

# TULUBAKAPORTIA



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# Tulubaikaporìa

*nova·nevédoma*

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# Episode 1: about applied asymptotology, déjà vu & jamais vu

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OPHELIA: What means this, my lord?

HAMLET: Marry, this is miching mallecho; it means mischief.

OPHELIA: Belike this show imports the argument of the play.

—“Hamlet” by William Shakespeare

A dream's a rogue, a phantom, a goal's beyond our grasp; the throwback's doomed — the past is a chimera, a monster caged and clasped.

*\*Boom!\**

Rockets the cork with a thunderous roar and punches a hole in a white panel of suspended ceiling. And there'd been a kitty hiding. Squealing, he darts and dashes around in primordial panic until one of the panels beneath him caves in and the kitty flies right onto our kitchen table, muzzle and front paws plunging into an immeasurable pot of borscht, the immensity of which could have solved planetary hunger almost forever. We laugh, pick up the borschted Meowbius and carry him to the bathroom for a wash whilst he licks the soup off his muzzle. If he'd pulled such a stunt in my parents' house, they'd have grabbed him by

the tail and carried him to the vet whilst he mewled, scratched, begged and tried to convince them of his innocence, that he was just doing his job, just catching the universal Mouse above that ceiling as he was destined to, or even exaggerated and said that there were swarms of them, those little grey parasites, who at night drum on the ceiling with hundreds of their little paws and don't let his esteemed and dear owners sleep. My parents wouldn't listen, would still bring him to the vet and, holding him by the tail, get him castrated on the spot so he wouldn't be so rowdy any more. A castrated village cat as a metaphor: lazy, fat, with eyes either like those of an Alexandrian philosopher or a Tibetan monk, having convinced himself of the superiority of mind over phallus, living his best life where he needn't kowtow to his libido, but can simply eat, sleep, meditate on dancing flies, sunbeams, and sparrows. But a metaphor for what? Ponder later.

— And you... when was the last time you were in Tulubaika?

Slavoslav Slavoslavovich<sup>1</sup> is now a balding, paunchy copper. His blue eyes have turned navy to match his uniform, his golden mop got tired of sitting on his head and sprawled all over his body. I want to have a proper chat with him, but there's nothing to talk about. Not because he's bald and paunchy, and not even because he's a copper (though such treachery, I must admit, is hard to forgive, even harder not to joke about, and impossible to weed out of your head), but simply because too many chaotic moments have occurred between the past and present, which, as in an old black-and-white cartoon, magically lined up into a huge interpersonal wall, propped up on both sides by rusty cast-iron

pillars. “We don’t need no education, we don’t need no thought control.” We live in different strata of reality. I’ve been to Berlin and seen the wall, and he hasn’t, which is a shame. He probably can’t even leave the country, which is also a shame. We speak different languages whilst using the same words and grammar. Life is morphology, a birdly fall into the ocean, but not for fish. To die? Oh no, to reach the depths. What depths? The depths of understanding existence through the study of forms. For there, in the darkness deep, down at the bottom, is a window, and in that window — transcendental visions, perhaps a fat learned cat<sup>2</sup>, waving its paw at sparrows, lies. No longer walks he round the golden chain, instead, turns over a chimera-thought in his lil’head, ponders how young he used to be, how he leapt among tall grass all dewed. Hop-skip, hop-skip — to the call of rustling wraps, pantherly homewards I bounce, mug cobwebbed — quick-quick-quick — for dry cat food shan’t wait for my arrival, shan’t ever eat itself! For who am I if not the most dangerous animal on this planet, a violent creature filled with hateful thoughts and a lust for blood and empty boxes?

What to say?

— Can’t remember. Ages ago, I reckon. And you?

We’re calculating the distance to a place that barely exists. It’s sort of there but sort of not and quantum mechanics has nought to do with it. Now, let’s take a ruler. A trophy Opel Kapitän sets off from point A to point B, but halfway to point B the engine coughs tubercularly and the car stops. The driver gets out, fixes it, continues the journey, but after

travelling half of the remaining half, the car stops again, and so on, half after half. The task: knowing the speed, distance, repair time, and everything else (see Appendix), calculate when the trophy Opel Kapitän will reach point B.

— Every year I plan to but never quite manage it, — Slavoslav Slavoslavovich replies, shrugging. — Work...

— And how is it there these days, do you know?

— Oh, they say it's good...

— That's good that it's good.

— Yeah... Good is always not bad... Much rain these days, they say.

— Well, there'll be mushrooms then.

— There will be... For sure...

— I could do with frying some chanterelles right now.

— Or pickling them... Or going fishing...

— Naaay. I don't like fishing.

— You used to like fishing.

Oh, I used to like all sorts of things, Slavoslav Slavoslavovich. I wouldn't even pick mushrooms myself now — I'd buy them from an old lady on the road to support the local gross product per capita, because you can't

order that sort of thing on any internets.

Slavoslav Slavoslavovich finishes wiping the bottle with a towel decorated with firebirds. The birds absorb the bubbles of cava and fly off tipsy to winter in Tahiti. Whoosh! And they're gone. There they hustle, stay and live, have children, and never return either to Tulubaika or to the surrounding villages.

— I still go... Both winter and summer... Mm... — continues Slavoslav after a long pause.

— Where to?

— Fishing, of course...

— Ah, fishing.

— Yeah, there's a lil'lake not far from here... Not quite Tulubaikan but still decent... We could go, you know... I caught an ide recently, — Slavoslav Slavoslavovich hints modestly.

— A big one?

Slavoslav Slavoslavovich smirks, as if I'd doubted his fishing abilities, and in the air, in addition to the alcoholic fumes, there now hangs a sensation of the unstarted tale about the ide, the tale that no one will ever begin or finish, but nevertheless the tale that lingers, begging with all its being to be let out, and we, mere mortals, don't let it, for we don't need it — we already know what kind of tale it is, for tales like these can

be told with just one look, so much so that Tolstoy himself would grow thin<sup>3</sup>, our dear Leo Nikolaevich, may he rest in peace and no war. Our dialogue with Slavoslav Slavoslavovich is built exclusively on such tales. They are the pillars of creation of the universe of our communication, unshakable strongholds, understood with just a brief stoic nod, man to man.

— You bet! Bloody enormous. Wanna see the video?

Some tales express their essence through a phone screen, just as stoically, phone to phone.

Go on then, I think to myself, I'd like to see this ide, and Slavoslav Slavoslavovich immediately draws his phone from its sheath and shows me the video of that ide thrashing about on the grass in hysteric waterlessness. Bloody enormous, indeed.

— You speak true, Slavoslav Slavoslavovich, such a biggie.

He nods and starts the video again.

— Thought the line wouldn't hold, but luckily we managed. Had to call a lorry, though. The whole village ate that ide afterwards.

— Ukha<sup>4</sup>?

— Nay, tiddlers would be enough for ukha... Smoked.

The smoky flavour on my tongue, a whiff of smoke in my nose, and my

mouth's turning into a saliva reservoir. I watch the ide flap its tail to and fro, bouncing, and think: I'd like to give this a proper like, man to man, I must, so I scan for the heart icon, find it at the bottom of the screen, and immediately tap it. Slavoslav Slavoslavovich nods approvingly.

— I feel sorry for it, — I say, — the king of the lake waters.

— Sorry not sorry, but what can you do? It's nature. A cat wouldn't feel sorry for it.

— Well, we're no cats, you and I, we're hoomans, oh-ho-ho and what kind.

— We're worse. A cat's at least honest in its intentions. A cat's an unprincipled hunter. To it, a mouse, an ide, or borscht — it's all the same, all prey. But we... Eh...

I try to absorb the philosophical substrate and rummage through my lexicon in search of a good word to form a response, shaking my head for a long time, vibing to the music playing from the next room. According to ancient beliefs, our parents listened to this music, and now we listen to it, too. What was cringe has become nostalgia, and so it is with everything. There, behind the wall, are endless ghostly laughter and voices of several more classmates, all mixed into one voice babbling something in an incomprehensible language, even more incomprehensible than the one Slavoslav Slavoslavovich speaks. Let them sit there, behind the wall; we're fine here. The kitchen is the temple of any party; the kitchen is where truth flows. Had I my will

afree — a human will with a speck of divinity — I'd transform with one wave of my hand all gatherings, parties, events, the whole world into a small table pushed against the wall in the kitchen with three chairs around it and people casually consulting each other about crises of various grades: existential, spiritual, creative, financial, political, ecological, even approaching midlife ones. Thus we'd sit in the wafting wisps of a wakened, wined wonder and talk, talk about this and that, about everything, about bits and bobs, the infinite and finite, in particular about how to achieve harmony of cosmos and chaos in the process of cooking borscht, and why borscht might be the key to understanding dialectical materialism and metaphysics as a whole. Real borscht, like real life, isn't cooked by the book, but by intuition, by eye and by avos<sup>5</sup>, and the correct dialectic occurs to you only when your head cracks along the welding seams in the morning. The main thing is to remember that in a true dialectical borscht there's always room for thesis, antithesis, and synthesis, and, of course, smetana<sup>6</sup>. Where would we be without it? For smetana is the symbol of unity and struggle of opposites, Gogol once said to Hegel. Only in such a kitchen confessional, in this cabal of souls desperate and splattered with borscht, can something real, something alive be born.

Here Alephtina finally returns, alone and without Meowbius, looks at us, at the ceiling, at the pot, shakes her head, sighs.

— Please eat the borscht.

— With the cat? — I ask.

— What do you mean “with the cat”? Should we throw it out now?

— Well, there’s no need to throw the cat out... — Slavoslav Slavoslavovich smirks.

— Our cat’s clean, we wash him every week.

— And he licks his cat balls every day.

— He’s got nothing to lick, don’t worry.

— He licks anyway, though. Thoroughly, with hope. One never knows; they might come back.

— He probably doesn’t even know they’re gone. That’s how you live your life, with balls, and then — bam! — no balls, but the habit remains, — adds Slavoslav Slavoslavovich.

— Yes, they both exist and don’t exist until he looks “down there”. This sort of thing often happens with cats, — Alephtina giggles.

As a child, Alephtina read Borges and thought that “Aleph” was about her. With age, however, she understood that it was, is, and will be about Tulubaika. At the moment when this Truth revealed her sacred orchid before Alephtina, she decided to abandon her previous endeavours and become a scientist. Now Alephtina is an asymptotologistess, application-oriented, studying ley asymptotes, a special type of ley lines (world-connecting curves) which one can approach indefinitely without ever reaching them. In Tulubaika, according to widespread theories,

there is a place where these lines intersect at one point, thus forming the most unreachable point on the planet.

— For a function  $f(x)$ , the line  $y = g(x)$  is an asymptote if  $\lim_{x \rightarrow \infty} |f(x) - g(x)| = 0$ , — Aleptina explains, while I ladle borscht into bowls, and Slavoslav Slavoslavovich dilutes our cava with artisanal samogón<sup>7</sup> of mysterious potency, distilled using an ancient Tulubaikan recipe left to us, they say, by the Mongols themselves. — In the case of Tulubaika, however, we're dealing with a multidimensional space, where each dimension represents a separate aspect of reality. Imagine a function  $T(x_1, x_2, \dots, x_n)$ , where  $n$  tends to infinity. Tulubaika might be a point containing all points of the universe, a kind of singularity in this multidimensional space.

Aleptina takes a deep breath and continues:

— In mathematical terms, this is a place where the function of being  $T(x)$  doesn't just tend to infinity, but undergoes a discontinuity of the second kind. In other words,  $\lim_{x \rightarrow \text{Tulubaika}+} T(x) \neq \lim_{x \rightarrow \text{Tulubaika}-} T(x)$ , and both these limits can be equal to infinity, but with different signs. Just imagine!

Slavoslav Slavoslavovich grunts into his moustache, which he doesn't have and never has had, and pours more samogón into the cava.

— Moreover, — Aleptina continues, helically stirring the borscht in her bowl, — if we consider Tulubaika as an attractor in the dynamic system of our reality, we'll see that it possesses a fractal dimension. It

isn't an integer, which explains the impossibility of fully comprehending it. Formally, this can be expressed as:  $D = \lim_{\varepsilon \rightarrow 0} [\log N(\varepsilon) / \log(1/\varepsilon)]$ , where  $N(\varepsilon)$  is the number of  $n$ -dimensional cubes with side  $\varepsilon$  needed to cover Tulubaika, and in practice, — she adds, sipping her borscht, — this means that the closer we try to get to the essence of Tulubaika, the more details we discover, and this process is endless. As Poincaré said, “Science is a continuous approximation to Truth. It's an eternal chase, but not after a chimera, rather after an asymptote”.

— White noise... — Slavoslav Slavoslavovich mumbles.

— They don't teach you this in cop school?

— No, they don't, and for that thanks to our comrade Major Yehoshua, may his memory be blessed, — he adds sarcastically. — No need to dilute our Orthodox thought with your foreign sciences. For such heresy, we could lock you up for fifteen days<sup>8</sup>, citizenette<sup>9</sup>.

We all laugh heartily. Aleptina leaves her spoon in the bowl and eyes the glasses, clapping her hands in anticipation.

— Tell me, what have you concocted?

— So, mademoiselle, we wished-s<sup>10</sup> to concoct a refined from-over-yonder cocktail, following a most esteemed French recipe. Alas, upon inspection, we discovered-s that our Champagne is from Spain, and the English gin is nowhere to be found. Therefore, if it

pleases you, we shall substitute-s it with the Tulubaikan samogón traditionnel, forsooth.

— Oh indeed, messieurs, that is how great discoveries are born, isn't it?  
— says Alephtina and picks up her glass.

— Well... shall we? — says Slavoslav Slavoslavovich.

— We shall, indeed.

We raise our glasses and clink them.

— Wait-wait, what about helixing?

— Right you are, mademoiselle.

— Not for nothing you're a scientist now, citizenette.

We swirl our faceted Soviet glasses until little whirlpools form, following Alephtina's advice to create a stochastic process in the drink and enrich it with oxygen. We sip. The spirit rushes through the body in spirals, warming the corporeal and the incorporeal. My chronic déjà vu immediately intensifies, and my forehead fills with a hot-cold sensation that we're sitting exactly as we sat ten and twenty years ago, and everything around is nothing but a nostalgic dream staged by a radical art-house theatre troupe—

— One every day, — says my doctor, his fake clownish moustache turning him into Felix Dzerzhinsky<sup>11</sup>. — Best in the arse cheek. Right or

left — you pick. But I stick it in the left — I fancy commies, you know. Go on, give it a go.

In my hand — a syringe, pearlescent goo shimmering inside it. As if I'm about to jab myself with a vial of glitter.

— And then boom, it's all gone?

— No booms, compadre. It'll be gone gradually.

— Maybe there are pills?

— The pills are bitter as olives from the tree. You might get asphyxia (and not an erotic one, mind you). Then, of course, everything'll be gone with a boom.

— Is there perhaps a stronger dose? Like, one-and-done, fixed for good?

— No, compadre patient, be patient. Chronic déjà vu is incurable, I'm afraid. You'll be on jabs for life now. I suffer from it myself but I jab it regularly and it's fine — no bother. But if you ever want it like before (ha-ha), skip a couple of days and everything will be back to square one. Will you give it a go now?

— My wife will “give it a go” for me at home. I'm afraid to do it myself.

— I could “give it a go” for you.

— I'm fine, thank you very much.

The doc nods understandingly.

— Better before dinner, this one.

I stand up, adjust my shirt with rolled-up sleeves, shake the doctor's poisonously blue rubber hand, and head for the door.

— Doc, what about the centrists? — I ask before fleeing this torture chamber.

— Ah, those... They use rectal suppositories, so it dissolves inside. It's uncomfortable to sit at first, though. The suppositories aren't small, mind you.

We nod to each other stoically, man to man. I exit, slamming the door—

On trips, I give it a go myself, contorting in front of the mirror in the hotel bathroom. I alternate right and left, just in case, to avoid jinxing it, but I reckon I forgot to dose up today and yesterday. So here we are, flare-up time.

— Oh, how lovely! — Alephtina exclaims, polishing off her glass. — This is what I'm getting at. How's your car, Slavoslav Slavoslavovich?

— Well, I took a taxi here. It's a piss-up, after all.

— What do I care about your taxis, Slavoslav Slavoslavovich? The Opel, I'm asking about your trophy Opel.

— Ah, the Opel... It starts up.

— Does it run?

— Runs it does. Not quite factory-fresh, mind you, but goes like the clappers. Bit of a rattle here and there but that's nought. More "authentic" that way, as they say.

— Will you give us a ride?

— Well... — Slavoslav Slavoslavovich clams up.

— For old times' sake. When else will we get a chance to ride in a trophy Opel?

— Well... There are still a couple of parts to replace... Can't seem to find the right paint...

— Just tell us which one you need and we'll sort you out.

Every evening after work, and sometimes on weekends, all year round, Slavoslav Slavoslavovich escapes from his family for a rendezvous. He walks along dark streets, encountering stray dogs and the absence of asphalt on the way, but such nuances are like smetana to a cat for him; he's a copper, with a gun. Reaching the coveted garage — one of the endless alleys of them, planted by Stalin himself back in the days of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics — Slavoslav Slavoslavovich opens the gates. Before him, as in a fairy tale, appears a slightly rusted but clean Opel Kapitän Cabrio, coloured like Schutzstaffel uniform, full of

rounded forms, equipped with bug-eyed headlights and a distinctive radiator grille, that very legendary car on which Slavoslav Slavoslavovich's grandfather drove from Germany in nineteen forty-five, fuming home victoriously to Tulubaika, minus one ear and two fingers on his right hand that were scattered around Europe. At one point, the totality of parts that had fallen into disrepair in this Opel amounted to about a hundred per cent. Slavoslav Slavoslavovich managed to replace some from local sources, some I sent him from overseas. Question: does the old grandfather's Opel remain the same trophy Opel if every original part in it has been changed several times? One might accidentally become a Volga that way.

For a split second it darkens, either in the world or in my eyes, but immediately after that, the night illuminates the kitchen with lightning. She's looking for sad people, the lightning. Hail begins to bombard the balcony windows and door, in a minute filling the balcony itself to the brim with icy tennis balls until they start spilling over the edge. Thunder drowns out the music, but the squeals and gasps of those gathered for the piss-up are still louder.

— That's some weather!

— Did you clock that?

— Fuck me sideways...

— This has never happened before and here we go again!

— Blazinn oodles!

— I hope my greenhouse is still standing...

Flash number two. Scratching the linoleum on his way and bumping into every doorframe, Meowbius, electrified after a hairdryer ordeal, bursts into the kitchen and, with one precise leap onto the fridge, begins the ritual of summoning the sly one<sup>12</sup>.

— *Ekekekekek tenebris princeps, audi vocem meam, surge ex abyssu, miau, et appare coram me!* — he could have shouted, and we all could have chorused “amen” at the end. We could do so much more that it’s unclear why we’re not doing it, at least “for the plot” it would definitely have been worth doing.

The light in the flat goes out, someone in the next room yelps, someone laughs, an unknown piece of crockery breaks.

— “Let there be light!” the handyman declared and snipped the power dead!<sup>13</sup> — announces one of the guests.

The frightened cat’s orbs begin to glow with hellfire. Around his fur gathers a sparkling aura. Oh no... Oh no... Oh no, no, no, no, no.

— *Miau! Nunc est bibendum lac! Ekekekek* — Meowbius could have howled. — *Audi me, serve humane! MIAU!*

Here the powerless fridge under the cat could have suddenly turned on, hummed, shaken, its door could have swung open and out he’d come

— the sly one himself, looking like a chort<sup>14</sup>, hairy, with polished horns and hooves. And we'd sit together with him, and knock back pure Tulubaikan samogón and chase it all down with toasted bread with demonic amounts of garlic, of which he, the sly one, wouldn't be afraid and would have prepared it for us in the fridge converted into an oven. But no, life isn't like that. Alas.

Aleptina wants to pick up Meowbius, but he hisses, kicks, flails his paws chaotically, so that with one careless blow, Aleptina would be walking around with an eye patch. A boozier uncle of mine in Tulubaika once had his hands so scratched up by his cat that my aunt thought he'd tried to cut his wrists, called the shrinks, who somehow packed him into a straitjacket and carted him off in a white bukhanka<sup>15</sup> to the yellow house<sup>16</sup>. What they did to him there remains a mystery, but he returned sober and never drank again. Note: treating alcoholism with a cat.

— Leave him be... He'll shred you to bits, — Slavoslav Slavoslavovich tells Aleptina, leaning back slightly.

— He's got no claws, — Aleptina replies, trying to wrangle the cat.

— No balls, no claws... What a life...

— He's just scared. Look, he's calming down already, — she nods at Meowbius purring in her arms.

With grace, electricity returns to our chambers. To the accompaniment of copper pipes<sup>17</sup> and the whole orchestra joining them, those gathered

burst into applause, whistles and sincere thanks to Ionius, the overlord of electricity, and the master of all free ions in the universe, who, to become free, had to protest against universal darkness quite a bit.

Someone, whose seasoned face I haven't yet recognised, quickly pops into the kitchen, asks whether we are bored sitting in the kitchen all by threeselves (cats don't count as conversationalists, not even ones like Meowbius), offers to join everyone else, to which we unanimously no-no, offers a joint, which we also prefer to no-no (for now, though), then, shrugging us off, grabs a random bottle of alcohol and, bowing out, leaves the kitchen temple.

Aleptina goes to the fridge with the disgruntled cat, opens it with one hand, takes out milk and pours it into a bowl. Meowbius, jumping down from her arms, begins to lap up the feline holy water, smacking his lips. She, meanwhile, takes out an hourglass standing on the corner shelf under a portrait of her smiling wrinkled grandma in a headscarf. Inside the hourglass, instead of sand, is nothing other than the ashes of the said old lady, who was rumoured to have possessed extremely supernatural abilities (at least by Tulubaikan standards). Sighing heavily, Aleptina sits at the table and places the hourglass in front of us. In a thin stream, Grandma Nüra seeps from the upper part of the hourglass into the lower.

— How long does she last?

— That I haven't figured out yet, to be honest.

— We could just flip it over, — says Slavoslav Slavoslavovich and reaches for the hourglass, to which Alephtina lightly slaps his hand.

— Hands off or I'll flip your head over; better pour us some. You're performing your duties poorly, Comrade Captain, — Alephtina declares sternly, yet with an indecent amount of irony, and pushes her glass to the centre of the table.

By copper's will and Alephtina's wish, the vessel brims with cava and samogón's swish<sup>18</sup>. I, meanwhile, lean towards the hourglass to observe Grandma Nüra's descent.

— Look here, — Alephtina intones, after first rinsing her mouth with the drink. — There's very little left.

We, pretending to have understood everything, nod in unison, men to woman.

— We need to go there sharpish, — she enunciates, taking a sip.

— Where to?

— Where do you think? To Tulubaika.

— To Tulubaika?

— Oh.

— You do come out with some bangers sometimes, Alya<sup>19</sup>. “Sharpish!”

— I've found out that, with a margin of error of three point four per cent (dead accurate, I should mention), Tulubaika will vanish as soon as Grandma Nüra runs out.

— Vanish? — Slavoslav Slavoslavovich and I ask, taken aback.

— Vanish.

— Just up and vanish, like that?

— Precisely like that. A spacetime singularity will occur and the village will collapse into itself. Flop and gone. Well, that's in theory.

— Well, blow me down... — Slavoslav Slavoslavovich drawls, scratching his bald bonce. — Like in the Bermuda Triangle?

— No, for real. No fairy tales. Poof! And no Tulubaika.

— How's that?

— Just like that. You know how it was in childhood? Your grandma asks you to help. "Go fetch some bread," so she says. You agree, toddle off to the kiosk, but it has run out of bread. What a pity, right?

— Too right.

— So you think: I'll go to the next village then, can't let grandma down, can I? You walk for an hour through fields, through birch groves burning with golden flames, triumphantly buy the last loaf of white bread in the only shop called "SHOP" in the neighbouring village, walk

back, get bored, hunger awakens in your belly, you forget everything in a childish way...

— For a moment of total transcendence...

— Exactly. You start eating this bread, just biting the loaf straight from the bag — it doesn't matter where you're taking it or to whom, it's still warm, crusty, the most delicious fresh bread you've ever tasted.

— Wouldn't mind some fresh bread now, I must say...

— So you walk, head in the clouds, grasshopping, admiring nature, maybe accidentally stumbling over an asymptote (they say children can still trip over them, and some can even *jump* over them like a skipping rope, fancy that), and there you are; you return to the village, but grandma's gone — she died; they took her away in an ambulance straight to the cemetery in a coffin prepared at home, cobbled together for a bottle of vodka by John the carpenter from the boards of the old collapsed Communist Party hut. What can you do? She was old, took three nostalgin pills every day and suffered from chronic déjà vu like everyone in our parts. And there you stand thinking: what now? I've already eaten the bread.

— Been there, done that... — Slavoslav Slavoslavovich nods. He looks like he might fall asleep any moment.

— It'll vanish completely. It will for us, and we will for it. If we arrive too late, we will not even recognise each other, — says Alephtina.

Time in Tulubaika always dabbled in certain dilations, like on that planet in “Interstellar.” You seem to have already graduated from university, gotten married, travelled the world, changed a dozen jobs, gained muscle and intellect — practically ascended to Apollo and Dionysus in one person, but in Tulubaika it’s as if nothing has changed, yet everything is completely different.

— That’s why I don’t want to go and won’t go, — I tell them straight.

They, Alephtina and Slavoslav Slavoslavovich, suddenly turn to me, having sheathed all their alcoholic intoxication, and ask in unison:

— And why’s that then?

And I look at them and don’t recognise them, as if my chronic déjà vu has again metastasised into chronic jamais vu. Déjà vu, jamais vu... Even a sober tongue would tie itself in knots, not to be untied. The world’s a splash from fish tails gliding through void’s vast sea. Splash! And chimeras flee the present, troika-harnessed<sup>20</sup>, clasp throats of forms and images, devouring all they see. Memories entwine in wreaths, from mind flee silently, sprawl languidly on graves. These people I (don’t) remember, their faces (un)familiar to me, their voices (not) known to me, a ghostly similarity is all my wretched thought can find, reflected in their plea — eyes hungry for my words, awaiting eagerly.

Somewhere in the beautiful distance, lightning flashes, and the sound of rain and thunder gently-nostalgically taps on the membranes of our ear shells. I sit, watch, unwind a thoughtful thought — the answer won’t

construct itself, just like communism over and over again, while in the next room the lads get out a guitar and start singing Yegor Letov<sup>21</sup>:

*Distant Ophelia laughed in her sleep:*

*A pot-bellied thrush, a shaggy deer*

*The habitually last year's painted snow*

*Easily, lightly and cheerfully crunches on teeth.*

— Jamais vu, — I finally answer after a pause as long as two pauses (or three).

— Jamais what?

— Huh?

— Jamais vu. Like déjà vu, but the opposite. You look around and everything seems like it's for the first time. I'm afraid that I'll arrive in Tulubaika like this and... What will I see there? Neither grandmother's baking, nor fishing with grandfather, nor the cat Dulcinea engaging in mouse-catching and obscurantism, only the creaking junk in the form of a windmill that echoes throughout the area, trees grown to the skies and fields overgrown with shrubs and weeds. Jamais vu, in a word.

— Complete jamais vu, comrade...

— A function discontinuity... — Alephtina mutters and winces from an apparent attack of her mathematical synaesthesia.

— Flush it down, — says Slavoslav Slavoslavovich and gives her his freshly prepared portion of Tsar Cannon<sup>22</sup> (thus we call our concoction).

The theatricality of the musical performance in the neighbouring room intensifies manifold and begins to sound from inside my skull:

*Enamoured Ophelia drifted far away*

*The night was bright, the earth did ring*

*Hastily hurried, without hiding from view*

*The clock to its foolish, comical land*

*Obedient Ophelia floated to the east*

*A wondrous captivity, granitic delight*

*A lemony pathway to an orange grove*

*Invisible lift to a transcendent floor*

— So what's the point of going then?

Aleptina rolls her eyes.

— All the more reason. That's the whole point. We need to go.

— I don't want to go anywhere.

— Consider Tulubaika as a quantum system  $T(\psi)$ . If we can describe the attempt to return with the equation  $T'(\psi') = M[T(\psi)]$ , where  $M$  is the measurement operator changing the state of the system.

— White noise...

— Returning to Tulubaika is equivalent to finding a fixed point  $T(\psi) = M[T(\psi)]$ , but the existence of such a point is not guaranteed, because Tulubaika is not only a point in space, but also a continuum of states described by the statistical ensemble of our memories and expectations.

— I second that, — I say, then nod towards Slavoslav Slavoslavovich. — But the noise is still too white.

— In short, the past Tulubaika is asymptotically unreachable by definition. Consider it gone already... (Aleptina hiccups) And it won't be back. But some version of it still exists...

We sit, silent, hiccupping, in one ear — a guitar, in the other — Meowbius's purring, sprawled on the floor by my right foot, the very one with a hole in the sock, causing the big toe to stick out and provoke the cat to bite. Ekekek he goes, ekekek. The borscht has already cooled; in it, the smetana has spread in white lumps, cosily gathered around oval drops of yellow fat that now tends towards a solid state. Meanwhile:

*Distant Ophelia laughed in her dreams:*

*A weary demon, a willow bush*

*Gifted ponies scattered at dawn*

*To the four winds — try to catch them now—*

— You see, compadre, chronic déjà vu, — the doctor tells me, — is not just an obsessive feeling but a whole syndrome of temporal dysfunction. If left untreated, there occurs, so to speak, an inversion of the perceptual continuum.

— Huh? — I exclaim.

My brain is about to melt and flow out of my ears.

The doctor exhales all the air from his lungs and, gesticulating like a juggler, continues to broadcast his cerebral ambrosia:

— Imagine the brain as a huge hourglass where the grains of sand are your memories. With déjà vu, this hourglass works as it should but with a small glitch when sand from the lower bulb, by a miraculous coincidence, seeps back into the upper one. But if no measure is taken, it can get worse, and the sand will start to get stuck. First in the narrow neck, then in the bulbs themselves.

— I see...

— By looking at you, I don't think you do. The danger is: when a critical mass of memory-grains gets stuck, your brain is no longer able to make sense of this petrified chaos of memory, and begins to perceive everything as new, even though you remember everything. This is

jamais vu. You look at your wife and feel like you don't recognise her. You come to your home village and feel like you're seeing it for the first time. You read a book you knew by heart, and each page is again a revelation to you. But the worst thing, compadre, is that you stop recognising yourself.

The doctor falls silent, thoughtfully stroking his fake luxuriant moustache. Quite dramatic, that chap.

— Even suppositories won't help there. Regardless of their size.

Biting my lower lip, I nod and once again shake the doctor's poisonously blue rubber hand—

In the dewy morning, after the roosters hoarsely greet the dawn, we (plus grumpy Meowbius), sobered up, slightly gloomy, charged with ibuprofen, nostalghin and melancholin, will sit in the trophy Opel Kapitän and, puffing and rattling, collecting potholes and chort-knows-whats, across the boundless field between oat dunes, in the shade of birches blazing with golden fire, with rotting leaves wrapped around the wheel, mixed with the rotting remains of bad news from newspapers, which you'd only use to wipe your arse with, will head Tulubaikawards.

But for now, we're still sitting, watching gravity pull Baba Nüra's<sup>23</sup> ashes into the lower bulb of the hourglass, finishing off the dialectical borscht reheated in the microwave, and listening as, somehow keeping the chords and rhythm, behind the wall in which there isn't a single

brick, Pink Floyd together with Ophelia drown in the raging streams of borscht...

*How I wish, how I wish you were here*

*Ophelia drowning in a borscht bowl, year after year*

*Running over the old ground, what have we found?*

*The same old fears, I wish you were here.*

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## Notes

1. A name that's a bit too Slavic. His parents desperately wanted to maximise his patriotic credentials, hence this. "Slavoslavovich" is a patronymic, meaning his father was also named Slavoslav. It's not a middle name but rather a distinct way of formally addressing a person. The US equivalent might be "Liberty Freedom Jefferson" or "Patriot Eagle Washington," while Brits might encounter a "Winston Britannia Churchillton."
2. A fat learned cat here and later is a reference to the prologue of Pushkin's 1820s poem "Ruslan and Ludmila" — a tale-telling cat who walks on a chain around an oak tree.
3. The etymology of Tolstoy's surname (Толстой) likely stems from an adjective "tolstyj" (толстый), which in Russian means "thick", "fat", or "stout".
4. A minimalist fish soup. Its defining feature is the pure, concentrated fish broth.
5. A peculiarly Russian faith in perhaps-it-will-work-out-somehow as a philosophical principle. It's neither quite fatalism nor optimism, but rather the comfortable space between preparation and surrender where one throws caution to whatever fiasco may come.
6. An Eastern European version of sour cream, typically with higher fat content, thicker and more resistant to heat, making it more versatile in cooking.
7. From Russian "само" (self) and "гон" (distill, run) — a homemade alcohol (moonshine), the foundation of Russian village alchemy.

The Soviet state periodically criminalised and tolerated the practice in alternating waves, never quite eradicating it. Neither scientific precision nor legal permission feature prominently in its production, which traditionally occurs in copper apparatuses of questionable engineering passed down through generations. Samogón's potency fluctuates wildly on the continuum between "temporary blindness" and "ancestral visitation," with flavour profiles ranging from "burning tire" to "aggressive pear" and much more.

8. A default administrative detention period in Soviet and post-Soviet Russia for minor offences and "hooliganism". The phrase entered cultural consciousness as the standard "cooling off" period dished out by authorities for everything from public drunkenness to political dissidence.
9. The translator deliberately rendered "citizen" as French-infused female-gendered word, to emphasise the original tone of the message. The Russian original uses "гражданочка", a diminutive feminine form that officials often employ when addressing women in a subtly patronising manner, combining bureaucratic formality with condescension.
10. The extra "-s" particle (as in "wished-s" and "discovered-s") replicates a speech affectation from pre-revolutionary Russian. It used to be used by merchants and servants as a shortened form of "sir" (сударь/государь) but became a linguistic marker of excessive deference or affected formality. In modern contexts, applied randomly, it can be used ironically to parody a pretentious manner of speech.
11. CEO and founder of the Cheka (the OG KGB), nicknamed "Iron Felix". His bronze statue outside KGB headquarters was famously toppled during the 1991 Soviet collapse, yet his organisational "legacy" has endured even after the monuments fell.
12. The sly one or "lukavy" is a traditional Russian euphemism for the Devil or Satan. This indirect reference reflects the folk belief that directly naming evil entities might summon them. The term appears in the Lord's Prayer as "deliver us from the sly one" and has entered Russian cultural consciousness as a way to acknowledge dark forces without invoking them explicitly, which a cat, of course, can't be aware of.
13. A famous Russian folk "rhyme" that must be recited every time the unplanned and prolonged power outage begins.
14. A mischievous humanoid demon or minor devil in Slavic folklore. Unlike the sly one, the chort is more of a trickster than the embodiment of ultimate evil. He can cause household mishaps, lead

travellers astray, or tempt humans into foolish decisions. When Russians exclaim “K chortu!” (To the devil!), they’re invoking this folkloric spirit rather than the big sly one. The chort therefore occupies a supernatural space between serious theological threat and annoying supernatural pest. See also: [A Conversation Between A Drunken Man And A Sober Chort, by Chekhov](#) and [How Khorya and Borya Trafficked a Chort](#).

15. The nickname for the iconic UAZ-452 Soviet van/minibus, derived from its distinctly loaf-like shape (“bukhanka” means “a loaf of bread” in Russian). It became the default public service vehicle during Soviet times, serving as ambulances, postal vans, and military transport. Despite its spartan interior and bumpy ride, the bukhanka has achieved cult status among both ex-Soviet and international off-road enthusiasts, some even trying to ship it to places like Mexico.
16. A Russian euphemism for a psychiatric hospital or asylum, deriving from the yellowish paint traditionally used on these institutions’ facades during the olden days. The phrase — colour aside — might also carry significant cultural weight beyond its literal meaning due to the Soviet practice of “punitive psychiatry”, where political dissidents were diagnosed with fabricated conditions like “sluggish schizophrenia” and institutionalised against their will.
17. A Russian idiom “to pass through fire, water, and copper pipes” (пройти огонь, воду и медные трубы) is all about the endurance of severe trials and hardships. The phrase’s origins are disputed: some trace the “copper pipes” to the trumpets of military glory and the test of fame; others to distillation apparatus and the survival of alcoholism, hence the translator’s decision not to render it simply as “trumpets”.
18. This sentence parodies the classic Russian fairy tale formula “By the pike’s command, by my desire”, which magical creatures or objects use to fulfill wishes.
19. A diminutive version of Alephtina (supposedly), used in an affectionate way. Alya to Alephtina is what Belle to Isabelle. Eastern Slavic cultures have an elaborate system of such diminutives that signal familiarity and emotional closeness between speakers and a range of other subtle registers.
20. A traditional Russian three-horse carriage team harnessed side-by-side, with the middle horse trotting while outer horses gallop.
21. Legendary Siberian punk rocker and poet whose band Grazhdanskaya Oborona (Civil Defence) became the voice of

late-Soviet counterculture. Letov's relationship with Yanka Dyagileva, another Siberian punk artist, inspired some of his best work, including his song "Ophelia" written after her tragic drowning death in 1991. Though he died in 2008, his uncompromising anarchical ethos and general post-Soviet punk aesthetic continue to endure.

22. Tsar Cannon was Moscow's famous 16th-century bronze behemoth that never fired a shot in battle. Thus the cocktail is a twist on the classic French 75, also named after cannons, however, while the French original is based on gin and champagne, the Tsar Cannon incorporates rather stronger and unusual flavours.
23. Here "baba" is short for babushka, a grandmother or often an old woman in general.

## Episode 2: about lingus venus

[nova-nevedoma.com/lingus-venus/](http://nova-nevedoma.com/lingus-venus/)

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“I am a myth. And you create it.”

— “Palisandria” by Sasha Sokolov

Among the timber tables run decrepit demon dogs, all ulcerated, their mouths bleeding, bubbling with an alabaster foam. I couldn't care less about them, though. There's me and there's her, though for me, there's only her, my heroine; nothing else matters, not even these weird creatures. The air smells of candle wax and balsamic vinegar someone has spilt at the table next to us. While the demon dogs are dead set on pinching anything off the tables, while the copious happy people around mumble, while the fish-headed waiters shout at each other in an unrecognisable tongue, while somewhere in the bushes right behind the restaurant cicadas compose a cacophonous lullaby, while branches of yew with red holey beads scratch the plexiglass roof of the terrace, my heroine, only my heroine, remains the sole focal point into which my decaying reality funnels, and while a fly drowns in my wine, I drown in her iridescent eyes. Those round, furtively blinking orbs are either grey, the hue of smoke or a thick morning fog, or green, the hue of jade, possibly faded a tad from overexposure to overattention. Around her dilated pupils, a ruby lattice of tiny capillaries has grown; masterful

jewellery, her eyes now. Is this the third bottle this evening?  $C_2H_5OH$  and some other substances; the transmutation of the evening into the—

— This is secret ingredient of transmutation from evening into night,  
— my heroine says in broken tongue.

— What kind of ingredient, though?

— Secret ingredient.

— O-o-oh, I see. A secret ingredient.

— Secret ingredient, yes. You know what that mean?

I shake my head, lips arched up.

— This means I not tell you what is this. Did you think I tell you?

— You must tell me, though. My mother taught me not to take strange substances from strangers, especially *strangerettes*, which perfectly describes the situation I'm in right now.

— I understand. Mother word is law.

— I wouldn't ask otherwise.

— Well, too bad, I still not tell you. Somewhere, somewhen, I am someone's mother. Therefore, on a grand scheme of things, my word is law, "though".

My heroine stretches a sly smile and takes a sip from her glass.

— But not now?

— You are so fixed on “now”. I not— I don’t understand.

My heroine keeps staring at me. She doesn’t blink, or perhaps we blink at the same time. It happens sometimes; people blink at the same time and never see each other with eyes shut, or blink in turns and never see each other with eyes open. I try to blink unevenly, at random times, so that doesn’t happen, but still never see her eyes shut. It is a state-of-the-art mesmerisation, no more, no less.

— I am. I won’t argue with that.

— Well, then don’t. Simple, da<sup>1</sup>?

— I won’t, but I thought it would benefit the evening a little bit and perhaps speed up the “transmutation” process if we build some trust.

— Such silly thing to say! I trust you. You’re crazy and naive enough to take pills from “strangerette”. You’re harmless. Harmless people trust everyone, you did that, so I think you “trust” me, in odd way. But why it matters?

A faceless waiter with five eyes, a peaky nose, and a Cheshire mouth under a Dali moustache walks by carrying on a plate a festering dog head sprinkled with parmesan and basil, the aroma of which overpowers the dog’s smell, as if it were pasta.

— Well...

— If you are afraid from falling, then fly. Or baituut. We said this in my village.

— Doesn't make any sense to me, I'm afraid.

— You shouldn't be afraid. You should turn on brain. Make it think, da?

— I'm afraid of "turning it on" to think about something like that.

— You see? You not understand. Risk of falling is not real if you already falling. It is in past and it is zero percent and hundred percent in same time, which in reality means it not relevant, which then means it not exist. Flying, on other hand, is w-a-ay more risky because risk of falling is still not zero — you can just fold wings! That is that.

— Didn't know you were a risk manager.

— Maybe I am. Maybe I am not. I prefer to stay a strangerette. Maybe I will poison you, rob you, give you syphilis or something worsen.

— Do you do that to many men?

— No, only to pretty ones. Rest I just rob.

— So I'm in grave danger then.

She scans me, head to toe, as much as the table between us allows, shrugs.

— Nah, don't worry. I think you very safe.

— Very safe?

— What, I say not correct?

— No, I just thought I'd come back home with syphilis. I already dreamt of that.

— Well... no?

— I'm thankful.

— You should be.

— So, tell me, am I flying or am I falling?

— We will understand this soon.

On the porcelain plate right in front of me lies a slightly charred squirming tentacle of an ancient god, drizzled with saffron aioli. Shoggoth? Yog-Sothoth? I don't want to know. The suckers on it stare at me by the hundreds of tiny eyes, not with pity, not with interest, but rather with irony, as if the tentacle is about to eat *me*: jump off the plate, wrap around my neck, squeeze until it cracks, and then, when my last breath leaves my lungs, crawl into my brain through a nostril and occupy my body.

— Maybe we should do it in the hotel.

She scratches her chin.

— Why?

I expect her to add “I do wonder” but she’s silent. My brain has started finishing her lines long ago.

— No, I mean... I am afraid I will start doing weird things soon.

— Weird things? For example?

— I wish I knew in advance, but no, I don’t know. Just weird things, stupid things, things you won’t like and I will regret...

— You have previous experience of doing weird things? I could make prediction about it. Maybe there’s trend...

— Are you an analyst now?

— Maybe I am an analyst...

— Like... I could start fighting with the waiters and then they would throw me in the canal and I would drown in there and die.

— No worry, I will pull you out from there. Did that happen before?

— Except the last part. Though I’m not sure about that sometimes... You don’t like your oysters?

Twenty rock oysters rest on the mountain of ice right in the middle of our table. My heroine’s order, untouched.

— I never ate oysters.

— You haven't? I don't eat oysters. They sometimes...

Here I think of how oysters, upon entering my body, would try to occupy it too, and I myself become an oyster, waking up in a rock shell the following morning.

— Well, I won't spoil it for you.

— How do you eat them?

— You just, um, slurp.

— Slurp? What is slurp?

I kindly demonstrate the slurp sound.

— Ah, “slurp”. Okay.

Multiple signs of cunning surface on my heroine's face: a smile, a squint, a long, thorough lip lick. She plots and executes, my heroine: takes an empty tap water glass, takes an oyster and pours it into the glass, setting aside the shell.

What are you doing?! I could've asked, but my curiosity suggests not to ask stupid questions and prefers to observe. My heroine takes a second oyster, a third, a fourth, ..., ..., until they all end up in her glass. Then, as I expected, she drinks them all (!), just like that, in one big slurp. Impressive. Somewhere in the back of my mind, one of my thoughts is

already looking for where nearby one could buy an engagement ring in the middle of the night.

— What? — my heroine asks, a slight shyness in her posture.

— No, nothing. I am, well, I am, I must say I'm rather impressed.

— Rather?

— Rather, yes.

— I did something wrong?

— No, you did everything perfectly. Not sure I've seen anything closer to perfection.

— I can read irony.

— I know you can, that's why it wasn't irony.

My heroine smiles.

Next to us, in the artificial river locked into three walls of brick and concrete and one wall of light-polluted city atmosphere, among dark green algae, cigarette butts, and crumpled cans, a school of fish learns to fly. Do they fly or do they *think* they fly? Or do they fall horizontally? What do the fish feel at this moment? Where are they going so free, so aimless, so hopeful? Straining their fins, they travel to the spawning grounds where they, like zergs, in sin, will multiply in quantity, and then come back to hooks and nets, to fridges and freezers, to pans and

plates, to fish and chips, to someone's mouth. Mine perhaps. Or my heroine's. Her pink lips, glistening with grease, unfold like an orchid in bloom and her red tongue licks the tartare sauce from her knife and her... Wait! My parents taught me never to lick a knife. It brings bad luck, it's tempting fate, it's bad etiquette, it's basic sharp object safety. But she... For her... For her it's a transference of energy or life force of the knife's victim to the person licking it. She lovingly pierces a chip with her fork and starts chewing it, her sharp jawline going in zigzags. She is a rare species of orchid-flycatcher and I'm a not-so-rare species of fly who can't decide between flying and falling. I can feel her chewing my head off with glee, or rather neutrally, in a manner of habit. My skull cracks open like a chocolate egg and the brain yolkly tries to escape this tragic transgression yet fates out like the fish. Then my heroine picks up a dried bucatini from her cocktail and, using it as a straw, performs one rapid succinct sip from my skull — *\*slurp!\** — it's gone! I've lost my head, I've lost my brain, I've lost my mind — I've lost everything.

— You never said it was so strong.

— You never said you were so weak.

— I'm not weak. I'm vulnerable to deception and drugs, like anyone else.

— Well, I am not vulnerable to whatever.

— Of course you're not... You seduced me, fed me your weird pills and

now my mind is melting. I see things I wish I couldn't see. I think things I wish I couldn't think.

— That is good description of my whole life. Strange that you need pills for that. What are you?

— I feel like, erm... (I wouldn't tell her I saw her eating my head. That would ruin the romantic) My brain is made of malleable paraffin and it's melting now, trying to escape this tragic transgression but fates out like the fish and my fish-fate appears predetermined, circumscribed by an insurmountable metaphysical aporia.

— Sometimes I don't understand what you are saying.

— Just listen to the words.

— Is not fun to listen to the words when you can't understand them, da? I could just listen to cicadas instead. Maybe I understand them better.

— What do they say?

— Cicadas?

— Yes, cicadas.

She scans her surroundings, squints intently, and, shrugging, returns her gaze to me. Those eyes again. I'm disappearing, flopping inwardly.

— Not sure. I don't know much about Cicadian, or is it Circadian?

Anyway, I know it even less than your tongue.

— Do they sing? Can you hear them singing a song?

After a short intermission of silence, the conductor hiding in the vegetation, its tailcoat fluttering in the wind, its eyes closed, its mind concentrated into a single dot, a dot that's about to explode with music, spreads its little cicadian limbs and, bursting with pompousness, drops them down in one sharp stroke, cutting the air and, who knows, the whole world, the whole universe into two halves. In a fraction of a millisecond (which some oddly label “immediately”), as if the “start” signal was transmitted to them with no consideration of time, telepathically, the cicadian orchestra starts its fierce symphony. Out of nowhere, a series of omnipiercing vibrating shrieks, like those of a spinning chainsaw or aroused starlings, takes over the space. *BzzzzzzZzzzzZ BzzzzZZZZzzzz BzhzzzzZZzzZZZZzzzzZzzZZZZzzzzZzzzzzzzzzz* and so on... The orchestra, perhaps, consists of all living cicadas, all cicadas that have ever lived, and all cicadas that will ever live. The symphony, simple yet complex, discordant yet meticulously composed for maximum deafening effect, angelic yet demonic, rhythmic yet arrhythmical, turns the air around us into gelatin. Everyone and everything feels it. Every flower, petal, leaf, grass, poisonous yew berry, every glass and utensil on every table, the plexiglass roof of the terrace, every eardrum, every hair in every cochlea — everything trembles, neither from fear, nor from awe, nor from pleasure, but from belonging to something greater, to something shared, to something universal, as if now the vibrations emanating from the orchestra do not just touch

everyone, but merge with them, propagated deep down to the innermost essence of every being and thing. It's a rock opera. It's jazz but with a billion "z" at the end of the word. It is a torrent of joy and agony combined into a hitherto unknown bittersweet sensation, a feeling of nostalgia for every fraction of a moment passed and every moment to come. Between the moments, if you tune in, you experience an eerie sense of quiet, like the universe has just pressed the mute button, and you have fallen through into a transient void. You feel its texture. You feel what the world really is, described in the cicadian tongue.

— ... That is how cicadas reveal to us the underlying vibrations of the world — through their music, through their unequivocal art, and they are just humble tree crickets. I can't imagine what a human could do, — thus I finish my speech.

My heroine bursts into applause.

— Wow, I mean... Okay, it probably was too strong on you.

— Did you hear all my thoughts? The whole thing?!

— Yes, but because you said it out loud. And let go of my hand. I don't mind it but your grip is just too tight, like a child handcuff.

I remove my hand from hers and look around. The dizziness takes over, and every person on the terrace, every guest and host (no dogs; they are gone, luckily), now has auras comprised of vibrating doppelgängers,

their appearances multiplying before my eyes, each body fanning out into a cluster of blurred copies, as if the shutter speed of my mind-camera has gone snail.

— Sorry... Can you say something in your tongue?

— Like what?

— I don't know. Something. I need to hear something I don't understand because now, I reckon, I understand too much.

— You are ill? Here, drink water.

She moves her glass towards me and I pour it whole down my throat, together with ice. It feels like embers crawling down my oesophagus.

— We can leave? Have some fresh air.

— No, please just say something. Words, I need words.

— Such as? What do you want to hear?

— I don't know. Just words. The whole thing I just thought... or said. About cicadas. Translate it to me. Please. I want to hear your native tongue.

— Okay.

I sit straight and look into her eyes. Mimicking everything else around, they multiply into dozens and hundreds as if she's Argus now. I close

my eyes and prepare to listen.

— Erm... well... it's, ugh, kaiabtuluulbaiakkatu.

She's silent. The only thing I hear is the cicadian orchestra.

— Wait, that's it?

— Da.

— Is that what it means? The whole whatever-that-was translates into... that? Just... what? One word? Two words?

— My tongue is very expressive. And it's not a word, there's no such concept in my tongue.

— Where are you from?

— It's called Tulubaika.

— Tooloo-what?

— Tulubaika.

— Toolookai- no... I can't do it.

— Tu-lu-bai-ka.

— Too-loo-bai-la?

— No!

— I think you're making it up. The wicked tongue. Everything. It makes no sense.

— No, I don't. Why make up? World has enough things already.

— Yes, you're making it up. I can see that in your eyes.

— You think I lie?

— No, not lie. It's different. You're making it up.

— No, I'm not. Why would I do that? I can't invent nothing.

— I don't know. To play me?

— I don't play games.

— What was it again? Tooloobulu-something.

She's laughing, I can feel she's laughing, inwardly, she's making fun of me, taking the piss.

— Tulubaika. Is Tulubaika.

— No, it can't be real. This can't be serious.

— It's all very, very serious. Everything is serious.

— I don't mean to sound impolite but is it some... I don't know... rare unknown indigenous place? Is that where you are from?

— Tulubaika.

— But what country?

— Asking woman where is she from is worse than asking age, mister. You can guess my accent.

— I don't know. I'm bad at accents. You're extraterrestrial.

— Yes, good idea. I like it.

— I mean it as a compliment, by the way.

— I know. Now I say I am alien from Venus. Tulubaika is village on Venus. The only one maybe. How does this sound?

— Alright. I see. Venus. Well... Okay. I mean, why not. Describe it to me.

— Describe?

— Yes. I want to know what it's like, Tooloobaila, Venus.

— Tulubaika! It is small, very small village, da? There isn't nothing to describe, "I'm afraid". It is very quiet and peaceful. There're fields around and nothing else. We have a few small houses and we have orchid gardens.

— Orchid gardens? For real?

— Da.

— In a village?

— Yes, just one.

— An orchid garden? As in a garden with orchids?

— See? You don't believe me, whatever I say. You don't trust me. This is your problem. You must trust people. This is how society work.

— In Tooloobaila?

— Everywhere.

Tilting, I watch her eyes multiplying on her face.

— We'd better get some fresh air.

Along the cobbled path, high above the surface, run four legs, from them two bodies holding hands grow gradually, entwined into one drunken silhouette that chuckles, bursts with laughter — the silhouette's only language. The words, the real words composed of morphemes with attached hints of meanings and history of the evolution of hundreds of tongues, have ceased to exist, dispersed into individual sounds, and these sounds, in turn, have dissolved into the air like vapour billowing from an air humidifier, and instead of them there now exist only glances, touches, emotions, laughs, the smell of hormones and alcohol, basil and garlic stuck between teeth, the waves of twisted electricity hopping joyfully from neuron to neuron, from brain to brain, liberated, given to themselves. Words are no longer necessary,

necessity itself is unnecessary; it simply is, everything simply is. The memory that has been and memory to come, the coordinates of seconds, minutes, perhaps hours, and any sense of continuity are — *\*snap!\** — gone. They are lines on paper filled with numbers and ticks that our brains cannot read. Chronology is not a property of time but a science that studies it, a pseudoscience for pseudopeople.

My heroine's hand is cold and wet. She smells of wine and sweat. We're traversing a piazza, a concave square made of thousands of thousand-year-old convex stones polished by time and soles. In the middle of the piazza is a fountain with a statue of Venus. The statue has no head, the head has no eyes and no mouth, the figure has no hands and the hands have no fingers, it has no legs, no torso, nothing, the statue doesn't even have itself, but it's still there, visible, looming a few metres high over the piazza, dropping its shadow in all directions, overlooking the paused fountain, now filled with coins from all around the world — tributes to the goddess of love. The gusts of wind soar at the piazza, whistling around us as we escape the space behind us. We've abandoned our shoes and every stone in our cobbled path now feels like a little mountain. We're flying above the mountains, thousands of little peaks, and suddenly hear the mus—

— Sound like someone is beating an elephant! Let's go and see what is it!

Her hair all over her head, face and shoulders, my heroine pulls my hand somewhere, without waiting for my response.

— Beating an elephant? lol, I mean LOL.

— LMAO even, look!

Before us — an arcade, a long illuminated corridor with beige brick walls and a few dozen glass doors under an arching glass roof. The shops and restaurants are closed and dimly lit, the lights of melon-sized bulbs hanging sadly above empty counters. In the middle of the arcade, a saxophone produces a wildfree melody that its lone player attempts to tame. Her eyes closed, she doesn't see us, and as we approach her, she keeps blowing, ordering the disorder of the air into melancholic vibrations, an elegant sequence of transient voids exquisitely arranged and timed together, weaving the empty space of the arcade into one single thick thread that leads us to... Where to? No idea. We tighten our collective grip, freeze and listen to the saxophonistess. We feel her wordless speech not with our ears but with our whole bodies as all the little hairs on our napes, hands, and legs rise, after the cold, refreshing, sobering and tickling sensation travels from our eardrums to our toes and fills our whole bodies with ecstatic charge. The song abruptly ends and the saxophonistess gives us a blissful smile.

In unison, we ask:

— What's the song called?

Frowning, she replies:

— It's not a song.

In unison, we express our persistent curiosity:

— But what is it called?

Upon a momentary pause, the saxophonistess answers:

— Let it be “A Lament of a Dying Elephant.”

Awed, quite so (myself, especially), we ask again (we must be very annoying):

— Has it died?

The woman seems amused by the conversation:

— Who? The elephant? I don’t know.

She shrugs, and we clarify:

— No, the song.

She’s almost laughing now:

— Ah, probably you can say that. I don’t think I would play it again.

— Why wouldn’t you?

— Because I have no idea or memory of what I’ve just played.

The song has passed from the physical world, for it stopped vibrating it and thickening and entangibilising its fabrics, but in our world, which is

far from physical, it still sings. Inside our brains, it's tattooed as a long sequence of notes, filling every convolution in dense calligraphic graffiti. It is a code, a program, an instruction, a spell, something that's now running continuously on our joint brainware in a magical, metaphysical manner, despite having no repeated elements that our ears could catch. Hypnotised by (as everyone agreed) "A Lament of a Dying Elephant", we dig coins from our pockets, tributes to the goddess of music, and transfer them into the saxophonist's hat resting in front of her like a loyal dog, and flee the makeshift concert hall.

Around us, there's a narrow and long public garden where, lanternd, grow various flora: camellias, roses, daffodils, lavender, hydrangeas, peonies, daisies, tulips, ferns, climbing ivy, jasmine, rhododendrons (lots of 'em), wisteria, azaleas, chrysanthemums, lilacs, marigolds, irises, begonias, violets, cyclamens, heather, foxgloves, pansies, sage, more-of and more-poisonous yew, cypress, rosemary, juniper, fuchsia, dahlias, petunias, anemones, aster, zinnias, cosmos, verbena, and maybe some others I can't recognise, for I'm not a botanical expert. We stroll through the labyrinthine collection of flowers and read the names from the plaques beneath. The little pebbles that cover the road prick our bare feet. The ground is still underneath, existing, and we, in fact, are not flying. I can't name the colour of my heroine's eyes anymore. In the dark, they are just two shiny obsidians of cooled lava. A carefree and ironic smile rests across her face. Her hand squeezes my palm, plays with my knuckles, rolls them hither and thither. Here we are, two people surrounded by sleeping beauty.

It's wrong but I want you tonight.

Say it.

No, can one even say that to someone in a park at night?

Can I argue with my inner voice? Does it even hear me back or is it just a monologuing entity?

Say it.

We stop. I grab both of her hands and look into her eyes.

— It's wrong... but I want you tonight.

— To khnight you? (my heroine laughs) I mean, sure. On your knees, please.

My head's overflowing with blush. The awkwardness condenses into one sloppy and scratchy lump and dives down through my throat. Left with no choice, I fall on my knees and bow to my heroine, my newfound queen.

— Are you ready?

My queen clears her throat and commences her speech:

— Before you rise, you must understand the very big responsibilities that come with this... well, impronto khnighthood.

— It's "impromptu".

— Da? “impromptu”-whatever khnighthood...

— It’s “night-hood”, you don’t say the “k”. Sorry... please continue.

— Khnight is good with valour, with justice, protects the innocent, and more so, speaks Istina<sup>2</sup> even when it is total bullshit. You swear to do all that?

— I swear.

“My queen.”

— So, remember, you are not just any khnight; you’re my khnight for tokhnight. Your duty is to be present, to be yourself, and maybe even to enjoy this weird world we share. All good?

— It is, absolutely, yeah.

— Swear then.

— I do; I swear.

— So, with authority given to me and by virtue of stars and planets and Venus and all that we cannot see because we’re in this city and sky is not clear, I “hereby declare” (he-he) you my khnight. Stand up and not forget — names and titles are only words, just don’t be dick. Okay, we’re done. Rise, rise, my khnight.

Something’s definitely rising at this moment. I shake the dust and bits of leaves off my knee. She smiles, grabs my hand and drags me further

through the never-ending garden.

In front of us, there are exit gates. The pillars are made from rough beige stone and topped with dome-shaped caps. Quite antique, actually. Between the pillars are wrought-iron bars with gilded ornaments and figures of flowers and leaves. Below the archway appears a monogram, a crest on which five hearts are arranged in a checkerboard pattern. The light from the lanterns illuminates the curvilinear elements of the gates and plays with shadows behind them. It's not simply gates, not a door, not even a portal. It's a piece of art, and it is, of course, closed. With sweaty fingers, we wedge between the bars and start climbing upwards. Foot. Arm. Foot. Arm. Foot. Arm. At the top, thank the architects, no thorns, no spikes, no spears, no barbed wire, and no other anti-human or anti-pigeon attributes are installed; instead, there's a smooth metal branch that grows from the pillar towards the centre of the gate, where the two doors meet above the coat of arms.

We land. Under us — a narrow pavement, in front — a motorway going approximately forty-eight (or forty-nine) lanes in each direction. Hundreds and thousands of sparks drift by like an asteroid belt: a boiling river of light, noise and exhaust fumes. Don't inhale them. Don't look at them. Don't count them. Look forward, onto your path. My heroine squeezes my hand and leads me forward, then slows down, turns around, circles me, changes her hand, drags me forward again, circles me again on the other side, and so on, spinning around me, spinning me around herself, waltzing. Thus we khorovod<sup>3</sup> along the motorway and before another bend, the pavement ends. Grimacing, she

examines the asteroid belt and the glimmering sea on the other side.

— I think we need to cross it.

— Do what?

— Cross this thing, the road.

My heroine's seriousness has acquired physical qualities.

— Why?

— I don't know. For the plot? It is a character development event.

— In some absurdist tragedy? That's a dumb way to die.

— Imagine you are in a story and you want to make it as interesting as possible to readers.

— What if I'm a secondary or just a background character? An NPC even? Or a narrator whose job is only to narrate the story of his heroine?

— Then your goal is to become hero! Protagonist, da?

— Da?

— You swore to be my knight for toknight.

— Yes, but...

— Classic yes-but situation. I see.

— You don't have to jump onto the motorway to test my knighthood. And I certainly don't want to jump in there.

— But you want, my knight. You just not know that. Not yet. Let me show you.

My heroine frees my hand and in a gracious feline trajectory jumps over the guardrail right into the road and dances off to the other side across all the lanes while honking cars whiz by until she climbs over the concrete divider in the middle of the motorway and disappears from my sight.

— Oi! Lady!

Breathe. The falling stars fly by in trembling curves, their blazing trails etched briefly against the dark. The coarse grit of the asphalt grinds into my bare feet, sending shocks of heat up through my legs with each footfall, and the world becomes a blur of hypnotic colours. The hungry herd of headlights speeds by, trampling all in their orbit. A whoosh of hot wind blasts my face as a streak of red screams past just inches away. The space stinks of burnt rubber, carbon dioxide, and adrenaline. The pawn moves towards the queen. The pawn crosses the thin line between the known and anarchy, terra firma and the abyss. The pawn realises it has a ribcage, a ribcage that has something inside that now starts reminding of itself. The path is laid with asphalt and perpendicular splashes of white paint. The pawn is electric. The pawn is electricity. It's a leap of faith or fall of faith or flight of faith — depends on the coordinate system of choice. The asphalt's infernal. Step. Jump. Step.

Run, run, don't stop and don't close your eyes, you pawn. It's the lament of a dying pedestrian. The great diesel beast stretches itself towards the pawn, distorting from a pinprick to a swirling giant, then collapses back to a singular point as it flies past. The pawn sees how a few metres ahead a ghostly figure of his heroine dances through the veils of exhaust. The pawn's limbs shake, his eyes never close, the pawn doesn't dare to blink. The pawn hauls himself over the same concrete divider, collapsing onto the blessedly cool pavement beyond it. There, under the trees, the pawn sees her, his heroine, waiting for him.

On a sandy pebbled beach, we lie and listen to the waves washing the green dirty lumps of algae off the shore and our feet. This is how the sea talks to you — via gentle strokes of water when it's calm and via heavy blows when angry. Now, the water is cold, and every time it soaks our naked heels, our bodies respond with goosebumps.

— Now what?

— Now we wait.

A coy breeze brings smells of fish, algae and salt and immediately carries them away, as if teasing us. The waves murmur like a dozen cats falling comfortably asleep, ebb, rattle the pebbles, and run away. Somewhere behind us, hidden in the leaves of the trees, cicadas play their symphony; a little further away the motorway roars; and somewhere deep in my head, elephants sing an infinite song and die one by one until sonic elephanticide ends with no elephants left. A little closer, beside me, I hear my heroine's heavy breath and see her breasts rising and falling as

she thirstily absorbs the sea air. Her eyes are closed. Just like mine, her lips dry in the breeze, and now and then she licks them. Before me, the stygian sky, illuminated by the city behind us, and on it, either by satellites or by faint stars, the outlines of her face slowly emerge, and the reality around me fades, as if everything but the vision of her face has lost its already minuscule significance. I roll over onto my side and lie watching the movements of her arched eyebrows, her nose greedily lusting after the atmosphere, her crimson lips... and, trembling, I reach for them until she, hearing my movements and sensing my ragged breath, draws towards me, our bodies merge in a clumsy kiss and begin to roll sideways, flipping over and over, on top of and underneath each other, again and again. Suddenly, I find myself alone in an orchid garden, a garden that is the whole world, a grandiose, boundless construction built to feature but one orchid elucidated in the cosmic glow, a glow born in a complex chemical reaction somewhere thousands and millions of light years away just for this resplendent orchid. It stays on the podium in a little white pot and stares at me, its petals softly curled outward. At its centre emerges the labellum, sensuous and pink, its lobes frilled with intricate ruching and folds. I reach for it with my lips and feel its wet silky petals and finally hear the words in the tongue we can both understand, the tongue of lo—

— You're snoring. Wake up.

My heroine's shaking me by my shoulder, chuckling.

— What happened?

The garden is gone, as if it never existed; what's left is darkness, the cold, passionless void.

— I listen to cicadas and you snore.

— Bonkers. I never snore.

— You do. You snore, “bonkers” or not. No idea what you saw in your dream, but you snored like cicada.

— Very funny.

— He-he. You almost missed everything.

— I didn't sleep.

My heroine sighs.

— Look. This is Venus, — she says, pointing at the bright slightly pulsating dot on the sky.

— How do you know it's Venus?

— I know.

— Are you sure?

— I'm very sure it is Venus, we call her “Ullalulla”. Good thing about her is that once every 584 days she floats as close to Earth as she can and you can see her even in the city. Today's that day. Today she's as bright as you can see her from the Earth. Baitu'katu'aktu'Ullalulla'tull.

— What does that mean?

— A lot of things. Maybe hundred words in your tongue. I can't explain.

— You could try.

She pauses and looks at me.

— You don't want to hear it. It's a boring story. Very boring.

— It's fall or fly, da?

— Don't use my weapon against me. You swore not to be dick.

— I won't judge or anything. Whatever you say I'll just listen and nod like a good knight is supposed to. A nodding knight.

— Ha-ha. Okay. But if you say even one word, I will drown you.

I adopt complete numbness, having cast a ziplock spell on my lips.

— Good. I told you it's boring. So... — my heroine takes a deep breath.

— When I was a little girl, I lived in Tulubaika, little village, before moving away later. In that village, when you go out, you would see woods, mostly birches, and sky, mostly stars, as if it was a sieve through which something magical flowed down to the Earth. Imagine that beautiful sky, every single night, full of shiny dots. Not sure if you ever saw it, Milky Way and all that — not all people know you can see it, apparently... but anyway. When I moved to that big city, first thing on

night sky I saw was Venus. There were moon, satellites, planes and other “celestial bodies” maybe, but I remember only Venus. I felt instant nostalgia even when I saw her first time. Then I didn’t know she was Venus. Of course, for me she was just “star”. Later I learned her course and how she dances together with Sun, but before that I just saw her becoming dimmer and dimmer every single night. So, “Baitu’katu’aktu’Ullalulla’tull” means something like, “soon, you see her again, every time she be same, same beautiful planet, but you be new person, slightly different, maybe more mature, coming to her with new challenges passed and new acquired, and despite them, or rather in spite of them, every time she would remind you that there’s something constant, something that gives you hope, something that fades and flashes, something that teaches you how to find comfort in chaos”. So, yes, there’s more things but it’s just brief summary for you.

Her eyes have welled up, and I see the reflection of Venus in them. She smiles and moisturises her lips again. Should I start talking or shouldn’t I? I don’t know what to say. It feels awkward, more awkward than the restaurant, than the knighting and the dream (it’s all been rather a downward spiral of awkwardness), as if I realise she’s told me too much and I’m expected to tell something of the same grade in return, but I can’t, I’m not that interesting and my thoughts keep panicking, running, stumbling, hiding from me, like three little piglets who’ve just seen a wolf, and I can’t find anything remotely worthy of sharing.

— Do you want one more? — my heroine asks.

She stretches out her slightly sand-dusted palm to me with a shiny pill, half red, half blue. Silent, I shake a nay, and she stashes the pill back into her pocket. We keep lying in silence.

— You know, I translate myself my whole life and I don't even remember what it's like to talk to someone in my tongue. Often I want to meet someone who would be able to learn my tongue.

I point at myself. She frowns.

— It is not just a tongue, da? Maybe you can learn it but you still won't be able to really think in it, I mean, "really". You'll still count in your own tongue, your dreams and subconscious will use it to talk to you. Universe will use it as well because that's simple and more easy way to reach you.

Her tongue clicks and she pauses.

— Look. You're a very nice and fun young man, but imagine if we were more than friends. Despite what I would say to you, there will always be so much more of me that you can never see, there'll always be so much more of what I can never translate, and even if I can, you will never be able to understand it. You would be looking at this image I spend so much effort to create and I will spend my life translating to you all my emotions and feelings. Even after you "learn the words", you'll never see my innermost self, who is a far more interesting person, by the way, she's very funny.

Holding our hands behind our backs, we slowly stroll back along the motorway as the cars whoosh by our side. I feel calm, almost sober, yet something bitter at the root of my tongue is drying out my throat. I look at my heroine as she toewalks, balancing. I smile, she notices it and smiles back. The world is playing a trick on me: a bad feeling that something beautiful is about to end grows in my head and soon engulfs it. The inky indigo of the night begins to yield as the hazy purple gradient creeps from behind the horizon, painting the sky with pools of radiant pink and orange, like swirls of different sorbets bleeding into one another. The sea catches the nascent glow and shimmers like a mirror fragmented into a thousand shards. Upwards, beyond it, the gulls cry and follow us to the city gleaming through veils of illumination like a mirage. The city is getting closer but I don't want it to; I want it to always stay where it is, frozen and distant. I try not to look at it and instead look at my heroine, the sea, and the sky. I just want to be here, staying and not walking, because with every step, time crawls through me, ferociously, and pulls me forward against my will.

Meanwhile, the blazing sphere of the sun breaches the waterline and Venus dissolves in the sky.

We go through the same public garden. It all feels like a dream, a blurry and dimly lit dream. Now, the gates are open. Everything's out of place, like someone's been messing with my dream: different flowers bloom, different smells float in the air, different birds sing. There, in the middle of the park, on the path parallel to ours and separated from us by a long bush, a bald man in an orange garment and a Zen face trims that bush.

A monk! He looks at us and we look at him, and at that moment I feel a throbbing urge to ask him about life. He must know, he's a monk, a disciple of wisdom, he's been studying the Universe and Self for years, perhaps millennia, his knowledge is far beyond my comprehension, just like the tongue of my heroine. If I had just one question to ask him, what would I ask? What would I so desperately want to know that could make my life take a sharp turn as if it's on a hinge that needs just a little nudge to move, and what would this man, this bald peaceful monk, know the answer to? What would he say to me? Yes, yes, I know what I should ask (or rather must). But what would he say? Would he say it's something you don't learn but feel, or that it's all chemicals in our brain? Or something else? I don't care, I just need an answer. So, I clear my throat of bitter mucus and approach him, leaning on the bush.

— Excuse me, dear mister. If I may ask just one question... What is the language of love?

The monk barks out a caustic laugh.

— How the fuck would I know? It's 5AM. Go get sober, mate. And don't touch the bloody bush.

I nod meekly, hearing my heroine's suppressed chuckle behind me. She takes my hand, says something to the monk, and pulls me towards the exit.

Everything seems old, shabby, as if all the electric charm has been sucked out of it, as if with the sunrise all the slovenliness of the city that was

hidden at night has now been revealed: the pavements littered with rubbish, the buildings with dark stains, peeling paint and long meandering cracks with little lizards scurrying between them. Everything has become monotonous and drab, the colour of old, the smell of old, the feel of old. We cross the same arcade with a glass roof, yet now it feels shorter, just a few buildings deep, and emptier, for no one now is torturing elephants, the phantomic melody of which has escaped my head, leaving no trace. We enter the same cobbled piazza that, like everything else before, appears much smaller now, as if new buildings grew overnight, a few rows of them from the periphery to that fountain in the centre where we find our abandoned shoes. We put them on and continue our way along the canal, to the river, next to the empty seafood restaurant with the tables flipped over on the terrace under the plexiglass roof, still being scratched by the poisonous yews. We enter the same hotel where we met last night, and, even though it's not night anymore, wish each other good night, part ways and ascend to our rooms.

After a short but deep sleep, my consciousness resurfaces at noon. I go to the reception and see her in the same clothes, in slippers, with a suitcase, standing facing the desk while returning the keys.

— Hi, — I say.

— Hi, — she says.

I don't know what to say, and she, wearing a mellow melancholic expression on her face (which also could be read as "tired"), doesn't

seem to know either, as if last night we spoke in a different tongue.

— What a night, huh? — I say.

— I was going to thank you for it, by the way. It was fun, — she says.

— Fun, yes, — I say.

Prolonged silence, as if nothing, a sheer void, can be prolonged and become tense and dense, thick and vibrating.

— You didn't say you were leaving today, — I say.

— I didn't say I will stay. I was here for one night only. My plane was cancelled, and well...

— I see, okay. I'm leaving tomorrow, too.

— Good! One more day, yay! Have fun.

— Thank you. I will. It won't be that fun, though.

— No, it won't. That only happens once every 584 days.

I wish her a safe flight, we say goodbye to each other, and she leaves. I watch how she exits the hotel through the automatic door dragging a white wheeled suitcase with a luggage tag hanging from its handle, the case covered in coloured stickers with flowers, flags and landmarks from various countries, and, instantly, in a furious flurry, the words for “goodbye” in their respective tongues pop up in my head. In French,

they say “au revoir”; in German, it’s “auf Wiedersehen”; over in Japan, it’s “sayonara”; in Italian, they say “arrivederci”; in Spanish, it’s “adiós”; in Mandarin Chinese, it’s “zàijàn”; in Hindi, it’s “alvida”; and in Arabic, it’s “wada’an”; in Swahili, it’s “kwaheri”; and so on — it’s always one or two words, but what she said to me was “Tu’baika’lu’ikatu’lui’baikatu’ika’lubaituka’lu’ikabai’tu’lukai”, and I have no idea what and how much it actually means.

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## Notes

1. “Da” (да) is yes in Russian. The translator dared to leave it as “da” to emphasise our heroine’s “otherworldliness”.
2. “Istina” (истина) is Russian for “truth”, in a literal sense, though semantically it stands further from simply “the factual/empirical truth”, closer to “the absolute/transcendent/metaphysical truth”, the kind of truth one might find at the bottom of a well or a bottle or never at all. In the same way, German philosophy differentiates between “Richtigkeit” (correctness, factual accuracy) and “Wahrheit” in its deeper Heideggerian sense of “unconcealment” or “aletheia”; similarly, Greek distinguishes “aletheia” (disclosure, uncovering) from “doxa” (opinion); Sanskrit offers “satya” (unchangeable truth) versus “vyavahārika” (conventional truth). Nabokov considered it one of the untranslatable Russian words, and the translator decided not to argue with Vladimir Vladimirovich and instead follow the path of the translators of German philosophers who were completely OK not translating half of the text, including most of Heidegger.
3. “Khorovod” (хоровод), or round dance, is a traditional Slavic circle dance of pre-Christian origin, performed at seasonal festivals, weddings, and ritual celebrations, such as midsummer. Participants join hands and move in a ring, often around a central figure, tree, or bonfire, singing songs.

## Episode 3: about all the fuckery & beyond

[nova-nevedoma.com/fuckery-and-beyond/](http://nova-nevedoma.com/fuckery-and-beyond/)

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“Think you’re escaping and run into yourself. Longest way round is the shortest way home.” — “Ulysses” by James Joyce

Into her eyes, the wind drove smoke and ash from a poorly kindled mangal<sup>1</sup> and made the sky dissolve. Celestial bodies rolled about like billiard balls, be it the stars, the moon, or satellites and the ISS. Our heroine felt them upon herself, their brightness, their weight, their distance, both physical and metaphorical. The sky above the dacha<sup>2</sup> was clear. Visibility stretched far, so far that one’s eyes rippled at its magnificence. Too beautiful, she thought. Such beauty ought not to exist. Such beauty could drive one beyond one’s wits. Such beauty should be outlawed, denied legal counsel, stripped of the presumption of innocence, for it, this unattainable beauty, is the prime cause of all human joys and woes. Yet, for some reason, no one else paid any attention to it at that moment; instead, they looked at each other, and not just looked (“Would be terribly awkward, wouldn’t it?”), but interacted, conversed, socialised. Was their interest genuine, or was it all a game with unspoken rules that everyone pretended to play? The people around were far from celestial, not yet anyway (“Touch wood!”), and far from luminaries, except perhaps in the sciences<sup>3</sup> (“Fingers crossed”), but it was pleasant to share the same space and time with

them, to observe them, to analyse their Chekhovian-Beckettian dialogues for meaning, while remaining silent herself. She could crack a joke when appropriate, throw in a sharp remark, answer a question directed at her. Yes, there were oddly many of those — she had suddenly become interesting (“Suspicious...”). For hours, she could wait, listen and re-listen, all while drifting somewhere else. Always this “somewhere else”; there’s no escaping it. It’s celestial, visible yet untouchable, impossible even to give it a proper name, for words are never enough to describe what you’ll never see. Some things have no name at all and cannot have one, so we call them names foreign to them to give them some semblance of form. — Are you here? — Alyona smirked and sat beside her. Me? Oh, if only I knew, she thought. Seems I’m here — here I sit, getting by without a sigh, nothing but skin and bones. How are things? As white as soot, no offspring to report<sup>4</sup>, watching the stars, warming myself by the mangal, listening to Kolya’s mediocre yet rather sweet guitar playing, but am I here? Perhaps. I’m just all dreamy, mysterious, unapproachable, with a special aura of alt girlie<sup>5</sup>, quiet but with volumes of Nietzsche and Machiavelli in my little black rucksack (“The straight-A student aura has long become boring to cultivate; straight-A students aren’t interesting to anyone and possess no mystery, except perhaps the ability to irritate those around them”). — Uh-huh. — Not cold? — Nope. — Want a throw? — Won’t say no to a throw. — Back in a sec, — Alyona smiled and vanished into the dacha house. From there, laughter could be heard, loud music was playing, something from the charts, some nameless, thoughtless, worthless, mechanical repetition of three notes (“Sometimes fewer”) and lyrics about nothing

of substance. It didn't let her think, yanked her out of "somewhere else", so she couldn't hear anything but the music, neither others' voices nor her outer voice nor her inner voice. A waste of time and eardrums — only pure, imbecilic decibels, or in other words, music for dimwits. Even Kolya's guitar, though imperfectly tuned, had some soul and sincerity. Alyona returned with a throw and draped it over our heroine's shoulders. She also brought a bottle of wine and plastic cups with her. — Beautiful, isn't it? — she said, looking at the sky. Our heroine nodded. They sat, silent. Silence is pleasant; you can observe it meditatively, like fire, the only difference being it doesn't crackle. — Well then... Ripe for some<sup>6</sup>? — asked Alyona, shaking the wine bottle. I'm not an apricot, thought our heroine. "Ripe..." Why does everyone use this phrase? Ripe for what? Ripe for wine? Ripe for a husband? Ripe for children? Being a ripening apricot would be far more interesting, for you can extract cyanide from its core. "Ripe" indeed... This phrase in another context would seem like an attack, but from Alyona it sounded soft and unobtrusive ("No cyanide for her"). She probably wouldn't have suggested wine to our heroine at all if she herself hadn't already been "ripe" for four glasses ("No, I'm not keeping track. The girl's grown up"). Everything from Alyona always sounded soft and unobtrusive. Suspicious, as it seemed to our heroine at first ("Truly suspicious"). Usually, if someone were that kind and courteous, friendly and glowing with interest, it meant they wanted something from her. — Maybe we could go somewhere? — they would say. — Looking good today, you. Nice skirt, — they would say. — May I borrow your essay? No, I won't copy. It's for inspiration. I'm having

writer's block or such, — they would say. — I know it's about personal feelings, but isn't personal universal? — It's five minutes to midnight on the doomsday clock, — they would say. — The geopolitical situation is complicated. Our predicament isn't predetermined. — You're the smartest girl in the class, — they would say. — Did you know that? — Oh, we were born on the same day! — they would say. — I'm a foreign businessman with a very, very big black Lamborghini and hair transplanted from my arse. Pleasure to meet you. Want to see my cock? Though why am I even asking... here you go! — Massive, indeed, like your mum, — our heroine would answer. — I'm just a simple guy, you know? Not like those other guys. Want to come over and watch me play Counter-Strike while I drink beer from the can? I've got frozen pizza, — a skufidon<sup>7</sup> would say. — I'm honest, I'm always honest with you, — they would say. — No, my sincerity isn't ephemeral. It actually exists. No, why are you saying it? No, I don't have "an ulterior motive". That's your "motif", that thinking. I just want to be friends. — Oh, please, — she would say. — Spare me, won't you? With Alyona, with Kolya, and the others gathered at the dacha, there was none of that. They needed so little from her that it became suspicious. They, like her, enjoyed sharing the moment, gossiping about professors falling asleep during lectures, deans running corruption schemes, discussing anything but studies, laughing at her politically incorrect jokes, except those about comrade Yehoshua ("May his memory be blessed"), for Alyona took her baptism too seriously ("The girl's grown up"). Our heroine didn't notice how all slow rationality abandoned her, and something inside her decided that she was ripe and grown up, too. — Really? — Alyona couldn't believe

it. Our heroine and alcohol were supposed neither to be mixed nor to be shaken, not invited to the same party, kept apart in every way possible; even putting them in the same sentence wasn't recommended, or else one might receive a witch's wrathful glare, a disgruntled feline hiss, accompanied by "I've already said I don't drink", "Well, maybe you've changed your mind?", "Maybe I haven't changed my mind?", "Well who knows, maybe you have changed your mind after all", *\*threatening screech of rolling eyes\**. — Pour before I change my mind. She felt coldness on her neck. The wine appeared winely; she knew well what it looked and smelled like. At every family feast, there was always cheap cardboard box wine for the ladies and vodka for the gentlemen. In respectable company, the type of alcohol wasn't important, for everyone got sloshed in the same manner and practised the same disgusting behaviour each in their own way and did and said things they wouldn't do or say otherwise. — She can drink already. She's here at the table with us grown-ups. It's just a spoon anyway, isn't it? No more than a spoonful of cough syrup. — No, she can't, she's only a girl. — Oi! Look at him, ha-ha. Face in a salad. — I wash my rug every week. They say so in the news. — Capital punishment is what we need. — You, uncle? — Well, not we, the country. — Why would you wash your rug every week? What's the point? — Look at her, grown up everywhere, in every way, a fine girl, I must say. Can't believe she's only fifteen, can you? — Wasn't your grandfather executed by the KGB? — There was no KGB back then. — There was, has always been. — I just use washing powder, there's no secret. — You blink, and she's married, just wait. The girls are nasty these days. You'll babysit your grandkids

soon, I'm telling you. Look at her. — Do you know Galina, a friend of mine? Her son, Denis, they spent a week with us when you were three, got all As. — I heard he's also grown up everywhere, in every way. Back from the army, he is. — No, mum, he and his brother have one brain between them. — Don't say that. Why would you say that? — He's an idiot, mum, it's no secret to anyone, is it? — Listen to her. Young but already cunty. — Language! She's a teenager. — Should it be whitening washing powder? — I heard they just use soot because why not? — Why not indeed. She would crawl into the wardrobe in her room, plug her ears, wait for it all to end. If there were no wardrobe, she would just sit, ignore everyone and everything around her, and be "somewhere else", somewhere where she had all the bitterest remarks to every dimwitted dialogue. — Well, how's the wine? — asked Alyona. — Like wine, I suppose. — Tasty? — Strange. Sweet. — Georgian. — Thought it would be bitter. — There's bitter wine too. Probably. — Like what? — Like bitter wine, I suppose. Ha. — Like wallpaper paste? — Wallpaper paste??? What does wallpaper paste taste like? — Very, very, very bitter. — Did you taste wallpaper paste? — Accidentally. I was bored when everyone was putting up wallpaper. I was five. — What was the wallpaper? — Like in a hospital. White. Alyona smiled. She had a beautiful smile. She could sing too, did ballet, had fair hair, but was no friend to mathematics, wouldn't have managed without our heroine — in other words, her complete opposite. — Really never drank before? — Alyona asked. Our heroine shook her head. — Nope. — You're having me on. — Nope. — Everyone drinks. — I don't. — Never? — Not in my memory. — Why? — First it wasn't allowed, then didn't want to, by

inertia, then read “Brave New World”, and well... you know me, — she finished the phrase and took a few sips. Besides sweetness and the taste of surrounding smoke, she felt little else. It burnt her throat slightly, like cough syrup. That was all. How much does one need to drink to get drunk? — What would a female Savage do? I mean, what if the Savage were a woman? — asked Alyona. — Anything but suicide. Why all that drama? She’d fly off to a retreat on a quiet island in the Pacific, get into numerology, write a book, “How I Escaped Toxic Consumer Society and Found Myself”. Or just marry some City trader and open a yoga studio. Alyona laughed with her mouth full, spraying wine on the throw. — What? — Our heroine smiled. — A bit cynical, that. — You know I’m cynical. — You’re not, though you want to be. Not everyone’s an influencer these days. — Not everyone, but even Tolstoy would have a TikTok about life in the village and shagging peasant women. Alyona’s laughter was ringing, almost childlike, unlike our heroine’s. — Crudish. — Prudish. — A toast. We need to drink to that. This one’s on you. — My first glass, and you want a “toast”. I’ve no experience in the matter. I don’t play games I cannot win. — Well, learn first, then win. — People probably spend years learning before winning. — You’re clever. You can learn quickly. That our heroine couldn’t deny — she was at a dead end. She didn’t want to think about anything, for thinking meant being “somewhere else”. To think means to immerse oneself in one fantasy, which leads one to another fantasy, and then to a third fantasy, and so on, spiralling down or up through that fantasy helix. Yes, respected teacher? Where am I? I’m here (“Actually, I’m somewhere there”). I’m not distracted at all. No, I’m not thinking about

boys. Cross yourself!<sup>8</sup> Do you think I'm a stupid girl? A nymphomaniac? I think about great things, Tamara Alekseevna. If you think about men, it doesn't mean everyone's like you. How dare I? Well, I'm a student — you asked, I answered. You won't give me a failing grade anyway, even for bad behaviour; I behave well, or rather “not at all” — behaviour interests me little, and you can't reproach me for unfinished homework, unlearned verse, failed test. I know everything, sometimes even more than you (“Right, what was I... ah yes, toast!”) — To all this fuckery! — Ha. Straight off like that? — Well, why not? I don't know what people usually drink to. To health? To love? To peace? To friendship amongst nations? To a bright future after dictatorship? — Sometimes you can drink to “all this fuckery”, I suppose. — Well then, to all this fuckery. They raised their glasses and clinked, though plastic against plastic doesn't create an authentic experience. Our heroine emptied her cup in an instant. — Well, you're going for it, girl. This was purely intellectual interest and pathological curiosity. The expected sensations of intoxication weren't there for some reason, and our heroine wanted to understand what was wrong with her again and what would happen when/if suddenly these sensations appeared, what they were like, what would become of her, and what of her “somewhere else”. The cat sits on the mat, mother sees Spot run<sup>9</sup>, father drinks beer, mother scolds, father hits, mother cries, our heroine hides, first in the wardrobe, and then, when the streams of spirits reach it and begin to seep inside through the gap between its doors — in “somewhere else”. Advanced problem: when she starts drowning in wine, how will Gandalf come to the rescue: on eagles, on a

blue helicopter, on a yellow submarine, or on an ark? — Want more? — Don't know yet. — Who knows, maybe you're wild. — Me? Wild? — Maybe you're wild and we never knew. — Anything but wild. — Shy and quiet, but then, all of a sudden, wild — your real personality revealed. — People better not see it, my real personality. — We don't know that yet. Maybe she's nice and not wild at all. Tell me, what do you feel? — Nothing, — she said with a shrug. — Stand up, walk around. Get your blood moving. Stand up, it'll go straight to your head. Wrapped in the throw, our heroine rose and began taking big steps along the garden paths laid with blackened boards, to the fence, around the mangal and back ("Hmm... Not even wobbling a bit"). The sky was clouding over and the celestial bodies started fading. — Nope. Nothing. — And nothing in your head? — Nope. — And your mood? Happy? — I wouldn't know — I'm always happy. — Oh, sure... — Well yes. — Comédienne. — Secret happy personality. — That's for sure. — Pour more. I reckon I'd be more drunk from kefir<sup>10</sup>. — Truth is in wine. — In vino veritas. — Lush. Why do people always dissolve into ethereal substrates over time? *\*Poof!\** — and gone as soon as you stop reminding each other of your existence. — We must see each other, — they would say. — Let's keep in touch, — they would say. — If you're in Tulubaika ever again, write to me, — they would say. — At least post them stories from your Europes, — they would say. — You know I post nothing. Well, good riddance, but where do they go? Were school friends even real? Some managed to drink themselves to death, get hooked on drugs, go to prison, become family people ("Not sure which is worse..."), a rare few flew abroad, even rarer were those found hanging from an old birch

in Victory Park after what was presumably an unsuccessful escape either from fascists or from antifa or both of them, or who were simply marathon runners. Got carried away, you know, ended up in the wrong area, stumbled with a neck on a rope, hanged themselves, didn't even bother to soap it, didn't even invite me to the funeral... What kind of person does that? Eh... Friendship is tested in troubles, unless it's troubles in the head<sup>11</sup>. ("Oh, seems like the fingers on my hands are starting to pulse!") — I'll step out. — Go ahead. In the mirror above the sink, she still saw a familiar face: no red eyes or red swollen nose, only ears... ears slightly reddened and a bit of a blush on her cheeks. She ran her fingers through her hair to push it back. The skin on her head was tense, a tad less sensitive than usual, yet more pleasant to touch. The experiment was going steadily; the subject was normal: no sudden desire to dance, nor to pour out her soul to those around or punch someone in the face; neither a straitjacket nor an adrenaline shot was required; quite the opposite — mental activity was bubbling. She wanted to think, think more, think about everything, think about the past, about the future, about thinking itself — to metathink, if you will — about the best moments, about the worst moments, about the best moments that became the worst, about the worst moments that turned out to be quite all right. Should have thought earlier, now you can't think it all in a couple of hours, girl. Think, think, think, think, or you'll drown. Weave a raft from thoughts, or you'll drown. Think, think, think. No, don't think, don't think, don't think, or think about how to stop thinking, think yourself out of this thinking somewhere far away. Enough thinking for you, you've thought enough, philosopheuse. Rain began

drumming on the toilet window. How frightening, how frightening to be under control, and oh how frightening, how frightening to lose that control, but how terrible is the desire to act uncontrollably, having seized chaos. No, she wouldn't lose these friends as she had lost childhood ones — they weren't just ignorant infants seated together at the same desk by the whim of planida<sup>12</sup> but adults who had consciously chosen each other's company. That's different. The rain drove everyone to the table. They settled inside on old wooden benches covered with throws to avoid catching splinters. — Are you all right? — asked Alyona. — Yeah. The bottom of the hot three-litre teapot inadvertently stuck to the plastic tablecloth, making it shrink and crease. The perpetrator of this mishap couldn't be identified. — Want some wine? Our heroine's face wrinkled. She shook her head and nodded at the teapot. Into a gigantic cup with a heavy bottom poured the so-called world-famous “fragrant dacha ambrosia”, a sweetened chai<sup>13</sup> drink made from mint, gooseberry and blackcurrant leaves. She wanted to remember this taste. Soon, in a few days, she'll have views of the Mediterranean Sea from the office on the twentieth floor, unlimited espresso, seagulls crying in unknown languages, perfectly paved and treed streets, galleries, museums, theatres, and all such cultural things (“And the sun will shine more than once a year...”). In foreign lands, over the hill, over the border, in strange parts, in the West, there will be no muddy pavements, no road potholes, no stinking buses that momentarily transform ordinary street puddles into Hokusai waves and drench you head to toe. It won't still be dark at eight in the morning and already dark by three in the afternoon. But they won't be there

either, those very people, across whose faces her gaze jumped, to and fro, to and fro, as if recording how they distribute under- and over-grilled meat onto plates, serve improvised salads, cut and pass home-baked bread, wave forks, knives, napkins, make toasts, “clink” glasses, drink, laugh, make toasts again, “clink” glasses, drink, laugh, play guitar, sing, make toasts, drink, laugh, laugh, laugh, chat, take pictures, drink, laugh, chat, chat, chat, chat, chat, chat, take pictures. Cosy, strangely cosy, but at the same time suspenseful, as if she needed to be on guard, as if everything were unreal and out of time, not an event, not an occasion that was in her calendar and was about to end, but simply a non-phenomenal phenomenon, a fragment of life into which she had stumbled by accident, and where she shouldn't have been, for she had always wanted to be somewhere else, but now, for some reason, did not.

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## Notes

1. A mangal is a type of metal barbecue grill popular throughout post-Soviet and Central Asian countries, typically designed for skewered meat (shashlik). The ritual of gathering around a mangal is a must for any respectable outdoor social occasion from May to September (but not limited to), with some inevitably arguing about the proper way to arrange the coals while others prepare the actual food.
2. A Soviet and post-Soviet phenomenon of a small summer house outside of the city with a garden to grow vegetables and fruits, hang out, have shashlik, and “enjoy” the summer weeding the seedbeds.
3. The original Russian phrase “светила науки” (svetila nauki) literally translates as “luminaries of science.” While English has similar terms, the Russian expression carries distinct connotations of official academic prestige, often used with a touch of irony to describe those enshrined in the scientific establishment.
4. The original Russian phrase “как сажа бела, пока не родила” (kak sazha bela, poka ne rodila) literally translates to “as white as soot,

- haven't given birth yet.” It combines two very idiomatic ways of responding to “how are you?” into one contradictory expression paired with that timeless reminder that a woman’s “ultimate achievement” apparently involves producing miniature humans.
5. Original uses “альтушка” (altushka). Even though it’s borrowed from English “alt girl”, the Russian metamorphosis of the term carries a distinctive sonic quality by adding an affectionate-yet-mocking diminutive suffix “-ушка”, hence “girlie” instead of “girl” in the translation as an attempt to convey the same tone. The “alt girlie” phenomenon became a meme around 2020-2021 in Russia and was nominated for “Word of the Year.” “Alt girlie” isn’t just any girl with “dyed hair and combat boots”, but a specific social archetype. In internet culture, the “alt girlie” became the object of desire for a particular type of man called a “скуф” (skuf), thusly creating one of Russia’s most widespread memes of 2024. The “skuf” represents men around or over 35 with unkempt appearances, dead-end jobs, and a lifestyle revolving around beer, TV, and video games — essentially the polar opposite of the aesthetically conscious alt girlie. The apogee of the meme was the appearance of the advertised possibility of finding your “alt girlie” on government websites, as well as a visual novel game called “Альтушка для скуфа” (“An alt girlie for a skuf”) that became a Steam bestseller.
  6. Common idiomatic expression in Russian, used in any context to indicate “readiness” for whatever it might be. The translator took the liberty to retain it as-is, given it’s used throughout the story, even in a meta-way.
  7. See also: footnote on “alt girlie.” “Skufidon” (скуфидон) is the final form of “skuf.” It’s a portmanteau of “skuf” and “Cupidon”, the Russian word for Cupid.
  8. The original “окститесь” (okstites’) literally means “cross yourself” in the Orthodox tradition, but is used idiomatically to tell someone to come to their senses or get a grip, often ironically.
  9. The original is “мама мыла раму” (мама myla ramu) that literally means “Mother washed the window frame” and is an example from Russian primers used to teach children to read.
  10. A fermented milk drink, tangy and slightly effervescent, with a negligible alcohol content, typically less than 1%.
  11. An Internet-Russian idiom. There’s the Orthodox TV show “Беседы с батюшкой” (lit. “Conversations with the Priest”). If we modify the original title by removing a few letters, from “conversations with the priest” we get to “troubles in the head”.

Thus it became a meme. It is often accompanied by the modified title image of the TV show overlaid with semi-transparent images of psychiatric hospital employees. It gained popularity in 2020 as a response to unhinged online rants.

12. “Planida” (планида) is an archaic / folkloristic Russian term for fate or destiny. It carries overtones of inescapable, often burdensome predetermined destiny, and is etymologically derived from Greek “πλανήτης” (planētēs) meaning “wanderer” or “planet”, reflecting ancient beliefs that planetary movements determined human fate. The word entered Russian through Church Slavonic and maintained its association with cosmic predetermination.
13. “Chai” in Russia and in many other countries literally means “tea” as a category, not necessarily a specific spiced version of it. The translator for some reason decided to use “chai” over “tea”.

## Episode 4: about microcosmos & microchaos

[nova-nevedoma.com/microcosmos-and-microchaos/](http://nova-nevedoma.com/microcosmos-and-microchaos/)

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“Love, in essence, arises in solitude when its object is not around, and it is directed not so much at the one or two people you love as at an image constructed by the mind, loosely connected to the original.”

-- “Chapaev And Void” by Victor Pelevin

There you are — trudge through the city  
all around skyscrapers sprout.

Behind, ever so distant, lies Tulubaika.

Ahead, ever so near

— bloody hell knows what.

On and on the avenue winds, its endless venue astretch, bound to snap like an old string, slash your cheek raw and leave a scar beneath your eye (the sight’s still there, thank you very much) so you’d torture your memory over that melody never mastered.

Primordial soup of concrete, metal, and glass fills the surrounding space of this chaotically ordered universe and takes shape as walls, ceilings, floors, staircases, windows, benches, poles, stretches of tarmac.

Upwards it grows  
downwards it burrows  
as wires and pipes and metro mole-tunnels.  
outwards it swells and scatters  
to an infinity infinitely large  
until the little human within  
finally recognises himself as  
an infinity infinitely small.

The proportion of natural light shrinks with unnatural greed, cars move  
ever louder, yet slower, people walk ever denser, yet faster.

Hum, hubbub and hullabaloo, the noise of tyres and soles merges into  
the background — sea sound, wave roar, storm forest hour — a  
monolithic din beckoning one into trance.

No brain-squeezing fear remains, no anxiety lingers, no claustrophobia  
caused by the sheer quantity of everything; instead  
— awe before civilisation's new element:  
earth, water, air, fire, aether...  
city.

The ancients built pyramids for egoists; we raise them for thousands of  
souls to make birds envious, pharaohs dead jealous, and children of  
tomorrow marvel at our grandeur.

In that village of mine, rooftops are a hand's throw away; here you  
won't spot them without binoculars.

There void holds its reign  
pure fields, grass unmown

pure sky, stars starving for glances  
houses askew from sheer emptiness.

As for colours: late autumn, winter, early spring — mere shades of grey,  
no kaleidoscopes of carnivals, no all-intipsifying psychedelia, just dust,  
decay, and cavity, bubble, geode.

Yet, it's lovely at times:

dawn layers agately  
night shimmers with amethyst  
birchwood drowns in citrine  
firmament glows with blue chalcedony.

In the metropolis, though, void has voided  
collapsed fractally into itself  
no room for it here no more  
& ceaseless secretion fills all manner of vacuums.

Nature abhors a vacuum  
& the nature of vacuum abhors  
itself.

With bewilderment micros glow  
— cosmos & chaos.

Wet asphalt and concrete shimmer in sunbeam, once pale grey, now  
dark. Clouds are thin, have almost finished their cry, and the hopeful  
light penetrates them. It reflects in the countless cars' mirrors, in the  
buildings' glass, in protruding phone screens that balaclavaed cyclists in  
black snatch from hunched passersby who but shrug and keep shuffling  
onwards, no umbrellas in hand, no bother for dripping warm drizzle,

for a pleasant phenomenon, this mushroom rain, as my granddad would call it.

Soon, winds will lift human spores up in the air and disperse them around the city. They will rise in trainloads from under the ground, and their presence will flood over pavements, squares, roads, and streets, all those venues of avenues.

Lo and behold —

off they trot, some to their jobs  
some to jobless affairs:  
to museums, cinemas, galleries  
theatres, bakeries, libraries  
reading rooms, skating rinks  
swimming pools, plazas and promenades  
food halls, concert halls, dance floors  
comedy clubs  
(or perhaps karaoke)  
rooftop bars, kinky clubs  
cosy corner cafes  
observation decks, prayer rooms  
botanical gardens, arcades  
hidden speakeasies, markets and malls  
parks and playgrounds  
— centres for everything  
or simply to wander, you know  
stretch their thoughts and restore  
to their legs their original purpose.

— From Brandenburg Gate station tha rides to Tower Bridge station  
— there tha changes to t'grey-brown-raspberry line<sup>1</sup>, and heads towards  
Brighton Beach till terminus. Take t'last carriage and t'moment tha  
hops off, leg it straight to t'exit. But don't get lost. Bloody 'ell it's packed  
there — can't squeeze a mouse through. Then half an hour on the  
movinn stairs and bob's your uncle. Easy, — says the navigator on my  
phone.

Sunwards I point my face, mightily I squeeze my eyes shut, all watery  
from fumes aloft and borrowed sleep.

(Debt collectors are on the way!)

The sun's reflection leaps off the glass building and floods the street  
with light.

The city throbs, breathes, digests its tenants, and gently mocks its guests.  
Go on then, run along, no point standing there gawping — you'll catch  
a fly or some affliction of sorts.

Yet here I stand

arms spread wide, straight as a rod  
alone in a meadow barren and broad.

Grumbling passersby jostle; gentle breeze; traffic noise sounds like wind  
through oats ripened for harvest.

O shall I leap upon my steed of two-wheeled pedal breed!

O shall I race along those roads  
trailing dust and childhood yarns,  
teenage fables, youth's swift whispers!

O shall the sun tousle my freckles

shall the wind shove my hair into my eyes  
& shall the chain chew grease-stained trousers  
& shall zoom onwards I.

O shan't I give a toss, or even "a fuck"  
(as I'd say with my grown-up permission).

— Give me change! — a hoarse voice shouts to me. — Change, I beg you, urgent matter. Or I'll leave. But first I'll show you the entire intimate essence of mine! Oo! Oo-oo! — so he moans, hands reaching for his fly.

— Won't give any! — says I. — No change to give, nought to share: not a toss, not a fuck. And I always pay by card!

— Ah, card shark! May the govs torment you!

— Eh? — says I, playing the fool.

— Here's your carte blanche for my essence!

Oo! Oo-oo! Oo-oo!

— ¡No hablo inglés! — I yell back and hurry  
to part ways with the stranger  
my mind dismissing this most peculiar mishap.

I descend underground to tunnel away. Still I stand.

In my ears — Shostakovich, String Quartet No. 8, *allegro molto*, breakcore flip<sup>2</sup>.

In my head — a bit of a do.

In my soul — the nobility of feelings ignoble.

In my eyes — local adverts: bits and bobs for home and body, this and that for business, everything from top to toe, from alpaca winter socks

to lacy knickers, from Chekhovian theatre to torture by TikToks of feline brainrot

(oo ee ee ah ee oo ee ee ee ah ee)

from attempts to sell desires to secretly flog me some memecoins protected by nought but cryptography.

Here, underground lies half of the city, be it rail transport, car parks, or shopping malls going down and down

while in Tulubaika

— only the dead.

Here, I'll slip into another world in an hour

in Tulubaika

— into Tulubaika itself for the umpteenth time.

Here, the air's full of suspension

in Tulubaika...

Well, none of that's there, in fact, only clean air, pure water and pure starry sky, pure as the consciousness of a fresh victim of gnosis.

Inwards and outwards voices fuse: whispers from within meet the clamour of the crowd.

— Ey up, I'm done in, mate, proper done in. Laid me low, this influenza.

— All sorts of bubonic drebbeden<sup>3</sup> goinn round t'village nowadays. Mowinn down folk left and right, young uns and old uns alike, and they keep shufflinn about, breathinn in and out their miasmas! Unbelievable!

— Tell me about it... Them city folk rabbitinn on...

- Put mask on then, tha shabootnous<sup>4</sup>? Get thy jab and all.
- Aye, reckon I might do just that!
- Aye, right then, do it then!
- Cough once and they eye thee like tha’s broken loose from some leper colony.
- At home tha stay, don’t walk away. Get on with t’times, t’stance, t’circumstance, t’happenstance. It is what it is. Autumn. Weak immunity. Muck and mire. Khondria<sup>5</sup>...
- Stop thy khonderinn then! Everyone’s now a hypochondriac! Get thyself pumpkin latte.
- Eh up, pumpkin hodgepodge now? What young uns won’t think of next, eh?
- ... It’s coffa<sup>6</sup> with milk, granny... “Latte” is Italian for “milk”.
- Whatever keeps young uns happy. Long as it ain’t henbane<sup>7</sup> latte.
- Undoubtedly, the characteristic patterns of urbanised environments, featuring high population density, intensive social interaction, and developed transport infrastructure, create favourable conditions for exponential growth in the transmission of infectious agents within the population.
- Just don’t breathe then. Might solve all thy troubles with them acute respiratory viral agents and their sleeper agent network.
- Take thy vitamins, C and D, maybe Omega-3, might shift that flu of thee.
- Think I got no sense to spare? With all the wit I have to bear?... I can tell a plum from pear, know what’s foul or fair.<sup>8</sup>
- Pale as death on antibiotics, tha is.

Train arrives, empties its carriages, into its innards invites us. Rather stuffy inside, one must say. Rush-hourous travellers are stockpiled like sprats. Proper and pensive we stand, ears plugged, eyes on phones

(absolute suicide to be without one)

or on newspapers passed around unwanted, except to crack up at the latest debates between vegetarians and lotus-eaters. Hot — sweat gathers on my solar plexus, between my shoulder blades, deep in my armpits. Departure's announced, doors close, snatch my scarf, and the train, with the populace of several Tulubaikas, creaks and plunges into the depth of tenebrous tunnels. Our faces' reflections amuse us in windows convex. We breathe down each other's necks, nudge each other with backpacks, cough politely.

Time hovers, spirals, spins its wheel, threading through my ears and eyes, tickles my nostrils to sneezing point.

Tra-la-la

tru-la-la.

I never get bored

not ever, not I.

There's this tool against boredom that will bail you out without much faff — called "thinkering". One might languorously daydream, head in clouds, become an armchair philosopher, estimate the x's and y's of the world mathematics, become a professor in asymptotology or syllogismatics, sit at a round table with a king and a jester and other facets of lyrical I to establish an anonymous society of knights, witnesses of solipsism, and wander from door to door, from one's own to another's, preaching that exact schizoid thinking.

Thus it was, thus it shall be, from dawn till dusk, from dusk till dawn,  
till kingdom come.

Location matters not

— it's all in the noggin  
not in the village or the city.

— Well... Never been fond of modern bookshops, if I'm honest... Don't  
want to pretend. Especially in the airports.

— Well... And why's that?

— Well... Just so. Can't stand the smell of new. They should smell of  
old: dust, yellowed paper, pressed flowers forgotten between pages. Not  
of factory glue.

— Well... Wouldn't have had any bookshops back in the village.

— Well... Suits me fine. Library was plenty enough, never had much use  
for a shop.

— Well... Libraries and graveyards are rather alike.

Somewhere there, beneath birch crowns old and dear  
a lone comrade major<sup>9</sup> moonward howls his sorrow  
longing for how far we've strayed.

O thou shalt not ask for papers no more  
shalt not hit our door with thy boot  
shalt not hit us with thy baton  
shalt not huff and shalt not puff,  
shalt not trace our IPs.

O we're out of range, unavailable. Leave thy message on Signal, not after  
it<sup>10</sup>.

We're no longer "there" yet not quite "here"  
just as "there" isn't quite there any more  
& "here" isn't really here yet  
— we wade through liminal bogs.

As you name your ship, so shall she sail.

Exile?

By no means.

Escape?

As they say, you can't flee from your planida...

Now, "mission"...

O "mission", that's a noble name.

Where spatiotemporal clothes once pinched the shoulders, these new ones from exodus-sale racks now embrace like a straitjacket — sleeves unbound, afloat.

— Mummy, dear mummy. I shan't wear this. What a frightful thing, what a cut!

— Stop moaning, give it a bit.

— But mummy... This seam's proper scratchy, like sandpaper it is.

— Sort it out we will, that seam.

— And this bit's all pokey.

— Wear it a while — it'll stop.

— It's so prickly! Like a rose bush, mummy, honest.

— Gets everyone, that. You'll manage.

— I don't want to! And this button inside keeps bothering me.

— Once we're home, we'll snip that button right off.

- Mummy, dear mummy, what if I grow up?
- Here’s hoping you will, love.
- It won’t fit then, will it?
- We’ll get you new ones then, won’t we?
- But mummy... still, is it really the time?

A “WAY OUT” sign, moving stairs, turnstile gates  
until a ray of welcome light reveals our path.

Joyful we leave to see the lovely things which Heaven bears  
& hail the op’ning glories of the stars.

Bit gloomy, this

— dense fog weaves patterns all around. In proper weather, a  
building tall would loom before me, but now I’m lucky to observe five  
storeys up. The view’s absolutely smashing, they say, whole city served  
up on a proper plate

(indeed)

not just the city — the world itself, no vantage point higher there exists,  
and even the horizon watcher shall have libido satisfied.

Crowds bustle through the square. I squeeze between them, heading  
straight inside. I’m ready, building, ready to serve my sentence in the  
most dismal line.

It ends, the queue.

I flash my QR code to the attendant, then hop into a lift for twenty  
souls. And thus we stand in silence embraced by the sound of Satie  
mixed with crickets, musique d’ameublement.

& lo! One hundred and eight floors later, we are up top

(before one dares to blink).  
Now, prepare to greet me, elevation!  
All yours, I'm here, take me!

Across the roof towards the wall of tempered glass  
I walk and squash my cheek against it  
eyes open wide with all their might.  
& what do I see?

The entire world spread out!  
I never knew  
(yet I confess — expected)  
it would be only fog:  
no buildings tall, no peopleants  
no traffic jam in sight  
no Ararat with Fuji side by side  
no paints, no flowers  
no roofs, no pipes, no spires  
no birds, no towers,  
no bridges, no weather vanes gone mad  
no balloons, no pigeons  
(flying rats, more like)  
no colourful umbrellas  
no sun in puddles, no cats on windowsills  
no laundry flags, no mother's pastries  
no chalk on asphalt, no "CLOSED" signs  
no sparks from trams, no balaclavaed cyclists

no soap bubbles, no tunes from windows  
no whiff of pumpkin spice  
no wedding rings on traffic lights  
no swings, no paper kites  
no hankies waving last goodbyes

In a few words

— all proper grey  
like homeland in winter.

& “here” isn’t there

& “there” isn’t here

only betweenherethere.

& Thus we stand — daft tourists in a castle in the sky  
trying to comprehend the zen of Fate’s provision  
(tickets gone to fuck).

But! Actually, no “buts” about it.

Time to descend.

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## Notes

1. “Grey-brown-raspberry” (серобуромалиновый) is a chromatic descriptor indigenous to Russian linguistic taxonomy. The term defies classical colour theory, belonging to a peculiar class of improbable compound adjectives deployed when precise hue identification proves unnecessary or impossible. In its most elaborate folk iterations, you could find “серобуромалиновый в крапинку” (grey-brown-raspberry with spots) and some others, less appealing ones. The colour and its variations remain stubbornly resistant to RGB codification.
2. Shostakovich’s String Quartet No. 8 was composed in Dresden in 1960 over just three days under what historians politely describe as

- “intense emotional distress”. The allegro molto movement features the composer’s signature frantic intensity and is “already perfectly chaotic, thanks”. The breakcore rendition that can be found on the internet has slightly higher BPM which further turns the original piece into “anxiety incarnate”. Highly recommended.
3. “Drebbeden” (дребедень) in Russian is used to denote nonsensical trivialities. The translator took courage to directly introduce the word into English. Drebbeden means something in between “drivel”, “rigmarole”, and “balderdash”. The word has phonetic kinship with English “debris” and “drab”, plus semantic overlap with “codswallop”, and, we can say, preserves the onomatopoeic qualities of its dismissive sounds like that of the Russian original.
  4. “Shabootnous” is an anglicisation of the Russian provincial and rural dialectism “шабутной” or “шебутной” (shabootnoúy), someone erratically unpredictable yet endearingly so.
  5. “Khondria” is an anglicisation of the Russian word “khandra” (хандра), a culturally specific word to describe melancholy or spleen. The translator decided to introduce it to English as well because of the unique connotation it carries, combining elements of ennui, world-weariness, physical sickness, and a specific form of existential gloom. Etymologically, “хандра” itself derives from Greek “hypochondria” (ὑποχόνδριος), creating a lovely linguistic circle as this anglicisation reconnects with its distant cousin in English. From “khondria” we can further create “to khonder” — experience and indulge in khondria at one’s own will.
  6. Like the original “кофий / кохий”, simply a colloquial transformation of “coffee”, with a bit of a folksy / old-fashioned vibe.
  7. “Belena” (белена) or henbane is a poisonous plant deeply embedded in Russian cultural consciousness as a symbol of madness and delirium. The Russian idiom “to overeat henbane” (объесться белены) describes someone behaving irrationally or insanely. The plant has hallucinogenic properties and folkloric associations with witchcraft. To the older generations, some modern trends might indeed be as questionable as medieval psychotropics.
  8. “Think I got no sense to spare? With all the wit I have to bear?.. I can tell a plum from pear, know what’s foul or fair.” — This passage adapts lines from Leonid Filatov’s satirical poem “The Tale of Fedot the Strelets” (1985), well-known in post-Soviet space, “Нешто я да не пойму. При моем-то при уму?.. Чай, не лаптем щи хлебаю, собираю, что к чему”. The original’s “не лаптем щи хлебаю” (lit. “I don’t slurp cabbage soup with a lapot”) is a folk saying indicating

- one isn't uncultured. See also: ләпти.
9. "Comrade Major" (товарищ майор) is a loaded Russian expression and a meme that transcends its literal military rank to function as cultural shorthand for state omnipresent monitoring of online communications (and offline, too). Russians invoke this phrase with ironic resignation when discussing potentially "sensitive" topics, acknowledging the hypothetical intelligence officer supposedly reading their messages at any given moment.
  10. The original phrase works as a pun thanks to a linguistic coincidence: it simultaneously references the encrypted messaging app Signal and the common phrase "после сигнала" (after the beep/signal) from answering machine prompts. The translator decided to give up. "Untranslatable, to be honest," he said.

# Episode 5: about letters & dreams

[nova-nevedoma.com/letters-and-dreams/](http://nova-nevedoma.com/letters-and-dreams/)

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“Ended the long-awaited summer. Came the long-awaited autumn.” — Valeria Narbikova, “The Murmur of Clamour”

Dear Grandfather,

If I'm honest, I've never written a letter before and I don't know what to write, so I'm just going to jot down whatever comes into my head. This is homework, so I haven't got any choice, have I? (They'll give me an F, chuck me out of school and out of the house, I'll have to live in the forest with bears, drink birch sap and eat mushrooms, which is only half bad). My teacher, Tamara Alexeyevna, was very annoyed about how nobody writes letters anymore these days, especially to Tulubaika — everyone's on their “internets and phones”. That's exactly what she said, and added that in the last ten years not a single word has dropped into her letterbox, as if the whole world's forgotten her address and this entire wholeworldness has rubbed our village off the map completely, so no post comes to us anymore: no parcels, no postcards, no letters, not by train, not by plane, not even by bus. “But how can that be? We're here, aren't we?” I protested. “Well, there you have it,” Tamara Alexeyevna answered me and threw up her hands. And I said to her, “Tamara Alexeyevna, but everything gets through right away on the

internets and phones, no problem!” And she nearly chucked me out of the classroom — that’s how it seemed to me for a moment — but she only shrugged her shoulders. That’s all anyone does. As you know, in our village there’s nothing else to do, especially for grown-ups, particularly for elderly pensioners. All together they come out of their little houses in the morning and, to the sounds of the hissing radio, start throwing up their hands and shrugging their shoulders — one-two, one-two, left, right, left, right, one-two-three, one-two-three. The drill goes on. The radio’s ancient, and the voice in it sounds like it does in Soviet films, the ones they show round the clock on the telly, where everything seems not quite real, like cartoons, only with actual people. Tamara Alexeyevna comes out to do these exercises in front of her house too. She must be about a hundred years old. I don’t think I’ve ever met anyone older than she. She shrugs and throws up her hands better than anyone, really natural like. We read “Van’ka”<sup>1</sup> at school today, a story by Anton Pavlovich Chekhov. Tamara Alexeyevna praised it ever so much. It’s about an orphan boy called Vanya who’s been left completely alone, and nobody loves him, and everyone picks on him. Because of this, he decides to write a letter to his grandfather, Konstantin Makarovich, so that he’ll come and take Van’ka to live with him in the village. He addresses the letter just like that, “To Grandfather, to the village”, and drops it in the letterbox. I didn’t understand anything at first, just felt confused and sad. But then I sort of worked it out. My situation’s really similar, but everything’s completely the other way round: (1) Nobody picks on me (almost). (2) Mum and Dad are doing fine (they send you their regards). (3) I’m also

writing a letter, just like Vanya (but I'm a girl). (4) We're both writing to our grandfather, but Vanya's writing somewhere "to the village", and I'm writing somewhere "from the village". Both of us, it seems, don't know where we're writing to. You tricked me, dear Grandfather. You said you'd never leave our village. You said there was nothing better in the world than our Tulubaika, that we've got a lovely forest, and a river, and the air, and the people are all right too. And then you went and left without warning, while I was in the city visiting the other grandparents. The holidays ended, I came back — and you were not here. Mum and Dad say, "Your grandfather's gone away to have some rest in warmer climates." And I say to them, "This can't be true, he'd never leave here." That's what you told me, right? You can't leave Tulubaika. Nobody leaves here and nobody comes here. But it turns out everything's the other way round again: (1) I left (for two months). (2) You left too (for an indefinite period). So it turns out you can leave after all, and everyone has lied to me (again). At times like these I start to understand why everyone just shrugs their shoulders and throws up their hands. I'm not stupid. All right, I'm not an A-student, but I don't even want to be. "You're too perceptive, young lady," they tell me. And I answer, "And you're not, then?" I saw you in a dream. In it I was walking through our birch forest, and only then did I notice that it's not a forest but a park (a forestpark, forepark, parkorest?). The trees in it are all identical and planted in lines, as if it all were deliberate. I went out of the house the next morning, and on the way to school I noticed that it really is like that, as if we're living in some kind of park. In the dream I walked through the forest for ages — into Tulubaika or out of it, I don't

remember — but I couldn't find the way out. And then I met you. You were sitting on a stump — a birch one too — with a basket at your feet. I asked you, "What are you doing here?" And you answered, "Sitting." And I asked, "Why are you sitting?" And you answered, "Waiting for you, granddaughter." "For me?" I asked. "For you," you told me and added, "Only you're a bit early, back you go homewards." That's what you said, and I didn't understand anything. It was a strange dream. I've got really small handwriting, like yours (I read your journal about the weather, the forest, and various mushrooms), so I'm a luckster — a lot fits on two sheets, but I need to finish now. If we're talking essentials: (1) The news is good (I'm doing all right at school). (2) The weather's good (golden autumn). (3) Everyone misses you.

## Your loving granddaughter

*B+ T.A.*

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### Notes

1. Van'ka is a diminutive of Vanya, which is a diminutive of Ivan. Another diminutive of Ivan is Vanechka, which some readers may recognise. The story itself: in [Russian](#) or in [English translation](#).

## Episode 6: about syllogismatics, briefly

[nova-nevedoma.com/syllogismatics-briefly/](http://nova-nevedoma.com/syllogismatics-briefly/)

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“I think where I am not, therefore I am where I do not think.”  
— “Écrits: A Selection” by Jacques Lacan

even having weighed the arguments beforehand measured the facts with a ruler across and along laid out before you all the “cons” and “pros” in two piles or perhaps three four or more for you never know if there will be discrepancies paradoxes or some other undefined drebedden in your logic you’ll still arrive at the conclusion that the anticipation of regret can be far worse than the regret itself and have existential practically eschatological consequences destructive to your psyche because the decision hasn’t yet been made the i’s haven’t yet been dotted and everything can still be changed ten times over with a snap of your fingers by simply deciding not to go anywhere neither *to* Tulubaika nor *from* Tulubaika nor anywhere else and either just stand still and think think think thinker with the premises devise new justifications find confirmations for your judgements and then refute them yourself or ride around in a cab circling from point A to point B and from point B to point A (you can even veer to point C along the way why not) until you become nauseous your head starts spinning you faint sleep for twenty hours see a cluster of bittersweet nightmares about what an abominable muck Tulubaika is this time of year but what beauties those

golden birches are and what a delight it is to gaze at them and stroll around if of course you don't look under your feet and if you plug your ears with your thumbs otherwise you might inadvertently go halfwit from the squelching of boots and the snarling of stray dogs and forget about fishing in the shallows about the first day at school about your first love be it for games on the Sega mind games game theory or girls about the first unlearned poem and the first skipped physics lesson where you got a fat parent-repelling blot of the first F and about how on a dare with the lads you stuffed your mouth with baneberry your stomach twisted your face paled you nearly perished at a tender age terminally-tragically-truly-indeed spent a fortnight in hospital but regretted nothing not even that you cavorted with all sorts of young rascallions and ruffians fought them clumsily played football traded Pokémon cards bartered May beetles<sup>1</sup> for Beatles tapes and now catching sight of those acquaintances on the street you turn your face away because (touch wood) they recognise you and start pestering you with questions like "how are you?" "how's life?" and answers like "as white as soot!" "better than yours!" "and mine is better than yours too!" which ultimately if it's not a zero-sum game of course makes each and every one of us the happy owners of a good life because if everyone's is better than one another's then it means that either no one's is better or everyone's is just alright and there's no need to regret the future or regret the past although in my case in the case of regretting the future it's much more complicated because if you mull it over the past will always have one version the one that's already happened ergo regretting it has a negative energy conversion efficiency  $\eta$  (unless you have a time

machine of course or some new quantum law is passed in the quantum parliament) while the future has infinitely many versions (and what versions (!) a whole kaleidoscope of events) and if we take as an initial condition the presence of free will in the subject without any evaluation of its strength (the formula for it has not yet been derived) and the absence of an entity modestly called “Fate” pecking at the subject’s nape then it becomes apparent that regretting the future not only has an emotional meaning (including a divorce from the past and nervousness due to the gnawing importance of the decision being made) a philosophical one (awareness of the finiteness of life the infinity of outcomes and the unpredictable nature of existence) but also an applied one because everything depends on it on the decision being made and where you will be (be it in Tulubaika or outside of it) and who you will be (because opportunities are different everywhere) and in general the whole future which like dominoes lined up in an endless row from one light push with the little finger can collapse lightly jingling and fall with a thunderous crash after which you won’t have plays in the West End but a cigarette-smelling Tulubaika cinema where there’s no popcorn yet there are rice and egg pasties bublik and black chai with two spoons of sugar instead of twelve-year-old Macallan and vintage Coca-Cola Zero of the existence of which in Tulubaika you can only learn from ads on the telly on one of those two TV channels and it’s unclear whether you will walk hand in hand with a gorgeous wife through a night-time Mediterranean city or help your neighbour besiege a broken tractor or time-lost Carthage for weeks or ramble through the mud on a rotavator or a topless Mini Cooper through Norwegian fjords or listen to the

singing on the Day of the Dead in Mexico or to the singing of the funeral service of Uncle Vanya who died from a drunken wallop with a rebar to his head on a clear day (on which it was not half bad to hang oneself according to the weather forecast) or drink chai with Tibetan monks to a state of chai intoxication and lush peacock-like opening of chakras or drink shots of hawthorn tincture hand sanitiser surgical spirit in tandem with local pissheads yet to the same drunken opening of chakras wide open with eyes wide shut when instead it might have been easier to decide and you wouldn't have had to lie sleepless squeezing your eyelids hoping to stop scrolling through the feed to distract your brain from scrolling through that situation where you a young cloud engineer a wanderer did get to the Istina with your mathematical mind shod a louse<sup>2</sup> taught a jellyfish to sing go I know not whither and fetch I know not what<sup>3</sup> and invented a time machine to travel to the future and ask yourself now an old chap grey with a cane in hand peacefully strolling through the birch park in autumn perhaps to pick some mushrooms looking at the birds dancing in flocks above the trees while you approach him and stammer to ask if he regrets anything in his long life and if so was it not that situation when he was riding in a cab to the airport or on a bus through endless oat dunes or in the opposite direction or in circles when he was silent and mumbled a monotonous “uh-huh” in response to the conversational enthusiasm of the taxi driver who has a business in Moscow a son studying in London and a castle from a Nigerian prince as an inheritance and extremely racist views<sup>4</sup> and listening to a demonic rendition of Shostakovich melancholically stared out of the window massaging his temporal

muscles building up wrinkles on his forehead which by the way will later be a good place to stockpile regrets (it's not for nothing that they only hatch with age) and watched the same but still so soulful landscapes or their grey absence unfurl around him and could not decide whether to ask the driver to stop and turn around dash back down the one-way road at one hundred and twenty km/h collecting potholes and boldly looking lorry drivers in the face or to make a couple more circles round the area because just a little more time and the reptilian brain will derive a formula for the optimal position of the capital yet still undotted "I" in space and time the essence of which lies in a simple binary opposition either where this very "I" is or where this very "I" is not

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## Notes

1. "May beetle" refers to the European cockchafer, a large beetle common in Eastern Europe that typically emerges in May in the areas near Tulubaika. These beetles are recognisable by their brown colour and distinctive fan-like antennae. Collecting them and making them race and/or fight was once (still is?) a common childhood pastime in Russia.
2. "to shoe a louse" ("подковать блоху") is a Russian expression meaning "to accomplish an extremely delicate difficult or seemingly impossible task". It's similar in spirit to the English expressions "threading a needle" or "splitting hairs," though with a distinctly fairy tale flair for the improbable.
3. The impossible task par excellence (much like accurately translating this text), a direct translation of the Russian folktale formula "Пойди туда не знаю куда принеси то не знаю что", which is the equivalent of being asked to run an errand without any useful information though with considerably higher stakes and fewer navigation options. The best narrative device for storytellers who enjoy watching their heroes and heroines navigate cosmic ambiguity

- and either magically transform or perish (or both/none).
4. All of this is a typical life predicament for an average taxi driver in Russia.







walking straight, but we, like all normal children, never walked straight. In autumn, after the harvest, the straw was rolled into bales and wrapped with thick white plastic strings. We cut them, tore apart the bales, and built forts and castles from the straw. After improvised day-long wars in such castles, we would return home itchy, scratched bloody, the straw falling everywhere from beneath our clothes. — Yesterday, there was a fire in the field, — says the old man standing next to me. He wears a life-worn blue “New York” cap, sweat pouring from beneath it down his bald head. — A couple of hectares, they say, burnt down. Terrible. — Eh? — asks the full-bodied woman next to him, wearing black sunglasses and holding an open newspaper. She reads it from time to time when her hands become tired of using it as a parasol. — Terrible, I’m tellinn thee, — says the old man. — A real nightmare, indeed, — says the woman. — It ignited by itself, they say, — the old man mutters, wiping sweat from his forehead. — No wonder. With such heat, I might ignite by myself as well. Oof! — says the woman, starting to use the newspaper as a fan. — Drought, they say. Everywhere. — That’s for sure. Everywhere. — But thing is, love, we have a drought every year ‘round here, heat like this every year, as long as I can remember, but everything is on fire only this year. Coincidence? Don’t think so. — It burnt in the past too, in other places. I remember the news. — It doesn’t just ignite by itself, does it, love? — Oh, it does, look at the sky and how it’s blazing up there. Although no, don’t look, it’ll burn your eyes out. The road is dusty, asphaltless, cracked. Though, calling it a road is a bit of a stretch. You need to know it’s a road, then maybe you’ll find it; otherwise, it’s just a large path through the field.

Above the scorched surface, the wind chases mirages. You can see the air melting; look closer — and you feel your brain melting, too. The sky is not even blue, but sheet-white. From the sun, scorching halos spread across it like ripples on water. If I were alone, I'd have taken off my shirt long ago, but as it is... eh, don't want to embarrass myself in the polite society of decent people. Not in the best shape, I am. — They say their machines are powered by clouds, — says the old man. — On the telly. — Whose? — Mine, of course. Every other telly, too. One TV channel we have after all. — Whose machines? — Doesn't tha watch the news? — What about them? — Doesn't tha know what people are sayinn? — All sorts of things nowadays, apparently, aren't they? — Aye, right tha is, love. — And so what? What's with the clouds? — So, they suck the clouds, and — as a consequence, tha might imagine — now there's nowhere to hide from the sun. — Who? People? Don't be daft, you. — Not people. People! Oh, love. Not only people. Doesn't tha know anything of what's happeninn 'round the world? — Who then? Robots? — Aye? Robots! Mayhaps robots, too. Science fiction and all the bloody drebbeden people're readinn these days. Cassandra me arse, nobody believes nowt until they're roasted alive. — Who then, mind you? The old man lowers his voice, saying: — The same who set fields on fire. — Is that so? And why would they do that? — So we'd have nowt to eat! — the old man spreads his hands in the utter state of obviousness. — You eat porridge every day, do you? — The oats? — The oats. — Aye, every morning. All my potato tops've dried up, too. Bloody 'ell. — Well, you should water them. Take a hose and water them. And don't eat potato tops, perhaps. — Water or not — same

result. — Won't make them tastier, indeed. As my group theory professor used to say, true learning ought to be painful, akin to muscle soreness. It must be felt. If you don't feel it, you're not learning; you're merely warming a seat. Patience, too, is a skill. Few of us know, but scholars distinguish between two types of waiting: scheduled and unscheduled. The only difference between them is that with the former you know when the awaited event is supposed to occur, yet both are equally repulsive and unnatural to a human brain. Take, for instance, the bus to Tulubaika. It supposedly runs on a timetable, hence, having arrived early, I found myself immersed in the first type of waiting; time seemed to hasten slightly, and the sensation was rather pleasant — I was heading home, where my family waited for me, bustling about, my mother would be baking pasties (with cabbage, egg and rice, mince, and marmalade from orange peels and gooseberries), my grandfather would be smoking some meat, beef, or pork (or perhaps fish, for he's quite an angler, Tulubaika's quite a river — perfect combination), my niece — perhaps with my sister's help — would be drawing me something rather lovely, and their new dog (which I've only seen on Instagram) would be preparing its fluffy tail for vigorous wagging upon meeting me, and also (importantly so) our old cat would be asleep, indifferent to my arrival, preoccupied with its own affairs and priorities, absolutely nonhuman and inhuman. Thusly, you wait, agitated, trembling with anticipation, like on the eve of your sixth birthday, only for the bus to fail to arrive on time, turning waiting from an exhilarating process into a suffocating one. Time, probably realising how unbound it can be, begins to swirl and torment you, passing with different speed at different moments, in

different places. The ecstatic excitement morphs into anxiety corrosive to nerves. What if the bus doesn't come at all? What then? My family would be disheartened, the pies would go cold, the dog, tired, would lie down to sleep next to the cat, the house would be shuttered, the stove extinguished, and the lights and telly turned off, the village bulldozed away. The prodigal son promised to visit once in a decade but did not. What would the neighbours say? What a deceiver those Tulubayevs raised! Bad parenting, terrible one. Every few minutes (there's no set interval here, for it could be a minute, five, or ten; time in the brain is such: it speeds up, slows down, writhes before you like an uneven sine wave), you pull out your overheating phone, check the clock over and over. Then, realising the battery is about to die, or the phone might as well ignite itself, you start counting seconds in your head, your breaths in and breaths out, listening to the wind and the rustle of oat stalks. Meditation, they say, is good for you. It helps train your waiting muscle for that very nothing or something that never quite happens. Thislike is the face of nothing, nontime, nonhappening:

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Why do you look for enemies everywhere, old chap? — asks the woman. — I'm not lookinn for 'em, love. They find me. You can't hide from 'em. They've got the whole Earth in the palm of their hand. Like this, — says the old man and shows his calloused palm with his fingers sprawling. — No one cares about us or our village, don't you worry. We're not even marked on the map. — That's just it. Truth, that. A dire situation, in fact. Do whatever they want to us — drop a bomb, poison us with gas, burn us with lasers — no one would even notice. But they've chosen a more elegant approach. — And what's that, mind you? — Told thee, didn't I? They've sucked out the clouds, stoked up the sun, and now they're smokinn us! How it used to be: tha steps out at dawn, faces the sun, closes thy eyes, basks in its warmth, sits down in a garden chair, sips thy cuppa with a biscuit, then off to work tha goes, aye? The sun is blazinn but feels good, warming the soul, so to speak, because tha knows that in the evening it will proper pour with rain, waterinn the vegetable garden and all other household plots. But now, how is it? Can't step outside; impossible! Step out of the shade and it roasts thee right quick — first a tan, then burns and blisters if tha's daft enough, and before tha knows it, skin cancer and tha's six feet under. That's their plan, tha sees. I knew an old chap — another one, not me — a revered fella, he was 108 years old, that bloody bastard, runninn 'round like a little lad, drinkinn vodka like a bloody elephant, but this

year... this year he died. Just like that. In his sleep, they say, but I know that he was sun-struck the day before, love. The woman shrugs. — So it goes. Slowly but surely, we'll all perish one by one, and as tha said, love, no one will notice. We're not even in a footnote on the map! — You know, — I say out of boredom, — what if this is some sort of social experiment? — Antisocial, — says the woman. — Might be antisocial, that's not to be ruled out. Or parasocial. — Like how, mind you? — The lad's got a point. This's how it happens: they test it on us first, on Tulubaika, because no one cares, then on the whole country, and then on the entire planet. And then... we're kirdyk<sup>1</sup>. Write us off. That's why our role in this is tremendous. We must fight however we can. We must resist. Now, I'll go stretch my legs; bloody 'ell they've gone proper numb from standing still. And those people, they sit all day! The old man straightens up, adjusts his cap, and starts to walk in a figure-of-eight along the road. He barely lifts his feet, causing a cloud of road dust to rise with every shuffle of his soles. — Have you been away for long? — asks a voice from behind. That dialogue seemed over, everyone had gone quiet, it was time to breathe out and think my thoughts, so hearing that voice, a gentle young woman's voice, I'm startled. — Oh, sorry for scaring you. I turn around — before me stands a young woman with fiery ginger hair tied back in a ponytail. She's wearing a white cotton dress with sweat stains showing at the chest and underarms. The hem, reaching to her knees, is covered in dust. Between her collarbones, she has a piercing, a golden sun with eight rays, resembling tongues. — Am I distracting? Nerves heating up, I shake my head. Where did she come from? She must have just arrived, silently,

like a mouse. — You're not distracting, quite the opposite. What's here to be distracted from? — From enjoying the majesty of summer. Isn't that wonderful? No, it's not. But I don't say that. I'm trying to maintain communication here, civilised dialogue between two adults. Small talk. — And why do you think I've been here before? Do I look like a local? — Oh, stop it. No one's here for the first time. — How's that? — Well, just like that, simple. You can be born here, leave here, and then return. That particular chain of events must happen. No one in their right mind would come here for the first time on purpose. No one can, really. You're aware, I assume, that tourism isn't exactly booming around these parts. — It's not. — So, how long has it been? — Since I finished school. And you? — I haven't left. I live here. — In Tulubaika? — Well, not in the field, obviously? — Who knows... And how is it now, in Tulubaika? — Quite wonderful. I'd even say delightful. Summer, heat, the river, flowers, berries. But most importantly — look how Sollie shines. Ah! The word "Sollie," spoken with a capital letter, sounded clear, deep, with respect, as believers would say "Goddie".<sup>2</sup> As she says that and exhales, the expression on her face acquires blissful qualities. — Bright it is, — I say. — Very, but such is life. Without Sollie, it would be the eternal night, wouldn't it? I don't quite know how to respond. Probably, yes — it would be. It's dark without the sun, that's for sure. I can't really disagree nor do I want to agree. Why would anyone agree with something so obvious? And that would make me submissive, wouldn't it? Is it a rhetorical trick? It must be. Thus we stand, in silence, looking at each other. Awkward. But not embarrassing. Yet. Awkward is better than embarrassing. I squeeze a shy wry nervous smile. — By the

way, I'm a teacher, — she says. — Oh, good for you, — I reply. — It is, yes. — Must be difficult. — What? — Teaching. Children these days, you know. — What's with them children? — Everyone's on their phones. TikTok, you know. She's perplexed by my anachronistic fathers-and-sons-ness, quite unsure which side I'm on in that grand conflict (the Grand Conflict). — You don't look old. How old are you? — I prefer not to disclose. — You look young. — Well, thank you. — And what do you do? — It's dull. I'm into... computers. — Oh, staring at a screen all day? — Kind of. — Can you fix my printer? — What? — Just kidding, I can fix my printer myself, — she says with a smile. — And Windows, I know how to install it. — Good for you. — It is, yes. A programmer, I reckon? — Kind of. — What do you program? You know, there are all sorts of programmers these days. — It's difficult to explain. — Try me. I'm not some country bumpkin, am I? — Well... Clouds. The young woman frowns and examines me like a teacher would. I feel her gaze even through my black sunglasses. — Very funny. — No, I'm not taking a piss. I do program clouds, for real. Have you heard of such a thing? — And why would you do that? — To make them rain. The teacher's expression darkens. — I see. So that Sollie shines less. — No, why? So that it rains. It has nothing to do with "Sollie". — To each their own. And is it difficult to live with that? Live with what? What kind of question is that? — Not particularly. It pays well. — I see. She seems to be disappointed in who I am and what I do. That doesn't surprise me. People here often think programmers are new kulaks and have to be liquidated.<sup>3</sup> I feel the sun furiously reaching its zenith, taking out a magnifying glass, and beginning to shine directly

through it, as if it's a year-five pupil and we are ants — the battle uneven, the fate unenviable. I wish I could program up some clouds now. Docker compose up etm.<sup>4</sup> From afar comes the roar of an engine of hell knows not what. The sound grows louder. Hearing it, the old man steps off the road. A few seconds later, a motorcyclist speeds past us, a young man with a pink mohawk, helmetless. Mixing with the black exhaust fumes (or rather an atrocious gas), a cloud of dust rises from the irritated earth, envelops the bus stop and sneaks into our nostrils. Everyone starts sneezing and coughing. Come to my senses, I do. It smells of dust, straw, engine emissions, tedium, and the colour white. — They go buyinn 'em drandulets<sup>5</sup>, fuckinn degenerates! — says the babushka sitting on the dry grass. She wears a headscarf. Few know that, but scholars discovered that all babushkas wear headscarves — it's like a mohawk for punks, an element of subculture. Without it, a babushka simply isn't accepted as one and can remain forever young. When I arrived, N hours ago, she was already sitting here and has been silent until this moment, so I've forgotten about her existence and not mentioned her in my story, just like many of us often forget about many babushkas and their existence as they sand away in hourglasses. Everyone nods in agreement, some — reluctantly, given the tone. The old man returns to the woman with the newspaper-parasol-fan and continues the conversation. — Has tha heard 'bout the panels? — What panels? — That solar shite show panels. — Oh, those. And what about them? — What does tha mean, "what"? Hasn't tha heard? Everyone's talkinn. — What are they talking? — Terrible things they're talkinn. Just terrible. — I'd never believe it. — But there's no need to believe.

Facts, love, facts. Does tha know why all this is happeninn? — We're having trouble with electricity. It's always failing. We lived a week without light. Every summer this happens, even in winter. With panels, it might be better. In summer, at least. They're right there — within reach. And it's hot, so... — Mayhaps “so”, mayhaps “not so”, but it's with these “panels”, they'll be aiminn their devices at us. — Ah, don't be silly, old chap. What devices, mind you? — Has tha seen who's installinn 'em? — No. — There thee has it! That's the point. They rustle 'bout at night. I've seen 'em, woke up one night to noise on the street. I go out and see — the field is all lit up. At first, methinks — a fire, but neither flame nor smoke can be seen. I approach closer, and there they are, bastards — right by the panels. They're right by my house, tha knows. Did I tell thee? Terrible, in a word, bloody terrible. A tanned boy with a freckled face and surfer hair approaches the bus stop. He is playing with a ball, or rather not a ball but a white inflated balloon with a large red digit six on it. For him, it is, however, a ball, which is, I'd say, fair enough given the circumstances. He walks around kicking it. — Are you his teacher? — I ask the young woman. — What? No. Why? He's just a boy, I don't know him. What made you think I teach children? — You mentioned you're a teacher. — That doesn't mean I teach children, does it? It kind of does, though. In parts. — I thought you teach children, naturally. — You thought that; I didn't say it. — Who do you teach, then? — Whoever needs to be taught. Whoever needs teaching. — Right, uh-huh... But, if you're not his teacher, why is he alone in the middle of the field, the boy? — Why should I know? — Well, you're a local. Everyone knows everyone here. When I was a little





pebbling running away from heat. — Look, a mouse, — I say calmly. — What? Where? — the teacher responds, surprised. She scans the ground, clutching the hem of her dress. — Right there, — I say, pointing right at her feet. She squeaks and jumps aside. The other people at the bus stop turn round to us. The surfer boy with the balloon stands still and looks at me creepily, as if I had stolen his chance to spot the mouse first and announce it to the world. That pebbling, however, is now nowhere to be seen. — It seemed it was a mouse, — I say, shrugging. Adjusting a stray lock of ginger hair, the teacher stretches a fake smile. — You really are odd. — That's just askinn for a stroke, — says the babushka sitting nearby. — Old I am, tha knows, scare me like this and done. Boom. Who's goinn to buy me a coffin, eh? Thee? I'd like a redwood one, please, young chap. — Sorry. I didn't mean to scare you. Just bored waiting for the bus. Trying to amuse myself, is all. — Look at him amusinn himself, — the babushka says, grumbling. — Tha'd be better off dancing then. Dance for us, will tha? — I'd rather not. Her pupils dilate, her left eye starts to twitch. I mentally prepare for the worst. Not sure what that is but there's always something worse to prepare for. Russian wisdom, that. — Smarty-pants. She spits on the ground, and turns away. Oof... Silence falls for a few moments. — What was that? — the teacher asks. — What was what? — Why did you upset the old lady? — I didn't upset anyone. She was already upset when I arrived, I reckon she's chronically upset due to everything: life, weather, other things. While I've been waiting here for all those N hours she's been upset the whole time. — You seem agitated. — I don't seem, really. By the way, would you know when the bus is coming? What's the schedule like

these days? — No, I do not know. You scared me with that mouse, too. It affected my memory. Badly so. Now I'm oblivious. Completely so. — Sorry, my fault. It must be that the sun has heated up my head. She frowns. — You are odd. Actually are. — Fine, I am odd. My phone's almost dead. I'm afraid to even check the time. — It's half-past one, — the teacher says, glancing at the gold sundial on her right wrist. — There's also the word "please" in our language, by the way. Or have you forgotten it all in your Riyadhs? — Thank you. I mean, please. No, I actually meant both now. None of us can believe I'm forming sentences like that when talking to people. — Do you wear your... "watch" on your right wrist? — I ask her. — I do. — Why on the right? — I like it like that. — Are you left-handed? — I am. — I see. The bus ought to have been here half an hour ago. — The bus doesn't owe anyone anything. It's simply a bus. — I wish I could be simply a bus and owe nothing to anyone. Convenient life, that is. — You could be if you really wanted to. — That would be odd, though. — It can hardly be any odder, can it? The teacher looks at me languidly and then returns her gaze to her reading. I notice a page has fallen out of her book and lean down to pick it up, managing to read a few lines along the way, or not managing — the lines immediately slip from my memory. Something about Sol. I hand the page to the teacher. Trying to be nice, I am. — That's not mine, — she says. — How is it not yours? Whose then? The teacher shrugs. Weird. I must be hallucinating. This heat. — I saw it falling out of your book. This one. — This heat. People see things. I do see things. Do you? — I, er... Has anybody lost this? — I ask those around, lifting the page high. Silence ensues. I'm utterly convinced it fell

from the teacher's book. I swear I saw it slipping. — Absolutely sure not yours? — Absolutely, — she says, keeping her face down, reading, not showing any signs of emotions. Perhaps I've upset her. — What's in it? — I don't know. Haven't read it, something about Sol. The sun? — I see. Why don't you read it for us? — I'm not good at reading aloud. — Give it a try. — Why should I try? — Everyone's bored. We're all friends here. No one will judge. It's a safe space. — Is it, though? — You never know unless you try. Of course. Why would I do that, though? What for? Am I becoming submissive? First — dancing, now — reading? — All right. Well, here we go, I say to myself. Refused the old lady's wish, complied with the young one's desire. Clearly, ageism. I silently read the first line: "O Sol, bright Sol, on thy heavenly chariot." An auspicious beginning, it rather is. — Seems like some sort of poem, or maybe a song. — A poem? Is it? About what? — Sol, as I said. — Could you read it out, please? I skim to a random line: "With thy beams, burn the impure and wicked, cleansing our sacred soil!" — I would rather not read it out loud. — Why not? Stubborn like a child. — Perhaps you'd like to read? You are a teacher, after all. You should have a better voice. — You found the paper — you read. — I would rather not. — I see. Men, making a tragedy out of such nonsense. — Do you know that tragedy means "goat-song" in Greek? — You really are odd. Odd again. Always odd. I take a deep breath, the hot air scorching my nostrils and lungs. My neck's in a vice. That's the physical sensation. A cold sweat runs down from it to my back, instantly warming. It feels like being called to the board to recite a poem I haven't learned. — Fine, if you insist. But I warn you, I'm not a good speaker. It'll be a torture.

— It’s okay, what haven’t we seen or heard around these parts? Plus, anything’s better than just standing here in silence, isn’t it? Some amusement for the bored. I read with as much expression as I can muster: — *O Sol, bright Sol, on thy heavenly chariot Arising daily over the earth! Thou art the all-seeing eye, the life-giving luminary That drivest away the creeping darkness. O righteous Sol, whose visage lights up the fields and valleys!* — Could you possibly read a little louder? I feel the words penetrating me. I feel them inside my veins. I don’t want it, but I’m becoming words, at least my body, at least it tries, it tries to sound louder but my throat has dried out and, tasting even more bittersweet, is beginning to itch. — *With thy beams, burn the impure and wicked, cleansing our sacred soil! To thee we raise our praise and thanksgiving And offer sacrifices without end.* — Could you add a bit more volume? I’m afraid they can’t hear you in the back. And I do, I submit to the words. *LET US EXALT SOL INVICTUS THAT BREAKS THROUGH THE MORNING MIST! BEFORE THY GOLDEN RAYS THE STARS DIM AND FADE. WASH US, CLEANSE WITH THY RIGHTEOUS FIRE OUR SINFUL FILTH! MAY THE MONGREL PERISH IN THE DARKNESS ETERNAL! MAY THE WEAK BE CONSUMED!* Upon finally hearing what I have been reading, the old man flies into a rage. His face wrinkled up, flushed with anger, he hobbles over to me. — Thee bastard! One of those, eh?! — What “those”? — Those very ones! A fork-tongued eunuch! I see the old man clench his fists and I begin to back away as he keeps stomping towards me, picking up pace, kicking up dust as if smoke trailed behind him. — Thee sun-scourged maggot! He reaches

me and grabs me by the collar. Turns out, the old man is strong and has a formidable grip, much grippier than mine. — Hey! Easy there! — Give it to me, thee slag! Releasing one hand, he tries to snatch the page from me with the other. I dodge. I dodge well. Never knew I could dodge so well. — Hey, it's not even mine! — I exclaim, trying to gently push him away. — Not thy?! Whose then?! — I don't know! I found it. — And tha'll say it was brought by the wind next! — he spits. — Bastard! — Quite possibly. I, the fool, picked it up. Never seen anything like it before. Never will, hopefully. I wasn't myself, maybe. I don't know. Really, it's all the heat, the sun. The old man calms down a little, probably to catch his breath. — Not local, is tha? — Local through and through, heading to my parents'. — Do I know thy parents? — You might know my grandpa, sir. It's the white house at the very edge of the village. It's a one-house street. Sir? That's an anti-sir in front of me. His frown deepened, and, unsure whether to believe me, he loosened his grip. — Give me that bloody shite then. Having no reason to keep the page, I hand it over to the old man. He skims through it, scowls, and spits on the ground again. — What filth. No shame, no conscience. The invincible sun, my arse. Fuckin 'ell. — Not in front of the children, mister, — says the teacher. She's irritated and tense. — He knows words worse than that. Right, laddie? The boy silently nods. There's a hint of a sly smile on his face. Little bastard. — Cunt! — yells the boy. Everyone twitches. The old man laughs heartily. — Told you lot! Now, own up, whose paper is this, then? — says he. Silence falls. The teacher says nothing. She stands there, staring at the ground, arms crossed, hiding the title of her book. But I know it's "Sol Invictus". It was her doing,

definitely hers. A femme fatale, a mysterious, mischievous, manipulative, possibly dangerous woman, she is. — Oi? — the old man presses again. — Probably dropped by the motorcyclist, — the teacher murmurs. — There he is, by the way, coming back again. You can ask him. True enough. The familiar engine sound intensifies. Over the field, a vast cloud of dust and atrocious gas soars higher and rushes upwards. The hairs inside my nose curl up, anticipating the pungent invasion. I'm preparing to sneeze. Against the backdrop of the sweltering air, the same motorcyclist with the pink mohawk appears on the road. Shielding our faces with our hands, we step back to the verge, almost into the oats. The white balloon slips from the boy's grasp; he tries to reach for it and steps on the road, but the woman with the newspaper pulls him back away from danger. — PUNKS NOT DEAD! — the motorcyclist shouts, roaring past and running over the boy's balloon, either by accident or deliberately, as if it were a dead or artificial fly on a urinal. The balloon pops. Its rubber fragments lie scattered on the road. No signs of "six" seen. We all stand together, watching as the motorcyclist disappears into the depths of the field. — It was definitely him, — I say. — Pure evil, this guy. The boy silently walks over to where the balloon mayhem occurred, picks up the rubber remains from the ground. — Cunt! — he yells, and begins to sob, quietly. — There, there, love, come here, — the woman with the newspaper says, trying to hug him, but he shrugs off her hand and steps aside. — These sun-arse bastards, damn 'em all, — grumbles the old man and walks away from us. — Degenerates! — adds the babushka. — Shall they perish in hell! Shall their souls forever boil in oil! Shall their balls dry out! — Aye, nowt else

to add. Tha speaks truth, — says the old man, his face revealing he’s clearly surprised by the babushka’s eloquence. The glossolalic ordeal is over but I don’t feel any better: tired, thirsty, sweat running down my back, all my clothes soaked through. Still no sign of the bus. I hope it will have AC. But who am I kidding. At my parents’ house, it was always warm in winter and cool in summer without any air conditioning. I know what I’ll do when I’m in Tulubaika. I’ll take a shower in the garden and dive into my old bedroom like I did as a child. There was no sun there — it faced north. It was like a cave. On one of the walls, there was wallpaper of a golden birch forest stretching into infinity with a gigantic raven flying above it. I used to love lying on the bed, being in that forest, imagining walking under the birches, losing my way to Tulubaika, finding it back. I hope my parents haven’t changed it. When I arrive, I’ll switch on my old PC if it still starts up, sift through my old CDs, pull out old games. What plot, what gameplay they had! They don’t make them like that any more. I hope my eyes don’t bleed from the graphics, though. — Thank you, — whispers the teacher, sneaking up from behind into my reverie. Here she is again. — What do you want? — I said thank you. — For what? — For not giving me away, — she whispers. I nod stoically. “Giving her away.” I see. — Was there anything to worry about? — What do you think? — I don’t answer questions asked in response to questions. Rude? Or not so much? She falls silent. So, it was rude, yes. Awkward. How odd I am. I should learn to communicate with people. — What are you thinking about? — she asks. At least she’s not offended. — The same thing as everyone, about the bus. — I’m not thinking about the bus. — If not

the bus, what are you thinking about then? Is there anything at all in this world to think about rather than the bus? Bonkers. — About Tulubaika, of course. Imagine, in a few hours you'll arrive in the village... what will you do then? Few hours? Sounds optimistic. Few centuries, more like. — I'll be lying down. — Is that all? You travelled all this way, from Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, just to lie down? — Listen, I just want to lie down. I'm tired. I'll lie down all week, eat my mum's cooking, maybe play old games with my niece, watch the stupid telly, and debate conspiracy theories with my grandfather. Today, I've learned some new ones — we have plenty to discuss. And I'll tell them about the deserts. Have you ever seen real dunes? — Deserts and dunes aside, Tulubaika has so much to offer. Fancy fishing? Then head to the lake or river. Fancy a swim? You have it right there. Do you know how magically the water glistens in Sollie's light? The whole area is blooming now, the scents are countless, organic perfumery all the way along. Do you know how delicious the air there is? Not like in your cities, in Riyadh. It must be all fumes there! In Tulubaika, even just breathing is always a pleasure. Just existing. Step into a field or forest, take a deep breath, and you feel better, you're healed, cured of all your pain. Cleansed. You listen, and the wind whispers softly, crickets chirp, birds sing. Spread your arms wide, close your eyes, face Sollie, and your soul rejoices. — You have plenty of moles, on your arms, legs, and face, by the way. You shouldn't expose them to your "Sollie" too often. You might get cancer. — I use cream. — "Sun"-screen? — Don't call it that. — Why not? — Sollie is a source of light, warmth, life, not a threat. — Then why the cream? — Sollie cares for us and sends as much light and

warmth as we need. And if a person lives in harmony with it, no harm will come to them. — Then why the cream? — Sollie only cleanses the impure, others are safe to accept His light. — But why the cream? She looks at me with the most enigmatic gaze I've ever seen (she's topped it again), looks, and remains blissfully tranquil. Seconds pass, minutes, hours, centuries, stars flop and black holes become twice as dark. — It makes my skin soft, — she finally answers. — Ah, I see. — Here, feel it. The teacher grabs my hand and places my palm on her forearm. The skin is soft, warm, damp, and slippery from the sunscreen mixed with sweat. — Well? I withdraw my hand, look at my palm, then back at her. — Well what? — What do you think? About my skin. — Not bad. — Hm. I see. She ponders, then, without warning again, grabs my hand and places it on her thigh. The skin is as slippery and sweaty but gentler, firmer, more elastic. She probably does many thousand steps a day. — What about now? — Not bad. Better. — Better? Is that all? — Yes. Skin is skin. Very hot, though. And it's already hot enough. Now my hand is slippery. — Odd you are. How's your sex life? So I am the odd one. — It's, well, a private matter. — Do you have a girlfriend? — I have a wife. — I see. I wouldn't tell. Do you have many friends? — Of course, I do. I mean, I have some. — In Tulubaika? — Not in Tulubaika, why would I need friends in Tulubaika? I don't live there. — That's a pity. — Why? — I pity you. — What? — I think you're missing out on something important. — Am I? Like what? — Will you come to ours? — Ours what? Where? — To the club. Club? What club? What is she talking about? Is it a youth club? A tennis club? Is it a drama club? Or a cult? — What club? — Interests club. — What interests? — Special interests,

you'll like it. The Summer Solstice is coming, it'll be fun. Trust me. I look at her: all in white, her face sweet, friendly, smiling. I think, ponder, evaluate the situation. If someone asks to trust them, it can mean only one thing. — No, thank you, I won't come. — Why not? — Have you seen Ari Aster's "Midsommar"<sup>7</sup>? — No. — Well, that's why. So we stand, confused, awkward, waiting. The babushka sits, silent, possibly dead. The woman with the newspaper has spread it over her head. She's not happy being here and likely feels sick, I can tell from her face. A huge, nasty horse-fly is bugging the unballooned surfer boy. It's as big as a hornet. The boy tries to shake it off for a while, then, after a series of futile attempts, grabs it in his fist. The horse-fly buzzes, trying to escape, but the boy doesn't let go, nor does he squeeze it; instead, he takes a straw, inserts it into the insect's arse, and now lets it go. The horse-fly, bewildered, flies off with the straw in its rear. Meanwhile, the old man starts mumbling again. — I awoke one night, me back seized in such agony I thought it would be the end of me. Yet, I recovered somewhat, ventured out into the garden to see if the hares hadn't made off with the carrots again, fluffy bastards. All seemed calm, serene even. And there I stood, enjoyinn a cigar sent by me son from Cuba, mind thee, rolled on a thigh of a busty Cuban lass. I only smoke 'em at night, in secrecy, for fear of the envious gaze and ill wishes of today's folk. And one night I heard a humminn, subtle but annoyinn, like a ringing in the ear. It seemed to come from nowhere and everywhere. Feeling otherwise fine, I deduced it must be something external. As I savoured me excellent cigar, I spotted something strange aloft. It was massive and indistinct, clearly not an aircraft for they don't glide so slowly, nor a

bird, for it was far too large and had no wings. I fetched a torch, futilely shining it upwards, only to see a vague oval silhouette. I then took out my phone — another gift from my lad (a camera is great by the by) — and snapped a few pictures, Dziga Vertov, me arse. Sadly, the screen showed nowt but darkness. I went back inside for my hunting rifle, reckoning I'd take a shot at the craft, aye, I would. After all, what else could it be but one of their "devices"? But as I emerged, weapon in hand, the craft had vanished. Silence. — And that's it? — asks the woman from behind her newspaper. — Just like that, it disappeared. — Fascinating. — Probably a UFO, — I suggest. — A what? May thy tongue blister, thee bastard, — the old man retorts. — It might well be a UFO, but I reckon it was that thing, their device, the one that slices through the ozone layer to boil us all alive 'ere. — One typically boils in water, though, — I note. — Tha, sun-blasted fool, would be boiled dry. — Just theorising. I'm on your side, by the way. I program clouds. — What? — Clouds. I program them to bring rain. — And where might thy clouds be, "programmer"? — Well, in Saudi Arabia. — In the desert, tha means? — Something like that. — And who the blazes needs clouds there? To water the sand? The world's mad! The conversation, it seemed, had reached an aporia, much like our bus somewhere. I lean towards the babushka to check if she was still breathing. Her eyes are closed. I peer into her face, listen for her breath, and she suddenly opens her eyes. — Boo! I jerk back, retreating towards the teacher with her book. She laughs. — Aren't you something! Trying to kiss the babushka. — I wanted to help. I thought she was, you know, dead. — Would that make it a good idea to kiss her? Sleeping beauty. — I wasn't

going to kiss her. I was checking if she's breathing. — Oh, indeed, she'll outlive us all. You're the one restless and sweating, while she sits calmly, waiting. You could learn a thing or two about patience from the older generation. — I don't like waiting. Especially not in this heat. — Suppose it's not hot in Saudi Arabia? — Of course it's hot. Fifty degrees now. — There you go. — It feels different there. At least they have air conditioning. — Listen to the bourgeois, "air conditioning". — The air here's humid. I'm suffocating. Feels like I'm gonna have a heatstroke. Damned sun. — Hold your tongue. Speak ill of Sollie, and Sollie will surely strike you down. Suddenly, growing louder in the distance, a hum encroaches upon our cosy timeless space. Hope exists, I reckon, but then immediately I understand — not really. The hum turns into a familiar roar, a cloud of dust and exhaust fumes crawling from its source. Everyone braces themselves, covering their faces, turning away. Then he appears, the motorcyclist, hurtling towards us with his pink mohawk shining. To spike a mohawk properly, I recall, one should use beer, otherwise — not trü<sup>8</sup>. Anticipating his approach, the babushka picks up a stone and, as the motorcyclist nears, hurls it at him. Instantly, without a whistle or sound, the stone strikes his head with an accurate shot. The motorcyclist loses control before he could even cry out. The front wheel twists sharply, throwing him onto the road as his motorcycle crashes, tumbles, and flies off into the field, flattening a few metres of oats. Silence. To say the least, we are all in a profound, petrifying, trembling shock. Fucked up it is. Forgive me, I simply have no other words. We stand, speechless, our mouths agape, staring at the contorted motorcyclist lying on the road. — Take that, degenerate! —

yells the babushka at the motorcyclist, continuing to sit in her place. We, except the killer, collectively approach the disfigured, bloodied body of the motorcyclist. Legs twisted, trousers halfway down, an arm broken with a white-and-red bone protruding from his forearm. His bare, tattooed torso covered in cuts and scratches. His face, having apparently slid a few metres across gravel, is all torn up, bloody, and dirty, with no nose in sight (and his mohawk is crumpled). No one says anything. They are either too stunned or overflowing with intrigue. There's actually a minute of silence:

I lean

over to the motorcyclist, my ear pricked up. — Not breathing, it seems, — I say. The teacher presses a finger to his neck. — No pulse either. Bad luck. — Well, this is a fine mess, — says the woman with the newspaper. — What an actual situation. Oh. — There was a lad, and now there's a lad no more, — adds an old man. — Just like that. *\*Poof\** — and it's all over. Eh... Life... — Don't even say it, old chap, — says the woman, grabbing her neck as if intending to strangle herself while her other hand starts frantically waving a newspaper. — Serves him right! — the babushka shouts. — Degenerate ponk! We look at her, speechless. I, for my part, have yet to fully grasp what has happened and that there's a real dead person lying in front of me. I've only seen such things in films and

games before. In games, I could smash anyone's head with a stone. I could do that easily, about a hundred or thousand times per evening. It is, actually, a lot of fun. Do I feel anything about that now? Probably not. He's just lying there. Well, shit happens, they say. "Bad luck." I hope he doesn't come back to life and eat us. But what if he does? On one hand, it would be an intriguing twist of events, on the other — a bit eerie perspective. Narratively, it would be odd and lazy as well because I've already told you it might happen. So, no, it won't. — Perhaps we should call an ambulance, — I suggest. — An ambulance? — says the old man. — An ambulance, — the woman repeats after me. — An ambulance, — says I. — Look at him, what good would an ambulance do? — says the teacher. Indeed. Looking at him — an ambulance is hardly going to be of any help, even if it arrives sooner than the bus. — Right on, love. Need an undertaker, we do. I know a guy. — And the police, — the babushka suddenly adds. — Give that bastard a fine! For speedinn. — A fine? — I don't feel it's fine at all, to be honest. — Tha, thee old witch, should be locked up, spend your life behind bars, — the old man retorts. — Fuckinn 'ell. — They drive like that! Degenerates! — You should hold your tongue, madam. You're only making things worse for yourself, — says the woman. — There are witnesses here. — Can't breathe here. The place is overrun with degenerates! Stuffed with degeneracy! — says the babushka. — I'm calling the police, — I say. — And an ambulance. And all the rest. — Go ahead, — says the old man. — The bus will come soon, we'll hop on and be off, and tha can sit here with the crazy old witch waiting for the coppers and the coroner. — We'll wait. This is a crime scene, after all. The babushka killed the

motorcyclist, — says the woman. — By cruel means, — I add. — With a stone. I feel a pebble hit me in the back of the head. Painful. There'll be a bruise. I turn around — the babushka is picking up another pebble and, grunting, is getting ready to stand up. — Hey, what are you doing! — Off shall tha fuck, ponk! — the babushka says and throws another stone at me. — Hey! I'm calling the police. — Ring thy bellend!<sup>9</sup> Another pebble. The babushka adjusts her skirt and, continuing to hurl pebbles, walks back down the road in the opposite direction from Tulubaika. — Where do you think you're going?! — Mind thine own fuckinn business! I pull out my phone. It's off. In my blurry memory there's no record of me turning it off. I turn it on. Wait. Wait. Wait, a long time, seconds, minutes, hours, centuries. It turns on. One per cent battery. There's even a signal. I dial 02<sup>10</sup>. The phone turns off and starts to heat up. Confused, I don't know what to do. — Hey! Babushka, stop where you are! Hands shaking, I start speaking into the turned-off phone. — Police? There's been an incident here. Yes, on the road to Tulubaika, a babushka has killed a motorcyclist. Will you be coming soon? Brilliant. Hear that, babushka? They are coming for you! — I shout after the departing murderer, but she either doesn't hear or simply ignores me. It appears the teacher has noticed my phone turned off, and, having heard my conversation with the imaginary police, she rolls her eyes and shakes her head. The phone in my hand grows warmer, warmer, and warmer until it's as hot as an iron. A spasm involuntarily courses through my hand, and without my consent, it (hand) flings the phone onto the road. I approach the device, look — the screen, it seems, is done. — What about the police? What did they say? Are they

coming? — the teacher asks. What a bitch. — They said they'll be here shortly. — Is that what they said? Shortly? — Yes, that's what they said, — I say rudely, swallowing what little saliva I've gathered, possibly the very last water in my organism. — We are told to wait. They promised they'll be here soon. — Promised? Soon? They never say such things. — Well, this time they did. They were very polite and considerate. As police should be. — Remind me, for how long have you been away? — Infinitely long, and that time, in fact, keeps increasing. — The longer we wait, the more it increases. — This is what I've said. — Should we just wait? — This is what we've been doing. No reason to stop waiting. — But the babushka? — She's left. — I can see that but don't you want to detain her? — I do not. Do you? — She won't get far, that old nag, — the old man inserts. — The coppers will nab her right there on the road. Meanwhile, the old nag, limping, vanishes around the bend in the road. — Would you like to call an ambulance as well? — the teacher asks. What a bitch x2. — I might. — Ambulance... — the woman with the newspaper says softly. Only then do we see she's out of sorts, staggering, her eyes rolling back, legs buckling; she drops the newspaper and collapses onto the road. We approach her, check if she's breathing — she is, thankfully, but unconscious. Her forehead is burning like a stove. You could cook eggs on it. — I can't, my phone's dead. Does anyone else have a phone? — I've seen enough of thy damned little phones, — the old man declares. — Ever wonder how *they* find us? Thy phones have navigation chips in them. Be it towers, panels, or some other nonsense like 3G, 5G — damn them all. Look at the youth today: riddled with cancer from head to toe, PTSD, autism, degeneracy, punk

— all because of them phones. Radiation, that’s what it is. Sun only makes it worse. I glance at the teacher, expecting her to help with the next dialogue line, but she merely shrugs in response. — I try to keep my mind pure, — she says. — No phone. Noted-understood. — And you, boy? Do you have a phone? Where would he go without a phone, I wonder. What if he gets lost? Though, when I was his age, we ran around just the same. Parents off to work, you’re off to the bus stop, jump on a bus, head into town with friends. Like cats, come and go as you please, and no one asks any questions. The boy just silently shakes his head. No! He doesn’t have a phone! All this time he’s just been standing on the side or whatever and he doesn’t even have a phone! — Let’s move her into the shade. Grab her legs, — I tell the teacher. — Where do you see the shade? I lift the woman by her arms. Her body is heavy, sweaty, slipping from my grasp. Or I am weak. We drag her to the side of the road, closer to the oaks. That’s where we lay her down. Of course, I realise, there are no signs of any shade. Even oaks don’t cast shadows. The newspaper, right. I take it, unfold it into a makeshift paper tent over the woman’s head to create some shade at least. I notice the front page: in bold letters, it reads:

#### ANOMALOUS HEATWAVE. WHAT NEXT?

The teacher takes out a small flask from her bag, pours some on her palms, and starts rubbing it on the woman’s face, then splashes some onto her lips. — What’s that? Smells of alcohol. — Sun water. For protection. Uh-huh, “sun water.” — May I have some? For protection. — You don’t need it. You don’t need protection. — Why don’t I need

protection? — I can see it in you. You're already protected. — No, I'm not. I've never felt less protected than now. — Neither have I. She looks me straight in the eye, brings the flask to her lips, and takes a swig. A lump slowly travels down her slender neck. She doesn't even flinch. And from the smell of it, there was enough reason to flinch. — What now? — she asks. — I don't know. — What, not a single idea, programmer? A thought occurs. A perfectly fine thought, but questionable. I discard it. We hear the muffled sounds of kicks. Turning around, we see the surfer boy standing and kicking the deceased motorcyclist. Meanwhile, the old man stands by, laughing as he observes the scene. — Hey! — I shout at him. The boy doesn't react and continues his kicking. — What are you doing? That's a person there. — It's a corpse, isn't it? — Was a person. He was a person. — Was, but gone now, isn't he? Like completely? To put it mildly, I'm shocked. — And tell me, why are you kicking him? — Because he popped my balloon. It was my birthday balloon. I liked it. My girlfriend bought it for me. — Well, happy birthday then. — Not so happy any more, is it? — Still, kicking a dead man isn't right. Do you think you're doing a good thing? What do your parents teach you? — Popping children's balloons isn't right either, is it? They taught me I should do that. Popping others' balloons. — Kicking a dead man is worse than popping a balloon. — Is that so? — Way worse. The boy stops and looks at me, his eyes empty, his face devoid of emotion. — But have you ever seen a corpse before, mister? — What? No. — Neither have I, — he shrugs. — Why kick it, though? Why would you kick a corpse? A man's corpse? — The corpse doesn't care, does he? But it amuses me. Amuses him. — Oh, it amuses you? — Yes. It is fun, isn't

it? — What's fun about it?! — No one's fighting back. Indeed. — And it's my birthday. — Look, boy, I can't do this any more. We need your help. That lady over there is unwell. The surfer boy looks at the woman whose head is covered by a newspaper. — What's wrong with her? — Heatstroke. — She was very upset by what she saw, — interjects the teacher. — We're all upset. — So do you want me to start kicking her too? The grandfather laughs heartily, wiping the sweat from his brow. — Look at the youth these days, — he says. — And they say: wasted generation. Not even a sign of it — all-round good bloke. — There's no need to kick anyone. Stop it, please. I kneel and take the boy by his shoulders. — Where did you come from? — From the town. You're hurting me. — No, I'm not. Can you go back to the town and ask them to send the police and an ambulance here? — And the bus, — adds the teacher. — And the bus. Of course, and the bus. The boy's hesitant. A lot. Glancing, he examines our levels of tilt. — What's in it for me? — I... I'll buy you an ice cream, okay? The chocolate one. With hazelnuts. Do you like it? — I don't want ice cream. — What? What do you want then? — Mister, I want to kick corpses. And a balloon. I want my balloon back. — All right, I'll buy you a balloon. — With the same number? It's my birthday. — Yes, happy birthday, of course. Same number, same colour — all you want, really. He shakes his head. — I don't think you understand what I want. You better give me some money. I can buy it myself. Cunning. I look at him — standing there, pouting his lips, furrowing his brows, his gaze avoiding mine. — All right. Good, I'll give you money. Fine. I take out a banknote from my wallet and hand it to the boy. — What is this? — It's money. A

banknote. — Crikey. — What? — It won't be enough for a balloon. — Are you sure? It's plenty of money for ten balloons. — Balloons are very expensive these days, mister. I had to save from my meals for a week to get just that one. For my birthday. I count out a few more notes. — Right, fine, of course. Here's for the balloon... Happy birthday again. I hand him another note. — And for the ice cream. Another note. — Is that enough for everything you want right now? Except kicking. It's not for sale, I'm afraid. The boy nods, turns around, and runs off towards the city. — Call an ambulance and the police! — I shout after him. — And the bus. — Cunts! — yells the boy as he disappears around the bend. Meanwhile, the teacher takes another generous sip of her "sun water." — Look at the youth these days, — the old man repeats, shaking his head and, scratching the back of his head and fixing the NY cap, starts walking around the motorcyclist's body until he notices something on the buttock beneath the lowered trousers — a tattoo of the sun with eight rays. — One of 'em! Bloody bastard! — the old man exclaims and starts kicking the corpse too. — Hey, stop that! No reaction follows. — I'll kill you all, maggots! — he shouts, unclear whether at the motorcyclist or at us. — I'll show you. You sun-worshippinn fanatics. — Oi! — I shout at the grandfather, but he continues kicking. In panic mode, I turn to the teacher. — Say something to him. — What should I say? — To stop? That would be nice. — He's ferocious. Why wouldn't you tell him? — He doesn't like me. — All these bastards. You won't burn me. Reading their books, walkinn around shouting "the invincible sun, the invincible sun." Disgusting! Damn you all. The teacher shrugs, finishes her sun water,

and, coming closer, whispers to me: — By the way, I have a tattoo, too. Someplace. Fancy taking a peek? I recoil from her, stumbling back, nearly falling, and move away. The heat's driven everyone mad. I want to go home. I want to go home. I want to go home. My brain's turned to mash, seems to have fused into one big heavy lump, swelling and pressing from the inside against my skull, harder around the temples and the back of my head. Where's the bus? What's the bus? Why's the bus? My head spins along with the surrounding oat field. Where is it? Where am I? I feel nauseous. I grab my hair and scream: — Bus! Hey! We're here! Bus! Bus! Bus! I'm here! The teacher and the old man startle. — What are you yelling for? — asks the old man. — Don't you worry, — says the teacher. — Calm down. — Bus! Bus! Hey! Someone help! — It'll come, don't be upset. The bus is always late. It's normal for the bus to be late. We'll all be in Tulubaika sooner or later. — Don't be upset? Don't be upset?! Do you see what's going on?! I settle onto the ground, enveloping myself with my arms. I don't feel like screaming, nor crying any more; in fact, I feel like nothing whatsoever, except perhaps for a yearning to sink deep into the ground, so deep that the cold seeps in, and warmth becomes a forgotten sensation. Yes, I crave the coolness, the chill, the clarity of thought, the lightness of the mind, my childhood bedroom, my cave. But instead, I feel as though I'm being boiled alive, like a lobster. Or worse, boiled dry. I fall to the side, curl up into a ball, press my cheek against the ground, and just lie there. I don't want to listen to anyone. I don't want to see anyone. I don't want anything. The surface, despite being as hot as everything else around, is slightly cooler than the air and smells of dust, straw, and manure. Suddenly, I feel a

wet, cold hand on my shoulder; I shudder and shrug it off. — Leave me alone! I don't want to see any of you any more. — Just look up at the sky, — I hear the teacher saying. — I don't fucking want to look at your fucking sun or Sollie or whatever the fuck it's called. — Oh, please. Language. But it's not Sollie. — Then what? Fucking moon, huh? — No, don't be silly, look. It's an airship. Air-what? — An aerostat, — she says. — What? Curious, I open my eyes and look at her. — Don't look at me, look up. There, — she says, pointing in another direction at the sky. I turn, propping myself up on my hands, and gaze at the sky afar. There, resembling a huge white cloud, an airship, an enormous dirigible balloon with a red digit six glides almost upwards. Its engine, possibly electric, emits a droning, sonorous trill, a single sustained note, resonating through the field — a choir of cicadas trapped inside a subwoofer. Trailing behind it is a cone-shaped tail of spray, covering an area of tens, perhaps hundreds of metres. The airship is bringing us rain. Oh, yes! Water! Sweet water! Come here, my dear! — Hey! We're here! Hey! — Over here! — the teacher joins me. The old man notices the airship, too, and turns pale. — No... No... They've found me... Bastards! He takes off his NY cap and, bending and groaning, with his trembling fingers, fumbles in his pockets. After searching himself all over, he pulls a crumpled piece of foil from his trousers' back pocket, straightens it out, and wraps it around his bald head. — Damn it! They've found me. Me! I told you lot! We, not at all surprised, continue to shout and whistle, in response to which the old man, with a look of both universal, existential dread, and deep, childlike terror, crouches, and scurries over to us. His eyes blaze, the cap gleams. — Shhh! No! Stop that! You idiots!

Idiots! We ignore him and keep trying to attract the airship's attention, jumping and shouting. — Enough, damn you all. Enough! Shhh! Then the airship shifts direction slightly and now heads straight at us, dragging its watery cloud behind. The old man sees this, crouches even lower. — Tch! Tch! The lot of you! Bastards! Fucking 'ell! And so, ducking, nervously looking around, holding on to his shiny helmet, he darts from the open road into the dense oat fields and vanishes. We watch him leave and continue to shout and jump. There's a warmth in our hearts, not in a thermal sense, but in an uplifting, hopeful sense, as if we, shipwrecked, have been stranded on a deserted island, and after years of waiting, a ship finally appears on the horizon. Not a bus, though, but good enough. Time freezes again, hangs in the air and stretches into an endlessly long strip like a taut string ready to snap at the slightest touch. And then, we're engulfed in the airship's shadow. The sun hides behind a massive cloud looming over us for an inestimable interval, while our bodies shake in anticipation. The teacher places her hand on my shoulder, and I don't mind; I, too, place my hand on her shoulder, and she doesn't mind. I stretch out the other hand, close my eyes, squeeze them as tight as I can, so tight that abstract shapes morph into oval blobs, the airship's imprint. And then, right away, we're drenched by a fine, cool rain, like the kind you get on a cold autumn morning, which feels annoying, as if someone's spraying your face with an atomiser, but right now, it's all we want. Drench me, dirigible! Soak me through! And it does, with a dense tropical downpour, washing the dust off my face, rinsing the greasy clumped hair, washing away the sweat from my body, soaking my clothes with

crisply cool water. Transcendent goosebumps run all over my skin, from my nape, down my back, along my arms, down my legs, even to my little toes. They are happy, too. The teacher and I fall to our knees on the ground, arms outstretched, laughing, sticking out our tongues as far as possible to catch as much water as we can. The rain stops, and with it goes away the shadow. Outside, there's coolness, the smell of wet earth, inside — bliss, a light shiver. We rise, soaked, and watch as the airship slowly drifts away. Everything around us is now dewy and sodden. Puddles have formed. The dirigible-borne rain has flattened the oats a little, washed the blood off the motorcyclist, mixing it with the mud. The woman on the roadside still lies there. The thoroughly soaked newspaper clings to her face. Probably dead. Silence. The sun rays are felt anew on my skin, comforting. We look at each other, clothes clinging to our bodies, water trickling down. The teacher smiles. — Well, — she says, — now that no one hears us, would you like to talk more about the Invincible Sun? My smile turns wry and nervy, and I pull my hand away.

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## Notes

1. “Kirdyk” (кирдык) is a word of Tatar origin that entered Russian slang, meaning “the end,” “finished,” or “doom”, pronounced with a fatalistic emphasis on the second syllable. It functions as both noun and verb to indicate a situation has reached its terminal state, similar to “game over” or “kaput”.
2. The rendering of “Солнышко” as “Sollie” and “Боженька” as “Goddie” is a linguistic compromise in the face of Russian’s formidable diminutive arsenal. In English you can append “-y,” “-ie,” or the ghastly “-kins” to convey affection, but Russian’s morphological playground of suffixes is wider and can express

- everything from tender endearment to cosmic reverence, or both at the same time. Were the translator to render it as simply “Sun” and “God”, a nuance would almost certainly be lost on Anglophone readers, who, bless their hearts, must now contend with coinages reminiscent of children’s television presenters. Such are the hardships of cross-cultural semantic transfer — what Jakobson might have termed “diminutive desperation.”
3. In early Soviet times, “Kulaks” (кулаки, lit. “fists”) were peasant farmers branded as class enemies for the crime of modest agricultural success, essentially sentenced for possessing a cow too many. “Liquidation” (ликвидация) was a common bureaucratic euphemism for any systematic elimination. Russian historical memory possesses a certain recursive quality, so programmers, earning significantly more than an average person and thus sometimes having inflated egos, are often mocked for that (without bloodshed so far).
  4. This is a reference to implicit containerisation orchestration via “docker compose up,” the imperative command utilised to instantiate ephemeral virtualised microservice instances in a multi-tenant Kubernetes-adjacent deployment pipeline familiar to all “programmers” who engage in contemporary DevOps practices with containerized CI/CD workflows. The translator trusts this explanation will prove illuminating to those readers who, unlike “programmers”, may not immediately grasp the elegant parallelism between the futility of attempting to configure persistent storage in ephemeral containers and the narrator’s equally futile desire to summon meteorological relief from the heat.
  5. “Drandulet” (драндулет) is a derogatory Russian term for an old, decrepit vehicle or jalopy. The word carries connotations of both the vehicle’s poor condition and the questionable judgment of its owner.
  6. It’s the longest school holiday in Russia for all grades, includes all three summer months almost in their entirety.
  7. Look it up, with the spoilers.
  8. Russian spelling of English-borrowed “true” is “труь”. Although that last letter isn’t necessary, the hard sign (ь) in “труь” is a distinctive feature of (already dated) Russian internet slang where adding this letter gives words like “true” an exaggerated intensity and authenticity. The hard sign at the end used to be a part of Russian orthography in pre-revolutionary times when it was also kinda of unnecessary. The internet usage originated in metal music subcultures, especially among black metal enthusiasts (“True

Norwegian Black Metal”) to distinguish between “trü” black metal and “posers”. The ь-suffix evolved to signify something as absolutely authentic, “old”, canonical, or hardcore. Thus the word “тpуь” aims to designate elitism and canonicity, not just precision of forms, but also... the authentic essence of any object, phenomenon or creative act, pretty much what “Istina” would be (See also: Istina). Thus the translator suggests to spell English “true” (and “truth”) with an umlaut to achieve the same effect.

9. The original Russian phrase “В хуй себе позвони!” literally means “Call into your cock!” It’s a vulgar dismissal that creates an anatomically impossible directive as a way of rejecting the threat. It’s structurally similar to other Russian obscene rejections that use the same pattern of directing an action toward one’s own genitalia as a way of saying “I don’t care about your threat”.
10. Police number in Russia.

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