a small thing to cause such—”

“It’s not a small thing,” he whispers this, a seriousness in his voice that frightens the young gnome, even more than he already is. “And, no. That was before my time. I’ve heard stories, of how a demon appeared to show it to man. The man picked it when the spirits were close behind him. They hadn’t expected a man to go right to the spot in the Bear’s Gully — perhaps I’ve said too much already, but the man picked it and the witch of the forest at that time had to give her wealth over to the human, but first he had to offer a blood sacrifice.”

“Did he? Did he commit the blood sacrifice?”

“How could he not when the witch reminded him of the girl he planned to marry, and how her Cossack father would not take him without wealth?”

Trepeta gulped. “What was the blood sacrifice?”

“The little brother of his lover.”

Trepeta startles, nearly slipping into the shimmering creek they walk along.

On the rolling green hills between the Hotel Bukovyna and Main Street, Basavriuk’s army of mortals practices the physical combat that has now become so lost to them. Men trained in the craft of bureaucratic paper pushing hold shields against iron

swords from another era. Men known as mafia henchman more accustomed to wearing black velour track suits and riding around in BMWs fight in armor on horseback with padded lances against trained bears brought in from the tourist cossack village zoo.

Basavriuk walks the grounds with Maryna, the gnome-glass monocle pinched between his thumb and forefinger.

“Will there be any problem making more of these eyes for our captains?” he asks the witch.

“There would’ve been, but I think I’ve devised a way. It will mean blinding a lot more gnomes, all the while preventing them from figuring out what we’re up to. If we had a fighter on the inside, to deceive the gnomes, it will be possible to lure more into traps.”

“I’ll leave that up to you.”

Cossack Sashko huffs over the hills, holding his concierge cap against the wind.

“I think he really likes you,” Basavriuk chuckles as the concierge approaches.

“He’s definitely not running for me.” Sashko’s cheeks and ears are red. He waves a paper in the air.

“Word has come from the metropolitan of Kyiv. The Ukrainian Orthodox army has agreed to fight with us!”

Basavriuk thumps him on the back. “Excellent job, Sashko. I told you the church has never had a problem siding with a demon.”

The witch nods, discretely glancing at the man from over the tops of her Aviator frames. She sees nothing spectacular, so she pushes her glasses back up to the bridge of her nose. Maybe because he reminds her too much of past, dull mortal lovers.

“I still worry about how we will defeat the ghosts,” Sashko says.

“Don’t worry. Those are the ones we haven’t had a problem killing in the past. They’re predisposed to dying. The only problem is when they rise again. Like their master, General Khmelnytsky. I’ll have to have something special waiting for him in the underworld. Do not fear. One beast in particular owes me a favor.”

“And by then the red rue will be picked,” Maryna says. “But we still need more on our side. Such a gnome army has never been assembled, my minions are telling me.”

“Sashko, can you think of anyone else?”

“What about the Mormons?” asks Sashko.

Basavriuk takes Maryna’s hand to lead her back to the hotel. She smells sweet, and her hand thrums with blood. “Um, no, they require too much. Trust me, I’ve tried.” Together, the two move like a swift wind over the rolling hills and up to the circular drive for the lady to catch her town car. Sashko runs to follow Basavriuk to the hotel’s front door. The demon seems to walk at a preternatural swift pace for someone who uses a frightful silver-tipped oak cane with its leering Cerberus handle. Sashko swears he sees the heads turn, following him with all its eyes.

“Ha-haveve you ever won...dered why man so often turns to you, to the devil?”

Sashko asks Basavriuk, holding his sides.

“What do you mean, Sashko?” They take tea in the Bukovyna restaurant bar in the corner of the marble-floored lobby. The floor reflects the busy comings and goings of the hotel guests and staff like a ghostly double of the living. Basavriuk looks at the lobby through his green monocle. It’s becoming his obsession now. He has not spotted another spy since Maryna sent the cossack ghost back to hell via the Beech Tree Conference Room. He should feel happy about this, but he felt unease instead.

“I’ve just always wondered, what with all our allies now. Many of them are the most respected men in town. The priests all have large families and good wives who’ve given them many children, who continuously worship the Lord with their lips.”

Although there were many things Sashko could’ve excelled at — his dramatic tenor was highly valued during caroling season. He also had an impressive recall of all the city’s important personages and their family histories. The thing that seemed to benefit Sashko the most was his ability to get people exactly what they needed, be it legal or not. He’d grown up obsequious to all the men who were now the major powers in town, but most importantly, their top cronies, and he could play them well enough to keep them fat and happy in his hotel, and still paying their hotel bills. He was an excellent sycophant, and held no strong opinions on any contentious topic (save *one*) to put him at odds with the secretary of the local communist party, or the vice-president of UkrainBank, or the devil himself. They finish their tea and the devil takes off again, his cane tapping the marble floor.

In pursuing Basavriuk, Sashko runs face first into a tall Russian Orthodox pontiff. The black-robed figure gives Sashko a little push while he's at it, and the man's fine pointy black leather shoe also catches the young man in the shin.

The devil stops as if pulled by a string and addresses the Russian formally. "Father Vladimir, are you injured? Have your robes been disarrayed? My friend, Sashko, respected but clumsy hotel concierge, gives a thousand excuses for running into you."

The demon shakes hands with the priest; the holy man doesn't give another smug glance to the young Ukrainian.

Basavriuk pulls his young companion up from the hotel floor. "The fiend in his own shape is less hideous than when he rages in the breast of man."

Sashko nods wearily. "Did a priest say that, sir?"

"No, a writer. They must think critically of the world and all in it — foul and fair — in their processes, therefore they have minds closer to God." God created them all, of course. The first fallen angels, the first fallen men, the men still to fall. The good, too, though Basavriuk has yet to see it. He remembers then what was said about himself. He was described by a writer from Poltava as a demon who caused trouble in a human form. Where he came from and why he came, nobody knew. He caroused, he drank, he vanished without a trace, then he'd appear again. Not so different from a common man! Demons like him were once angels long, long ago. Oh, what a fall! And all because they disagreed so with God over his creation of Man. The demon's mind has not changed in all these millennia condemned to earth and hell. Basavriuk has seen over the generations that mankind is more troubled by itself, close enough to the devil with their fickle desires

and profane obsessions, yet with far more access to the mind and hearts of other mortals than he alone could ever hope or want to possess. No, they were God's worst plan, any fool could see that. They would cause trouble all on their own with no help from him.

The doorman bows to Sashko and Basavriuk. The wind has picked up now that the treacherous beauty has gone. She never stayed long from her hell-heated library. Basavriuk wonders about this. But he had no time to figure it out, and she would never say. Maryna had made a promise, Basavriuk wanted to see if she would keep it. He needed her to keep it. The mortal fighters had to be able to *see* the gnomes they were going to kill. If they couldn't do that, all would be lost. Once they could see, then they could be trained to fight without looking into the creatures' green eyes. If a man did, he'd lose his mind, and any idea of what he was fighting for. His entire mortal army would turn and run into the grasses like hares. That would do no good.

The wind rages so heartily when the two step onto the entryway that Sashko has to clutch his polyester red tux around his shoulders.

Basavriuk looks out over his army, practicing there on the rolling green lawn. The tourists, and even most of the locals, think it's for one of Sashko's historical festivals. It's the perfect cover. "It's easy to confuse us two, man and devil. We have many things in common. I fell from grace along with the great Accuser, because we knew what would come from God creating humanity on earth. We disagreed with him. We knew it would come to this." He looks over to Sashko and gently takes him by the shoulders. Sashko notices the three-headed cane stands on its own. "You are that humanity. And I'm happy I

was right. We're both imperfect beings in the eyes of the Great Creator. Only I see no need for the redemption of my questioning nature. Your lot still has that burden."

"We're mortal," says Sashko limping along.

Basavriuk steps into the middle of the square wrestling ring, brought in that day for hand-to-hand combat practice.

"The Russian Orthodox have also sided with us!" He cries out to those assembled.

The men cheer, particularly those who attend services at the pink cathedral, the largest Russian Orthodox congregation in the ancient city.

Basavriuk adds, almost as an afterthought: "The metropolitans have only requested that we make Russian the official language of this crusade. Then and only then will we receive an allowance from the church. It is no problem for us—"

"Wait, what?" Cossack Sashko speaks up from the corner, where he still seems to be cowering from the wind, massaging his ankle. "We are in Ukraine. We speak Ukrainian here." Only the men close to the ring can even hear him, the brisk wind having stolen Sashko's words as soon as they come from his lips.

Basavriuk hears everything. "Yes, I know that, Sashko, but we just have to declare that Russian is the official language. What does it matter? You can speak what you like," Basavriuk says, deftly ducking beneath the ropes. Sashko does not budge. The demon notices. He turns and sighs heavily. "It's not like we're fourth formers play-fighting here. This all has a purpose. Both languages are spoken together, *surjik*, let's keep it so and all will be fine."

Prince Yura takes a break from pummeling a burly mafia henchman into submission with a flat wooden sword.

“I just speak pure Russian,” says Prince Yura. He sticks his wood sword into the side of the mafia hit man, which strikes between the spaces of “armor” made with steel cooking sheets and door hinges.

“Tell me again why we’re fighting with these weapons my medieval grandfather would’ve trashed?” the mafia man on the ground bellows. He pulls out his Beretta and points it at Prince Yura. “See how much easier that is?”

The demon slices his cane into the air and the gun flies into the sky, so far up the men can no longer see it. This is getting to be too much for even a supernatural creature! Why couldn’t humans just do what they’re told? he thinks. The Ukrainians used to be so good at that. He supposes it would only get worse as they became more “Westernized.” But he’d cross that bridge after he dragged them to it. Some point soon he’d have to seek consul from his brethren in the West. There was a demonic conference every year in Venice, nothing would keep him away now.

“Are you stupid?” Basavriuk asks the mafia thug. “Didn’t you listen during my last lecture? You can’t kill a gnome with anything but an iron weapon sticking them between the eyes or in the eye, depending on how many they have. Some have one. Others have two. It all depends. And I’d like to see you shoot a gun in the ancient forest. It’ll twist its musket and shoot you in the face in the nanosecond after you pull the trigger. Or the bullet will lose its way in that foul air and come ‘round and hit you in the ass.”

Basavriuk turns himself back to the issue raised by Sashko. “Look, men, we have to pick one *official* language, that’s how it works, and it’s going to be Russian. We need the financing available from the metropolitans. You don’t think those horses and this nice boxing ring just falls out of the sky do you?” Basavriuk takes a deep breath. Dealing with the mortals always brings out the worst in him. “Jesus, why must Ukrainians always be so horrible with financial matters? We have needs, we need backers. The books must balance!” He looks up to the sky in grief, though he knows there is nothing there but a rising moon, nights coming too quickly for his taste.

“If we all have to pick one language for this battle, let’s just stick with Ukrainian,” Cossack Sasha says.

“Russian is more widely used and has a stronger global economic influence,” Prince Yura says, taking off his spectacles and dusting them on his aide de camp’s pocket handkerchief. His vanity wouldn’t allow him to wear them too often. In fact, he only did when it was something he really wanted to see, in this case, the witch and her fine black town car. “I mean, come on, Russian is spoken in more than seventeen nations. That doesn’t mean they all bow to the Russians — it’s one of the languages of our ancestors, my grandfather came from Moscow, and it’s part of our history. That doesn’t make it evil. We all speak it.”

“But Ukrainian is more melodic.”

“I speak *surjik*, and I’m happy with that,” says Basavriuk. “But give the priests what they want so they give us what we want!”

A few of the fighters sneer.

“Ukrainian and Russian are practically the same thing!” Basavriuk says, hanging onto the ropes, feeling like he might vault over now and body slam Sashko into the corner.

“No, you son of an unmilked cow, there are no words in Russian for the specific water and fire traditions of Midsummer Eve, those are Ukrainian words. Nobody would understand what we meant if we don’t use Ukrainian. How can we possibly communicate in only one language when the principal traditions of the holiday we are celebrating are Ukrainian!”

“I thought those words were Russian. Check that out,” Yura whispers to one of his cronies, who hovers by his elbow with a tablet computer, along with another man carrying the prince’s towel and water bottle, and another suited man answering his mobile phone.

“Ukrainian is better!” Sashko stamps his foot on the canvas, then winces. “It’s *our* heritage. It’s also not so harsh sounding and is the language of an oppressed people seeking a better life for their children — who better to finally grasp the red rue after five hundred years than the Ukrainians who speak Ukrainian?”

“You speak *surjik*, don’t you, Misha?” Basavriuk asks the mafia thug sitting on his ass after the Prince’s blow to the midsection from the wooden sword. He sheepishly nods. “See? Everybody speaks both languages together — what does it matter? If there’s a better word for it, we use the Russian, if there is only the word in Ukrainian, we use that. That doesn’t mean we’re—”

“Oppressed losers. I’m a winner!” Yura yells, throwing his wood sword in to the center of the ring. “I am for us staying united. I am with Basavriuk.”

Basavriuk rips off his philosopher’s cap and throws it into the ring along side the sword. “This is getting tiring, Sashko! If it bothers you so much, you don’t have to fight with us on St. John’s Eve!”

“Yes, Sashko, run back to your little desk and give directions to the tourists if you are so offended.” Yura steps into the ring with all his cronies.

“This is exactly how Russian sympathizers are! You resort to name calling and childish taunts as soon as you feel threatened! And I’m not going to back down — I still want to hunt for the red rue, but I’ll do it without all you cronies! Anyone who wants to speak in Ukrainian, train using the Ukrainian language, not be led by this devil, and his bureaucratic windbag, side with me!” Sashko takes the wood sword and shakes it into the sky.

“Sashko, have some sense!” the demon cries. “We can’t divide now. How could you even think it? There is no way we can pick sides with two Slavic languages that are so close!”

“Don’t you see, that’s exactly what they want us to do,” Cossack Sashko cries. “To betray our roots and then ask for *more* concessions. These priests are slippery. If we’re not careful they’ll have us fighting with the Russians when the time comes, not against them.”

Basavriuk hits his cane against the canvas, the dogs crane their heads up and howl at him. “You fake Cossack, you wannabe hetman, that will not happen! We won’t side

with those Russian devils! Do you know the elitist demons they have on their side? I would never! We side with some holy devils of Moscow, we turn against them later. Tell me why that's a bad idea. Together, we will speak in Ukrainian of our true deed, they won't understand a word."

Cossack Sasha, who looks a bit wounded from being called a wannabe hetman, faces the gathering group of mortal warriors.

"We want to speak Ukrainian!" A few men, affiliated with the transportation oligarch, get in the ring behind Sashko.

"I prefer to speak Russian."

"I can only speak Russian."

"But I can understand you, so what does it matter?" Basavriuk says.

"But I can't understand you."

"I mean, are you serious? You just did."

"Basavriuk, will you choose to side against your own countrymen? Against the very language of the red rue song, born into the world from our home?" Sashko sucks in some air and then begins to softly sing, his voice growing in power. All in the boxing ring and around listen reverently.

"Бачу я тебе в снах у дібровах зелених

По забутих стежках ти приходиш до мене

І не треба нести мені квітку надії

Бо давно уже ти увійшла в мої мрії

The men crush forward, singing along.

Червону руту не шукай вечорами

Ти у мене єдина, тільки ти повір

Бо твоя врода, то є чистая вода

То є бистрая вода синіх гір... ”²²

Basavriuk and Prince Yura stand together across from Cossack Sashko and his small group of Ukrainian speakers.

“We’ll see you in the forest.”

“I will beat you to that red bloom,” Cossack Sashko says.

²² “Don’t look for red rue in the evenings
For me you are the only one, only you, believe me
Because your beauty, it is pure water
It is the rapid water of blue mountains
I see you in my dreams in green groves
By forgotten paths you come to me
And don’t bring me the flower of hope
Because you have long ago entered my dreams”
Translation by the author and Nastia Karalash.

AWE LA DI DA DI, FOR MARICHKA

[Illustration — 1 Beatbox University]

I know you cherish music so I thought you would love this story. A lesson plan, really, that contains a story. At the beginning of the semester, I had my students listen to a podcast on what beatboxing tells us about language acquisition. Hearing the samplings of vocal beats sent thrills through the students, shaking bones ossified by three years hunched over Arakin text. Like musicians, language learners manipulate sounds to gain comprehension. Imitating sounds found outside your mother tongue, emphasis on stress, isn't it fun? Intonation blowing from the lung *з акцентом!* But I've forgotten, you haven't met Arakin yet. He's the 50-year-old British-English textbook with a Soviet-Russian monocle. Well, you will make his acquaintance soon. But hopefully not. I guess it depends on how successful I am here.

Anyhow, that next day, the girls (all girls in this class) came to the university in low-hanging baggy pants, backward caps and cigarettes tucked over their ears. A student I know to be from a farm surrounded by an apple orchard wore a dollar sign thug chain around her neck. Another of my girls mouthed a silver grill! While I walked down the hall, the petite class monitor disturbed me with a fist bump. She must've underestimated the power of her crystal encrusted brass knuckle. During lunch break, in the cantina, the girls broke it down old-school. In turn, a group of fourth-year translation students challenged them to a rap battle. The winner was Masha of the apple trees, who now goes by the appellation Mash E. Fresh. She originated the Ukrainian human percussion of a dub step wobble kobza, which sounds something like a maiden's upper-register sob. It

was all such a success the newly formed CHNU Beatboxing League of Extraordinary Ladies had a bonfire beatbox celebration lit by the Arakin textbooks. I usually disagree with the burning of books, but I understood it to be a contextual artistic statement. So I ate my roasted marshmallow.

* [Illustration — 2 Accent]

In your last note you asked about the importance of accent. So I will tell you this true story. I once had an American friend, a more attractively maned Andre Agassi, who always went on and on about how much he adored women with accents, how he was only aroused by foreign women because they sounded so *mysterious*. So I set him up with a Russian exchange-student friend who I happened to know was interested in dating American men. The next day, I called to find out how it went. She told me that halfway through dinner, he started appropriating her accent. By dessert, he was using Russian words. When he paid the bill, *she* had to act as translator between him and the hostess. They went back to his place. He put on Rachmaninoff. He entertained her by doing a troika dance with squat kicks. She left his home in disgust. The moral of the story, and answer to your question, authentic variety is best. Imitation can become tedious.

* [Illustration — 3 Bukowinian Black Metal]

I found this graffito while on a walk about town and thought you might enjoy it, too. In my cultural dissonance at finding English graffiti in a red-light alley of the regional capital, I first read “Bukowskian,” probably because recently I’d noticed students sneaking out his books of poetry when they were supposed to be rote memorizing Arakin dialogues. Apparently, the dirty American writer is a popular

transgressive figure here. But, of course, my eyes had tricked me. This “Bukowinian” is a variant of “Bukovinian,” the historic name of the beech-tree region. This is a term used by the hardcore black metal band Granskog, who hail from Chernivtsi. Their music video for “Unknown Woods Whisper My Name” is auditory and visual dissonance not at all whispering in your ear. I used it as inspiration for a lesson plan. Since Granskog screams in a mixture of Ukrainian, Russian, German, Hungarian, Romanian, and synthesizer, I challenged my students to compose their own American English lyrics to metal music. Those students who hadn’t yet converted to Beatboxerism donned their Queen T-shirts, disarranged their black maiden hair and added a bit more eyeliner. Just a bit, since they were close as is. I will share my favorite stanza and chorus, which a trio of students presented accompanied by a genuine 1982 Prophet-5 synthesizer and a cherry wood bandura:

Skipping through the woods I see lovely bird, fox and a bear

They tell me I am maiden fair

I keep skipping because mama ain’t raised no fool —

do not trust animals that talk so cool

Especially if they say it in American English

Death! Death and gore!

Singing this makes my throat sore!

Life! Life and more!

Singing this makes me yearn for ancient lore!

DEATH DEATH AND GORE

LIFE LIFE AND MORE

It is a true thing that Ukrainian women can make anything sound good.

* [Illustration — 4 Dissonance]

I realized something sad today, dear Marichka. I think some people thrive on dissonance. Some people are happy living indefinitely as discombobulated expats. I'm not and I don't think I can be. Recently, I've been curmudgeoning like an old angry pensioner. Something I think you could understand. And I'm reminded of this just now — a sound like Granskog has filled my apartment. I've just returned from whacking on my ceiling with my squeegee handle. I conferred in polite tones, which were magnanimously returned through the cement along with the continued wretched drilling. This dis' quite ruinous to my work and attitude. I feel like I'm the first riotous audience to Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*.

I return to you now that I have found a solution (why would I write if I was only complaining?). My landlord is replacing my plank front door with a fancy European model. I will no longer have to lock myself in, leaving the keys dangling from the inside keyhole. It's reverse culture shock. Anyway, the rancor of this construction invades the entire building. The plaster dust fills the spaces between my cramped handwriting. I live in a Soviet block apartment complex (which you need no description of, but if you will indulge me). I can hear everything knocking ghetto-style around me: toilets flushing, children crying, old men singing and snoring, some unknown fracas above that sounds like clashing light sabers, washing machines agitating, sexy-time grindings, the pitter-thud of tiny feet, the mastication of tiny teeth. I've never contributed to this racket before

except with the squeegee. But now *they're* all responding to the beat of my retribution.

Heeeheee heee heee heee heeee he he.

* [Illustration — 5 Light Please]

You just missed the man I call Chesterfield. Not that you miss much. He visits often, we don't understand each other at all and he thoroughly enjoys this. Chesterfield knocked first, but it was just a courtesy warning to let me know that he was coming on in. But this time the door handle jiggled only — locked — what a surprise for him! When I answered, I stood like NATO on one side, he like the Eastern Bloc on the other. He held his cigarette in the air. Because this is my role in this building, to light Chesterfields when the man finds himself lacking. I wanted to be polite, but I also wanted to get back to my rigorous cultural study of the Turkish soap opera “Roxolana: The Magnificent Century.” Chesterfield dismissed me with a callused wave, gray smoke curling and clouding in the hall: “That show is only for women.” Chesterfield came back at about 4 a.m., scratching at my door and calling my name in an inebriated chortle that in brighter circumstances could've been mistaken for a jolly cartoon bear. I turned my bolt, opened the door and threw a lit match like one might hurl a Molotov cocktail. The cartoon bear went up just like he was stuffed with synthetic material. Actually, the stuffing was Ukrainian vodka and he'd consumed just enough to enable spontaneous human combustion there behind my brand new security door.

* [Illustration — 6 Sinkhole]

Shocking thing today — I saw a lady waiting at the bus stop in a violet lace bra clearly visible beneath a scarlet dress made of a stretchy polyester net that was

completely see-through. She had a ridiculous net cap on her head and high-high heeled pumps. I worried that if she tripped, her dress might blow off on the way down. And you won't believe what happened then! The inevitable, I'm afraid! The ancient, cobbled streets seemed to notice her, too, and also were alarmed. Perhaps the earth desired to banish her from sight, or indulge in a tasty morsel, without the obstruction of much clothing, because the earth opened like a concrete maw, oh, an urban sinkhole! A gutter-lipped gullet with a throat of black loam! Oh, bottomless pock! Oh, pit of earthly hell and cobbled fangs! As quick as the fox's bite, it snapped shut. My dear, I seem to be a prophetess. The woman's dress had indeed blown off on the way down. Many hundreds were on Cathedral Square that morning. Their bodies pitched and leaned with the land, as if they were riding a steppe stallion, but when it settled again they looked none concerned. Oho, the Ukrainian unflappability! As many who'd observed her before, none took note of her absence now. Of course, the feral dogs bolted from this tectonic phenomena, not even pausing to lick the piss squirted in fear by the mangy mutts. I, on the other hand...hurried and plucked the scarlet dress from the air, stirred up as it had been into a "devil's wedding" vortex. The Ukrainians have a saying: If you slice a knife horizontally through the center of this whirlwind, the blade will draw blood. I tuck the dress into my hip pocket. I'm sure it will come in handy later.

* [Illustration — 7 Mashup]

You must tell me, dear girl, is the national melancholia the reason Slavic women sing so beautifully and tragically — even at a young age, when they have plenty of beauty and have not yet experienced much tragedy — with such authenticity it just

squeezes your heart? In my pathetic other-ly peripateticism I've heard this dolorous beauty on every occurrence in my vicinity. I will recount to you the most memorable of these times. It was on the occasion of the translation department's celebration of writer Oksana Zabuzhko. Poets are honored in this country as if they made a difference in the world. One of my younger students sang us a mashup of Pink's "Family Portrait" and Slick Rick's "La Di Da Di." She raised her dark brow and puffed her Chesterfield. Her face relaxed:

La-di-da-di, we like to party

We don't cause trouble, we don't bother nobody,

Cause it ain't easy, growin' up in World War III

Never knowin' what love could be

You'll see, I don't want love to destroy me

Like it has done my family

Can we work it out?

Can we be a family?

I promise I'll be better

Mommy, I'll do anything

La di

Da di

We're just some men that's on the mic

And when we rock up on the mic we rock the mic right

Can we work it out?

Can we be a family?

I promise I'll be better

Mommy, I'll do anything

The drunken adjuncts melted, only the chemicals that kept their bodies functioning smoldered in the grass. The most stoic professors curled in on themselves like shrimp. I pulled the scarlet dress from my pocket and wept into it. I flooded the earth in pinkish tears, and I don't know where it all came from because I'm from the desert. The girl's chesty, folk intonation exposed my past and told me my future — that I had come from Sandhill and would end beneath the Palm swallowed by its hungry soil just like all those before me. Around me, magnolia petals fell to the grass, magpies stopped in flight, clouds became mist, there was no wind to carry the sound anywhere but here, this small forest in the world, shared by celebrants, yearning to be lovers and friends, they had loved and friended, and I knew that my own loneliness, awakened by a teenage mashup of unrelated verses not so oddly chosen when one realizes the Ukrainians pick it for sound not meaning, is not the only one felt, nor the first nor the last...no, no, no much suffering has been seen in the world and is still to come. Amen.

* [Illustration — 8 Marichka]

While on a *marshrutka* passing through Kosiv, a girl got on the bus with her mother and line of panting suitors, a picturesque folk procession. Her blonde hair in an elaborate ribboned braid that snaked around and to the side of her head. She wore an intricate grass green, violet, rose red, and sky blue *vyshyvanka* with an embroidered skirt falling about her like sycamore bark. Her pink cheeks and arching brows as if she'd

stepped out of a Gogolian time warp. Decades were spent sewing her clothing and seconds on her braids by all the grannies. On her lips was my name. Her name was Marichka. It was you. I saw you before you spread. Do you remember me? I was unremarkable. I knew you from all the songs about the devil's vortex. I'm the one who throws the knife that draws blood. You didn't know me and you never would know me unless I became that girl who never got off the bus and somehow became notorious in the way of a foreigner who stays forever but who never stopped being foreign and that was just what I'd do because that was what people like me do while we were watching people like you being the authentic you. In the bleeding country nestled between hills, sundark flitted over the river freshet. On the brimming banks lovers entwined with hoary men balancing their fishing lines. The mellow golden glow touched the tops of the firs and the low linden branches full of tiny krakens. Grannies, more wanted and needed than Eastern oligarchs, sat along the broken road selling golden strawberries and home-made compote, the shutters of their *dachas* painted in a peeling yellow and blue. An expectant mother's neck craned to see a stork's massive twig nest perched atop a telephone pole as the bird took into its gullet the entire world — all except Siberia, nobody likes the taste of Siberia. The passersby ogled the maternal bird cleaning gore from its beak, the human heads tilted up — a phalanx of vampire chicks taking what they need.

La di *da di*.

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SKILLS

Teach university English composition: rhetoric, lesson planning, class room management;
Teach comparative literature - contemporary Ukrainian literature in translation

Teach creative writing workshops for children, teens and adults

One-on-one writing mentor and English tutor; ESL and TOEFL iBT tutor

Professional writing and editing for publication: newspapers, online and literary magazines

Research, reporting and fact checking for publication

Proficient in Word, Pages, WebCampus Blackboard and Canvas, Adobe Presenter Video Express, PowerPoint, Audacity, MS Movie Maker, Submission Manager, Submittable, Audio Vault and Saw, NewsEditPro

EDUCATION

M.F.A. Master's International in Creative Writing
University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV), *August 2014*

Certificate in Teaching English as a Second Language
Oxford Seminars, Las Vegas, NV, *July 2007*

B.A. in Journalism
University of Nevada, Reno, *May 2002*

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

Comparative literature instructor, Nevada State College, *summer 2014*

- Teach modern comparative literature, ENG 481B summer online session, contemporary Ukrainian literature in translation using WebCampus Canvas and Adobe Presenter Video
- Curriculum design on A Culture of Folk, Fairy and Fabulism; The Post-Soviet Experience; Sexuality and Identity in Nation Building; Urbanity and Back to the Village

University English instructor, Peace Corps Ukraine TEFL program, *spring 2012-spring 2014*

- Teach about nine classes a week, 20 hours a week, 130-160 students a semester at Yuriy Fedkovych Chernivtsi National University, founded in 1875, a UNESCO world heritage site, which has a student body of 15,000, with about 450 full and part-time students in the English and translation departments. About 70 professors teach in these departments under the authority of the Ministry of Education of Ukraine, and English Department Chairwoman Nadia Hryhorivna Yesypenko and translation department Chairman Vasyl Dmytrovych Byalyk, awarded with the highest IV level Decree of State Accreditation Commission, full individual membership in the European University Association, and known as a leading higher educational institution in Ukraine
- Curriculum designer and instructor in Academic Essay Writing, first and second semester, Reading Response to Literature, using *The Great Gatsby* and *The Norton Anthology of Short Fiction* and *Tom Sawyer*; Debate Skills for ESL using Contemporary Topics, Talking About Literature, Music and Education for ESL; and The Zombie Apocalypse in Popular Culture: Beginning Academic Composition for ESL
- Administrator for Inspired to Write University Education Improvements in Ukraine, a \$1,000 fundraising project to create and implement new essay composition and home reading curricula for CHNU teachers and students. Developed the writing curriculum manual with other Ukrainian professors who teach writing. Also, for home reading classes, new workbooks were developed for using modern and contemporary American English novels and stories: *The Giver*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *The Great Gatsby*, and *The Norton Anthology of Short Fiction*
- Coordinating university English club weekly on the topics of American holidays, travel and tourism, and film and serial dialogues and monologues
- Oblast coordinator and fiction judge for Write On! creative writing competition 2013 and 2014
- English teaching volunteer at Shevchenko Pedagogical University in Chernihiv, Ukraine, duties include teaching two classes a week to about 20 linguistic students, organizing English Club and cultural community project, helped write pedagogical manual for ESL communicative methods using the *Peanuts* cartoons

Teaching assistant, SAGE Academy at UNLV, *summer 2012*

- Creative writing workshop teaching assistant for 16 gifted and talented middle school students, 40 hours a week
- Organize all afternoon curriculum, including lessons on writing children's books

Graduate teaching instructor, UNLV, August *2010-2012*

- Teach first-year composition courses English 101 and 102 (a total of 4 sections a year, 45 students a semester, 20 hours a week) to develop critical thinking practices to support writing and reading, focus on writing as a process and a series of skills to construct analytical, evaluative and persuasive argument essays; teach computer-

assisted research methods and bibliography for writing the long research argument essay

- Design weekly lesson plans: handouts, small group/large group discussion activities, a variety of blog and written assignments, multimedia presentations, timed essays, peer reviews, mid-term and final exams
- Create content and ensure regular updates of WebCampus – an online learning center and writing studio where instructors post class materials, links, homework calendar entries, and assignment folders
- Integrate current events and multimedia into class activities and assignments
- Conduct regular assessment of four major course papers and process work: timed essays, peer review, written assignments, multimedia presentations

Substitute teacher, Adelson Educational Campus, Las Vegas, NV, *spring 2012*

- Substitute teacher for middle school English, math and government, 20 hours a week

Writing center tutor, UNLV, *August 2010-December 2010*

- Help students to edit papers and to outline assignments based off instructor's criteria, 10 hours a week
- Provide daily consultations on essay structure, grammar, punctuation, college research methods, and writing for an academic audience
- Help students to generate ideas and essay theses

English instructor, Korea PolySchool Seoul, S. Korea, *August 2007-August 2008*

- Kindergarten reading and phonics instructor responsible for designing curriculum, worksheets and activities based off the Houghton Mifflin textbooks
- First through sixth grade writing, grammar and vocabulary instructor for about 50 students
- Conduct regular assessment of weekly journals, papers and homework

Summer school teacher, Tampa Methodist Elementary School, Tampa, Fl., *summer 2001*

- Lead language arts activities for three classes of 10-15 elementary school students at an at-risk school; classroom management, literacy instruction and curriculum development

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

Freelance writer for *Startle/Forbes Travel Guide, the New York Observer, Vegas Seven, Desert Companion, Las Vegas Weekly, BLVDS magazine, Las Vegas Bound, Carpenter Magazine* and *Recharger Magazine, 2008 - 2012*

Online reporter, Greenspun Interactive, Las Vegas, NV, *October 2008-April 2009*

- Cover breaking news, arts and entertainment for The News and the Las Vegas Sun.com

Business reporter, *Nevada Appeal*, Carson City, NV, *August 2004-May 2007*

- Daily business spot news and feature coverage
- Responsible for creating content, coordinating graphics and photos for the weekly Sunday business section

Health and government reporter, *Lahontan Valley News*, Fallon, NV, *August 2002-August 2004*

- Reporter and photographer covering: Fallon leukemia cluster, county government, business

VOLUNTEER WORK/INTERNSHIPS

University English instructor, Peace Corps Ukraine TEFL Project, *2012-2014*

Teacher trainer, Chernivtsi English Institute, Chernivtsi, Ukraine, *summer 2013-fall 2014*

- Teacher trainer at Chernivtsi English Institute and Peace Corps programs for about 80 Chernivetska oblast secondary education teachers
- Seminar leader on teaching vocabulary in the ESL classroom; speaking activities for all ages; and teaching writing in the ESL classroom
- Instructor and counselor, Camp Community Action Ukrainian Style, Ternopil, Ukraine, *summer 2013*
 - Instructor for Peace Corps supported English 10-day summer camp for Ukrainian students, focused on community service and international cooperation
 - Taught creative writing and journalism classes to 20 students; edited content for two camp newspapers produced by students
 - Led seminars on community project development to produce the first Ukrainian-English language newspaper in Chernivtsi with student leaders
 - Coordinated and MCed camp talent show with literary reading

Editorial assistant, *Creative Nonfiction* magazine, Pittsburgh, PA, *summer 2011*

- Editorial assistant, select stories and edit literary magazine and nonprofit foundation, 25 hours a week
- Edit *An Immense New Power to Heal: The Promise of Personalized Medicine* (In Fact 2012) fact check and write the bibliography

English tutor, Community Multicultural Center, Las Vegas, NV, *January 2009-January 2010*

- Volunteer English tutor and conversation assistant for Spanish speakers, 20 hours a month
- Part-time tutor/reading instructor for a dyslexic adult, 10 hours a week for four months

Crisis counselor for rape victims, Crisis Call Center, Reno, NV 2004-2006

Student leader and organizer, Intervarsity Christian Fellowship at the University of Nevada, Reno, NV, 2000-2006

- Volunteer coordinator and instructor for an annual week-long seminar on social justice and equality for college students for three summers; organize curriculum, study materials and schedule, 2005-2007
- Volunteer team leader, coordinating service projects, 15 hours a week, 2003-2004
- College Bible study leader, 15 hours a week, 2000-2002

Intern reporter, Daily Sparks Tribune, Sparks, NV, *January 2002-May 2002*

- General news, feature and government reporter, editing and page layout, 10 hours a week

Intern radio reporter, KUNR-FM, National Public Radio affiliate, Reno, NV, *August 2001-December 2001*

- Investigate broadcast feature stories, record audio, write script, edit script and interviews on Audio Vault and Saw, 10 hours a week

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Workshop presenter at the Center for Literary Education in Kyiv, two 90-minute creative writing workshops, *Nov. 2, 2013*, to 30 Ukrainian writers

- “Where the Writer’s Craft Starts: Inspiration,” <http://fakty.ictv.ua/ua/index/view-media/id/48397>

Demonstration presenter at the XVIII TESOL -- Ukraine National Conference: Global English -- Global Decisions, *April 13, 2013* in Sevastopol, Ukraine

- “Emergence Writing in the College/University Classroom: How to take your students from the academic essay to the digital market”

Plenary speaker at the Current Problems of Germanic and Romance Philology, Educational and Socio-cultural Process 20th anniversary conference, *Oct. 4, 2013*, Ternopil National Pedagogical University

- “Innocence Lost Abroad: Teaching Intro to Modern American Literature”

Witness literary magazine nonfiction editor, UNLV Black Mountain Institute, *summer 2012-spring 2013*, reader 2011-2013

Workshops attended at The Association of Writers and Writing Programs annual conference Washington D.C. *February 2011* and Chicago *February 2012*

- Pedagogy forum presenter 2011 “Fit to Print: Story Creation using the News Media”
- UNLV GPSA forum presenter, *2011 and 2012*

Workshop presenter in Seoul, S.K. *March 2009* Korea Poly School Annual Conference

- “Teaching Vocabulary in an ESL Environment”

Seoul Writers annual anthology judge/editor, *2011-2012*

- Select writers for annual anthology and edit five stories for publication

Creative Nonfiction magazine reader, *2011-2014*

Neon Lit reading media contact, *2011-2012*

PUBLICATIONS

NANO Fiction, “Garden of Arugula and Tiny Tomatoes,” Vol. 6, no. 2 *April 2013* <http://nanofiction.org/issues>

Interim, “Reveals Long Sharp Teeth,” Vol. 30, 1&2, *spring 2013*

Metazen, “Put a Ring on It,” Oct. 25, 2012, www.metazen.ca/?p=11395

CityLife magazine, “His Hideaway Pool,” *Nov. 3, 2011*

10X10: a Creative Exchange Between Visual Arts and Writers, “Trampled,” *November 2011*

HONORS AND LEADERSHIP

Las Vegas Valley Book Festival/CityLife magazine Flash! Fiction Contest winner, first place *2011*, third place *2012*

Clark County Government Center "10 x 10 Invitational" writer exhibitionist for the Las Vegas Valley Book Festival, *2011*

Nevada Arts Council Artist Fellowship grant recipient, fiction honorable mention, *2010*

Nevada Press Association award winner and judge:

Best business coverage, first place, *2007*; second place, *2006*

Best spot news story, best photo page, second place for best business and feature stories, *2004*

Second place for best in-depth story, and honorable mention for best business and feature stories, *2003*

Society of Professional Journalists’ Mark of Excellence award winner:

National finalist for in-depth online reporting, *2002*

READINGS

Міжнародна Літературна Корпорація /International Literature Corporation MERIDIAN
CZERNOWITZ Best Cafe on the Corner Literary reading for writers in translation
“Garden of Arugula and Tiny Tomatoes” *May 21, 2013*
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HhDwu955gdA>

Neon Lit “Stripped” *April 22, 2011*; Neon Lit “Put a Ring on It” *April 2012*

Feasting on Words Vegas Valley Book Festival/Three Square food bank community event
“Drink More” *Nov. 6, 2011* and Vegas Valley Book Festival Poetry Courtyard readings
“His Hideaway Pool” and “Trampled”

ClarkCountyNV TV “Drink More” October 2011 [http://www.youtube.com/user/
ClarkCountyNV?feature=mhee#p/u/13/YaLu9qRsVUc](http://www.youtube.com/user/ClarkCountyNV?feature=mhee#p/u/13/YaLu9qRsVUc)

REFERENCES

Douglas Unger, UNLV creative writing professor and thesis chairman,
douglas.unger@unlv.edu

Lee Gutkind, founder/editor Creative Nonfiction Foundation, 480-727-8787,
leegutkind@verizon.net

Ruby Fowler, UNLV English Composition Program assistant director, 702-895-4186

Michael Lukashchuk, assistant professor of English, Chernivtsi National University,
mlukashchuk@yahoo.com; 380-372-584869

Roman Oleksenko, regional manager, US Peace Corps Ukraine,
roleksenko@peacecorps.gov; 38-044-391-66-33