



THE DESIRE NOTEBOOKS

John High

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*N*_O*T**E**B**O**O**K**S*

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THE DESIRE NOTEBOOKS

John High



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*Not to accept an event that happens in the world is to
wish the world did not exist.*

Simone Weil

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THE DESIRE NOTEBOOKS

The Book of Mistranslations 13

A Face of Desire 97

The Monks Overlooking the Story 213

*for Katya Olmsted
and
Sasha High*





Prologue:
p.s. i love you

Waking under the illusion of necessity, her life had always been savage according to the rhythms of her body. The one-eyed boy would explain this to the man, but he would be on a different journey by then, one he would have to make alone and without her. He already sensed it as he studied the white skies and the fires in the distance.

Our countries are dissolving—the way paper dissolves—you see it now, don't you? she'd remarked coolly that first afternoon once the soldiers pushed her to the platform, capriciously let the rest of the passengers pass as these ravaged souls filed in a single row out of the train. The border guards eating pork chops by the tracks. The one-eyed boy gesturing to her from the white field. Old men in fur hats clawing, some clutching their children in the chaos as a fire erupted to the south of the station. Still, all the man could think of was the secret pleasure of bending over her earlier, in the corridor of the train that morning. Wanting nothing more than to sleep with her. Snow falling on the hills and the whole world contained in whiteness. Her smell not a part of the scene or their violence—this mob of frenzied refugees now running about the station, screaming at the soldiers, even bowing to them earlier when the soldiers stormed into the coupes.

Her voice remained calm while pushing the small deringer from her purse into the man's head, and for a moment he thought she might shoot him, or herself, but not them. The

almost origins of a stage, these grotesque parables! she had mocked the soldiers instead, slapping one of the officers before being thrown to the floor.

His fever from the night before passing. The man had stared out upon the 18th century towers, the gray churchyard, the migrating crows as the train pulled into the station. The crowds had begun to vanish as they travelled on. These vanishing crowds. It was odd, he thought. A country's collapse? Perhaps it was true what she had said, though having renounced the world, he could not know. He watched two dark women desperately shoving to get on any of the trains out. And these soldiers, only boys themselves with blush faces in tattered brown uniforms, pushed them back against the brick walls and the stone statues of mythic gods scattered about the grounds. The sheer violence of it stunned him.

He held her by the waist, tried to assure her. Shadows of snow curving across the doorway. Unmarried girls in shawls and mourning gowns hurrying down the tracks, crashing toward the gates, falling over the snowed platform. A group of teenagers, maybe nine or ten, making ice cream from the snow, laughing as the fire spread toward the one-eyed boy.

Then, she had slapped him.

Soldiers no older than his own son tapping their guns on the video machines in this vanishing station. The sheer violence of it stunned him.

He thought this was her world while remembering the partisan they'd seen trapped in the tower at the last station. Delirious, the man's shoulders on fire, naked and shouting at the villagers.

The woman's coal-black eyes now staring at him as she shivered on the station's platform, her white shirt torn, the blue tennis shoes speckled with blood from where the officer had struck her.

Look at my face! she demanded.
I will not look, he answered her.

That night he searched the platform, the churchyard, the towers, even the women's room. But he could not find her. The cramped faces of angels pressed against the station's window. Four angels dressed according to each of the seasons singing, but he could not hear their voices, only saw their mouths contorting in the shadows.

After such a close connection.
He finally began to understand.
Vanishing.

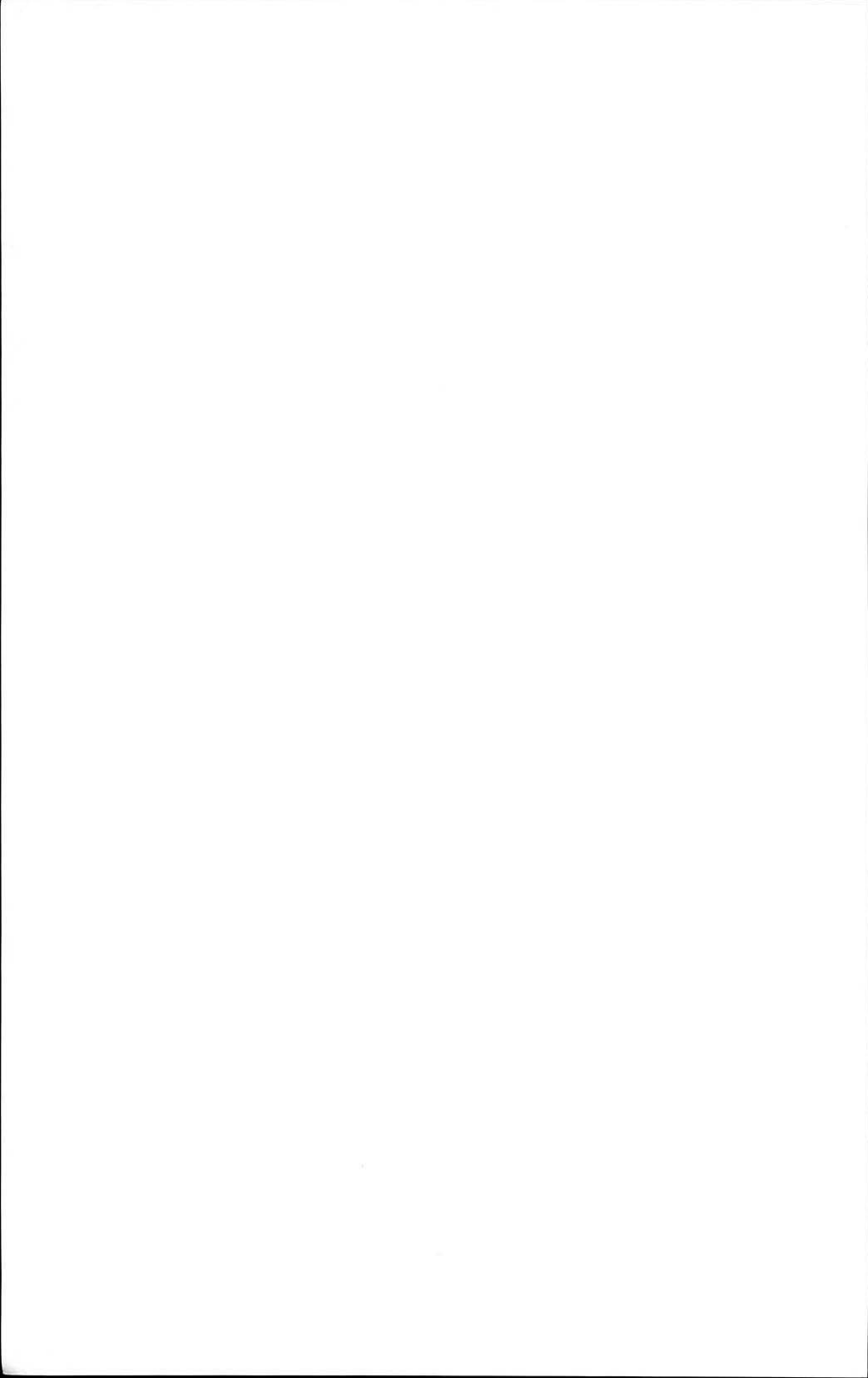
She could not survive here. Though the one-eyed boy was waiting, calling to her from the fields.

The strong ones playing the video games.
Power of the unseen.

p.s. I love you, the boy had whispered leading him instead of her into the church yard as the town clock began to chime at midnight.

Crying somewhere. Frailty, the most precious thing. It's ok to be vulnerable, she'd admonished at the castle before they began the journey. But he could not allow himself the luxury of repentance. Not here. At least until the morning, when he would again find her.

Puking in a public toilet.
The cancer on the floor.
Three crows laughing.



The Book of Mistranslations

for Nina Iskrenko
1951-1995



day one

She had awoken again astonished hearing the voice of the one-eyed boy as she had first heard it walking to the monastery with her father from the shores of Lake Baikal. A pink light scattering the countryside with so many different faces here as she moved through a foreign territory by way of train, though a territory not unknown to her or her father. Falling in love with a stranger on this, the first day of departure, she thought, amused and awed by the beauty of the gathering hills and the snow that submerged them. She sensed the designs of the earth as she took out the notebook and began to write of the boy, still drunk on the morphine and only able to speak to herself in the third person. She and the man, this stranger she had curiously awoken beside on the train, had shopped in a village before boarding, bought wine and cheese, collected acorns, walked on and later searched for the trains almost intuitively....As she stood and fumbled through her purse for the needle it struck her that the man had only been conscious of one thing then, a desire to please her. Stranger, she had called him, laughing flirtatiously as a column of soldiers marched down the crowded street. As if she were his wife or lover. He had straightened his tie and told her in a calm voice that his life revolved around the pleasure of those around him, and now it was clear to him, this would be her. She would be his calling. The two stood in the center of the old town laughing, paying little heed to the soldiers who surrounded them and asked for

their papers. He gave her a sausage, turned in the shadow, watched her smile....Then the weakness in his chest later that night when completely oblivious, he had wanted to marry her. She understood this pain that had not yet become the pain of love and so she had not listened. She took her clothes off in the dark with her back to him.

No other passengers in the coupe that first night they had boarded the train, and she had considered it peculiar that the man had trailed her across the burning field after witnessing the partisan's fate. That poor man burning and screaming from the tower of the castle. Yet this lover had followed her just as she had followed the one-eyed boy into the distance as her father had instructed as a child.

Disturbing, his love—she now wrote in the margins of her notebook: The shape it presumed by the tracks as the soldiers mounted their horses, released the crowd into a harsh pink light. He resembled her father as a young man, a photograph she had once seen of her father before he entered the monastery with the boy.

The city behind them felt ancient, cold, almost forgotten as she sat in the still light staring at the man's gaunt, unshaven face. She remembered there had been people on the hillside where the two climbed to the castle shortly after leaving a cafe. She noted all of this in detail now, so she could remember it later, when the details would become more important:

White skies blurring along the river, explosions in the night sky and flurried snow, the mass exodus of wagons and walkers along the roads, Father....A silhouette of four angels floating in and around me across the salmon-colored hills of the castle's gate. A partisan trapped in the tower and a group of villagers were apparently trying to save him! Earlier in the day, I saw that partisan walking the streets.

This wasn't our story but it moved me as I watched from the bathroom window injecting the morphine into my left arm....Later, the tractor beam lights focused on the tower while I hummed from some old ballad. But to this other man, who resembled you Father, this man sleeping beside me now—it was to him I was humming. And this was my weakness, to fall in love. Though I won't pretend to understand it.

A tribe of drummers over the ridge and the Danube was clear, not frozen. A stranger lit three Orthodox candles and walked across the river as we listened to the screams from the tower. From his countenance I assumed this stranger, this lover, was a priest. Almost as if he were walking on the water, this tall, unhandsome man in white khaki trousers and a blue shirt, black tie, an old, tattered overcoat. And though I sensed his sorrow, a peculiar music emerged over the hillside. These drummers playing for the partisan trapped and burning in the castle's tower...yes, I was certain. Nonetheless I found myself praying to him—to this priest, I am sure he is a priest—as he lit the candles, crossed the water, extended the sacred candle above his head, not unlike a priest, no Father.

Wet and cold, shivering when he reached the other side, I ran to him, father. The border guards had demanded his passport. As if he were trying to escape a country that, actually, no longer existed. I gave him my scarf and without introducing himself he asked me to marry him. I laughed, as did the guards, sipping from a bottle of wine we all shared together afterwards. Keen at camouflage. Do you know that? I asked him. We are keen at camouflage, we monks! So good to be so close to dying without dying tonight, I then said—rather demurely to his proposal I admit—taking his hand and leading him away, toward the tracks and the one-eyed boy who has again found me. The soldiers parading the hills, drunk themselves—merrily dancing with their guns as the fire eventually consumed all that had once stood on these grand hills.

Yes, I would leave with him.

I considered you and your blindness, father, the first time I laid with the boy at the lake—my own life even, how it has changed since leaving the monastery. My astonishment constant along the road these past days. Now I am no longer alone.

In the tavern I sang for him before boarding the train. Because it was part of my fear and I knew this priest already loved me.

Are you a priest?

He did not answer, Father.

Yet he loved every frailty he would never touch in my body, yes. The frailty of the body. Even this first night, I knew. Gesturing toward the moon. The white birds and black, ravaged fields. I saw him walk across the river and knew.

The theory consists in our mutual distrust and need to break the code. Kiss me, I asked, rather boldly. And he kissed me. Or he didn't. And I never asked....does it matter, Father?

She couldn't remember now. Distinguishing between the pseudonyms that owned accident. Her black eyes shining as he leaned over her in the corridor of the train.

The one-eyed boy appearing by a corpse in the field.

As if for the first time.

day two

They had both been feverish that morning. Promise not to betray me, she'd whispered in the man's ear after chatting with a monk they encountered at the station—or perhaps somewhere else along the road—she wasn't sure now. The sun already floating across the white and clouded hillsides as she put the morphine back in her bag and studied the sky. The monk had taken her arm without salutation in the pre-dawn light, mysteriously motioned toward a trail that led away from the station. Do your work and step back, he'd then instructed her as the man came between them, suddenly seized her hand—as if there were something more important he had to tell her? Beige, broken meadows scattered with frozen poppy....Yet in the darkness of the train she had slept at the foot of this man's bed throughout the night and mumbled in tongues until he could no longer refuse the waking. Listening to the highway sounds and the rumble of the tracks beneath the coupe. It will be a dangerous passage, she'd cautioned him as the two took to the road, eventually found themselves with the monk in this huge poppy-stained field, surrounded now by a herd of lost goats....

She had been the first to see the monk that morning, even before the train pulled into the station. The monk walking along the tracks forlorn and singing to the crows as she watched from the window. The monk approached the platform lazily, begging for money, conversing in a strange language with the crows that swooned about the yard as he stumbled and they began to fly away. Then the three had trudged along in the mud and the snow for hours together, the man talking incessantly about the angels

from his own childhood, apparently unconcerned about whatever she had dreamed. This hadn't surprised her or the monk, who laughed at everything the man said.

It confirmed in her mind that he was, indeed, a priest. She had known many as a girl. Once, as they crossed a frozen-over creek, it occurred to her that she had seen him in another life, yet she couldn't be sure. The road to the left consumed her attention as they came into the meadow and the goats began to surround them. The sky too brilliant, oppressively dark with stars clearing along the horizon above the goats' heads and the four angels she heard singing on the ground where the monk presently stood.

Each angel is one season of my death, she said. I saw them before in a dream and understood this even before I left the monastery.

The monk nodded and touched her eye with his forefinger.

Promise not to betray me, she uttered once more when the three reached the demolished church the monk predicted she'd find after secretly whispering in her ear—

Go out and see where the roads are going, what the trees are saying, how the wind is going. From the church we sent runners out in all directions, and one soldier asked forgiveness for winning this battle.

The monk smiling coyishly as he vanished from the field. Neither her 'priest' or the woman spoke of him further.

Some soldiers had been at the temple before them, though she at once saw the little girl praying silently in the corner. She fell to her knees and began to puke, knowing the prayer revealed the story of the temple's destruction. She listened to the girl's voice swaying in the smell of smoke and incense where the

monk had led them.

These icons of angels, now burnt and desecrated, surrounded outside by falling fences marked one by one with the heads of scarecrows, yellowed grass, spotted birch forests off in the distance...we too are among them now... the girl half-prayed and half-sang in a cajoling tone that did not seem to be that of a child's.

The man stared at the crow squatting beside her now, looked about for the monk.

Where did he go? the man asked, as if he had just noticed the monk's absence.

He edged toward the woman timidly then, tried to think of something useful to say.

How could I betray you?

Because you know my smell. The past of it. Look at the burnt icons, she replied. This little girl. Did they rape you child?

The girl nodded.

I've died a thousand times on this road and only the child seems to know the prayer, the woman said as the tears began to mix with the blood in her mouth.

The man scratched his head, thought he could understand her when she spoke simply like this, and it encouraged him. Since it was true what she said. He already knew her smell, the past of it. One of seduced paper, burnt and sweetened ash. Her tentative, anachronistic hands waving in the air above his head as the one-eyed boy walked into the clearing and began to signal the child. She slid her hands across his face, kissed it.

Your dress is torn. Perhaps we should find you a new one?

Do you think you really need me?

He stepped back, rather brusquely she thought later that evening as the two crawled into the back of a boxcar and stared at

the goats running across the parish yard toward the train.

My ghost is listening too, but these goats cannot come with us.

What?

You think too highly of yourself, she smiled, taking the bottle of wine from her bag, looking to the left. Several children were giggling in the corner of the boxcar, though the boy had taken the praying girl with him further into the hills.

We are both confused, somewhat shy tonight. But it was like this for each of us, even in the earlier lives.

Before we forgot one another, she wrote on the back of his arm in black ink as the train pulled away.

Before we vanished.

day three

A memoir. Perhaps that was what she was seeing. The landscape of surrounding mountains not unlike those of her father's home, her father's face, as she had once described it to the boy walking along the road. Flat and uneven meadows spotted with leafless trees. But then, her father's eyes (weren't they?) always missing. The boy on fire by the tree, his wings fluttering! Dawn, the calm light, gray snow. O, I could never grasp it, she sighed. Now this man, who claimed to be her man. As if he were revealing his heart. Whose heart? The one great moment, the only thing: this journey into a forgotten place—to feel deeply—this

movement of trains, migrating nations, the shadows unfolding as she turned. Redemption, is that why I have come here? Why he has followed me? In the dream she thinks his eyes are a metaphor.

That is why she had kissed him.

To love doesn't mean to look at one another, but in the same direction, the boy grinned, whistling along the road.

day four

The train had slowed by an old shed of a mining town on the fourth day. Like these drawings on the bathroom wall, she told the man when they woke—sketching the image of a child with her lipstick on the toilet's mirror, taking then a moment to reconsider her past. The two had briefly slept in the shed after departing the train and the dampness of the earth had soaked through the straw beds there.

Aren't they, the drawings that is, a sign of intimacy? she asked coyishly in the tone of the girl they'd seen in the church, staring in the mirror, now trying to make herself pretty again.

The haul of boxcars had stopped near midnight, and the two had simply jumped off for no other reason than having seen the building standing alone near the tracks. Still, before dawn, another train had arrived, a passenger train, as if having been sent for them. She had walked into one of the empty coupes, smelled the blood and urine on the seats, said nothing. He had sat beside her, silent for hours, sipping water and looking out on the expanse of unknown countryside as the train moved sluggishly onward.

He appeared awed by the flatness of the land, curious with an expectation only a priest could experience, she thought. The man pointed at the five monks walking along the tracks and only then spoke to her.

What is it you're writing? he'd asked, pulling on her skirt and gesturing out the window. The train had reached a stone bridge where a small crowd gathered in the snow by the river.

These letters will be for you, some day, she responded. Today's is only the first.

She closed the notebook.

My father gave it to me when I was just a girl really, she went on, taking a cigarette from his shirt pocket. She put the notebook back in her bag, glanced at the monks who had entered the crowd now, conspicuous among the villagers with their bald white heads and fish-stained coats.

The train has stopped again. Should we exit also? he asked.

Under the hills a whiteness scored in light. Do you hear it?

I don't know what you mean.

Has your life sprung from necessity then? she demanded, raising the pitch of her voice, tapping the window with her pencil.

Yes.

She reached back in her purse, pulled out a brush, began to comb the man's short wavy black hair while running her tongue across his face. The stench of sweat in his soiled-blue shirt. Unable in spite of yourself to escape the thought of how easy it was for the tanks to cross quickly here? she asked, almost flirtatiously, signaling toward the flat terrain, all of the unmarked graves propped up like scarecrows in the meadow. He gestured with his hand beyond the crowd to the white stones.

Dead ghosts. She laughed.

What do you mean?

The train began to edge across the bridge.

Perhaps it will turn out that you will be called on? She now smirked, removing another cigarette from his left shirt pocket and lighting one.

I'm dying, do you know that?

Pastries, then vodka she miraculously found behind one of the coupe seats like a magician. The pastries stale, though they satisfied his hunger. Did you see the school girls playing by the castle after we met? she asked.

Come again?

When we met. Before we walked to the castle and saw that poor man burning.

No.

Everything is gestation, she explained. I cannot save my family, or myself—or you.

Only her hair in his face then. And his needing more than this. She nuzzled into his neck and spoke slowly about the women she had once known at the monastery.

The women who played cards and forgot their pasts after going into hiding, she whispered as the villagers began to wave....These women renounced their names, you know.

And you?

They visited my father every night. I understand the problem.

White flags burning further in the forest. And the scent of her age again as she bent over him, a scent of dried and decaying leaves as she pressed her hands tightly together.

Yes, I am of them. But my mother was not.

Sitting so close and only touching gave him a hard-on.

He wanted to lay her down and enter her. Immediately.

Possess her. Instead he went to the toilet and glanced out the window. His ghost like her ghost. He saw it there in the mirror, the face of a child. Later, when he told her of his masturbation, she suggested it was only male heat, intoxication, a restlessness. Or the ageless prejudice of your sex, she'd joked. Yet she said this while touching his face with her thumb, teasing him in this way.

There will be personal damage, of course.

He escorted her back to the toilet with him then, shared the intimacy of his sex as she watched him unbutton his pants. As if out of spite she took out the crayon and began to draw on the mirror. A sign of intimacy? He hardly recognized his own eyes in the mirror when he came once more, listened to her hard breathing, glanced at the picture of the boy she had made there. Disgusted by the stench, the filth of everything around them in the toilet. The image of his pants down. This ambiguity and doubt. But her stroking him from behind on the thigh, saying—it's all right now. We should sleep together.

Later, still when she was sleeping, he would read from her diary—

One day we'll see a large body of water called a sea in the pages.

Then in the margins of the notebook she'd scribbled:
The sky will come down. Five monks walking along the tracks.

Male-heat, she had cooed, recording these words as well, though the man did not understand he was reading the story of her past and his future.

day five

The morning she left the monastery she had tied together a bundle of her father's letters, this notebook, some cooking recipes, a list of the monks' sayings she'd gathered since childhood. How long ago? The fact that she knew she was dying, even as she packed her bag and prepared to leave her father. Returning now. But through which passage? Whose was this voice speaking from the road? And why did she let the stranger follow her so mindlessly.

The years of travel—our first breakfast under the trees—her father had grinned after asking her to find the road where his own journey began.

This is how she had answered to her father—

I will go out and see what the roads are doing, what the trees are saying, where the wind is going, Father, she had promised him that day.

He had been standing in the field after reciting the wedding vows for the women without names.

She had cut her father's hair then. Perfect. All of the imagined cities. But her father wished she had packed more apples, better prepared herself for the road.

The memory already fading, though she knew it was her illness as well as her clothes that had seduced the soldiers. She'd painted a heart on his face with deep rouge lipstick, then wiped it away with a kiss. She had held the scissors closer to his throat as the tanks crossed the hills that last day in the monastery. Boys in white uniforms running across the field toward the small fortified walls. She held the scissors close to her father's throat,

as if to diminish the desire while unbuttoning her shirt for all of those soldiers, boys really, later in the night.

This, too, will become a revision of memory, her father reminded her.

The soldiers glimpsed the provocation, her seduction, her simple want reflected in the mirror of the monastery's great hall. They had assumed the gesture as one intended not for her father, but for them.

While the one-eyed boy hovered above them on the balcony, issued the warning, and this is when she knew.

Ours is a vanishing story, the boy said as she closed the notebook tonight.

Though we are not in the least way lonely.

day six

These bright colored skulls. On a postcard from childhood she had saved in order to remember her life. Or the place of it. The monks' home. Over the hills, on the other side of God's face, her father had told her as a girl. But his death was less an issue of memory than revision. That bothered her. Oddly. O father—where has my voice gone? Did she say this to him when she last saw her father? There was his dream, and her dream to come, but she didn't tell this man. Couldn't. She watches his facial



muscles, his motionless eyes, a mocking smile as the train takes them further into the darkness. What did she really know about him, or the self she had invented for him in order to reveal this story? His advances, gestures, habits—his speech and dreams she now recorded in the notebooks. A ghost or shadow, golden leaves, an outdoor cafe by the pond. The face of her mother then. As if she were charting a map of their world on this man's body. A post-card she had mailed to herself in childhood from a garden district. Her mother and father standing by a pond. She stuck it in his pocket.

She had written: My body is a map of their world.

When he awoke, she showed him the scars to prove it.

day seven

Before again ascending the mountains the train passed by a series of burnt villages and birch forests to the north and south of the tracks. The woman realized she didn't want him to see this, didn't want to lose this man beside her now that she had finally entered the wilderness. She was, after all, searching for human clues as to how her father had discovered the one-eyed boy along the road....The road looked very much the way her father had described it, even in the aftermath of the soldiers' ravage.

Since power always fascinated father, he finally rejected it all together, she now told the man, looking up with a postured sadness. Crouched on her bed in the corner of the coupe, she began to read from her father's letters with her glasses on. The

man had not seen her in her glasses and her age was clearer this way. What he witnessed in her face while she read resembled something like a raw completion, a temptation and a washing of rain. He couldn't put his finger on it exactly. Though he now remembered the night before she had told him she was his sister. One of many you've invented to balance the frailty of your own life, she'd said, requesting that he steady her leg as she inserted the needle.

Why a sister? he'd asked.

Why does longing change you so? she'd retorted as he laid out her bedding.

At the last station, a group of school boys had boarded the train and the two were no longer alone. Sixty boys, he'd counted them, were huddled about the floor, cramped in the corners, sleeping almost on top of one another. White birch and sycamores flooding the hillside as the angel descended among them, and though she recognized the one-eyed one, she said nothing. Though she avoided his advances. The boy stared at her as she spotted a corpse on the tracks as the train whizzed past....A hard, blinding snow out the window. Her hands too small to touch the boy's sorrow, so she played with lobe of the man's ear instead. He is my lover, you know? she whispered to him later as the man began to doze.

The boy nodded.

That she was approaching the edge of the boy's terror encouraged her.

Not my advance you reject, but any sign that might threaten your father's story?

You are my angel?

I am the one you follow.

Then you should know these things.

The boy withdrew his breath.

Why do you think so much depends on desire, Thomas?
You are Thomas, are you not? she asked the ghosted one.

She closed the notebook.

The boy said nothing, took the notebook to the head of the coupe. The heat from the coal-burning stove now left a heavy sweat in the air.

What will it come to? she wondered.

The soldiers checked and returned their papers at the next station, only wanting the stranger's good cigarettes. Not even curious when she demanded her book.

She peed in the snow as the soldiers mocked her, kicking the pages into the snow while the man cowered on the ground beside her.

The train is leaving without you! one of the soldier's clapped.

Is that all you can say?

The snow frightens us! the men cried in chorus.

There will be another train....

Everything is distant this morning.

Yes, the soldiers agreed.

The men examined her face, each guessing what the face might eventually become, and afterwards, they drunkenly began to fire their guns in the air.

A place we have come to and I cannot leave, cannot remain, she said.

He helped her pick up the pages as a second train pulled into the station.

She glanced over her shoulder.

The boy rolling dice by the tracks.

Thankful that he had decided to escort her.

day eight

If there were time, she thought. The man looked at her face and tried to understand the changes. I really didn't believe the music, she said. The first time I heard it. This was her own music, he knew. The quality of the voice. Noble fir, Christmas lights, the face of another as she lay beside him now, trying to recall the balloons, a windmill, the ancient texts she had seen in the library as a child. If there was time, she thought.

Hand and nose, ears and neck. The coachman laughing as the ferry crossed the river. Her meditation on a desert. Because she knew. Go to the left, she told him. When you find my home. You'll find tomatoes, bananas, this moon. The history made blood. The sun will become an object.

Her hands trembling when he caressed her.

He denied it, but he knew.

The crisp blue marks on her throat, the cancer growing.

day nine

Think of the tracks as a metaphor for our time together, she uttered into his open mouth while it was still dark out, still early the next morning. Like refugees we, too, will be made to exit this train. The soldiers will make their way, carry on between themselves, drink from a case of vodka. I saw them. The Lieutenant will ask us kindly to exit, treating us well, distributing

oranges among us.

The man stepped onto the platform confused and lonely in the ancient light.

How do you know?

Think of the human signs as ambivalent even, she continued, brushing back her hair, then searching in her purse for the needle. Bones or scores, the way there used to be a music for desire, a clear delineation, direction for the body, she almost hummed as they stepped from the train and began to walk into the field....She caressed his fingers, played with the brim of a red hat she saw and retrieved by the tracks. Coughing blood as they trailed further on toward the graves.

As they came into the graveyard she glanced at herself in the mirror of an abandoned tractor, told him she felt pretty again.

Later, with the rising of the sun, he saw the Gypsy wagons in the clearing. Then, she saw them. The wagons scattered about the muddy and partially snowed-over pastures. The roaming bands of men they met later by the river did not introduce themselves, though these men too thought she was pretty, and he felt uncomfortable when she began to drink and skate with them on the iced over river. As if they had revived her, though he couldn't deny his own fear. The Gypsy's grey and black cloth tents spread out along the forbidden countryside, the contaminated and frozen river. White skies floating over the water as he sat by one of the fires and watched her.

There is no more drinking water, he thought, taking out her notebook and beginning to thumb through the pages.

But there is, one of the men answered, handing him a canteen as another crawled from under one of the cloth tents which now appeared to be made of flesh.

Silly! She walked up behind him, took the canteen from his hand.

You were in front of me a moment ago, weren't you? he asked her.

We've moved our loss into the miraculous, do you know that? But now you're unsure if even this is possible? she responded, drinking from the canteen.

It is wine.

And you're already drunk, he said pulling the canteen back from her.

Do you think this boy is real? she laughed.

She appeared younger to him now. His own face had whitened whereas her's had a pink glow. A dime, a torn note, someone to love? she teased, pushing one of the Gypsy boys back as he stumbled over the bones of a cow. In this world where we begin, she sighed, mimicking the boy's voice—You doubt love is even possible. A way out of the plot. See?

No I don't see.

Let me tell you how we should do it then!

She blushed, visibly disturbed by his impatience, rearing back her head as she grabbed the Gypsy boy with red hair and kissed him.

That road on the edge where the hills drop meditatively. Don't look at my neck dammit! The stark valleys out there. That black line of wrecked boxcars, the parallel train tracks that move into the farmlands. Scarecrows. Gray earth. More scarecrows. Another past, do you see it?

No.

She kissed the boy a second time.

Now do you see?

These are our angels.

She pointed at the frozen lupine, acacia, the bird of paradise—the rolling snows across the hills and the strange manifestation of a brief winter sun. You stopped believing in journeys

long ago, didn't you? She paused, turned and tipped her hat to the boy, winked at the children gathering around the loneliness of the fields.

Is that why you followed me? Because you are in need of redemption?

Then who are these children? And why are they singing?

Look at me, she chided.

He touched the black knot of her throat and she edged toward him.

The question for us ends on the trains where there can be no real ending. Look at me, really look at me! she chided him once more.

I will not look.

Because you see your own death in me, she laughed.

Two stark figures walking away from the field on Christmas morning.

day ten

After returning to the train with water, he had imagined this story too, even before she wrote it: He had left the monastery grounds. And she had followed. A walking crow hovered on the shore by a crippled pigeon. Lead the way, or follow me, she'd said. The monks' hands were not the same either—after dipping them in the water, she went on. My Father wanted to slap me for kissing each of their mouths. But I was only a girl, and it was too late to stop the journey....

From a basket of rumpled laundry, the birds flew out! Mother waiting, she went on. But that morning mother had decided to wait no longer. She would no longer wait for my father, and she left the monastery.

By the terrace, a rock garden—Mother waiting. Virgins slept separate from the monks. Mother had visited Father from the Convent, helped him at first decipher, later write-out the monks' sayings. Mika, the blind. Virgil, the laughing monk. Ezekiel, the teller. Sisdal, the Gnostic without hands. Thomas, the boy-angel. Peter, the apostle who falls from the sky to greet the millennium.... You will find it all here, in my notebook, she told him. I have come all of this way to find them again.

But when you choose, will you choose me? she then asked.

Her mother's suicide on this, the last and first day of her own womanhood.

If he had only known.

He wished he had known when he found the page and again remembered the dream as he first experienced it.

day eleven

...Such a myth we want to tell. Surely you see. One full of wonder, conviction, belief, even 'honesty', if you will allow me to use this word? I have seen you in Constantinople, Rome, in Babylon.

Your face written on the white pillow as your hands speak, moving through the dry air, this windless, winter afternoon. The way we tried to restore the love, mere travelers, having been given a train. Places of destruction, despair—then the normal sounds of footsteps along the river. This flock of black crows. See their faces squawking. The blue heron and white egret in the shallow? Everything returning to where I once began. This movement backward and forward in time. This is how I know you. The fresh track along the river which ceases to be a river because you don't yet see it. Here you are. Soon we will escort you there. To this haven where our voices take refuge, come in from the snow. I welcome your problem. Because once there was a river, and then there wasn't.

In the next dream her father had told him this.

day twelve

The improvisational order of her life made history seem a local thing on the trains. Snapshots of a blooded stone, a burning horse, a talking fish.... A real face emerged from the window as they crossed the border, but this wasn't her face. No love of death or dying. Don't go to the toilet yet, she requested, somewhat vulnerable in this hour of the morning. I still need to come back to it, come back to your dream, its story, that is....she said as he stood in the corridor. I've been hiding this love for a long time, she went on, drawing the syringe from the almost empty vial. I remember the yard, a line of oak trees, orchids in the kitchen one

crisp autumn afternoon. The monks dipping water from the well. A truth that perhaps could be named, yet the hero becomes frightened. Are you still frightened?

No.

The ghost of the journey called to you, she said. This is how you should understand me, as I understand you. My father searching the road for an unknown love. That unknown may be your face for me.

No.

She placed her hands on his hips, and it was this that he loved most about her. The gesture, bird-like. He sat, looked out the window. A holy place—transformed, a plural time, but a singular event in the way she told it—a landscape of rich monasteries and fields, mosaic glass, maybe a harsh history, though he was unsure because of his hunger.

When we resume our talk among the rats and rain, she said. Can you see it?

No.

The child in the story you'll become, she said quietly. When you meet the boy, remember his name is Thomas.

We have met.

No, she instructed. This is more than a dream.

As my Father did before. You think this is the morphine, but it is not.

How am I to understand this?

It must understand you first, she smiled.

He helped her to the cot where she slept until evening.

day thirteen

In her own dream that night she had followed the famous one's ghost which had grown weary after so many years of having its body falsely displayed. This was not her ghost or her story, but she knew him well. She was weary as she entered the dream, and she sensed the accidental nonsense of her own being. She followed the ghost across Red Square in a chilled rain without an umbrella and soon noticed the slight limp he harbored in his bad leg. The Kremlin lights low, but she was sure it was him. The best is the enemy of the good one, he sighed, grinning backwards as she approached.

He paused by the corner of the Armory.

A smell from the streets rising up like the fathering place of ancient names—the ghost coughed then. Even my closest comrades have been broken, hauled away piece by piece as mere shattered stone and statue.

Are you searching for them? she asked.

She awaited his answer, suddenly wanting to hold his sex so that he might consume her as he had consumed the millions before her.

The ghost glanced down the boulevard, seemingly surprised by the desolate streets and stores. She felt his presence and yet no contact. Even the rats scuttled away as he window-shopped for a new cap. But there were no caps in the shop windows. Or perhaps they were all the wrong size.

Fleeing toward the metro, the seizures which began in her lungs moved toward her heart. A longing for those lost in this empire. My dead among them, she whispered into the wet air, yet the air did not answer.

O Father, where has my voice gone, she began to cry.

They crossed the prison yard, and neither was frightened. She wanted to ask the ghost where her father had vanished.

Wandering in and out of history like this makes you feel cold?

The rain has a touch of snow to it, she responded.

Now he is running from her toward Patriarch's Ponds. She sees the faces of her dead and realizes it is Tuesday. Still, she chases after him. He stops to catch his breath by Pushkin's Monument, begins to read the plaque. His coat torn. Come home! she shouts, near hysteria, realizing even the stories hold a tradition which will outlive her. She hears him cawing, or maybe moaning, like a drunk who can drink no more but still cannot sleep.

Am I boring you? he suddenly asks as she approaches the foot of the statue the ghost has now climbed.

No, you're not boring me, she sighs, reaching up to touch his hand.

But we should eat something.

Yes, it's true, he says. The whole nation is hungry.

The one-eyed boy and the crow watching....

day fourteen

You want something definite from me, she remarked that morning after waking and finding the boy's voice again inside her—his eyes staring at her from the book....But I prefer something indefinite. There was an arrogance to her tone, a rage unfamiliar to the man. He had put his mouth on hers while sleeping, held her elbows tightly in his hands and entered her this way. Not so much out of want, but rather as a pretext. There was no use trying to explain. He watched her thin shoulders bend toward the window as she sat up, nudged him away, the way a damaged child might push away her father. She took out her notebook and began to write down the dream. No legend between us, Father? This rupturing of the senses—between the spirit and the flesh. What is history if we never understand?

You came in me?

No.

As if what was happening in her body was perfectly normal, he thought.

Outside the latrine he had found her puking that night, brought her back to the coupe, sliding the needle into her arm himself though with difficulty as there were few places of unscarred flesh. Then he had taken her.

It's the morphine, she now joked, smoking his last cigarette, again writing so that he would be unable to forget.

Who is the soldier who asks for forgiveness after winning this battle? Are you that one....?

Read it. In your own language, she said, handing him the note.

I heard his voice.

Whose voice?

The boy's. When we were both quite drunk and flirting
at the cafe I heard it the first time, he said to the dying woman.

She smiled and directed his attention to the window.

Do you see him then?

What?

The boy—walking there.

He stepped to the window and saw nothing but snow.

Parables, she suggested then. Everything that happens in
your life.

In what way is the boy a parable?

The way you want to enter what has thwarted you in my
body for instance.

I have only wanted...

The desire to say God, that too is a parable.

And the morphine....

Or the story as self, she then laughed, tilting her head,
taking a long draw from the cigarette without inhaling it.

You too want my mouth sometimes? he thought to ask—
though he didn't.

And this issue of a culture's metaphor, the significance of
any life. The winter birds muttering like angels, she muttered in
the darkness of the coupe, looking up to the ceiling as if a flock
descended upon her.

You've died a thousand times on this road, just as I have.
Yes.

I am not who you think.

They slept together in a small town not far from the next station. Waited out the blizzard. The few guests at the hotel, even the boy, who came in the middle of the night, thought of them as husband and wife when he saw them cuddled there.

Look at the photograph.



day fifteen

The story had no ending, so when he saw her writing the opening paragraph of her biography that afternoon, he wasn't really surprised. Her birth in the mountains, the monks who had followed her father there, her mother's later suicide in Moscow—these were only some of the details she had written out for him. What was the source of his pain tonight, though? The edge of a spoon she balanced on her nose. Monks' voices, champagne corks popping—the magic spells uttered in the hallway the night before in a hotel room?

Searching leads to middle ground, not an end. Father once told me that, she said, smiling.

Together our lives will be almost indistinguishable someday. Yet a chronicle shaping.

He wanted to hold her, hold any story of her past which would unfold on the page while he watched her body vanish. If it was what she wanted.

I have no answers, she laughed. I'm simply in love. I feel almost free now.

He decided to tell her the truth, and then curiously felt oblivious to his own body.

day sixteen

A new plot, but which one? the woman inquired as he fought his way through the refugees and secured them seats on an uncharted cargo freighter. Since the soldiers had again stopped all movement within the territory, it had been difficult to find someone to bribe at the station. She had been sleeping so deeply that he had had to carry her from the room, and she was delirious upon awakening. Worse, the freighter would be another without a known destination, and he feared for her. He feared the snow as well today, the way the whiteness appeared to go on without measure in the dark morning starlight. The background of our lives is incidental now, you see? she'd said as he carried her onto the freighter. Even the one-eyed boy finds such things to be difficult. Whenever, for instance—when we were children—I showed him my notebook, one of the pages would vanish!

The man looked about and suddenly noticed that no one, no one was on the platform as he helped her onto the train.

Where did they go?

It just proves that my experience is not yours, she quipped, seeing the surprise in his eyes as he stared down at the snow between the tracks.

Can't you see I am trying to help you?

Look at the crows. They will help you.

Still, you are in here as well, she went on as he leaned her against an empty crate of oranges inside the freighter. A second variant of you, she clipped, tapping the notebook, which further irritated and confused him.

Where have they all gone?

The people?

Pay attention to the crows instead, she warned him.

Danger in the crows' eye.

The sun burst through the clouds. She shrugged her shoulders and drank from a thimble full of vodka. Has the freighter pulled away from the station?

You've taken too much.

What are you saying?

She shrugged her shoulders again, refilled the thimble, cursed the crow that landed by her feet.

Like the evacuation of 1917. It is not a story intended for us, but perhaps we were there.

Winter birds. Huge black crows cawing in the freighter's engine, a cawing sound as she lies her head on his lap, pretending to herself that she is only 17 and with her first lover, the one-eyed boy, whom the villagers all called a mysterious saint.

He lived in the forest, and I was beautiful then, she now told the man.

day seventeen

Whoever comes into my mind finds the beginning of a story, she had written in the notebook as a girl. And this is how she had begun her life as well, as if writing her own future. An excuse for living, she told the man today, standing by a snowed-over corpse, rolling up her shirt-sleeve in the snow, pitting the needle to the base of her wrist. That's what you want. An excuse for living? Or finishing things in the present tense?

The man's acrimonious grin, his somewhat distant

expression this morning. All night drinking. No one understood. Her passion. But then there had never been time to consider her own feelings. Sometimes a face vividly becomes a story, he agreed. One possessed with the mythic quality of touch, or smell. This is what's most difficult for you, she went on as he spat, put out the cigarette and pounded the road with his forehead, as if trying to crush it to death.

The choice is yours.

day eighteen

The future held a peculiar significance for her afterwards. After kissing this man while he slept. Colors, smells, locale, perhaps tension in the weather. She remembers the boy laughing, crossing the hill to the monastery when she was still herself a girl—the first time she had seen her father's collection of letters. As if Father were shaping each name into a country, she told the man earlier, taking his hand, strolling up and back down the corridor of the train all day. A dead face she saw beside him in the corridor then, her mother's—though the memory of her mother's face had begun to fade long ago....The boy had taken her hand too—though she didn't know how to explain this to the priest—led her to the lake where the monks were gathering walnuts and acorns. Something involving a conflict, yet she couldn't quite touch it and didn't know how her life would actually end now. Sticks and stones may break my bones, the monks had chanted jovially.

The boy later became an angel, but I and the boy had plotted out the distance to Lake Baikal together, she'd said, trying to describe it....Walked there in the spring from the monastery. And the boy put his hands in the still frozen water. Fish. The eyes of the fish were different afterward and the boy then miraculously withdrew one of the fish from his mouth! A large sea bass unknown to the lake....and then I saw my mother's dead body float to the shore.

A child discovers life and death, an encounter with fish. Walking back to her father's room, the boy had informed her how he would die while drawing still more fish from his mouth.

The fish flew into the sky as white birds.

I will never forgive you if you die!

Forgiveness is perhaps the greatest thing we can do.

His eyes different that morning, the fish flying....

But now, your eyes are different too, she told the man when he awoke, though while you slept I entered your body as you have entered mine.

day nineteen

You'll think of the hills sometimes, the purpose for leaving that which was known to you. Fragments of memory weaved, the candle in your bedroom, the monk's bed, which will be your bed—my hands.... The way I touch you now. You'll come to see my hands, or

hear them, as a voice from which your own identities arise. A personal history, yet no one can tell you this—the pain in your groin, the unkempt desire. Try to tell me why we die. Sporadic gunfire in the hills. A shifting sense of time: you will also move on, as my father, as the other Gnostics in the story. Blue and yellow, a leaf you hold tight. On the trains with another one day, a remembrance of our day, this page, this chronicle of your own life divided. Cleanly wipe your oak table, take up the parchment. Hear their voices below. A squirrel runs by, you see a deer in the field, your angel, a fox, a blue jay. You are older, but you are almost like a woman. Call you a child, if you like, promiscuous. Neck flush to a white collar. Reading the liturgies, counting balloons. This household on the mountain, I love you. A place in my mind. This is why I write, forming an angle of triumph for the piano I will no longer play—the candle, a chair, my spoiled window looking out.

This was the first of her letters the man had translated.

day twenty

When she translated the next letter for him herself, the man began to cry. Just the nearness of her body, even the cancer of it, was enough for him to deny everything he had learned, that he had once believed in. All of his education, the preparation for this withdrawal from the world because he knew this world too was dying. That is why he had lit the candles and crossed the river. He knew she was his angel when she ran to him that first day.

Contained clues, a dream whispered again, red and hidden. The face of his son the morning he left the Abbey. Her voice demanded inhabitation, a pronounced tongue. This is how he described her in his own letter to the boy: If this is love, it has no middle. Only beginning and end. And these words, too, frightened the man for she had written them in the notebook before him.

Why not? she proposed, so confident in equations that afternoon after climbing into the red caboose. While he was trembling, afraid to even talk—having shown her his letter. Listening to her voice only, her mouth contorting as she read and paced the caboose. What if he confessed everything here? How he wanted to take her from behind. On the road in the snow with her dress still on to let the wind take their shadows and die there together. Cigarettes and cognac that night. The caboose cold, empty—the forlorn and leafless trees along the tracks and the red caboose flew into the open expanse of endless hills and mountains and shadowed skies. As if these trains were without time or history.

Nonetheless, it was true. Each evening it grew clearer to him. Blue moon on the horizon as they moved through the darkness and he felt as if they were flying. The stars sudden and fractured along the darkness. The letters from her father. Then the letters to him. This letter he had written to his own son now. All vanishing. How many times did she cry out from the pain? He saw a village to the south of the tracks burning, a flock of crows flying toward the train. And then, he too was flying. Smoke across the highway as he glanced down, witnessed his own removal—yet participation in all of this vanishing as the hills grew smaller and the fields melted into the checkered patterns of a chess board played out by crows.

With time you will become obsessed to uncover the passage that sculpted into her a delicate formation, pure as a revolution's fiction but still enveloped in its anatomy, the one-eyed boy

grinned, flying beside him now....

What does a body mean that can contain a concept?

I don't know, the boy answered, spitting—extended his burning wings as they lit up the fractured darkness of the sky.

(She slid the needle into her leg.)

He watched the lights escaping down the tracks....

p.s. I love you, he scribbled on her arm in black ink.

day twenty one

The ghost—its history rose of the stone—like the cobblestone bridge she had once crossed at the age of twelve. They were talking about Jesus on the road, and she had started to fear his presence. An outsider—choosing between place and journey—one of the monks had touched her on the shoulder then. As if to acknowledge the bleached-out huts, the domed church of worshipers—the Old Believers behind her. To travel, first of all, is to change one's body, the monk instructed her. Why did she remember this now? Designated hours for looking at her shoes. Or a dialogue with the world she felt occurring whenever she touched this man beside her on the train.

Tell us what we already know, she whispered.

The boy looked about.

Tell us the truth of what we already know.

A shadow falling on the door to the tracks.

day twenty two

The strange love that provoked him the next morning. He had two great loves before her, he was sure—but had she become the third?

Those who love must share the fate of those they love. He had awoken on the train without her, surrounded by strangers, rocking toward the south and the small villages mapped across the Black Earth region. After searching in the snow. Walking for hours in a dream until the ghost took his hand and led him back to the station. A monk had paid his fare, then stood on the platform watching him move away through the window with the brown bundle of warm potatoes and carrots the monk had prepared for the man.

It dawned on him as the rumbling of the tracks stirred him and he saw the passing land covered in a bright light from below, a curious blackness layered above in what he had first thought of as an horizon. But it wasn't the horizon. Bathed in light from the ground, a heavenly whiteness ascending, as if clouds—though maybe it was only the dawn's east sun cutting through the thin line of darkness inhabited by a sky and no stars or moon or apparent heavenly bodies. His body drenched in sweat as he sat up on the cot, buzzed from the awkwardness of all the sleeping monks around him.

Forgiveness, the one-eyed boy had whispered to him while waking. Forgiveness is perhaps the greatest thing we can do?

Talking sudden and wild as he shook the others awake, spitting, trying to make them understand what he could not understand. He flung her letters before them, pointing at the words written over the pages as the monks turned into the small figures of divided rivers and roads, the pieces of sparkling water on

a bridge, the opening eyes of a half-white sky populated by angels. What does it mean! he cried, surveying the hills and fields and blue ripeness coning upward in a spiral, in a vector through the passing landscape of the train's window. The monks joked and slapped their knees, offered him their wine. He wanted to cry, and they laughed harder at the sight of his tears. Even the girl without any shoes, shivering by herself in the dark coupe began to mock him. Though as she listened, her mouth contorted oddly, and it was clear in this way that she loved him, that she was the same girl they'd met in the church praying after the soldiers were done with her. She clasped her hands over her eyes and shouted—Of course! You'll have to meet her death then, like the opening sky, the cone, the sparkling tears of light on the bridge. Return, only sideways, in the dawn's brightness that splits and flowers the night!

The monks continued to poke fun, growing drunk and merry in the darkness of the coupe. The girl suddenly grabbed his shoulders, pulled the man to her mouth, stared back at his trembling throat eaten away by cancer. Of course! she moaned, taking a crumpled letter into her hand as it began to vanish. I'll show you! Here. Here! In the next paragraph. You see it, don't you? Here, where it is written that you sleep in her body!

Without even a blouse to cover her small breasts, pounding the man's chest. The hole in the vase of flowers, the lightning rod! the girl cried. There! What else could it mean? This silence between things! Listen. Silence is the language of God. Remember silence is the language of God!

What do you know! he asked.

Kiss me.

What do you know!

Kiss me. How strange. And you've only just awoken!

Her tongue in his mouth. He wondered if this girl, this emaciated, naked girl had stumbled into his dream? The drunk

monks began to pull the two apart, pushing them back to their separate cots on the floor of the train.

The black earth and snow and the ruined villages rushing by. How could this girl answer in all of their voices? The flagrant flood of sky pouring through the window over her white belly, her taut breasts. And this attracted the man, too, as the train pulled into the next station.

The Desire Notebooks, she muttered. And though he could not yet understand, he heard her say, Yes, that's where you are going. The passage the boy gestured you toward. The Desire Notebooks, of course.

This is how he later came to name her letters.

day twenty three

On the next train, he praised her. They ate and joked about his dreams—eating her so called sexual food. Dried sausage he'd traded his watch for at the market where the last train finally pulled into a station. Afterwards, a chunk of rotted cheese, a bottle of vodka. Everyone taking off their clothes in the fourth-class coupe. In front of one another the boys and girls giggling, spreading their bedding across the floor, grinning—everyone nodding their heads at having caught another train.

Viva la revolution! the one little girls cried.

And the man savored the smell of her hand on his mouth.

Where will you go? she asked him.
You don't know?
Power of the unseen.
White gulls flying past in the white fields.
PS. We love you.

day twenty four

As for herself, she was sick of sleep. Of wanting. And then, there was the death-walk left for her each night on these trains. But the stranger secrets her father had promised. Walking beyond the man as he slept on the floor tonight....Always saying the wrong thing. She didn't know how to talk to him. Yet even this awkwardness became a part of her meditation. Why has he appeared, Father? The splitting image of you as a young man....She no longer doubted it. Can you imagine me when you sleep? she had asked him that morning, the pain restricting her throat, the cancer spreading through her breasts. She could feel it like an unknown person moving inside her body....As if she were alone when she spoke to him, though. Celebrate the transparent jealousy as a companion to love. Love—the taste that disturbs, she said as she studied the blue hills.

She tiptoed in the darkness, careful not to disturb him now.

In the countryside they are slaughtering horses for meat, she whispered. But no one panics....

She slid her tongue into his sleeping mouth. He had a

funny way of sleeping with his mouth open, sometimes mumbling about the snow. Her neck was bruised swollen, almost too swollen to speak. She glanced at it in the window's reflection. A slight sliver of turquoise moon. She thought of the monk in the next village who could bring terror from a stone. He will be waiting.

She felt herself dying.

How could I not love you? she said in a low, singsong voice, edging away from the man as he turned, brushing up against her unfinished letters now open and scattered on the floor about him.

I wanted to write you in this dream, she cooed—as if she believed the words would actually enter the dream:

Sheer black soil. Or a bruise as black as the one on your lover's collar bone. Wooden carts of hay pulled by horses. White birch trees with black spots, too. A huge black owl in the branches. A turquoise moon. Five monks walking to the sea. This is the country I remember. One day you will be among them....

I could have given you everything in another world, she then whispered, writing afterwards in the notebook—I'm too sick to have your child.

She combed her hair, stared past at the boy with only one eye who had managed, somehow, to again find her here. He lingered in the hallway by the open door of the coupe.

Tell me the truth? the boy asked, coughing as he spoke. Are you afraid of dying?

What else is love after all?

Well yes, there is grief, he answered.

You need to sleep, the boy then said, shifting his weight to the side of his good eye.

Sleep. Unbuttoning her shirt. I need you to see this. She turned back to the man. The hole in the mirror, sleep—she said, exposing herself.

Where will your father be this morning with the roads all white? The boy grinned.

Whiteness, this primitive calm, she cooed, stooping by his elbow.

They are talking about revolution in the next coupe....The boy stepped from the corridor.

Do I bore you?

Do you bore me? No, you don't bore me, the boy laughed.

How long has it been since I have really slept?

You have not slept in too long, the one-eyed boy responded.

Blackness, an erratic calm.

Yes, the boy answered.

Of course I love you, she warned, stooping nearer to his face. But what's the difference between love and need.

Aren't you hungry?

Yes. We are both hungry.

Are you the one who will meet him when I die? the woman inquired.

Yes, I am the one who was chosen, the boy grinned.

Why could she no longer taste her hunger? And why had this train stopped. Tonight with his sex inside her. Was there an act to redemption she couldn't remember?

Sex, the beginning of what becomes sleep?

Mercy, the boy whispered. Show yourself some mercy.

Outside the deserted station she watched a lone soldier

carve out the insides of a dog and began to cry.

But when she looked behind her the boy was gone.

day twenty five

Do people ever really change? the first monk asked.

Does one thing lead to another? responded the second.

What constitutes the myth of a life? the third monk inquired.

Who is the lover who tells your story? the boy asked the first monk.

What does memory, the past, mean? the fourth monk replied.

Where are the hidden ghosts of your life? Peter, the Apostle, now wanted to know.

And where do the imaginary and the real meet—or do they? the last of the monks interrupted as the five continued down the road.

day twenty six

While the peasant woman was lying on the operating table, still under the knife, the lights grew dimmer and dimmer, until finally the man couldn't see her arteries at all, could only feel her heart with his fingers. He had to leave her there until dawn when he discovered she was still miraculously alive. For the next three dreams, twelve monks were trapped under the earth without light or food or a lift to return them to what might be confusion in another spirit.

Seven volunteered to die to save the air for the others—the boy told him—these five monks who survive and roam our roads tonight.

A white sky, a love not experienced in the reckoning, the first monk grinned. And in the massive bakery the bread rots in the stove until the villagers in rage and despair break down the doors and take what rot they can find! But what can we do about it?

The man simply watched and listened at first, a witness to these strange events and unaware of whether he was dreaming or being dreamed.

Each night in the darkness they wait without electricity. As my mistress waits for you outside, in the train. But you have picked the peasant woman who spent the night with her body open? the one-eyed boy asked.

The man had met her in the ration line and at once realized the woman had been sent to him. He saw the haggard face, recognized her eyes. Having renounced the world, he thought he understood these things. She had the black eyes of a crow—of one who had been opened and entered by death. We're all hungry, she'd said, a bird flying from her throat as she began to sing. But

you cannot taste your hunger?

Yes, I can taste my hunger.

Then I will come with you.

Though he had no food he invited her back to his room.

At least we can share the warmth from the kerosene stove the ghost has given me, he told her.

Why do you call the boy a ghost?

Along the roads the snows were accumulating. Crows amassing on the roof of the church. He could see the train in the distance beyond the road and wondered where the woman had vanished.

What's your name? he asked this woman.

This love hurts and seeing it makes me visible, she said as they walked further along the path and the monks followed.

She trailed him through the flock of crows as the sky grew blacker and they both heard the monks beginning to chant. As they strolled along the road past the miners and hungry villagers, he sensed her suspicion by the way she trailed a few short steps behind—though perhaps so that she might hear the monks chanting, he thought.

Who are you? he again asked.

What?

Your name?

We are without names here.

When they reached the room, she opened the door and invited him in, but he did not consider this strange.

She removed her shawl and he saw that her hair was completely white, combed neatly behind her ears. Once she entered, she sat on the floor in a separate corner of the room. The man found himself staring at her legs.

Will you not tell me your name? he inquired once more.

I woke up without it. The winter can do that, you know.

He walked over, touched her shoulder and felt the pulse of her blood in his veins.

I fear for my Mother, she smiled then, fingering the sleeve of his shirt.

Where is your mother?

Across the river. Where our Father died.

Why are you staring at my legs? she asked while untying his shoes.

She crossed her legs and laughed in a deep voice as another bird flew from her throat.

Did I tell you I think of you every night, make a small prayer?

But you do not know me.

You are new here, true. But all the same, I make a small prayer. But why do I fear for my mother?

The woman glanced at the crows gathering on the window seal now. Do you know these crows?

I want to know what happened to you on the operating table.

It's all just a dream, she said—demurely, as if she had come from good-breeding. The operation, it was like a show on TV. You have seen them, shows on TV.

He took and cupped her icy hand. Poured her a glass of vodka, heard the voices of the monks now laughing in the hallway.

What do you want from me? she said, sipping from the paper cup as the third bird flew up from her mouth and began a horrid squawking.

I know this is hard for you to understand.

Where do the birds come from?

He put a blanket over her legs to stop the shivering.

I thought maybe you could help me. You see, I do not

know where I am, or who I am.

Or who you are....In spite of your accent, I could love you—the third bird answered for her.

A woman on the trains, we were...

She waved one hand in the air, clutched the bird in her hand, chuckled—pointed at the largest crow on the window seal, the one trying to come in, pecking its beak against the glass.

Your name, dammit!

There are those in the hallway who have come for me. But one need not be so lonely when one talks to God.

She drank the vodka, stood to leave. I see you've deceived me.

What?

You are not a priest, and you want more than her body. But you do not even know who you are. How can you know where you are.

She walked to the door, again pointed to the crows.

You will find them someday.

His arms and legs were frozen. Yet when he found the letter the woman had left by the the door, he was suddenly aware of moving closer to her. She had written, *Every man when he finds himself becomes a myth and then his death is predictable. Which tense would you like to live in?*

Later, he closed his eyes and drank freely from the bottle.

Later still, he found the letter in her notebook.

day twenty seven

Nights of albino angels. The incarnation of another's life in his body. Perhaps a boy's face today, perhaps an old man's, though you are unsure? You are afraid, aren't you? she'd said, turning toward him by the tracks. An almost invisible crowd now, not unlike angels in the way the crows follow—she teased him as they walked along, sharing a cup of warm coffee a beggar had handed them at the station. A map, a river, a lamppost. In the next dream it will come to you that you are afraid of death—afraid of my dying, she went on, touching the ground after the train pulled into the station. He'd followed her sheepishly. Yet when you arrive there, you will find me there, just as you will find your own writing here, she said, tapping her fingers softly against the binding. Five short letters. Pressed between the pages. See? Each one will lead you to one of the monks. And here is my portrait. My vision of memory. But it is true that I love you. You can trust me, even if you don't understand....

Does one thing lead to another then? he asked.

Though she herself had lost faith in her body. As if the cancer might fall like apples, shape a belief, even if this were not the proper mix of words or images for her today. You have this secret you have told no one—the shame of family, of your childhood? she said, sauntering to the platform, not pushing but moving past the ghosted-looking soldiers. That you left your only son? And you do not think I know this, know it is part of why you love, why you are afraid to love me?

I have never been afraid to need you.

Yes.

But you are frightened by my death.

Crushed to death, as if lifted by Hercules.

day twenty eight

It came to her in the next day that if she stopped her meditation, perhaps she could let him possess her. The way a man wants to possess a woman. But she masturbated in the public latrine in order to sustain the desire while keeping him distant and fluent in her imagination. That way she thought, as she stared in the mirror, the absence of a personal history would better suit him on the next journey. In this search for a language where he could invent himself in a mythic world. One of trains. Trying to return each day—to the past, to her father's home, to the boy, to the grief of her mother. Her body would tell their story, and this man would someday name it. This priest who gauzed the wound with vodka now, kissed her throat and prayed. He had lit three more candles and crossed another river this morning. Once again the candles had remained lit. A mere fragment of the monks' journey, yet her journey carried the distances she had bore inside her as a child. Since only a child knows. Seek, sought, seen. The mysterious glory of creation. She saw her father's mouth opening around a spoon the first time he greeted the monks, a white light exploding about his face, and suddenly she sensed a love filling her own mouth in a way she had not experienced as the man reached the other side of the river, found the candles were still burning. A flat tire clattered across the road and she could hear horses clopping down a brick road.

A gunshot echoed from the hills.

We are closer, she said after again running to his side, out of breath yet exuberant.

They're rioting in the streets, and the soldiers don't care!

Our house is in chaos, but we have left the house.

We too are vanishing....

The river and heavy coats thrashed through wet dreams,
the dead leaving their smells behind....

This is what she had tried to tell him.

Ideology has exhausted itself in the plight of humanity.
Do you understand?

He trembled first, and then began to laugh.

You are almost like Father.

The voice of angels, the bells from the church, the parish-
ioners' muted singing.

Yes, the man had responded. He nudged her shoulder. I
hear them now.

day twenty nine

That evening, so calm and restful. As if the man had slept
for the first time when they camped in the field by a slow fire.

The one-eyed boy hovering above him as he slept.

The woman smiling.

Again the rituals of return.

white sky

The truth of her death would suggest more, yet he could not yet comprehend it. Anymore than he could understand the dreams. A doubling of his own past. A sky, whitened out like snow. Like a page. A vanishing countryside. And more wine as they travelled on their way. A history once overlooked is not forgotten, she said, shaking his arm and kissing him. Reveal facts, buried feelings...is this what she had whispered when he touched the blackness on her throat?

Daddy's little girl.

day thirty

Sleeping, she saw the signals on the water. A group of girls gathering around the edge of that place from where the light came. My life, she buzzed, working in the shame of it while danc-

ing with these spirited ones. She had stripped off her shirt so that they could more freely touch her. The problem is, you've forgotten how to love! she shouted across the fields to the man. He glanced up, and the gesture of his fluttering head revealed the changes. He could not really hear her. Nor was there any terror in his eyes and she wanted him to understand why. But it was useless, perhaps too early? Each time she came close to him she sensed they were no longer alone. Nonetheless, as if out of necessity, she touched him often, laughing as she motioned to her father who awaited her on the other side of the river.

The sweetness of being out of this world. A blue moon. These nomadic monks chanting.

The last time I was dressed like...these girls! she cried out. Like these lovely girls with stolen jewels around their throats, on their wrists, covering their beautiful fingers....I loved the darkness of my own hands, the way my mother would care for me and ask nothing. The way she walked invisibly into a room. We were loading stones in the back of a truck. In the monastery yard. All of the monks stopped and stared as the colonel brought father into his arms, clasped his hands over his face and mouth, snapped the neck....

On the day of harvest, we had spotted a blue moon!

Now these bare-chested girls so fair and strong and willing, possessing me in the darkness! she cried now—but again the man could not hear her. You see the signals on the water, the white light of a frog's mouth, the lizard in your own hands, these rats scuttling about the river, the lightning bugs flickering behind me as I dance....You will see me like this again...when you are no longer haunted by your loneliness.

He wrapped his cold hands around her thin waist, entered her with difficulty. She slid her hand into his mouth and withdrew a fish. Since she knew his anguish better than he knew

it himself.

A massacre in the fields, that is how they killed the monks. But you see they are with us still. They travel throughout time to places of destruction. The music of all the things we cannot understand. Yet they are with us.

She rushed to the river with the fish from his mouth, held the fish over her shoulders, gestured the other girls back. Kiss me! she sang, tossing the fish into the water where it safely swam to the other side.

The boy standing beside her father too, whistling. His arms on fire.

day thirty one

This much was true.

day thirty two

A source of the work? It's hard to say really, she'd nodded, spinning the coin on the table to the constant rumble beneath them. A dime, a torn note—someone to love? Maybe even your pacing back and forth between the scattered corpses whenever the

train stops. Anything that's revealed.

This was painful for her, to speak now, so he adjusted her collar.

Just what is it you want from me?

A smell of torment.

Here we are, at the moment of escapades, notebooks, a personal process. The body will disappear. You want a catharsis?

What if I put this gun to my head?

A bird on the rim of the caboose.

The tracks leading nowhere in particular, everywhere.

This is my source, she said. The tracks leading nowhere in particular, everywhere. This bird on the rim of the caboose.

day thirty three

The images that remained before her now: Coffee cups, cracked wooden bowls, a green Bible, a hammer on the chair. So why this fear? she asked. His fear perhaps. How had she smelled it? You may think I'm lying, she whispered, but to deny me, the memory of me even, would be less than a failure for you. This image of your's—what is it—perhaps your way of crossing the river as the morning again has?

If her father had compromised, if the angel had cried, she would have described the physical body as a journal page, a life embellished, completed. Like an object which is a word but is also human. The past remained before her. There was death, love, pain, and then loneliness, as in the utterance of something mirac-

ulous. For what would have been, had been.
She named this, her story.

day thirty four

A sound in the dark. She heard it this morning. That ebb to her father's voice. It suddenly reminded her of someone she used to be. Memory no longer of use. She thinks of a road map without streets. Her father rising in pain. When I lived there...she says. Who knows why we talk of death. Don't tell me it isn't worth the trouble, though. She sees the man's hand now. Trust me. I will be there tomorrow....When we depart the train. A draft in the coupe.

This priest who pretends to be her father as she is dying.
But he cannot take away the pain.

When I was a child.

Passion before I was dead, she cried.

day thirty five

Why else have you been brought together, other than to travel this loneliness together? the one-eyed boy mused. The boy

had followed them onto this last train, and he appeared older in the salmon-tainted light. He played with his hands.

Two figures seeing the outline of a church as you approach the city thinking this is enough? he grinned, gathering up his own courage. You see, all this suffering, too, is holy.

She glanced at the boy's shoulder, which was again burning.

She admired the elegance and grace of the gold spirals, too—the onion domes and curving white buttresses of the cupolas as they swished past in the window....The silence the church projected as the train's speed quickened. The monks walking along the tracks.

Even when you were a girl, I wished I had your shyness, the boy went on.

I am not shy.

God hears the shy ones talking! It's true.

My father would have preferred me that way.

The boy glanced down at his shoes. Your father loved you as you are.

But the way you take this man's arm when you stroll the corridors of trains and assure him of his place among us!

A common ground where we can all be together, someday.

That's why you've come back with me? she asked the boy.

The boy scooted closer to the woman.

The pain will cease soon.

When?

When you see where the birds are flying.

She felt the trembling in his chest, the heat in his arms. He cooed at the crows.

Later, when she saw where the birds were flying, she didn't cry.

A room inside me that has known you all along, the boy continued. Your sweetness and separation too.

She saw the people gathering, holding up their hands on the road before the tanks. Assembling in rows along the streets and empty stores.

There are days like this when you have to believe, the boy mused—believe in all creation.

The man sat up.

He could not quite yet see the boy.

Though he saw the tanks and armored cars along the road.

The boy gestured for the train to stop.

The crows circled the church's golden domes.

She trusted the blood in her mouth then.

It's snowing.

Yes, the train is stopping again, he observed.

When the shooting breaks out, remember you are in my house, she whispered.

day thirty six

As hard as she tried, she couldn't stop falling in love.
Every time she saw him sleeping like this....

As if for the first time.

The small hole that reflected the whole.

Her father had trained her for this.
You are but a child, love.

day thirty seven

Why this need to carry on? She had asked him this the next morning, not as a rebuttal but as if to get at the source of his anguish. A watch, a stone, the silver tea cup he kept in his bag. Your memory will begin to unfold in this way, many years later. A sign by the tracks. The angels, you too have again seen them on the road....I wish I could understand, he said. No train had come for two days, and now it was again approaching the time of departure. So the couple walked on.

To carry on? The closer I come to you, the more I forget the details of my own life, she'd said, stumbling along the tracks in the dawn light, rhetorically answering her own questions. As if the voice of her father had been interrupted during the night—and then again, found her here on the road home.

More than his voice, though. Yes, many voices.

Toward this you'll begin to walk in the pages someday—pretending to merely translate them, she said, mocking his fear as he began to read her final letter in the notebook.

Easier this way.

Her father had turned to the other monks in the fields as the soldiers' gunfire erupted around her. If she had been dying then, she would have asked her father the same question. Though she did not need to answer it now. The need to carry on? So you

spat, open your eyes. Oranges, tulips, a pencil!
All of this living spills into our love-stained mouths.



day thirty eight

Then return first, the boy uttered. These frozen weeds by the river. He had awoken, opened his eyes, realized he was no longer dreaming. Dry mouth, frozen acorn nuts, the blue-black ants by this station. But he knew there was a purpose to it. Just as he knew they'd finally arrived. By the look of the onlookers' faces at the iced-over station.

The one-eyed boy squinting near the latrine. An old man wearing his war-medals, waving an old Soviet flag. She took his hand and led him down the streets she had once known as a child. The one-eyed boy followed as a line of soldiers poured through the terminal gates, watched the lieutenants salute by the harbor.

Do you recognize him? she asked.

The boy?

Yes, he answered.

Then the dream is no longer dreaming you.

day thirty nine

Walking alone (sleepwalker?) into the future he could smell the end of their beginning. It came as if grown up in something unspoken by the silence. The monks' faces. The boy's hands. Like this woman's small bird voice in the dreams. (Cockatoo. Turtle dove. Bittern. Crow.) The lighter snow still covered the tracks. He wasn't sure how they had come here. Though he

remembered walking. Walking for hours or days in a complete whiteness. She was wearing a black scarf. If love had not been an option? she uttered.

Outside, it was growing lighter, too. The clock in the city square had its own agenda propelling him toward the room where she had once lived. Who had she been as a child that the beauty outlasted her body? Someday he would find the lost articles and order for meaning in her life. This longing in a girl's ballet costume, a list of prayers, these letters she had written to herself, a pair of white shoes. Early signs.

She would stroll beside him, as if dancing in a photograph. Where now? He had lost his patience to possess her.

Black scarf. Black eyes. His time in the park, later the zoo, the monastery, the room where she lived as a girl—and finally, here, in search of ourselves, she would say, as if laughing. Her listening a muted language. God on these streets in what has become an unknown naming between us.

It's time, she would tell him.

Are you ready?

Time?

Time to change your clothes, eat, shave.

He wasn't distracted by the sight of the hungry faces that gathered around to study her moral expectation.

Her body floating by in a torn coat, carrying an empty bag.

Traveling the myth they would become.

The life passing in solitude and then, beside her again.

day forty

In the monks' story, she didn't love him and only loved him. But by then, they had eaten her body and this did not matter.

day forty one

*.the passage of the crossing presented two tracks to memory
.her face had found itself in this benign image
.not time but the immeasurable landscape around them had required
the changes
.standing at the side of the highway, he glimpsed the outline of eyes
which had always alluded desire
.a creek, then a river, finally a sea
.what renewal? he asks, looking back into the background of her own
life
.animal law, the object of her father's love, my child
.two children running toward suspense
.because first there was a river and then there wasn't
.proposing the question
.skirting around the nowadays
.cities, journeys, desire...the way this drawing of my face would
always remind you*

This was the last thing she had written in the notebook.

day forty two

They had summoned him to the hospital. In this dream, it was true what she said: there were white boats on the water. The monks waited for him at the house. She was already becoming a ghost, a legend she would later betray floating up the staircase. The boy led him to an elevator. Together they travelled to the floor of death. Her father then took him past the other corpses, toward the vaulted coldness of the room.

The man was again frightened when he witnessed the bodies of the dead rising and falling from their beds. He requested to be excused. In the dream, however, she did not know herself. And she was not ready to die, to become one who traveled among the monks of time. Her body was not in the refrigerator. This relieved him. The first angel appeared, showed him down the hall to the lovers' bedroom. She was sleeping, her pulse vaguely noticeable. So there was his kiss, and he told her she was not dead.

The second angel had been aware of this all along. The third was dumbfounded. The fourth angel showed no surprise. Though she explained that the physician had pronounced her dead an hour ago. But there was this kiss, and she began to jump up and down on the hospital bed, singing.

When he returned to tell the monks, they were gone. Her ghost floated up the staircase. Then the boy offered him her book.

Something to calm your nerves? the one-eyed boy suggested. Show yourself a little mercy.

day forty three

Going through the ritual of return. She's sitting down for the first time in her mother's kitchen. Hand-washing all of the clothes, preparing a black soup for the monks with the odds and ends the man's gathered by the tracks this morning. A ritual of homecoming. Onions. Finger-sized potatoes. Beets. She smokes, glancing over the ingredients. Scattered notes and fragments and drawing spread all about the small kitchen floor. To gain stability. Any message. Find something to lean into. The cold winter outside, forbidding and lovely. There's the chapel where the old women gather in their mourning gowns. A skating ring across the field. A line of birch trees she vaguely remembers and recognizes. A flock of crows fluttering about the monastery yard. Offering, perhaps, everything she ever wanted—and all that terrified her mother when she was a child. This country of the imagination. She had wanted to tell the priest about this, but what was there to tell? One accepts loneliness as an entry? A view of God's face. Listening to the liturgies and choral singing by the stove stirs pleasant memories—of family, familiarity. Dissonance in the chatter of monks in the next room. The background of her life was always present. A question of spirit and breath as her father explained the meaning of the words. Spirit is a physical thing, he told her, and in its original meaning, signifies breath. Living in the present tense.

Are you here? she asked.

I am always beside you.

But even your eyes are missing?

Yet you feel my breathing.

It bothers her, and she feels partially on edge. Knowing she still prefers the man's companionship, something other than

God to rely on. Sleeping like the monks by the river. She thinks, if only he too could change his body—into a bird's, a woman's, a worm's....It is almost time, and I'll have to go through the next passage without him—the one which has so often eluded me.

Waiting. For the right morning, its confession.

She sees herself standing in the kitchen confused in the disruption of change and cold rain, the women singing to him from the old ballads, later bowing to the soldiers who tried to arrest her father. Why did the monks follow him there? As her father had always wanted it. As he had imagined.

day forty four

Two people hold the code to love in separate bodies they've received. Only they don't speak the same God and their bodies are written in unknown symbologies. Each is a half, which is useless without the other. When all of these people are starving....

You must discover this riddle along the road. When I am no longer of you.

—Your loving Father

She was no longer of him when the man translated this letter.

*day forty five*

Because desire makes up such a small part of our lives, the one-eyed boy said to the monk Sisdal when the soldiers opened fire on all of those at the monastery. Because desire makes up such a small part of our lives.

day forty six

Wanting to talk to God and go deaf in the music.

When you hear that music you will know it is time, her father had written the day the soldiers arrived.

day forty seven

Dear Father,

I reserve this right not to talk. You see, a thief and a drunkard.....These are my sins. Yet what we love cannot be restricted. So I leave it to death. Mystery and language no matter what we say of our better sciences. All of these years. We have not dwelled, even when daunted—with indifference to our very different stories. Sometimes I wonder what it is you wanted, why you have so guarded me from the world.

I should speak more simply for there is little time, but do you think my journey reveals the deeper confusion within you? Do you even know? The body with all of its failings, this sense of absence. Can you read my life? Because I'm certainly aware of your brilliance, your kindness not only to the monks, but to me—the daughter of the woman you hated and destroyed because she refused to become one of the Gnostics....

So often we talk about talking. Now what can you tell me?

—Love, your Daughter

What I can tell you:

I am not lost. I am not genuinely lost. I am particularly afraid, though I am not lost. I have FOUND. But do you see the sadness this has brought him? I have encountered the road. Curious. All of you, I wonder if I will ever fit into your moment of death. I thank you most for the places in which you have made me feel human.

And I thank you (in the deeper sense). Do you understand? Ultimately, this is your choice.

—Your 'Priest'

(This was the man's first writing in the notebook.)

day forty eight

A series of dreams she had written that last afternoon:

You will tell my life. Like a film. Facing death, the apples and oranges on a table. Twenty-five years from now. Letters and dreams scribbled in notebooks. In three different languages, but you'll remember, vaguely. A blur of air. As you run from a field, watching my father walk past the other monks—and your own angel, the burnt one. Gathering walnuts. A rich, black earth. Take care. A moon in the afternoon. That you will find this letter on this day, it will amuse you. As you understand your own death then. No one else in the room. When you arrive at the monastery. You want to remember this, so pay attention. In spite of the sadness. Because there is glory. A lamp, a thistle, a book. Who are you? Ask each object. A letter, a girl's handwriting—yes! Ask your life.

Your life is in these objects:

The smell of light.

The cargo on a small white boat.

A girl removing an apple from her father's hand.

The shedding of a child's skin. Like a snake's skin.

Your hands. Look at them. In the photograph of my Father I saw more than a face. You'll start to believe in the hunger, then it gathers. You'll pick the walnuts up between your fingers. This which attacks you now will attract you then. When you find this letter. When you understand. That you are more. You will doubt this. Remember. So much of wind.

day forty nine

In any case, here he was sleeping.

The myth on the radio of the blind boy who sang...Because all things are broken, the body is renewed, the boy hummed on. The priest combed her hair and touched her eyelids as he sat up in the squalored light. Imagined there were two of her, mother and child. She bent over, gasping slightly. The curve of her mind and his eyes, she would whisper later, pointing up at the sky and the blizzard and the approaching darkness. He slid his finger in, reached for her mouth. Tearing at the edge of the mouth.

The light crows and pleasure buzzing in her tongue as she swallowed. The road more than a journey. Three trash cans leaned against a red brick wall. He edged his body closer to hers on the blanket. Rubbed her back as she opened herself. The idea that you are no longer alone.

The boy uttered this and she understood.

Suddenly she had returned.

Though the one inside her would have to finish the sojourn.



day fifty

When the tanks rolled into the city, everyone was surprised.
Where had they found the petrol?

day fifty one

There had never, of course, been any question of them loving one another. As the ice formed on the street lights, he asked her to marry him for the last time. Concentration in her eyes then. All of the desire that had passed between. He had carried her to the river, as she requested. Though what he really wanted was for her to walk with him.

Without bodies? she'd asked when he made the proposal, even using the new word, wife. He proudly tilted his head, pleased with himself and the champagne he had found in an abandoned apartment. For herself, she too was surprised to see the river remarkably as she remembered it as a child. Though there were no longer fish in the water and monks walking to and fro on the shore. Instead she saw the grand oak doors of the monastery strewn across the ice and mud.

The music of a gypsy orchestra. Do you hear it?

Let's toast, she said afterwards.

The boy, too, seemed perplexed.

With the government paralyzed, the population has begun to seize whatever they can in the resulting mayhem and

civil war. Just as they'll seize this, the one-eyed boy told them, floating his burning arms through the air.

But we can meet here?

As if she was attempting to translate the vision.

The boy nodded.

No longer snowing. Still, the frost would freeze in his nose as he breathed in her smell, the flesh of her neck as they hugged—thinking of tomorrow on the road without her.

We will walk along the river where earlier I dreamed the soldiers were skating, using their empty rifles as hockey sticks. We will walk to the monastery, as mother did.

It will be different. But work with it anyway, she instructed him.

Even in the mayhem, this night will be made calm for you—so you can find your way. Among the crows, an understood silence. Do you see?

Dreaming of oranges, roasted nuts, ham, cheese.

You silly man.

The frost froze in her nose. Down to all of this which is only human.

day fifty two

Days and then more days. When death came, he wasn't frightened. Only trouble is interesting, she had sighed. Why had he told no one? At least in death, her passing had become his. Her emotions were his, too. Pain, the cancer in his hands that morn-

ing. Her crying, calling him mama, daddy. Then he gave her the last injection. Drank the end of the morphine himself. He would always love the days and then more days. You are here, in my mind, she had said, pointing at her skull with a trembling hand. Talking to God. Across the river. While walking across the water, she held his hand. Why he had told no one? Covered the body with stones, prayed. She never admitted it either. I see the people across the street, she said. Their faces are not unfriendly. And for her, the street too was a river.

Outside the pain.

day fifty three

The story had no ending yet so much grief would be put to rest. The search for ripe green apples. Walking in this way. Walk in the sun. For who he might become. The image of her, yes. Even when emaciated: beautiful. Where will he go? In the beginning was the word....An excess of horses on the road tonight. The word made flesh? Or blown yellow leaves. Two tires lying in the weeds. Walk in the sun. See the tracks to the east, a turning point and then. Her hand going on there.

This windmill.

The boy waving from beyond the windmill.

It could happen this way.

day fifty four

When she came into his rented cottage the next night, she no longer had a face. Not her face. Each hour had unfolded in his hands like the hours of a clock as he waited. Not because of the death but within it. Something you wanted to tell this other person. Now, you can only tell yourself, he thinks. A conflict of love. An encounter with the woman he can still touch, like the hours, one from which everything—her hands, hair, teeth, eyes, throat—are realized. A page of the body. Have you found the boy, she laughed, entering the room, though he did not recognize her. The hero of the story. As when the first day began. Fantastic, this love. And that's enough. An angel came toward her, they touched, and now, the man will always want her.

day fifty five

The American stumbling in the story. Always stumbling backwards. Chaos, the river, scribbled notebooks. There is no other way—this stumbling—as we attempt to understand. Her specter real now, like the smell of her underarms on the train. A hair on the pillow. What is the silence that she cannot speak it? Anything else, even fiction will not speak it. A word, a monk, one's solitude. In this manner I went to her, as if to someone we knew. Perhaps someone you know?

This is the American stumbling in and out of the story, unable to finish her book.

day fifty six

See then what is not there, the boy whispered. These human signs revealed in her moment. The day you discovered love was not final. Seek, sought, seen. She uttered this too, fumbling through the desk drawer, going through her father's letters, the photographs of her parents, before you arrived. Taste your own muscle, an arm, one thumb—the way she tasted it. All of this sickens you now. Why did you choose the journey? The journey, it is in your body, because it chose you. The night you were laughing by the tower. That dawn you discovered her smell, betrayed her—because all that is human is betrayal. Mystery, monolith, mouth. This tendency to exaggerate in death. A book of forgetting, or learning to forget from this day forward. Cat, lace, laundry, tea. You choose it. Roses on the table, a champagne glass on the rug. O you. See it then. See it clearly. Then leave the room, the one-eyed boy said, as if he truly understood.

But he did not.

day fifty seven

His longing to ascend. The dirt road vast and narrow, infinite, void of any human life. To be something else. Toward, too. Animals vanishing along the stones and trees. A bitter taste of raspberries, dry weeds. In the dust of where she began. For instance, why were there no houses along the road—no taverns or

churches? All of the leaves shifting, perhaps changing, taking color. Spring far off, though a new sun—the way fortune would turn the hills blue, cobalt. Fine layered grass, red azaleas, pink forsythia which might sing. If you were to smell the longing ascend, what might it be. He took out her father's notebook and began to read. A picket fence covered with straw.

What the hills want.

This was perhaps the beginning, but he was unsure as he rested by the foot of the mountain.

They seemed so far away. The monks walking further on in the melting snow. Tin soldiers by the river, toys spread about the place she had always wanted to call a garden. If I could overcome the grief I could see her as she was. As she is. Forever sleepy, I was about to cry. Your imagination became my imagination. Yet it is no longer fiction. Somewhere in these hills your characters are flying to the moon. That pain, or was it only pain for you. They seemed so far away, the angels. When I was reading. When I was reading your letter to your mother. She was at the funeral, not far from here. Why only yesterday. Your imagination became my imagination.

How did that become a story?

TOMORROW

Foremost, the brown soil, fences rolling into the hills, as if backwards. That moment unlike any other, because I had begun to sense my failure. Finally, after all of these years. In my death, it would change. There are things I tell no one. For instance, my life was never a story and could not become one. And imagine, I had thought of black leaves, a burning bush, water no longer a part of my sex. Everyone had gathered, our monks, the boy, Father—though he, too, was almost completely blind. I began to see shadows and pots. I looked at the white. Something in the air, cherry blossoms, almost pure. Today when we say good-bye. She was kinder this way, they will say. She was almost among us.

The monks singing.

The boy waiting to escort you as he has those before us.

EPILOGUE

Here is the garden where Providence sends us a fountain without water, a granite bench that gave way under the weight of a human body, then a swing wet after the rain and a rack for the birds flown to the hot countries. Four chapels for four wandering figures barely able to distinguish each other in the morning fog, or in the afternoon vanity, or at dusk signaling a solitary reflection.

What are they thinking about, staying the night under the same roof, having collided in a stumbling time, at the narrow space of a dinner table? Nothing special. They just sleep, eat, and talk to each other without any pretense to a deeper understanding or to a long happy life. They are almost not sprung by the spring equinox; they do not notice the cautionary silence of the bell, the school bell in the backyard. Nor are they scared of the cemetery which begins just behind the invisible fence. Several garden tools, the boy's bicycle some crocuses poking out of stones and last year's dry leaves—what can be more constant and long-lived in the world? Maybe only the evaporation of these things absorbed into the page?

Four figures in a sliding garden. To approach each other they need only turn their heads for a moment in one and the same direction. 4-14-1994

Ask John to prepare a brief introduction for you concerning the art of being alive in the Soviet Union. 20-5-90

Hope to see you once more. Somewhere and sometimes. 4-7-92
Occasionally I have a new wonderful adventure with John in
Czechoslovakia (We pretend to be performers...). By the way, my
Troikas are translated now into Slovak language too, but not yet
published in USSR. 17-10-91

As for me, I now look like one of your turtles—having just come
out of hibernation. But we had a good poetical time this spring.
We performed some actions including *The Repetition of Gardens*
(at John and Katya's place) and a *Breakfast on the Grass* in the
Botanical Garden, really fun. I'm full of projects for collective
actions but my patience is not enough to fulfill all of them. 20-7-
93

Our life is full of impressions as always, nobody has need of our
poetry, as usual, but we are ready to live in this world and to love
it until there is somebody else in it besides us somebody else for
whom we can do something.... 29-12-90

Our life is interesting as usual. The worse we live the better we feel
ourselves. 29-11-90

My business is not successful, but to be honest I have not any real
business and may spit on it with a quiet heart. 27-11-90

Christmas is approaching—it's wonderful. 27-11-90

Thanks a lot for your invisible but sensible presence in my life.
20-7-93

When the earth turned to salt and the skies came down
to meet them. An almost white sun. Some flecks of dust lifting off

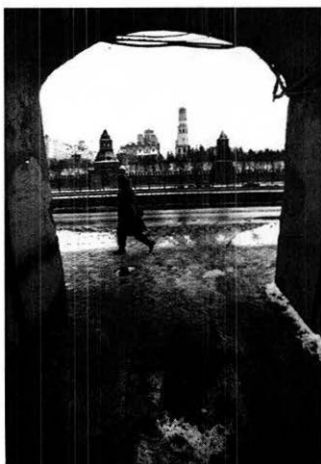
the thinly disguised road as the lovers walk past. A man & woman walking toward the sea. Black lizards and frogs flickering across the fields to the ritual noise of gunfire. We first saw the two in this black & white image while travelling on the trains, returning from the Crimea, less than a month ago. So little time has gone by & yet it seems like a thing of imagination. All of these men, soldiers really, walking in hoards before the woman & her lover, toward the same beach & body of water. Her face sunburned as she glanced at him, this younger man, who walked alongside her. The image less haunting than the actual story, which is why, perhaps, we look for a language of desire that outlives each desire in & of itself. As when speaking of ghosts and absolution. The ghosts of our body, prayers in a territory that continues out of its own peculiar changing.

His desire to kiss her, for instance, before crossing the water. Belief forms a narrative, or the narrative forms a belief? The spare chance provided is what we're after, an ongoing ritual that so often eludes a daily speech. In the walk toward the sea she was first. She carried the prayer inside her. Though the young man knew he shouldn't kiss her. The impulse becomes an invocation. She had told him—we heard her say—landscapes, not people talk. One by one, the former soldiers began to lay their guns on the beach, enter the water. A spirit thing made physical? She was smiling, fully aged now & yet, what a beauty, he whispered under his breath. Perhaps to avoid the sentimental & not the sentiment.

As memory invents it. We had spent the day swimming in the Black Sea with friends, drinking Cognac, in the white sun & black water when one of the boys told us he wanted to return here when he died. These were his waters after all, as all of the prayers in the end, are about return.

liquid thickens a cloud grows dumb and
embraces a black pipe the pipe can't sleep
the rude cry of the trolley joins it in song
beneath the bridge it's dark and water squelches
like a starting crank like decorated forest butterflies
fly softly whistle become wet on the asphalt
string bags girls candy wrappers as if
morning
or evening were strolling with night
tender
through puddles for fun for autumn for a new warm jacket
as if it means nothing as if that's how it is
for pure truth a coin gleams by the entrance the exit
by a wounded bench in the cut glass of an aerat-
ed
shop-window as if I were completely different
for you and you draw a hole on the fence
and shout to me from the other side Quick I'll
kiss
you so no one will see

*final passage, dated letters, Nina Iskrenko translated from
the Russian by Patrick Henry*





A Face of Desire

for Bill High

PLACES OF
DESTRUCTION, FALLEN EMPIRES.
THESE ARE THE WORLDS IN WHICH WE
SHALL GATHER. THE BOY SAYS TO EZEKIEL AS THEY
STAND BY THE GATES OF THE OLD CITY. AND THIS IS HOW
WE SHALL KNOW ONE ANOTHER, THROUGHOUT TIME, KNOW THOSE
WITH WHOM WE BELONG....

—*The Desire Notebooks*, 987
(original manuscript, Kiev)

S P E A K F A T H E R

into one more field that's an eye. then following the rules of a painful science. here you are entirely. though only in the moment where the world is not watching. so they don't exile you, you exile yourself. rub your hands over the fire & watch the ghosts on the surface. hissing at one another in an earlier language. the leaky house across the street. the lamp came on at six. why are you so afraid to acknowledge this vision? when it leaned into the visible of the page? a body's landscape, miraculous. & it's early again & again & again. the red motes drift slantwise through the terrain's startling light. are you frightened? when the story in the eye takes its own down the road. a road dreaming in the snow. while the page is burning. this isn't your america. across the field the windows open up their dirty hands in advance. look straight into your pupil. the earth lapidary here—more terrifying than speeches, or thunderstorms. clouds ripping like dirigibles.....

dear you, he begins, I've decided to name you 'you', as in the Notebooks I can find no other reference to your origin or design. the burned angel appearing this afternoon as a sign of your entry. a slow walk by evening. from where she commands your absence, the thinnest emerald. the palestine of your mysteries increases the sum of our breath, her father says now, stepping from the shadow. somewhere in the snow, more snow—& the further north, the better. bear it a little longer. it's not time yet. so what now? the burned angel walking in the snow on a later afternoon will ask you. as he begins the page knowing the words you

write, though not their sentiment, forge a lie, a damaged crossing.
so you arrive uncircumcised of heart? into one more field, an eye.
pretend you're some kind of language—though nothing's ready
yet. wandering in & out of the pages as you watch the one-eyed
boy & his crow walking across the snow. answer the question.
answer us with a smile which deserves the attention of my achilles'
feather pen. a story still flying toward absence & without a body
& therefore without boundaries?

The man rubs his hands over the fire and watches. The
blackness of his own blind eye, her raw mouth. When the wind
starts, comes alive again.



THE MAN'S FIRST
ENCOUNTER
WITH HER FATHER

The burned angel came walking in the snow toward him. This was the first time he had seen the one-eyed boy, his white wings scorched where they connected under his bare and blackened underarms. The white fields spread out behind them....The boy walking slowly with his black crow, leaving no footprints. And smiling, as if about to say something he found pleasing.

NAMING THE STORIES

The one-eyed boy had turned to him after he left the last village, signaled him further down the road. The man's feet were tired, and he saw a yellow light coming up over the horizon. Glazed white hills. Morning had found him and the boy together. The angel awoke in his eyes as he approached the blue skies. The boy's arms ashen, his small gray hands appearing tentative in the yellowish light. A wolf in the clearing, waiting—as if to carry him back to his own life. Do you have any more cigarettes, the boy asked.

He tied his shoes, drew in the cold air, re-read the words of his last letter before her death:

Dear You,

I'm afraid. Are you afraid tonight? Not of history that is...not the wars....not even the stories. What does it mean to be separate while we walk together all day? See that darkness we sometimes call night. Where is our house? What if once finished with it all, we find it was as easy as saying something like—haven't I told you that I love you?

MORNING — SHORTLY AFTER DAWN

A black seal popped its head from under the lake's ice. Then, a thunderous explosion echoed in the mountains of the surrounding Lake Baikal.

It's just the sound of ice cracking, the one-eyed boy replied, almost shyly.

You think it funny, he smirked. That I smoke?

No. I'm curious as to where her monks have disappeared to.

Curious as to why everything disappears, yes.

The boy wiped the sleep from his eyes, took the cigarette. Do you like your letter?

Where did they go?

The man came to his feet, sealed his letter.

The boy shuffled his feet too, looked toward the hills.

Do you know their names? the man asked the boy.

The blind monk is Mika. This Mika is from the Buryat tribe. He was blinded by an explosion, though he accepted his blindness and joined the others in the fields. As all the Mika's before him.

The boy glanced about.

The one without hands is Sidel. Known for his habit of leaving the monastery for long periods, walking the snowed countryside—always longing for a desert. Though the ice cracks in the

summer, this Sisdal longs for deserts.

What happened to his hands?

Once forgetting his fate, Sisdal stuck his hands through one of those cracks. See for yourself how black the lake's water is. The fishwoman had brought him here.

The fishwoman?

Hezhen is her name. She gathers at this lake on the first day of summer when the ice thaws. She purchases all of the fisher's catch for the highest price, then tosses them back into the water. Once when greedy, Sisdal tried to retrieve one of the fish for lunch!

Why have we come here?

They're good fish.

Are all of the monks damaged?

The boy grinned.

Is this why you brought me here?

You chose to come here on your own! the crow suddenly squawked, rolling on its back in the snow.

Tikho. Tikho, the boy whistled.

The others?

Yes, the one always writing in the book, Ezekiel.

Ezekiel's always scribbling over the pages, discovering the places of destruction, then trying to heal them. But he has no memory. One day he stumbled into the fields and became a part of the words. Hezhen found him here too, the boy went on. Hezhen is a witch, and in one sense, the mother of us all.

We've been together for many years.

Tikho is our crow.

What is my damage?

Desire itself, of course.

She'll be forgotten without me.

And you're lonely too. Love doesn't mean to look at one

another, you know—but in the same direction, the boy said.

The others then?

Don't find them! the crow again squawked, beginning to pee in the snow, writing out its name.

Virgil is the sleeping monk who always wakes up laughing. He came here full of tears. But now he laughs.

Why are you laughing?

He is a beautiful sleeper in the pages. He is quite fond of you both.

The small one?

The apostle, Peter. Who has come for the millennium, I believe.

What does that mean?

Most of you were chosen. He chose for himself to fall from the sky. It will come to you in a story while crossing the hills into the sea. When you drown. She tried to tell you.

Who gives you the words?

Why don't you ask where I found the paper, the crow cawed.

It's your sea.

Why should I want to go there?

So you can find your damage, heal yourself.

What is your damage?

Not knowing your damage better, I suspect. Though I've been allowed to escort you. Don't you even remember my face? the one-eyed boy grinned, gesturing him further into the black of God's face. Since as it is written, Whoever has never hated his father and mother never had a beginning, he went on, gesturing toward the white fields, the monastery beyond them.

A JOURNEY INTO DEATH

When he woke up that first time beside her in the fields, the man saw the signals on the water. A number of odd-looking monks gathering around the edge of that place from where the light came. She had been dancing to the accordion with the Gypsy girls. She had stripped off her shirt so that their boys could more freely taunt her, joined in the circle of colorful children. The problem—she shouted over the accordion—is I've forgotten how to love. The priest looked up and past her in such a way that it was apparent he didn't believe her. The absence of any terror in his bright, almost radiant blue eyes. They had slept in one of the Gypsies' tents the night before and rose together that morning. She had awoken often during the night, touching this man, sometimes dreaming of her husband.

The last time she had been with her husband, she too had thought of herself as something of a child. Like these Gypsies with the curious coins strung around their necks, around their wrists, covering their dirty fingers and blistered hands. Though in fact, she was much older. She had loved the walnut-color of her husband's hands too, his cock, the manner in which he would care for her and ask nothing. And there was his peculiar pride. How he had left the monks to marry her. The way he carried himself, unashamed, among the white guards after the soldiers came, even

though they mocked his dark race. One day everything changed. They had been loading stones into the back of a truck in the monastery yard—the monastery chosen by the new regime to serve as a prison for the dissident monks and their followers. All of the monks, including her father, had stopped and stared in disbelief as her husband brought the foreign colonel into his arms, closed his hands over the man's face and mouth, snapped his thin neck.

Now these bare-chested boys so strong and willing—hoping to possess her in the carnival air, though she was twice their age. She thought of the monks her father befriended and how he had traveled with them all those years. He had first discovered the 'Ezekiel tribe' while wandering in the fields surrounding Suzdal in 1933, though he had found them again many times in different parts of the world where they roamed. In the legend, it was written that these monks had the ability to travel in time, though only to "places of destruction" where they then chose survivors from the population to join, and in fact, physically incarnate their presence in a living flesh.

When she saw this man lying in the weeds—this priest who had pulled her from beneath the rubble of the bombed theater just two nights before—she had suddenly begun to remember some of the monks' faces. Though she stared at his clean-shaven face, having problems placing it in time.

This would be her signal, her entry into the present tense and its convergence with love, Ezekiel had predicted then.

Perhaps he's simply another one of my ghosts! she called to one of the Gypsy soothsayers, the one called Sidel, again waving at the priest, drinking black wine. The handless magician laughed and stroked her tan arms with his own grotesque and deformed elbows. Or perhaps the priest was another angel, like the little girl we saw running out of the theater after us, she

thought, though she dared not say it. The girl she had heard chasing her and the man, screaming something awful about these Notebooks she now possessed. The girl's body engulfed in flames.

No! she yelled more loudly, angrily, across the tents and open fires, across the stretch of boys trying to touch her small breasts—across the wagons and horses scattered around this deserted countryside where the Gypsies had brought the lovers. No! she cried more emphatically, raising the pitch of her coarsely-sexed voice. You are not an angel, sir! Or I would not feel this desire for you.

Virgil woke up from his nap and began to laugh.

The white light of the frog's mouth, the lizard in his trembling left hand, these rats scurrying away from the polluted river. Lightning bugs spreading tiny specks of yellow flickerings across the ravaged fields. The fascists this man had fought against had burned the smaller towns as their armies began their retreat west. Though another army would surely replace them. It had been a century of wars for her people. She looked at the one Gypsy woman who wanted him too, but her 'priest' had been lost in the abstraction of the Notebooks' stories....As if he had no sex, no lover, no dream of his own. For her it had never been possible to generate such silence. He had sat like this for hours, scratching the cataract in his left eye, studying and translating from the Notebooks, sleeping throughout the day—already writing her letters. Though he had told her repeatedly that they had to leave this countryside, to find the trains.

With the gradual flux of hours, the wine, the sensation of so many hands running over her body, what she told him that morning had apparently come true. She could no longer remember the explosion in the theater, or the monks' faces, or how she'd

been found by the partisans near the monastery. But she could see the face of her daughter rushing down the alley after them, saying—*take these. They are not mine.*

Though it was only in death that she saw the girl was her own child.

Sleep. He was sleeping again. Weakened by the gunshot wound in his shoulder, though curiously calm in the cool air, even happy. So she nudged his shoulder, causing the lizard in his lap to look up at her. The fat black lizard that had caught her fancy, since she had always been haunted by the masks of men. Though she'd never found a suitable language to reveal this. She picked up the lizard, stared at its sharp leaden eyes. She would have nothing else to do with their wars.

Perhaps, she had whispered to one of the Gypsies that night—perhaps, she would let this man take her. Turn her over in the mud, wrap his damp hands around her aging waist, enter her with difficulty.

The way she has entered his memory, the witch Hezhen hissed across the river now, though the woman could not yet discern the witch's cry.

Still, she knew his anguish better than he knew it himself. She had slid her hand down his pants earlier as he slept. Then the music of all the things she didn't understand became clear for a moment. Then forgotten again. Now the absolute paradox of love manifests in the image of a drowned horse floating to the surface of the water behind her, like all of the monks' eyes across the river as she rushed to the shore and back again, returning the lizard to the man's lap, taking hold of his shoulders, laughing and shaking and turning to gesture the Gypsy boys back. Take us away from here! she shouted, kissing his neck, then slapping him.

Demanding it in this way.

This was to be the beginning of her journey in the Notebooks. The ones you entrusted with her the day she escaped the monastery with the girl and began her walk through the forest where the partisans eventually found her, thinking of herself as but a child. Crying, clutching your Notebooks in her hands?

Yes. This was to be her beginning, Ezekiel nods to the apostle Peter, who has again fallen from the sky. And though unaware of it, she had already begun to hear our voices, the one-eyed boy grinned before leaving to find the man.



THE FIRST MORNING

When he woke up that first morning without her on the road, he was no longer surprised. Though he didn't know where he had fallen asleep, or how long he had been sleeping. The black crow flew up to the side of the one-eyed boy. The crow hovered there watching the movement of sable over the frozen water. The man sensed then that the boy might be an angel. He had read about the crow in her Notebooks. Where are you from? he asked the boy.

I came from the monastery east of these hills, the boy said, pointing with his scorched arm which was again burning. That is where her father actually died, not long after completing his work.

The black crow stared toward the hills also now.

Is that where we're going?

He could hear the trains passing over the tracks to the south, the call of their laughter, then the odd sound of ice cracking.

Someday we could go there, the boy said.

How did you get your burns, the man then inquired.

When I was like you I went out searching.

The boy stepped forward. His short-cropped hair red and uncombed, his left eye white, his good eye blue.

Would you like to go beyond the road, into the forest? he asked.

What will I find there?

A cross and a rose. More stories. A sacred book. Perhaps
a storm at night....

Questions.

The truth of why you have come here.

Well, go ahead then. Take me there.

You will have to come on your own, the boy warned. If
you want to hear the story I have to tell you, you'll have to vanish
on your own. Without her.

Thus they had begun their walking.



THE APOSTLE WATCHING OVER HER IN DEATH

Bright yellow leaves in the river where she was now walking. Apple blossoms, the slight scent of acacia, young Gypsies skipping rope on the shore. And her gait was steady in the water. The green coin her father had given her clutched tightly in her palm. Though she couldn't remember the day he had fallen, she held it tightly in her hand. The *way of kings*? A phrase that stuck with her as she strolled deeper into the dream.

Was this what they told me in the monastery? Or later running from the soldiers in the forest?

Peter gestured to the coin with the words *Filius Macracosmo* inscribed on its back side.

It is a hard story, Peter hummed, but you will remember.
What day has overcome me?

Taking another step backwards in time, it occurred to her that her life had begun to resemble her father's. Yet how could she describe the memory when she could not see it?

I love you, Peter whispered.

Too many questions as she strolled into the obliterated sun and the river opened before her.

Do you know my name? Peter asked.

Beauty isn't just a word.

A memory then?

Yes, the man touching my shiny black hair, our making love on the damp floor of a train before the soldiers boarded.... The sun comes up around us in a small room where I am not—where I am sleeping and forgetting all over again. But seeing his face, and falling in love all over, as if for the first time. Don't you think it's strange?

What is it you're humming, sir?

The silence. Have you not heard it before? Peter said.

How does one fall into such a perpetual ebb and flow of memories?

Peter stroked his fingers across the veins of her slightly arched neck. Opened her mouth. I know you. Yes, you were there in the forest, the woman said.



The crows cried out along the river.

What do you suggest?

Another language, another memory.

I'm boring you, aren't I? she whispered.

The stars were brilliant last night, Peter sighed. So tell me, which song matters? How can I help you? All of them would like to know.

What is your name? the woman asked.

Peter. Though others have called me by other names.

As if there's actually a music to history, Peter. And each love unfolds within it? Is that what you mean, Peter? I'll remember you again—and not only for this birth of memory, or its repudiation, but for its nuance of flirtation, repetition, anguish.

ON THE THIRD NIGHT

When the boy stopped walking, and it was clear that there was no more sky, the crow glanced momentarily to its left where the man was leaning on his knees, panting, already wanting to write his letter. Did you really love her the night you left, do you think so? the boy asks.

Yes.

I wish I could love her.

Do you love her tonight?

Yes.

That's not true.

If you love her, why are you here with me?

The man comes to a full stance, stares himself at the blue mountains partially glazed in ice, the lost roads, the boy with his dirty face—the black crow and its red beak squawking at the group of monks trudging over the hills to the stone walls of the monastery. She's dead.

Yes, it's good that you actually say it.

What will I find, if I go there? the man asks, looking at the blue mountains.

I can't tell you that. But it's not what you expect, your pain.

He hears the monks are singing as they walk—carrying on about something or another in a chant too distant for him to make out. The black robes against the white snow, the blue hills,

this absent sky. The one waving appears to be blind and his head is shaved.

Yes, that's Mika, the one-eyed boy Thomas says. He's the blind one.

Which story?

The one dreaming in the snow. Like the one you will write about in your letter to her. The one you have no confidence in, the boy grins, wiping some of the dirt from his chin.

He starts in after the boy, who has again started walking. But it was the crow that started walking first, as the monks on the hill retreated into the snow somewhere. Even the apostle Peter, the smallest of them all, as he joked with Ezekiel about their world's renewal in this destruction.



TALKING TO THE DEAD

This city, the angels in the rain, she'd written him the day before she died, placing the letter on the suitcase that served as her mother's last kitchen table, then leaving for the river. This view from above as they, our angels, look down on us and these Notebooks without astonishment. The darkened stones and raw flowers of the world, she'd written her lover. *The fishwoman you saw yourself from the window while watching the monks assemble their boats on the river! I know you saw her. Hezhen is my mother's name.* And yes, their wooden boats seem out of place in this city. Well you see what has become of our world. Still, I knew they would find me here. Imagine the monks' wooden boats even before the Gypsies, before the forgetting began and took hold in my eyes. Even before the soldiers beat you, raped me on the trains—then strangely let us continue our journey. I thank them for that....

The crab-red light sifting through the morning fog, she'd written. All of the ash from the looters' fires rising up in the dawn of another winter. I didn't know how to tell you of my vision after departing the trains and arriving in this city—the splendor of it, the uncertainties surrounding my God. The blue-haired grass running alongside the road as we stepped toward the crowds in the dream, quietly and without fear because I saw the apostle's

head among the crowds. Still, that had been morning and then it was afternoon again. Never so sure, so clear in my resolve to touch the voices as when I buttoned my blouse to leave for the river to find Hezhen, closing these Notebooks, presumably for the final time. For I sense I know them all! And I know you dream of them too, love. Don't deny this. But all naming from the past has been lost to me.... So you see, I've once more forgotten your face. Yet when I found your translation under the bed, I was suddenly stirred by the parable, as if I awoke inside your dream:

IT WASN'T TO BE OUR FINAL CROSSING.
OUT OF CONSTANTINOPLE AND BABYLON WOULD
ISSUE YET ANOTHER SILENCE...THE HARVEST FINE,
THE LABORERS FEW. THE EARTH HAS TOLD US, PETER.
EVERYTHING TALKS—BIRDS, STONES, WORDS,
WORMS. JUST AS OTHER LOVERS REPLACE US. WHAT
FOLLOWS IS AN EYE OF ENDURANCE. THE KINGDOM
OF HEAVEN SPREAD UPON EARTH. THOUGH ANOTH-
ER EMPIRE IS BURNING. THE BLIND HUMMING AT
THE SEA. A SHORE WITHOUT THE NOUNS OF DEFIN-
ITION. OUR CENTURIES OF SEARCHING THROUGH
THE WATERS. BECAUSE OUR STORY IS A SOUL. THE
FEMININE WE BECOME INSIDE THIS MASCULINE
SHELL. THE SOLITARY ONES EXPANDING ACROSS THE
SEAS. THIS IS OUR NAMING. IT'S FOR THE ANGEL WE
RECORD IT TODAY—THE BOY THOMAS OF ODESSA
WHO HAS CHANGED THE URINE TO URINE, THE
COPPER TO COPPER. THOUGH THEY BURNED
THOMAS FOR KNOWING THESE SECRETS. S E E
ALL THE BROKEN LINES IN THE FIELDS, THE RIVERS,
THE BROKEN FACES.

YOU FOLD YOUR HANDS AND LEAD US

ACROSS THE RED SEA AWAY FROM THE CHAOS
 TONIGHT. YOUNG LOVERS TAKE TO THE TRACKS IN
 SEARCH OF OUR GREEN COINS. WE FOLLOW THEM.
 FACES OF SKY. WE TAKE UP THEIR LAUGHTER TOO.
 WHERE NO MOUTH COMES NEAR TO
 DESTROY & NO WORM. THIS IS OUR CALLING. SKIN-
 BACKED HILLS. TWO FIGURES WALKING AWAY, ON
 INTO OUR MORNING.

SOON I WILL SEE YOU.

Ezekiel of Panopolis, 988

She folded the translation, waited as Peter finished his cup, wiped the dust from his mouth, Ezekiel now tells Sisdal who has again joined him by the shore.

It does not strike her as strange that an apostle has come to her?

No, she placed her own hand over his tonight, stared at his half-closed eyes. Though she didn't understand his expectation.

These signs from the culture's death and her journey?
 Yes.

You want too much from the words, Peter then whispered to her. The swelling in her thighs?

And you want too little, she scolded him.

The stark light of their sun. Preparing for a different kind of journey now. This unknown country in the dream where the fish say I love you, she said, glancing up at Peter's startled face.

Ezekiel takes Sisdal's elbow and leads him further into the garden.

BACK AT THE RIVER

She can't remember whether she gave him her letter or not. Can you, Peter? she asks. She can't recollect whether she was born today or 1000 years ago before the Baptism of Russia. But she smells the emptiness of the world without the concretion of his body before her. Can you?

Will you often speak to me in the third person? Peter inquires.

What is the color of his eyes tonight? Blue or green?

The apostle shakes his head, shrugs his shoulders.

Who is this man who accompanied me, this one with straw blond hair, skin the color of goat's milk?

The apostle shakes his head.

Another betrayer?

Do you think all men are betrayers?

She looks up at his bewildered black eyes.

The woman sees the Gypsy girls again and wishes she could touch them before abolishing the dance of their golden fingers with a swoop of her own dark hand through the air!

Am I this woman?

Will you often speak to me in the third person? Peter once more inquires.

These questions issue more questions I must address anew each time. Do you understand!

Any attempt to understand everything is frivolous.

Are you sad in this death?

No, it's just this certain cluster of words. This image of their making love in the bathroom with their clothes on—this is what confuses her. Confuses me. I love you so much I can't say anything bad about myself, the priest told me that day. Of course, he had been trying to explain his betrayal.

Why betrayal?

It's the male treachery, the male history, she sighs....There's no use in denying it. But even that last morning, after all that had passed, wasn't it all he could do to keep himself from kissing me when I rose up from the bed to come to this river? All he could do to refrain from following me out the door....

Horses and crows!

Horses and crows? Peter asks.

Perhaps you have to stop wanting so much?

And you should stop wanting so little, she laughs.

His coming back jacked-up on booze, you see—preachy and cantankerous.... Yet he was the one who set off the bomb in the theater, killing the angel.

Your daughter. Why do you continue to deny this?

What about the river!

There is a river, yes.

The fishermen?

They're fishing.

What about the tanks?

They're parked in the Kremlin.

The angels?

They're waiting, wandering in and out of experience with no concrete relation to time, history, plots, events, Peter holds forth. She winks as the fishwoman approaches, skimming rocks off the river in her black stockings. It's really quite remarkable! she then yells to the monks gathering in the grass where the snakes

will not strike. Yohoo! Sisdell! she cries. The monks stop whatever it is they're doing and turn in slow motion. As if they can't hear her, though they recognize, vaguely, that the dream is friendly.

So again he has brought you to my river! Hezhen caws.

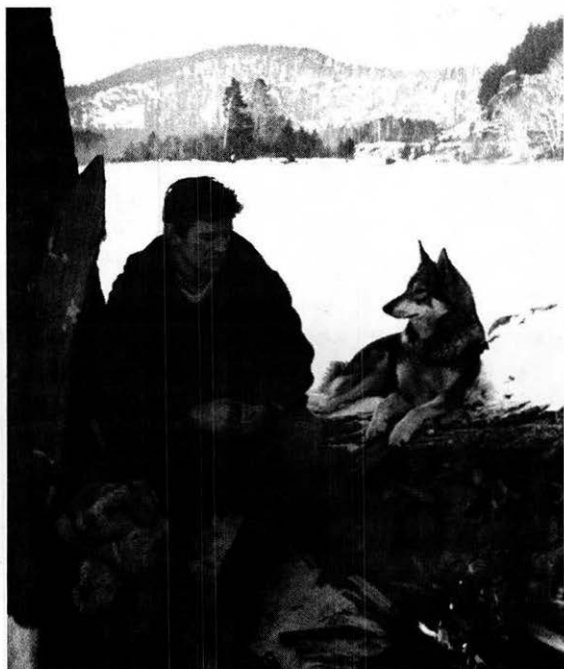
Yes. I've come to your river.

And what kind of fish are in your mouth today? the witch hisses.

There are minnows in my mouth today.

And this is where the fish lead you?

Yes, this is where the voices lead me.



Good. Then you can go home.

No!

Soon you'll remember!

What?

Ezekiel is waiting! Hezhen pouts. For what goes into your mouth does not defile you! It's what comes out that defiles you.

The conversations continue to vanish. Forgetting all about the wars, the killings, her mother's disappearance, her husband's and then father's death at the monastery—this emergence of yet another revolution in the country surrounding her. Even her own dancing at the theater for the fascist officers on that almost human night—forgotten now.

For what else is history other than this fiction of lies invented by men, she coos as the apostle prepares to lead her further.

Yet each step backwards and seeing this one man's face again and again—and falling in love all over, as if for the first time.

It really is quite remarkable, Peter whispers to Hezhen as the words fly up.

THE NEXT DAY

Tell me, where is it you really want to go? the boy asks.
Do you want to carry the sky, or do you want the sky to carry us?

The three had finally reached the point on the hill where the man had last seen the monks singing.

Your unhappiness, is it like this field? the boy then asks, pointing to the cemetery beyond the fields of the monastery.

It's where I wake up, the man started to explain, but thought better of it.

If it's where you wake up, where is it you sleep? the boy asks, though these words again startled the man for they came from the beak of the crow.

In my dreams?

No. In your sleep.

In my dreams. I can't say. There are so many faces.

But one is hers. Is that what frightens you?

The man stares over the wide breach of frozen ice toward the lake and field and monastery before them.

Draw a face, the crow suggests.

The man takes hold of the boy's burnt wing and brings it down to the snow, begins to map out the features he sees.

A moment later the crow stands back and studies the picture.

Yes, it's a peculiar face, the crow says, noting how much the face resembles its own.

Yes, the boy agrees. Quite peculiar.

The two then begin to pee in the snow together, covering the face.

Life damages people in the most simple ways. It is the face of her child that you see. But there is something else. You know her better. Can you remember the child now?

This is my dream?

Why do you think it's a dream! the one-eyed boy shouts. He then sweeps away the remains of the face in the snow, and they start walking on the lake, which later became a road, and later a sky, and even later—a story. Though it would be much time before the man would see it like this, and only then when he saw it with her.

AT EZEKIEL'S GARDEN

In the guise of a child tonight, the laughing Virgil haws.

Yes. At the turn of another millennium, Thomas grins, floating back across the monastery year. Her mouth half-open, the unexpected giggles with our Lord, her curious and insistent blinking of eyes. Because it could only be like this in her story, the way she would create it for him in order to find the sky, to find you and Hezhen too, the boy goes on.

Imitating the gestures you loved in her as a child. Though the gestures still reveal themselves, yes.

Will you join us for tea? Ezekiel sighs as they gather about the table and he begins to carve the fish. Will you join us now, Thomas? Or have you just come to hear yourself talking?

THE END OF THE WORLD

The day he had smuggled her onto the trains they had begun to pass through the birch and linden forests outside Sarajevo. He already sensed then, sensed that he had fallen deeply in love with her. Because it was her pain instead of his own he felt inside. And this frightened him. He wanted to help her. Knew about what had happened at the monastery. Had learned about the slaughter of the monks in the fields surrounding Vladimir—that it was her husband's act, his killing of a colonel, that had precipitated the massacre. But he was afraid to talk to her about any of this. Since there are times when neither a man nor a woman will tell. On the trains he'd read to her from his translations instead, searching for other clues, something that might give him a direction. On the eve of the bombing he had learned from his unit that some of the monks had escaped from the monastery, that it was possible her father was among them. As a student he had read the early writings on the mythical 'Ezekial tribe', and had studied all of the known writings of the time. What had fascinated him most was the possibility that her father had been among them. Yet she herself would tell him nothing. She refused to even talk to him about her father when he tried to bring up the subject. They had been sitting in the cafe across from the theater when she had suddenly mentioned Ezekiel by name....But then there had been the explosion which detonated prematurely, inadvertently killing her child.

In her delirium she would sometimes speak of the monks—of how she had joined with the partisans to revenge them. Though she had never explained how.

Crouched on her bed in the coupe, she'd read from his letters with her glasses. A beautiful woman, she appeared younger than her 35 years. As if she intuitively understood. Her eyes in those moments resembled something else.

A dark rain and washing, the kind sung when death is no longer a separate sound, she'd told him herself one evening as he sat across from her.

Why does longing change you so? she asked.

He had been too nervous to answer her question.

That they had come to the edge of anything had encouraged him, though. He had looked about the damp coupe after smuggling her on the trains, as if he might find her real identity among the sleepers. Over a hundred passengers scattered about the floors, whole families carrying their lives' possessions. Refugees cramped in the corners, children giggling and rolling dominoes. He watched the spotted birch trees flood the hillside, the row of lindens, the vague appearance of a man running by the tracks among the random spread of horse and cow bones spread about the mountainous roads. He studied them too. Her hands small, almost masculine. Though her hair was black and with the feel of rice. Her legs long, dark, emaciated—but beautiful, he thought.

One night she had opened the Notebooks and begun to read from the pages. Power has always fascinated us, so we have rejected it outright. Do you see the ghost withdrawing its breath....

Do you think so much depends on desire? she had then asked. It might never happen, you know. Your longing.

He folded the wet blankets and returned them to the

head of the coupe as they approached the border. Smelled the heat from the coal-burning stove, its heavy sweat in the air. History, what will it come to? she sighed, bemused, chattering in the darkness to no one. The way the soldiers again returned his papers and passport at the last station. Only wanting his cigarettes and good money, no doubt. She laughed as they heard the engines slow to the clamor of voices outside.

A soldier put a pistol to his head. They had just begun to gather their few belongings. The border guards' twitching hands, he felt the soldiers unease. He sat near the boy dealing cards by the window as they approached the station.

Waking under the illusion of necessity, she remarked—as if to mock the soldier. Our world is falling apart, you see it now? Do you see it! Put down your damn gun.

He saw the Gypsies gathering by the tracks beyond the station from the window but made no motion after he recognized their magician, Sisdal—the handless one—or the young girls with their colorful scarves and bright red dresses, the lads she had let touch her. He thought she had forgotten them all, just as she had forgotten how he placed the bomb under the stage. Her daughter rushing toward the theater. But she called out to them.

You see it, don't you! she then shouted, and the young soldier put down his pistol.

Later, the soldiers pushing her to the platform. The first snows falling in the chilled, pre-dawn hour. They had crossed the border, stopped at the station and the guard confiscated their bags, began to line all of the women up along the road.

The first smell isn't part of the scene, she hissed at him on the platform, stroking his neck. You see, the station full of rioting. All of these people with no more money, no where else to go, do

you see?

Because she had already begun to remember.

The partisans found me alone, didn't they? she hissed, then kissing him hard on the mouth and grabbing his balls.

Everything going white. Screaming at the soldiers, at the interrogators. Then she slapped one of the guards after he called her a slut.

Your hungry crowds! Your gray 13th century towers! Your churches! Your crows and buzzards swooping above the rooftop. Murderers! Your Byzantine monastery prisons. Your stone fences and barbed wire. Your people shoving to get out on any of the trains. Your men pushing them, pushing them back. Murderers! she screamed as one woman was crushed by the trains....

The cold butt of the pistol again in his neck.

He wrapped her by the waist, tried to hold her. Though it was clear. Panic in all of the women's eyes. The first snow storm. People rushing down the corridors with all of their possessions, with their hats and shoes and cats and dogs. The women crashing toward the doors inside the station, falling over one another, the soldiers choosing among them. Covering their faces with scarves. Some of the men eating ice cream as they watched.

Why are you letting them do this!

Hezhen! she cried.

Soldiers no older than seventeen or eighteen, choosing among the women. School girls hastening across the yard. Trying to find their families.

Why are you letting them do this! she yelled, tugging at his coat as he stared at her small Gypsy wagons departing in the distance.

For no other reason than the color of their skin, mistakenly shoving her into the line of marked women, telling her that

her country no longer existed.

I never had a country!

The boys in the station playing video games.

Our ghosts pressed against the restaurant window, she began to cry. All of those ghosted faces! she began to cry as they held him and dragged her into the crowd. Until they were finished with her. When he tried to resist, they had ripped the bandage off the wound in his shoulder, stuck the gun barrel inside.

Father! he heard her cry as he fell to his knees weeping, then going, lost in prayer.

Later that night he had searched the platform, the churchyard circling the towers and the road leading away from the station. But they had carried her back to the coupe, finished with her, and in the morning let them both pass freely out of the country.

Frailty is the most precious thing.

He heard her hush voice as he entered the coupe. Her voice already changing. They began to pass through the mountains again.

There is a place we will come to. A place we cannot leave, yet one in which we cannot remain. She had glanced out the window at the women along the iced-over tracks. Are you going to take me there now? she whispered, sitting on the floor....Because frailty is the most precious thing. And we are frail together. Do you understand?

He had been feverish for days, even before she vanished. Even before she found herself alone, lost in death. Promise not to betray me, she had wanted to sing into the darkness. Just as she

had given utterance to these same fears when the Gypsies and the monks disguised among them vanished by the river. Their journey had begun in the rain as she extracted his promise and they searched for the old road out of town seven months before. Fleeing the soldiers, the theater, her memory, she thought—the face of the burning girl. Why did she have to repeat this story? Why did it seem as if her life had only begun in its telling?

Promise not to betray me. Yes. She remembers his promise after she pulled the fish from the horse's mouth by the river, abandoned memory the way another might abandon a lover. Standing by the side of the water near the tent in the rain, terrified because she could no longer picture her husband's face....

Torched huts burning across the ravaged fields. This was the sentence that bore her. The fields burning in a light rain that eventually turned to snow as they had begun to travel together. The night and its smell of wisteria, hydrangeas, scottish broom rising along the tracks. The human stench, too. Yet she had known the monks would again find her.

The stark figures of scarecrows glowing in the fires. Her father's corpse lying by an open pit. The man had escorted her to a station after leaving the Gypsies' river, smuggled her onto the Russian trains. Do your work and step back. Do what you have to, she'd asserted, hoping to free herself of him as well as this war. He had been unable to save the girl. Just as he had been unable to help her when the men took her to the back of the train, later carried her inside the station where even more soldiers were waiting.

Approaching the priest in the alley by the station that night, slapping him, putting her fingers in his mouth, tasting the blood from his mouth, touching the gunshot hole in his shoulder. The one he received when he ran back into the streets after her

daughter.

Later, he had disguised them in the Gypsy's bright clothing. He had taken her to a concert in the center of one of the towns they'd passed along the way.

How could I betray you?

Because you know my smell. And you know what has happened to me, but you will not tell. When they found me in the forest, your friends. When they found me was I alone?

Human shapes taking form in the monastery fields. The other monks scattered among the pumpkins and walnuts. Then that morning in the Gypsy camp when she had sat at the priest's feet, chanted until he could no longer refuse her accusations. He had explained that her husband was dead, that they were all dead, massacred on New Year's Day. Then he had asked her about the Notebooks, professing they would help him in his efforts to find her home. But she could remember nothing.

The pale blue color of his hands, his black eye almost swollen completely shut.



She'd only been dancing at the theater for two weeks.
While setting the fuse, I got it wrong....
Then I saw you lying there in the alley, and I hated you
for some reason.

Why?
Do you love me, she'd asked as he dragged her away.
Soldiers everywhere.
My little girl.
Where did the Notebooks come from?
Have you ever been raped? she'd responded coolly, spitting in his face.
Where.
They were my Father's.
She remembers his promise.

Sitting on the floor of the coupe as he gave her his coat, covered her. The women's wails converging in a chorus along the tracks as they approached the border. The surrounding fields marked with scarecrows, the black grass and scorched weeds, the spotted birch trees in the distance. Then the image of the monks' bodies strewn about the earth. Mika and Ezekiel beside her in the monastery the winter before, but then, they too had disappeared somewhere. She remembers meeting the one-eyed boy in the forest, but then the partisans had found her by a gully. How?

Crouching beside Ezekiel, she had tried to put her fingers in the old man's mouth too.

Forgetting and remembering.
How could I betray you?
Because you know my smell, she'd told the man. And you know something of my past that I myself don't know. How did your friends find me by the monastery?

It was true what she had told him. But he couldn't tell her

about the girl, or the Gypsies who brought her to the theater. This had been the beginning of his fear.

Her torn dress as they exited the coupe. She was wearing a bright red dress and that odd shaped hat she'd found on the road with the Gypsies.

We moved our loss into the miraculous, she'd cried as the fever overcame him and the forgetting began at the edge of the river, by the side of the drowned horse. Part of her memory vanished, just as everything else had vanished.

We moved our loss into the miraculous. But you're unsure if even this is possible. Is that what you're hiding from me, is that what you don't want to tell me? She sensed that he was more comfortable with her now. He had his own secret.

Silence.

Silence and this would be the most dangerous thing.

Do you need me?

You think too highly of yourself, she'd laughed.

She had unbuttoned her blouse and watched his slow gait across the field as he gathered their blankets and gestured her toward the road. Prepared to seduce him, she knew how.

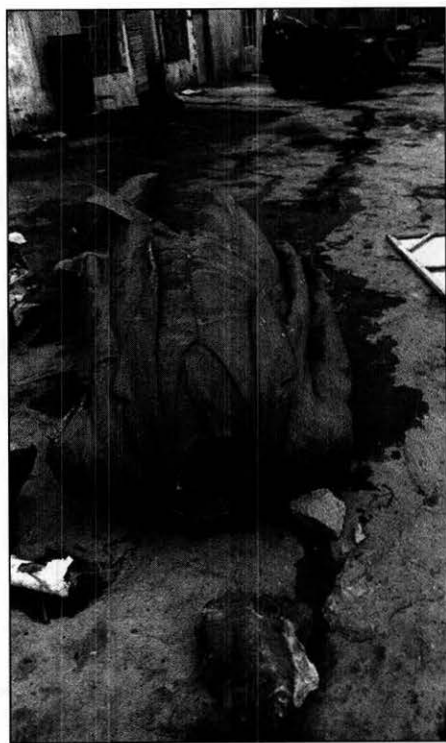
I knew you were going to deceive me.

Listen. There were no monks, no burning little girls.

Why do you lie to me?

It had been raining and suddenly it had occurred to her that it was New Year's.

You stopped believing in journeys long ago, didn't you? she remarked while taking his hand, staring back at the drowned horse floating on the surface of the river. And then she had seduced him, discovered his fear.



IN EZEKIEL'S GARDEN

A god in her, but which one? Mika the Blind asks as the ceremony commences in their garden.

The lovers outside the dream, casually smoking, Ezekiel says, stepping out of the pages, again pouring their green tea.

We came to watch as the couple walks about, Sisdel—the handless monk—tells the others, looking about the room for the one-eyed boy Thomas, who has again ventured out with the man.

Perhaps we have just been sleeping much longer ourselves, Virgil whispers into Ezekiel's ear, addressing him as 'Old wise one'. Perhaps that is why the lovers have again awakened our desires? Virgil says before breaking into hysterical laughter.

Just as in the Notebooks not only our lives, but their lives are revealed, Hezhen hisses.

Sisdel offers forth his cup. But how? he asks. In this hour of Sundays?

BEGINNING OF THE WORLD

Such a story we want to tell....the man had begun to translate that night in the fields beside her, slowly decoding the Latin, Greek and Arabic signs from the Notebooks as she drunkenly danced with the Gypsies. Though it had only been seven months ago, he sensed this was the day that marked their beginning. And full of conviction, belief, the first wandering monk, Ezekiel of Panopolis, had written in 987, if one chose to believe in the manuscript's authenticity. He had tediously deciphered from the ancient writings, carefully working throughout the chilled afternoon, hoping at first that they contained some hidden message from his unit as to how he should proceed after the bombing. The man had received no further contact however, not that night, and not since. And after the treaty between nations had been signed among the warring factions of the south Balkans, what difference did it make, he had thought when he later smuggled her onto the Russian trains. Though as she had predicted, while they fled through the countryside, the eastern part of her world had gradually fallen into a deeper chaos....

As he shoveled the rock across her forehead before leaving, he again remembered her sensuous and lavish movements, her arms flailing about the damp air when he promised to bring her into the fields. Her apparent oblivion, even madness caused

him to fear for her even more once the visions again erupted. Her eyes darkened, confused. Her damaged skin. Should I have their child? she had asked him. He didn't understand. But she had been made pregnant from the rape.

The tremor of his white hands as he watched. As a young man, at least he had thought of himself as young when the wars broke out, he had almost immersed himself in the war's cruelties, as if for no other reason than to stop these tremors. But he had never learned to say what his fear was about. This was to be the first sin that haunted him. He had been pleased when asked to join the small band of partisans from his own country. Though he was a priest, he could still carry a gun. Then he had traveled with this woman whom he had hardly known before he began his work with the underground. He had begun to write out her cryptic letters, and his own translations from these Notebooks.

The face of the prophet written on the white pillow as his hands speak.... Curious utterances. He had studied the curves of the woman's face more closely, opened her fan-shaped mouth, licked her black lashes. How had he come to this place. After so many months of hiding, almost starving, traveling endlessly by foot and train, surviving one encounter after another with the roaming bands of ex-soldiers, communists, fascists, deserters.... He had waited and watched while she slept, continued his translation that night, though himself no longer sure why. Perhaps because the Notebooks were all that was left to him. And it had struck him as odd as to just how accustomed he had grown to their mysteries. While she slept he began to read to her from his last translation, which he later left on the kitchen table of her mother's apartment. A monk had met them at the walls of the old city three nights before, directed them to the bombed out building on

Gertsen Street where her mother once lived....Ezekiel's first letter to the apostle Peter, and the first of his completed translations. The letter the monk apparently sent to the Novadevichi Monastery before beginning his walk across Europe in 986 to the sacred fields of Vladimir, where according to Ezekiel's vision, the apostle would next fall:

...SUCH A STORY WE WANT TO TELL, PETER.
SURELY YOU SEE. ONE FULL OF WONDER. AND FULL
OF CONVICTION, BELIEF, EVEN 'HONESTY', IF YOU
WILL ALLOW US TO USE THAT WORD? I HAVE
SEEN YOU IN CONSTANTINOPLE, ROME, IN BABYLON.
YOUR FACE WRITTEN ON THE WHITE PILLOW AS
YOUR HANDS SPEAK. MOVING THROUGH THE DRY
AIR. THE WINDLESS AFTERNOON. THE WAY WE TRIED
TO RESTORE THIS LOVE IN THE COINS WE GATHER
BEFORE BEGINNING THE NOTEBOOKS. HAVING
BEEN GIVEN OUR ROAD AMONG MEN. PLACES OF
DESTRUCTION, DESPAIR, AND THEN THE NORMAL
SOUNDS OF FOOTSTEPS ALONG THE RIVER AS
THEY GATHER. OUR ANGELS, LIKE BIRDS. WE SEE
THEM IN THE FIELDS THAT AWAIT US. THIS FLOCK
OF BLACK CROWS. THE BLUE HERON AND WHITE
EGRET IN THE SHALLOW. HEZHEN'S FISH.
EVERYTHING RETURNING TO WHERE WE ONCE
BEGAN....THIS MOVEMENT BACKWARD AND FOR-
WARD IN TIME—ITS PRESENT TENSE OR ITS MEMORY
OF EYES. LET THEM PERSECUTE US IF THEY WILL. WE
WILL SPEAK OF THEIR OPPRESSION. AND THIS IS
HOW WE SHALL KNOW YOU AS WELL. MIKA AND
SISDEL ARE BESIDE ME TODAY, THOUGH THEY TOO
ARE DISGUISED IN THE CLOTH OF WOMEN. SOON

WE WILL FIND VIRGIL AND THOMAS ON THE ROAD.
OUR WITCH HEZHEN. AND THE OTHERS TOO.
SINCE OURS IS THE PARABLE OF LOVERS WALKING
THE EARTH SEARCHING FOR THE LOST FACE. A LAPIS
STONE. A COMMON MODUS VIVENDI. THE GREEN
COIN YOU SPOKE OF: AURUM PHILOSOPHURUM,
OUR PHILOSOPHER'S GOLD. SONS & STONES. CALLA
LILIES AND FIRE. THE FRESH TRACK ALONG THE
RIVER WHICH CEASES TO BE A RIVER BECAUSE WE
DON'T SEE IT, PETER. HERE IS YOUR MYTH. WE FOL-
LOW IT. SOON WE WILL BE ESCORTED THERE BY YOU,
TO THIS PLACE WHERE THE VOICES COME IN FROM
AN EXILED BEAUTY OF AN UNPOLISHED FACE....WE
WELCOME THE PROBLEM. YOUR PER CRUCEM AD
ROSAM. THE STORY OF OPPOSITES TOLD IN
THE CROSS & THE ROSE. BECAUSE ONCE THERE WAS
A RIVER. AND THEN THERE WASN'T.



Which river? the woman asked, rising and staring at the
apostle's small face, no larger than many men's fists. Whose river

that isn't a river? she asked Peter, who had appeared before her in this dream of death. He touched her waist, restoring the light, resting his elbow on her hip.

Where is this city? Hezhen then cried, somewhat startled, since she too had stumbled into the woman's death.

Do you want to go to the river, or do you want the river to come to us? Hezhen cawed, gnawing at her hand, pointing at the river's shore.

DESIRE NOTEBOOKS

Dear You—

....Filius macrocosmi, a description of bells, Ezekiel had written in his last epistle to Mika before disappearing in the words, like all of those who had come before him, revealing at last the green, living coin under his pillow, playfully flipping it in the air, then laughing until it fell into Hezhen's lap full of fish.

Filius macrocosmi, Ezekiel wrote, sensing his passing, since he believed God would only be freed to wander Himself when given a human path between the fields.

Do you understand these translations, love? Is there a reason you have refused to tell me....

(the 4th morning)



EZEKIEL & THE BOY STROLLING ABOUT THE CITY

.....Throughout that first week the bells rang every night mysteriously and unexpected, for there were no religious services and whoever played on the rusted chimes did so as if composing an unheard and still ancient music. No one knew who it was that climbed the steeples at all hours of the night, though the figure or its outline, spirit-like and lovely in the matching contours of the domes, became vaguely visible on clearer evenings—and throughout the city a rumor had sprung up that an army of angels were gathering to relieve the population of its occupation and grief. No one asked why these things happened. They were simply brilliant signs. But everywhere on the streets people spoke of God. Something was changing. The military officers revealed their unease by cracking down on those who collected cigarette butts to sell by the metro, arresting the boys who were harmless enough distributing their revolutionary papers on the corners along with their sale of stale sausage and cans of beer.

That something mysterious, yet long present in humanity was beginning as well could no longer be denied, the one-eyed boy goes on, contemplating the pages of the Notebooks as he wanders the streets with Ezekiel beside him tonight. Why, even the most desperate sons and daughters of the previous elite con-

strained themselves. Vampires had begun to band together by the shrines of heroes, secretly burying the corpses that rotted in the city's center, sometimes pulling the stripped bodies from the trolley cars, cleaning the corpses and sprinkling them with the holy water renegade priests would bring for these ceremonies, the boy says to Ezekiel, again addressing him as 'Old wise one'.

But then when you see the world it dies—just as she had told him in death. It's the end of the world when we see it, she once mocked him before she vanished, taking her lover's hand and leading him further down the path toward her father's grave.

Were these not your words, Ezekiel? Is it not how the first Ezekiel penned them after seeing the apostle?

It is.

The man's eyes are paining him today, it's true. I know him. His unwillingness to accept the grief. Don't you agree?

Ezekiel nods. Yes. You are right, Thomas.

How else had he failed to understand her illness, her pregnancy, the Wise One observes, scratching his chin.

Though we understand she too is clever, Thomas. That is why we have chosen her.

True, Ezekiel.

Will they come again? the monk inquires, turning the corner, trying to pick his own way through the ruined streets he once knew and loved as a child.

Look at my eye. Do you see? Do you see the problem, Ezekiel?

Will they come again, the army of angels? Ezekiel interrupts him, remembering the image of the letter he lives by. Is it possible the myth will continue?

The boy languishes calmly beside him, holding onto the sleeve of his white gown, glancing about the desolate faces of crows flocking around. He grins, in no hurry to answer such ques-

tions, even from Ezekiel, his favorite wanderer.

The memory of love outweighing love, do you think? O Wise One. Is that why my eyes hurt even you today?

Ezekiel stumbles forward.

All of the images of angels lost in this world? the monk says. It is a hard story. Their world no longer believes. Even I find it hard to see you here.

His arms shivered in the wind. A black moon. Many haggard faces. The boy shrugs. He puts his hands in Ezekiel's pockets, leads him further down the road.

What was that! Ezekiel exclaims, staring at the huge gray tanks stationed along the boulevard.

She loves him! Thomas laughs, tugging Ezekiel toward the cemetery. Don't you get it! She loves him. Like she loves this



revived mysticism spreading from the churches to the streets to the liturgies to the psalms to his peculiar visions of pickles, cucumbers, apples, oranges....This imaginary metropolis. As if it were being born again. As if all of us were simply dancing in the bell towers ringing those bells ourselves. The boy chuckles, looking about, swirling Ezekiel into his arms, kissing his cheek.

Bananas, he goes on excitedly now, hurrying them further down the alley to the church. Yet in fact, only six nights had passed since he asked her to marry him and this man was dreaming of bananas!

Ezekiel lowers his head, sensing that these tired scavengers and soldiers and forgotten families trudging past them on the street have returned to the metropolis not out of need, but because of the bells and the hope of angels.

Do you believe things will ever be normal, Thomas?

Do I?

Yes, Ezekiel whistles.

She slapped his face when the man asked her a similar question. Why I've always believed, she told him, madness is as common as the other workings of the mind, so it's only the focus and clarity that matters.

Indeed. She is clever, Ezekiel nods.

Why, it's almost as if your face too has vanished along the traces of my eyes!

Yes, but....

All right. A place, a time, any experience...You know better than I, Ezekiel. Love's reluctance, that is...everyone denying their own pain! This modern world with all of its machines. Silence! See those hooligans running along the fields, behind the scarecrows out there, over there Ezekiel—then all of those broken down factories, their run-down tanks and jeeps and guns and clocks and phones. What is it you want me to tell you, Old wise

one? Why did you ask to come here with me?

Do we belong? Do we belong, Thomas. That's all. And, will we be all right in the morning?

We'll be fine. And of course we belong. The story is one of love. You can possess all these things, but without love....

You are nothing, Ezekiel whistles, reciting from the Sermon. I first heard it as a boy, he then sighs....

A woman trying on the sources of her own laughter, trying on a new hat. But memory is not without costs. Do you understand? This is your destination, Ezekiel.

The full wind blows around them. Ezekiel and Thomas watch the wind. O, Ezekiel exclaims, following the one-eyed angel past the graveyard to their left, muttering now—*whatever the right hand does, the left does not want to know*. It's always like this, in every beginning, he observes. But memory is not without costs. And one day, she will remember how her father found me too, how he staged his own death in youth in order to escape the authorities and begin his own journey by foot, eventually finding us by the river, Thomas. Ezekiel touches his burned face as the boy stops and points to her father's grave.

Shall we gather by the river tonight? Ezekiel then asks.

Yes, let's gather by the river, the boy cries, clapping his hands, delighted, as they begin to eat from a jar of pickles.

THE BRILLIANCE OF SUN

The trail to the river littered with old newspapers, broken glass, propaganda posters proclaiming the new order in Moscow. Communists boys in jeans and discarded military uniforms from the various armies playing dominoes and checkers with pebbles from the shore. The country had fallen and there were many refugees like herself. Though they were all ghosted in her vision. And she was only sure of one thing really, the one thing evolving out of that moment. Peter's small cryptic figure, his crow-like eyes and tiny feet. The river. The fishwoman in her black stockings picking river bones out of the sand. Because first there was a river and then there wasn't! the witch Hezhen cried. The flute she heard playing along the worn path. All of the century's exhaustive wars. But I will have nothing else to do with them! she cawed. A flute from a herdsman, she almost laughed to Hezhen, staring at the fish the witch pulled from her mouth—instantly forgetting what a herdsman might be....Calling to Peter who strolled ahead of her. Regardless of her own coming or going. How did she know them? All of these ghosts she sees traveling beside her in the forest after she fled the monastery. Then, her own dark strong hands as girl. The freckles on her arched chin. The face of the child who dropped the Notebooks in the alley.

Peter signaled her on toward the wooden boats, but Hezhen would not speak.

Are you frightened?

No. But why have I forgotten how to love? she asked.

Forgetting and remembering and forgetting over and over, yet this doesn't matter.

Are you happy, child?

I hear my Father's singing in the weeds the day they slaughtered the fields.

Oh. Everything has come back to its initiation then, Thomas tells Ezekiel, joining the others on the shore...

There isn't an explanation for that, though from time to time we may marvel, Ezekiel agrees.

Laughing as we watch her trace her steps about the river where whatever was modern in its language no longer appears that way, Hezhen hisses.

What is seen first will be remembered last, Sisdal the Handless grins.

Oh scarecrow, the woman hums, almost picturing the face of her daughter before the soldiers found them hiding in the monastery.

Ezekiel takes her hand. Do you know where you're going, little girl?

Sisdal opens her mouth.

Go ahead and look inside, she tells him, running her fingers over Sisdal's stout, round face, touching his handleless elbows.

Are there fish there?

There are fish there! Hezhen cries. She is of me!

A cold gray brilliance with outlines of red reaching in the sky over the river. See the fishwoman's black stockings! the apostle secreted into her ear.

The whole world seems to sing out as Hezhen swims down the shore, then dances on the water, weeping. The witch in

all of her.

The monks without shoes mulling in this grass where the snakes come.

This is certainly a mouth, Ezekiel mutters.

Yes, but are there really fish in it? Virgil, the laughing monk, laughs, waking at the shore.

After they remove one small minnow from her mouth, they continue in the journey, since there is no reason to be sad.

You see, Peter sighed. The goats on the hillside.

The parked tanks without petrol! Virgil snickers.

The drained colors of the gray and white buildings floating out above the architecture of the once forgotten city, floating around these shoeless monks who the snakes will not strike.

Are you frightened then? Peter asks.

No. I am not frightened, she reminds him.

IF YOU WANT TO
FIND THE MEANING,
STOP CHASING AFTER
THINGS

It was true what she told him about his eyes, though he had denied it. Even as he set the last linkages in the fuse which they were to place under the theater's stage. She had warned him, but he had remained steadfast while threading the primary detonator and coding the timer. Tonight he remembers her entering the dressing room of the theater, confident, wearing a black fur coat, her red leather heels. And he was already falling in love. Graceful in her age, laughing at her own mock appearance while quietly questioning him a final time about the fuse....

He hears the clamor of the brigade as the officers storm out of the militia station and down the road. He had dragged her into the shadows of the poplar trees. The explosion rocking the entire center. She screamed as he pulled her from beneath the theater's fallen rubble. And then she had asked him, calmly, if he loved her. As if it were a natural question. They'd started down the alley, and he was sure she had mistaken him for her husband whom she had mentioned the day before—in a tone that suggested she believed he might still be alive. Though they both knew otherwise. Her husband had been buried in a mass grave some-

where in the forest surrounding the monastery along with most of the other monks.

The streets around the theater erupting in fire. She had suddenly run back to the middle of the road, and he had wrestled her to the ground. The alley had then opened up in a spectacular light, the light bursting from behind the girls' legs as he hurried them both to the station where the Gypsies were waiting. The sirens giving way to fear as everywhere people rushed for shelter in the chaotic gunfire.

The next morning she had found a new hat on the road. The Gypsies had stopped by the tracks to water their horses. He had washed the scars on her face, sponged her bruises. But when she asked the Gypsies where the girl had disappeared, they had shrugged their shoulders and walked back to their wagons. The oldest among them had cackled then. The tall magician Sidel signaled the two into one of the wagons, warned that by evening, no one would be able to escape.

She glanced in one of the shattered storefront mirrors, studied her face and told him she almost felt pretty again. The Gypsies thought so too, and he was uncomfortable when she began to drink with their men.

Do you love me too? she asked.

The stench of manure and straw from the wagons.

She had aged during the night, applied blue eye shadow to her lips.

The tents and caravans scattered along the forbidden countryside, the contaminated rivers, the black skies.

She ran the dry wool of her scarf through her hands while staring out across the fields. Pointed at the lupine and acacia, the bird of paradise perched on one of the scarecrow's head across the

river. You stopped believing in journeys long ago, didn't you? She turned away, tipped her hat and winked at the young boys beginning to gather around.

Who are these children? And why are they singing? he wanted to ask her.

Look at me. The soul is the most important thing, you know. Every soul has its story. Do you think we will ever be happy together?

She'd reminded him about the cardiac once more after the Gypsies vanished. This will be the last of my rebukes though, she had chided, mocking him. He'd been the first to awaken after dawn, finding nothing but the waste and ash of the fires smoking along the polluted river. Dead fish scattered on the shore. The carcass of the drowned horse that had floated to the surface the evening before.

Think of those tracks as nothing more than a metaphor, she'd whispered, gesturing distractedly at the boxcars in the far distance as he buttoned his white short-sleeve shirt, pulled up his khaki pants. The Gypsies have gone, he started to explain.

Do you think there ever were any Gypsies? Or theaters. Or soldiers? Listen. Think of those tracks as nothing more than a metaphor, like bones, or scores of music.

Though he was unsure as to where they should go, it was too dangerous to remain.

....He again hears her calling out for him as she stared at the face of the drowned horse by the river, as if spell-bound by the small minnows floating inside the horse's open mouth. Did you ever love your wife? she'd asked.

Well, did you love your wife, she said, combing her black hair and staring at her reflection in the bloody water.

She had dark olive skin and a curious face that sensuously drew back in on itself in a long, bird-like arch.

He saw her pick a fish from the horse's mouth, slapped the back of her head, pulled her away from the river.

Tell me! Did you ever love your wife, the way you today love me! she shouted defiantly.

In the weeks following his wife's death, he had refused to eat, to cut his hair or change his clothes, hiding in the quarry caves outside the town until some of his men eventually found him. He had been drunk for days when they arrived with her. Only she and a handful of the others from the monastery had survived. You're going blind, she had told him matter-of-factly. A skilled dancer, she had volunteered to work with him in the theater after his wife's identity had been discovered. She had stayed with him after the men left, already aware of what had happened and what "had to be done." The fascists had increased their surveillance before retreating from the city, concluding their occupation with daily hangings in the public squares. His wife had been among them.

He knew he would have to find a way. Over the mountains. Return her to her home. To whatever family or friends she might have.

And that morning as he packed the tent and their bed rolls, he could no longer deny what she had been the first to notice. He was going blind. He had set the fuse too short, leaving too little time for her to exit the dressing room after dancing for the fascists inside....

Let me tell you how we should do it, she'd teased him after the monks and their Gypsies had vanished. She had recognized the monks across the river. Though she had not told him. Her father among them.

See that road on the edge where the hills drop off? Those stark blue valleys. The black line of wrecked boxcars, the parallel train tracks moving into the once-upon-a-time farmlands? That look of the scarecrow's face? All those ravens and helicopters flying about the place. The gray earth that is gray out there. Way out there. Do you believe me? Are you happy, sir...Will you take me there? To the fields. That's where the monks are going, I sense it.

Influence of God! she went on more hysterically. The snows across the hills melting, that brief sun. Can you see it? Can you see it, dammit!

Yes, I can see it!

Is that why the angel was on fire? she had shouted. Is that why everything is burning, she demanded, slapping him for the second time as they started down the road.

Two stark figures walking away from the field on this, their first morning.

DESIRE NOTEBOOKS

For just as the wounder wounds himself, the healer heals himself, Peter said to Ezekiel after falling from the sky and they began their stroll across the centuries, each wondering how to cure the other's pain.

Ezekiel searching for a way to part the waters, then deciding to simply walk across them.



BACK ON THE ROAD

The crow turned to him as they walked into the clearing past the forest to their east. This is what I want to tell you, the one-eyed boy said, now breaking the silence they'd walked in for several days, hearing only the crunch of their footsteps on the ice, the snap of branches falling in.

The three-foot, black crow nuzzled under the tip of the boy's shoulder.

I want you to stop thinking love is so difficult, the boy smirked, lighting another cigarette.

But I don't believe love is difficult.

You deceive yourself by saying otherwise, the boy snickered. To do nothing takes courage. Do you understand? You yourself have decided to come here. Sometimes to do nothing takes courage.

The black crow flew into the snow, let out a deep, horrific squawking.

How long do we continue walking, the man inquired.

How long can you stand it? the boy responded. Their kingdom is tucked between the hills and the surrounding forest on the other side of God's face.

Do you want to go there?

Since to travel, first of all, is to change one's body, the crow said, as if mocking the sky.

Moscow—

January 3rd

The night she vanished, it came to him in her dream, came to her in this slow, unfolding myth—arrived in this city. While she was lying on the operating table, hemorrhaging, the lights had grown dimmer and dimmer until finally the doctor couldn't see in her at all. The doctor had left her in the clinic until dawn but then later discovered she was still miraculously alive.

Just as for three days, twenty miners were trapped under the earth without light or food, she now says to Peter. Do you know them?

Surely I do.

Seven volunteered to die in order to save air for the others, the twelve who survived? That's what they wrote in the papers.

I have seen them, Peter says. And I have read how you described them in the monks' Notebooks. You will discover this myth.

A white sky, a love not experienced in this reckoning, she thinks, remembering the field of crows, hoping he might understand why she had to die. As she could not tell him then, and there was no way she could have continued to hide it.

In the massive bakery the bread rotted in the stoves until the population in rage and despair broke down the doors and took what rot they could find, she chatters on, confused yet speaking into the darkness.

Peter?

I am here, love.

Yes, he left me out of despair, Peter.

No, you are dead, Peter reminds her.

So the woman masturbates, in order to sustain the desire, in order to keep him alive and fluent in her imagination. Do you know what I mean? That way on the road without her he may find a language to reinvent us, find us another story, one we can live in? she mumbles, feeling this shame. Strange. His blind eye, she thinks, imagining what he might write in his letter, because she knows he will write. He had read her Ezekiel's first epistle from Kiev. He would have to discover its source now.

She sees his mouth opening around a road, a white light, a love she has never experienced in this way. She imagines him walking in snow. Will he one day find our beginning? she asks.

The apostle waits by the window, unsure.

The fires burning on the streets below. Her mother had lived here alone before the revolution. The communist boys rioting all afternoon, though the police didn't seem to care. They were drunk, on holiday. Our house in chaos, she utters to the crow on the window's seal. The river and heavy coats thrashed through wet dreams, leaving their smells behind, she mumbles to the bird she will someday become, she thinks, glancing toward the window from her bed. This collapse of nations. The end of history as we know it?

Peter?

I am here.

When it's hard to find even bread?

To love doesn't mean to look at each other, but in the same direction, Peter admonishes, taking her hand. You have reason to hope.

Who will help me then, she coos to the red-beaked crow. After what all of these men have done?

This will be your beginning.

Earlier that evening she had tried again to understand the passage from the Notebooks that confused him when they came

back drunk. Some of the pages scattered about the damp floor of the kitchen now. Yet she had only partially succeeded in her attempts to complete Ezekiel's epistle. *Ideology has exhausted itself in the plight of humanity*, she whispers, quoting the monk's words at the gates of the old city.

The apostle's tiny face dark and staring at her, as if in the silence he is waiting.

Because every man when he finds himself becomes a myth and then his death is predictable, Peter begins in a hush tone, preparing to fly out the window. Which tense would you like to exist in, love? he asks. There is no reason for you to despair.

I will come again.

He kisses her hand and vanishes.

Read me more, she had beseeched him on the trains. Read me more she begged after he placed his coat around her naked shoulders, carried her away from the men who were still pulling up the trousers of their uniforms at the border. Even after he had read her the story of the traveller who walked past the river through the forest where he found a table overflowing with eyes. After he told her about the girl who roamed with the Gypsy vampires and became a witch. Even after he had read her the story about the woman whose body had been opened by a white sky, and how she had later met four monks walking in the snow, she still wanted him to read her more. You don't understand the words? she then asked, tracing her finger around the tenth century map of rivers and fields in the Notebooks.

No. I don't understand them, the man said, sensing that these too, had somehow been her father's words.

Naturally, Hezhen laughs. What do you expect of a man.

*Moscow—
(the last day)*

Going through the ritual of return this morning. The real and her sister, she mumbles to Peter who has joined her at the kitchen table, sensing her death is again dreaming. She's sitting down, as if for the last time, beside him this morning. Hand-washing all of the clothes, preparing a red soup with the odds and ends. A ritual for homecoming, she whispers to the one with such tiny feet, curious as to why he keeps returning. Though she refuses to ask. Onions. Finger-sized potatoes. Visions. Beets. Stir them all together? she calls to the crow waiting outside. She smokes while trying to organize the translations. The scattered scraps and fragments and drawings. Oh yes, she whistles. Oh you my crow of love. The apostle glances at the crow and crosses himself, remembers the sky of crows in the field by the monastery. To gain stability, she whispers. Any word. Find something to lean into, she mumbles. The winter outside returning. In the Notebooks too—forbidding and lovely.

See, she calls, gesturing Peter to the window. There's the church in the park where the old women gather in their mourning gowns. That was my father's favorite church. She watches the apostle turn his head to the faces beyond the steamed window. A skating rink. A line of birch trees she vaguely recognizes, forgets. As a girl she used to play there...O flock. O flock of what is known. All of this offering, perhaps, everything she wants?

And all that terrifies you, he says.

This country of the imagination? she wonders. Though again she refuses to ask. It is for him to ask, her to tell. As he should be abiding in her, and she senses this. But he only knows the written truth of men, she thinks. She had wanted to tell him this, tell him everything, yet what was there to tell? One accepts

death as an entry? A view? A warning? This is what it meant to be human. And she senses that he wants this most. Listening to the partisan songs on the short-wave radio brings back pleasant memories, familiarity. The fighting in the countryside. Dissonance in the old forms. Tradition providing her with a frame though the background of her life is missing as she stirs the soup. Are you frightened?

I am frightened...Peter answers, wondering if he will ever understand her pain. For even his eyes are hurting.

Why do I always sense that the eyes are the first to go?

It bothers her, though she's feeling capable of what she has to do, even if edgy in this dream. Knows she still prefers this cowardice—the masculine case of his companionship, something other than herself and God to rely on. At least we were eating, she whispers to the crow pecking at the window.

The apostle seems pensive and quiet today.

Not like the crows we saw sleeping by the station, she goes on. No, at least we're eating. She says, if only we could change our bodies, change them into that of a bird, a sky, a coin? Now that there's nothing, we'll have to go to the next passage. The one which has so often eluded us in the current....Waiting, you know. Waiting for God.

She sees herself lying on the corner by the theater drunk and confused. Confused in the disruption of the explosion when she first confessed her love and then forgot it. The cool rain, the burning image of her daughter, her wandering through the forest by the monastery that night Ezekiel and Mika escaped with her through the monastery tunnels. She remembers the day he detonated the bomb in the theater too, inadvertently killing her girl. How had she loved this man afterwards. Then the Gypsy wagons

the monks had sent passing in the fields as she sang to him from the ballads that flowed into his mouth. Later cursing the soldiers who tried to arrest him, who raped her. Though even the soldiers didn't know why they did this. Funny. She had screamed that it was because of the Notebooks, and then the fascists had let them pass....

But it was Mika and Ezekiel who were with her in the forest, who assured my passage.

Why did you let him come with me?

As you have always wanted it.

Or as she had imagined? she responds, leaving for the river to do what she has so feared doing.



AT THE RIVER

Eight months ago?

Yes, yes, she says to Hezhen excitedly. I think, yes!

And are there fish in your mouth! the witch demands.

Yes, they're fish in my mouth.

Then tell your story!

The freighter, of course, once again was without a known destination and he feared for me. That's when it happened. When the soldiers came. He'd try to find the story in the pages, the way the monks had played....

Go on, Hezhen hisses, pulling the woman from her sleep. What about the deception.

Whenever, for instance, the man grew close to deciphering one of the signs of my death, I started going deeper and deeper into it. This world of dreaming. My Father's history. He couldn't imagine, you see...he had lost his wife...and though he never admitted it to me....

Tell me! Hezhen cries, pulling a minnow from the woman's mouth.

Though he never told me, I found the orders myself.

Go on.

From his unit, the notice ordering him to quit the assignment, not to go through with it—instructing him to return for new orders. See. They knew about his eyes.

But he went through with the bombing anyway. His way

to revenge....

What else! Hezhen demands, pulling another minnow from her mouth. What else! she cries, stumbling in the darkness. Tell me what matters to you!

He thought he could travel with me then. Cross the border and escape with me. He didn't think I knew....

A little girl, Hezhen says, reaching into the water pouring from her mouth. A little girl! Can you imagine...such pain, like yours....

My experience is not yours! Hezhen hisses, slapping her face and lighting the fire by the river.

It is. It is yours. Yes I know your pain. That is why I have come. I am you.

Hezhen stumbles, bends over, revealing the scars of her birth. Tell your story! she caws, pulling a three-headed trout from her own mouth.

No direction. Desire. Amazing. But do you love me? I asked that night when he dragged me from beneath the rubble. The little girl burning in the alley, then the roads, the scorched fields, the monks and Gypsies, I remember....

The girl!

I forgot her!

Later he found us tickets on the midnight freighter. I had to help him. Horrible. Danger in the crowd's eye. Like 1917. Like it was for you. They were hungry.

Hezhen hisses, then picks the bones from her teeth.

I was helpless and he made the mistake of trusting me.... Otherwise he could have got away I'm sure. He knew about my Father. And the soldiers knew about him, but they let us pass. I didn't tell him. Because there was still a price to be paid.

Your story!

You didn't tell him, so neither did I.

Your story!

I hinted it. I might be....

Remember! When you slept together! Hezhen cries, groping in this darkness on her knees by the river.

Yes, when we slept together, I accepted Father was dead. They were all dead. But somehow I escaped.

Hezhen grabs her mouth, searches inside.

They had been executed at the monastery. It was my husband. You already know.

The girl!

My....

That's how you seduced him!

No!

He knew you weren't who you said you were. Knew you had lied just as he had lied. The Notebooks you smuggled out of the monastery. Why did you lie.

I forgot.

Why do you betray me.

You lied to him too. She was your girl. Are there fish in your mouth!

There are fish in our mouths!

Tell me the truth then. Show me!

She pulls another from her mouth and Hezhen gobbles it quickly.

Go on!

All dead. My husband and Father. But Ezekiel and Mika took me through the tunnels. Then the Gypsies came.

While you were sleeping with the Colonel at the monastery while they shot our monks!

They took them out into that field and shot them.

No.

They swore to....let me keep the girl, that's how we

escaped.

Are there fish in your mouth?

I don't want the story.

Then the partisans came and found you on the road, but
you wouldn't tell him. Why?

He knew! The Gypsies were supposed to take care of her!

Tell me!

She ran out into the alley before the bomb exploded.

They lied!

Because you could no longer bear it. But she was your
daughter!

I was sick!

Wake up! Wake up, the witch screams as she opens her
eyes and sees him shaking her own corpse by the river. She hears
the last of Hezhen's caw, pulling the last of the octopus from her
open mouth.

Wake up. It's the first day!



DESIRE NOTEBOOKS

These mountains and these fields, Ezekiel had prayed, gesturing for the others to follow.

That is where we will go, he said, taking her hand and leading her away from the monastery through the tunnels.....

38 DAYS

Sorry the priest had not seen her with Hezhen. That might have comforted her. All of the images of her past life. The river and a woman's darkness—her mother's so much like her own, Thomas says to Ezekiel. The ghost of her daughter too, you know. The execution. She boils the water for tea. Outside, the smell of spring gradually approaching.

You've been sleeping inside the pages, too. I know.

She combs her hair. Imagines him inside her. Her fingers probing inside his mouth. For the taste of it. She wants to indulge herself in this way.

She'll slide her finger in his mouth later.

The crow outside sways, dazzled—alone, the boy says, fluttering about the room.

DESIRE NOTEBOOKS

Because desire makes up such a small part of our lives, this is what we shall call them, The Desire Notebooks, Ezekiel said to Sisdal as they stood on the banks of the river....

—Berlin

January 23, 1945

He didn't know how to talk to her. Though even this awareness had become a source for meditation in her body. Dreaming the roads with him. Why else had he vanished? Can you imagine me when you sleep, she'd asked, almost as if she were already alone the morning before he left her.

Can you see me when you sleep. Can you taste this taste that so disturbs you? she blurted out. It is true that you love me, you know....

Singing the roads. Almost as if she can touch him, touch the story he has chosen. The stark and miraculous sky returning to the earth. The stunning fields to his left. Her days strolling on

the iced-over river with Hezhen and Peter now. Stranger promises spoken by another tongue.

A hint, she'd taunted him that morning when she read him her translation of the woman whose body had been opened by a white sky, saying *the stone the builders rejected is the corner stone*. The scroll describing a path to the sea. She had tip-toed past him toward the kitchen, scattered the pages of Hezhen's story across the floor. But he didn't want to hear the woman's story.

What do you know about love?

What do I need to know?

She'd risen from the chair, taken a slow step toward the cooking soup, but he did not want to hear.

In the countryside they're slaughtering horses for meat, he'd responded instead. Did you know that? And the Major has passed another decree outlawing suicide.

Then we can't kill ourselves.

The memory of his sliding his tongue inside. Her swollen breasts, the child within her. The terror in a stone?

Have you fallen asleep too, she asks Peter now.

A near perfect blackness. Yes, I've been sleeping as well, he says. But I have not forsaken you.

How could I not love him. Yet I could not have this child. You understand.

Yes.

Did you know these Notebooks are the moments between us, Peter begins, reading from her recent inscriptions:

The horse-drawn carts carrying the old along the roads. The white birch trees with round black spots. The huge crow in the oaks lining the yellow brick road.... The night's full-blue moon. Hezhen,

the one known woman allowed to travel among the monks, has refused to renounce her sex as it is expected of the others....

Scarecrow. You're my scarecrow, she flirts. You too, more often than not, are nothing but a man, Peter. But your feet are too small.

You have described Hezhen well.

You, too, more often than not....

In the town hall the sisters will be gathering to pray for potatoes, he sighs. Would you not like to join them?

The smell of soup and onions cooking in the room.

Your flat mouth as the words fall to the floor. Dammit, Peter!

What else is love, if not a seed, the giver and the given interlocking hands.

He smiles, caresses her hand. This death has brought me closer to you.

A few soldiers will mount their horses on the road. Did you know the hole in the mirror is sleep, Peter?

Where will he be with the roads all white?

Peter pulls back the blanket as she puts on her pajamas.

Peter?

I am listening.

This eerie and primitive calm. The boys on the street talking of a new revolution. Is it possible?

He takes the scraps of ghosted paper from her hand and puts them back in his pocket.

How long have we been sleeping?

Your wounds are healing.

Of course I need him. But I could not have the child. And I cannot marry.

Do you know the difference between love and need?

What's the difference between love and need?

To love means to look in the same direction. To need means to look at one another.

Is there an act to forgiving we can't remember?

Peter?

I am here.

On the road he sees the boys carve out the insides of a dog, and suddenly begins to cry.



BACK IN EZEKIEL'S GARDEN

OF ALL THE EXPANSE THAT PASSED THROUGH THEM, PETER SENSES THAT THIS DREAM WILL BE THE MOST DIFFICULT, THE BOY TELLS THE MONKS AT THE TABLE. FOR SHE IS SHOWING CERTAIN SIGNS IN HER FACE—THAT RAREFIED COUNTERNANCE, DEMURE OF A CHILD. A FACE OF DESIRE. THE WAY SHE SWINGS HER LEGS CARELESSLY BENEATH HER MOTHER'S BED. THE LAUGHTER OF HER BLACK EYES EVEN SHEDDING THE ONCE DAMAGED SKIN AND BEAUTY OF HER ACTUAL AGE IN YOUR PAGES....IN THE GUISE OF A CHILD. THOUGH THIS OF COURSE IS WHY HE HAS ALWAYS LOVED HER. IS IT NOT, EZEKIEL?

IT IS.

BUT SOMEDAY SHE WILL HAVE TO COME TO US ON HER OWN, EZEKIEL REMINDS THE BOY, AND RETURN OUR NOTEBOOKS.

DEAR YOU

Dear You—he writes today as the crow watches on. Wondering if he will become one of them as her father had in 1933, searching in these same fields. Adopting the names and traditions so that the monks' mystery might continue.

I've decided to name you 'you', as in these Notebooks I can find no other reference to your origin or design....

The boy walking around him in the snow on a late afternoon as he begins the letter knowing that the words, though not their sentiment, forge a lie, a damaged crossing.

Dear You, It's cold here today. The boy and his black crow peeing in the snow....

He looks at the one-eyed boy Thomas. Another road dreaming in the snow? he asks.

That's what I love about you! your mirthful eyes. I understand this love! It is your journey—to see it and its impermanence, too!

A face that expects rebuke, but only on its own terms, the boy chuckles.

...A random shift of white clouds over an ice-blue field. This photograph of her in his wallet.

What is your name? he asks the boy, glaring up from the letter.

At last! the boy then cries. Alas! I am Thomas, one of the doubters. The apocryphal twin brother of Christ, some say.

A bright and rather ravenous beauty. The snowed fields opening up before him as he had once more awoken on the road. Skies the shade of a human skin. A thin veneer of red distinguishing the horizon. The villages and run-down military post in the distance. The vast mountains to the north covered with barren spruce. Old mining villages.

What is it you have to tell me today, he asks the boy, shivering and squinting so that he might better see the crow's beak.

I know why you have come here.

Why?

Because you love her, but you lost her, and you are ready to discover your own happiness.

Is that all?

It's enough. Why do you deny it?

I don't deny it.

You deceive yourself again.

Is this a dream?

This is the story of your life!

How do you know?

Because you will find her again! the crow squawks.

What is it you're trying to say, crow?

That you will find her again, the crow, Tikho, squawks.
Go ahead and finish your stupid letter. Love is in the body.

I've decided to name you 'you', he notes in this series of letters. Why?

Aren't you hungry? the boy asks a moment later, peering over the man's shoulder, sniffing at the words.

I can see the monks traipsing across the meadow in the distance again.

Yes, that is how her father first described them, too.

Where is her father?

Buried in those fields.

That's not what she told me.

Don't you think that's enough of letter writing, the crow snickers.

White empty pages she breathes into the shapes of monks, crows, angels? he thinks. A road through the forest. A one-eyed boy walking in the snow, though leaving no footprints. Almost human.

Have you decided? Thomas points at the sky.

Decided what?

If you're hungry.

I'm not hungry.

A man could freeze in all this snow, you know! Why, whole populations have begun to question the possibilities of love after all the chaos and famine of the last millennium. Did you know that?

Thomas shakes his head and takes the letter in his hand.

What is it you have to say for yourself?

I decided to walk for 40 days and 40 nights. Searching somewhere in this wilderness.

Look at the sun sideways then. That way the light won't blind you.

Where now?

Over those hills where her father traveled.

Just as the armies trampled over them, they retreated once more, the crow squawks and they again begin their walking. Just as the armies trampled, they retreated, behooved into believing, as armies do, that they had destroyed us. But what the right eyes sees, the left is blind to, the crow laughs and laughs and laughs.

DESIRE NOTEBOOKS

Requien eternan: "Where there is truth there is no peace and where there is peace there is no truth." Sidel the Handleless whispered—testing his old friend as they strolled toward the monastery garden.

From the rabbinical sayings? Ezekiel guessed, stopping at the waters, himself almost human again after touching the lovers' story.

—*Moscow*

February 5



FINDING AN EYE ON THE ROAD

The blue mountains to the east. Her body opened by a sky. The monks on the snowed hills. The one without eyes who could nonetheless see him. Walking in the darkness the man can no longer distinguish the darkness. The priests outside the village. The soldiers' open pit. The church. The deserters and communists inside. Not that it mattered. There were so many villages in her country, who could ever remember their names. The sweat coming off her hands as she had moved the pillow closer to his head that last night before he buried her. Her fear. He'd opened a can of beef hash, inched it closer to her mouth, touched her freckled back before. Speak of a promised land.

Promised land?

I'm afraid. But I don't know why.

She'd awoken and the darkness had engulfed her. Because the crow had flown off somewhere.

As you, too, will vanish without me in the snow, she had told him.

No.

Which promised land?

The way she had come so often in the middle of the night only touching him. That a woman with such a scaled voice could snore so coarsely had surprised, even aroused him. What am I supposed to do? he had asked after she'd rejected his proposal for marriage.

She stared at his strong white legs. Be careful on the road. It happens you decide one thing and God decides another. Sidel learned this all too well. You'll see he has no hands.

What are you talking about?

I had a dream. A dream of flying up from the earth—surrounded by children who loved me—though when the one-eyed boy swarmed about your waist, I drifted down to the earth and again awoke beside you, calm.

Will you go to that dream?

I will go to that dream.

We no longer look in the same direction, you know?

It's in the imagination that your intentions most deceive you.

His straw blond hair, the skin of his arms the color of sour goat's milk that day. An almost translucent whiteness beside her dark body.

She had motioned with her hand for him to lie beside her one last time.

You don't even know who I am anymore.

I never did.

Taking off his shirt in the darkness. His nakedness from the back.

You know, this is the first time I haven't bitten my fingernails in years, she suddenly cried out as the apostle flew into the room with the crow and the man's letter....

Peter stared at her girl's waist, admired it then.

Wanted her in that way. The letter is for you, he said, taking the envelope from the crow's beak.

Tonight walking down another road....

Yes. Walking down another road, he signaled. But what can I do about it, love?

Have you seen him, Peter? she exclaimed.

In the fields yes, he told her. The man approached the monastery, witnessed a vision—a leisurely ride through the cemetery in a carriage drawn by horse and buggy. The monks singing as they traipsed across the hill. He drank with one of Hezhen's horseman as they sang, and then Thomas pointed to the field.

What's to be done? she interrupted him. Clean you see. She showed Peter her nails. You see they are clean, Peter. But what am I to do with this death?

These are the things that have brought you together, he whispered. Though the things themselves will also vanish.

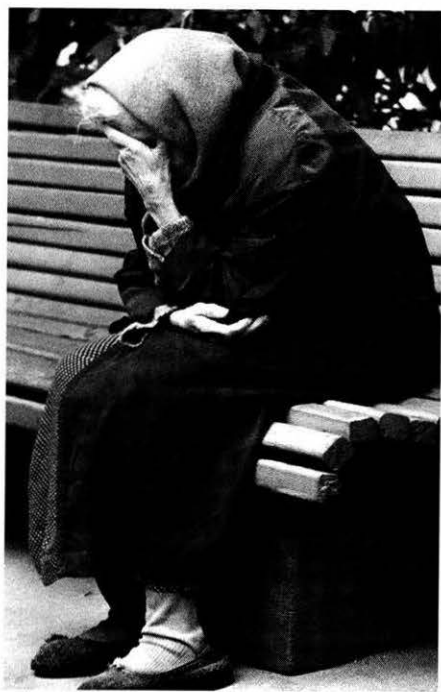
Dear You,

she begins, unfolding the letter.
*Whenever we dream together the stories and our
lives seem to merge. It seems that way to me. What
were you wearing that day when you spoke of our
house? Or can you tell me why your crow refuses to
reveal itself to me? The boy and I talk as you watch
on, you can't deceive me. Your eyes are in the crow's.
Your eyes are the same, and brilliant too. Is it true
that you've written us into the Notebooks, that we'll
awaken in your Father's world? Do you sense what
I write before I write it?*

Have we finished our exile?

When will we finish our exile?

—afternoon
opus magnum—divinum



THE NOMADIC MONKS GATHER FOR THE CHOIR

That he no longer feared her was a sign of his entry?
Mika, the first among them asks.

Yes, Ezekiel says, stepping away from the story, changing his gown.

Placing blame will help neither them nor the situation as a whole, Virgil, the sleeping one laughs, yawning and waking letting the words fall from his mouth like leaves.

She smiled, wanted to taste his face, but feared his blood, Ezekiel tells them, pleased with the journey, its return.

Later that day the population burned effigies of the homosexual Jew in the center of the city, Mika interrupts.

Yes, and what did you make of that, Mika?

A national hero once, a poet of impeccable character and high reputè. Just as you once were yourself, Ezekiel. Before you joined us in the fields.

The two watched on in awe and disbelief that day, Thomas reminds the others. But after all, we've lost touch with the world.

She took his hand and led him toward the theater.

Why the sky was almost red, Sisdal chimes in.

She led him into the alley off the famous road. There they hid behind a fallen horse until the night completely consumed itself.

We saw it ourselves, Virgil chuckles, shaking his skinny head.

Which dream?

It was your dream, Sisdal tells Ezekiel. You were the first to dream it in Constantinople.

She looked into the shadows, then down the yellow brick road.

The trick is patience, confidence, a contentment with both the self's and the world's demise, Peter then told her.

A spectacular glow in the new moon that moved about the alley, Hezhen hisses. Like the decrepit haunts of novels and men.

The trees stripped and naked on the main boulevard.

Her hand fumbling in his pocket.

The effect was to make her slow down even more, Ezekiel comments. Which he believed had its purpose.

Crossing herself with the old signs as her father had, preparing to become Hezhen.

They started off for the theater once more and she interlocked her arm with Peter's.

I find my story in her! Hezhen cries.

After they reached the theater and she broke the lock, they entered?

He put his arm around her shyly, almost as if he was a man again.

They both imagined a performance on the grand and blackened stage. The actors, the props, the construction of a tower, Eiffel or Babel, he wasn't sure, Mika goes on.

This is the law they accepted among the hungry where we find them?

Yes. For just as we have all died, we will all be born again in their world, Ezekiel says, reading from the scraps in his pocket.

BEFORE THESE
BEGINNINGS...

He and I aren't talking to the world, but to the banal things that make it not abstract, she conjectures, dreaming herself back into history, running her fingers over the remaining treasures from her mother's open jewelry box. Her mother's favorite blue ribbon, her father's memorial star, her husband's watch and this key to a lock box that no longer exists. Though she had found it by the river. It would be different if she didn't remember the faces returning as she speaks to their remains. These incarnations of memory as she again listens for their voices. The nomads she had first met with her father as a child. This sect that repeated the histories begun in the pages, each wanderer taking on anew the identities and names in the Notebooks, believing in this way they bridged time and connected their lives with the past.

Just as her father had taken on the identity of the one who preceded him, Peter.

And as it was written first by Thomas long ago, Peter whispers in her ear. Only on this path can they each be free to wander among the fields outside of human time. Traveling the entire distance of God. The boy wrote of this as the *mysterium coniunctionis* in which each field is a body; each road a cross—each river, a baptism. Past, present and future are one.....

Blessed in this way and for the moment, I recognize the blessing, she tells the apostle. I can see the past, and I no longer feel a need to dream further to find them. She takes his hand and leads Peter across the room, then out the door. He offers her some of the scraps crumbled in his pocket, though she refuses them. Soon, they stop near the steps of the church, and she bends closer to one of the corpses piled by the Byzantine cathedral. As if to more clearly discern the words it may be speaking. She calls the



corpse "Father," and while appearing threatened by this, Peter doesn't intervene. Yet he gestures for her not to touch the iced-over flesh, already stripped of all its clothes and belongings.

What else is the metaphor of this life, he hums. If not that of the seed, the giving and the giver interlocking hands? Your life is in death, and your death is in life.

She glances to her left as if searching for his voice again, kneels for a moment more beside the frozen body in the snow, rises slowly as she looks from his crow-like eyes to the daunted expressions of the onlookers who have begun to gather around her ghost. The babushkas in their black shawls, the boys pulling their toy sleds, the children curious of any who might so unabashedly approach their dead. Though she is unaware, they can see her.

Peter!

I am here.

Some military men were beginning to assemble by the doors of the church. She walks on ahead, dismissing them with a wave of her hand, trudging on through the muddied snows and strewn newspapers. She furtively searches past the darkened church to the rose-tinted skies vanishing toward the highway.

Who are you, sister?

Peter!

She stares down at the tear in the top of her left boot, aroused and stunned by the sudden chiming of the bells, the sudden firing of the soldiers into the crowd, the sudden figure of an angel she sees appearing along the high blue walls of the church—and afterwards, the bells tolling so unobtrusively.

A young soldier points his rifle at her.

Another gestures for the man not to shoot.

Placing her hand on her hips, she yells in their direction—Is that why you're doing this! Where is my Father!

Miraculous, Peter whispers. As if she possesses the face of

a child walking invisibly through their world, through this shooting and noise and terror. The bullets flying about. The children rushing around her....The way she had looked when she was young—that slash of black hair across her forehead, the slant of her bird-shaped face, her handsome defiant eyes.

Oh yes. I knew you were going to leave me!

Isn't she not a bird, Peter buzzes, tripping and slipping through the air, stumbling to his knees, coming to his feet awkwardly. His own dwarfed face whitened and freshly aged by the snow. She laughs, brushes the snow from her chin with a red glove and starts home, as if oblivious to it all, as if she were, indeed, invisible among the crowds and flocks of crows.

History continues in the eyes of those who are singing! Peter calls to her, studying her gait from behind, thinking of his descriptions in the Notebooks before her.

She coughs, wipes away the tears she hadn't noticed on her face. Have I been crying? Is it so, Father?

He doesn't understand, though he begins to hum the melody which had become a symbol of her earlier life in the pages.

When she, too, was among us, he says to the one-eyed boy who has stumbled down from the rooftops. Just like her father, though after all that's happened to her I am not surprised that she has forgotten, the boy says.

Isn't she not a bird? he hums once more, looking at the angel's astonished face. The boy freckles and burns as he flies into the wind.

As if you have only now, for the first time, fallen from the sky? Thomas calls back in a teasing voice.

Yes, Peter motions, singing under his breath, again falling in love with his daughter. Miraculous! But isn't she not a bird!

THE LAST SUPPER

There had never, of course, been any question about them loving one another. As the ice formed on the street lights, he had asked her to marry him, let him father the child. He had escorted her to the restaurant across the river. Suggested a walk. We're both drunk, she'd agreed. Though what he really wanted was for her to tell him.

He'd proudly tilted his head back after they entered the restaurant and were seated by the nearest window. Pleased with himself and the champagne he bribed the waiters with one of her father's coins after arriving in the city.

She was surprised to find this restaurant remarkably the same, though there were no longer chandeliers, or lace on the curtains. No handsome officers in white uniforms like the first time. Instead the grand oak doors were guarded by soldiers.

She had only been fourteen when her father brought her here. Then disappeared.

Do you know what you're talking about? she had asked him.

Love, yes.

He leaned over the table, smoothed his forefinger across her bottom lip. Are you all right?

No. I think we have to leave.

Outside, it was no longer snowing. Yet the frost still froze in his nose as he breathed in the smell, the smell of her sickness first, and then of her neck.

They walked along the frozen river where earlier in the day he had watched the Gypsy fishers skating on the ice, using their oars as hockey sticks. He took her arm and led her past the church as her hands began to quiver and they both recognized the signs of her fever. They stopped by the cracked walls of her father's church, shared the last cigarette.

It's desire that provokes these fevers, she had lied, not telling him the truth of her pain, but taking the morphine as they spoke.

Did you know that desire provokes these fevers, she uttered, somewhat demurely as he helped her to her feet.

Yet even in this mayhem, she went on—with the government paralyzed and the people seizing whatever they can, this night has been made calm for you. Just so you could declare your love. While dreaming of Christmas, of oranges, roasted nuts, of ham and cheese?

The frost froze in her nose, too. Our world in collapse and down to all of this which is only human, she chattered on, seeing Ezekiel turn inside the alley where he walked with a boy whose face strangely reminded her of a moment.

No. I could never marry you, she blushed.

They had walked further on along the river holding hands as she led him to her father's grave.

HEZHEN'S RAGE

Another might consider memory as a seed, Hezhen croons as Thomas escorts the man into her kitchen....

A mustard seed and then horsepiss on the pearl reserved yet about to yield. But only if he can inhabit the air we breathe! the witch cries. Forty days and forty nights have passed, she screams. Shadows among the pots and pans. Alone in her kitchen as the tea pot boils! she cries, pulling a small octopus from the rot of her mouth.

The view outside the lover's window. A vast white! A col-lage of tree tops, dead vines—floating branches....

My day will find you! Hezhen caws. So much that enters the unpredictable. The clock ticking by the stove. The yellow brick road. Three blind mice....

The witch signals Thomas to the table, but the boy refuses to sit with her and the man. Everything becomes a present hour in the world, converging! the crow shouts back at her.

The story harkens and unravels and dissolves! Listen, she hisses. Working backwards the woman sees the tracks she left while walking toward my river. My river! The upturned stones. The rats by the boats. The footprints, the black water....My fish!

Her spoon stirs the sugar in my cup, Hezhen laughs, stroking the man's face as the crow watches on.

Her eyes will be wet as you again enter her kitchen....I'll show you, the witch croons. I'll show you. A fine voice! The sun almost too bright to imagine outside this moment in which we belong, Hezhen bellows, pounding on the sky.

Thomas picks up the remaining living words and escorts the man back out of her kitchen.

DO YOU KNOW WHO I AM?

A white house, a pond, this day with its yellowed sky as she begins her journey and sips her morning coffee. Homeless camping in the railroad stations, along the roads and parks. Their spread of small fires and huddled bodies in the snow, she then whispers to Peter who has entered the room for no other reason than to see her. All of these refugees traveling east, trying to escape the new wars which resemble the old ones, Peter. You remind the woman of the ghost in her dream. Do you know that?

Why do you speak to me like this? he inquires. Don't you know who I am?

This ghost who arrived in the dream, a dream so void of the qualities one considers as dream while dreaming, she continues. The broken roads the woman imagines in the freckles along her thighs.

She puts the pen down.

The ghost accompanied us on the journey here. O yes—I am sure of that. I can now see all of their faces.

Do you know mine?

She picks up the pen, gestures for the apostle to sit.

The ghost unaware of me at first, though I could see his earnest mouth clearly when we started down the road where the Gypsies vanished. Then the monks walking behind the old Gypsy along the tracks as he shuffled through the pages of these Notebooks. You don't fool me, do you know that, Peter?

Do you think I am a ghost?

You remind me of one.

What did you say to your father in your dream? Peter asks.

I glanced out the window at the field of slaughtered horses to the west of the trains while staring at my lover's face.

Those who love must share the fate of the ones they love.

Later that night when I first really looked at the man by the river, I sensed he had already betrayed me.

How?

I remember meeting him at the cafe....and I was prompted to ask him if he had ever really loved a woman, if he had ever loved his wife. We shared a table, going over our final preparations for the bombing. We saw a fire erupt in the hotel across the street. And he sat. Calmly watched the fire spread, not in the least disturbed. Almost as if he enjoyed the chaos in it, chattering on about his translation work in the University, asking me about Ezekiel.

She starts, but can't finish the words. She has forgotten why she had wanted to tell this story.

You see, we've arrived in the city of mother's birth, she goes on, and sporadic skirmishes have again broken out throughout the country, just as I told him they would.

You are close to the other shore now.

Who will I do this journey for? she beseeches him, peering out the window at the crow. Now that I am dead.

For years you have sensed the signs on the sky you must follow?

Yes.

Even as a girl when the monks first realized you were one of their chosen, one of their wanderers in the pages?

Yes.

So your training began first in seeing for Mika, then in touching for Sisdal, then in recording the signs on the sky for Ezekiel. Then laughing for Virgil and fishing for Hezhen. That is why you were chosen. Do you remember?

For years she had sensed the signs on the sky? Yes, perhaps that much is true.

And more than once you have imagined a highway of birds, just as your mother and I did?

I have forgotten.

She stirs the coffee, contemplates his suggestion.

Before his death my husband spoke of a journey. The night they tortured him, he told me that all desire is a road. That's how he maintained his silence.

Can you see him?

Yes. But I will always forget.

What are you writing now? Peter asks.

He's far too emaciated. This other man with his naive face, she stutters, looking up at Peter.

What now?

The woman pauses to watch a horseman galloping alongside the train in her last dream, of course.

And now? the apostle probes.

Dear desire we call history, dear tradition we call father.

I'd like to talk to you.

She copies out his words neatly.

I'd like to talk with you about your father, the apostle says.

I know. And I know this is a vision, but tell me, are you my Father?

What are you writing now?

Dear image we call love...no. That's not it either.

What is it then?

Dear history we call treason....No!

No?

Help me then!

You can't finish the sentences? Why?

It frustrates me, she tells him. Because I can't remember the source. Why this rather slight man with blue eyes and hair the color of bleached fields? Why has he abandoned me? You see, he is but a stranger to me really. Though as a girl, I considered all strangers to be angels.... How can I tell you?

Read me her words—Hezhen's words. The apostle raises his voice.

Dear apostle—the monks prayed to the sky, but I fear you not....

Now you are becoming Hezhen! Peter proudly proclaims.



She takes the page and puts a match to it, again sees the field of human heads she'd been forced to bury after the fascists slaughtered the monks in the monastery fields.

You see it all, and it dies, yes. Yet in the present tense, Peter sighs, turning the page in her lap, falling, loving her once more. And always as if for the first time? he appeals, hoping himself to better understand this pain. As he too was there the day the soldiers led the monks out on New Year's Day. Though it was she who recorded these events in the Notebooks.

Are you my Father, Peter?

I am, Peter answers.



AT THE MONASTERY

Faith is what you need, the one-eyed boy told him on the 40th night as they entered the monastery.

Yes, faith and rest, Mika added, taking the man's hat. Stay on for a while. In this place, one need not be so lonely when one talks to God.

Yes. But this time he....

Ezekiel smiles. Yes—the man looks rather ghost-like, and it's true, he came into our wilderness out of despair. You're right, Mika. In spite of your blindness.

And she knows this, Sisdal nods. She knows.

Naturally, Virgil laughs. A love that has yet to become the true pain of love.

The man shivers, looks about for the boy and his crow. But the pair has departed.

When you awoke on the road this morning, you again felt your hunger? Mika the Blind asks, following him down the hall with his hand on the stone walls.

Yes, he answers. After writing her my last letter.

Our shy ones talking, the witch Hezhen moans, somewhat envious of the man's shoes.

On earth as it is in heaven. Sisdal nods, moans, himself motioning as the angel whistles at the food spread about the table.

The horizon forgetting itself by morning? Virgil burps.

Then this gathering of birds, Ezekiel tells Virgil, though he is not himself hungry.

Bring us some tea, the chorus sings. Bring us some tea.

Tell mysteries to those worthy of mysteries! Hezhen hisses, slapping Ezekiel's hand this time. Why have you allowed him here. The man is not one of us.

He is.

Do you believe in God?

The man sits down, stares at the witch's face.

The face is quite lovely. Not as I had expected. Are you her mother? Are you the mother of what has happened here?

I am not the one she has hated! I am this one.

And this is not your fate, Ezekiel tells him, stroking the man's cheeks.

Sisdel stares at the man's elbows instead. Your hands are quite lovely. But do you enjoy your elbows as much as you do your hands? Sisdel asks.

My hands! Hezhen caws, removing a fish from her long throat.

She then pulls a carp from the man's mouth. See, these are my fish. Carp! They are certainly of me, Ezekiel.

He stopped yesterday to study the four crowns of the monastery?

A cohesion in the air. Indeed, Ezekiel nods. Return to life. Go to your sea.

Can you see me as I see you? Mika asks.

You are blind.

Yes.

What will I discover if I do? If I go to this sea, what will I discover?

The truth of your soul. Why wait for death? Virgil remarks.

And this morning of all mornings, Sisdel whispers, scratching his bald head with the back of his own elbow, staring

at the hills. If all things are alive, you are among the animals of the kingdom.

I want to hear him laugh! Virgil hoots.

In the church, yet another anonymous couple were married today, Virgil goes on.

And the dead came about? Mika asks.

Such a day, Ezekiel sighs.

The ghost of our story.

One need not be so lonely when one dreams of God, Sisdel says.

Are you discouraged? Mika then inquires, smiling at the man though he himself cannot see the astonishment on the man's face.

No, the man answers. I am not discouraged.

Then go. There is something to believe in, Ezekiel declares, calling on the silence, as the chorus again begins to sing for tea.

The wind blows over their cups.

You'll make it alive pissing up and down this road, Ezekiel clips, beckoning for the chorus to leave the silence alone.

Virgil burps, no longer embarrassed by such things.

For you can have all of these things but without love you are nothing, the monks nod in agreement, gathering their things, preparing themselves to go to the sea for which they have written all these years.

Thus, they lifted the sky onto their shoulders and began walking.

WHILE THE BIRDS FLY PAST

While the apostle hums he watches her eyes close again in that place where the visions continue. He picks up the journal she left on the shore and begins to read: Digging into the soul of our world, she'd written, tracing out the words from the Notebooks, yet pausing now as if herself not understanding the translation. What I mean is that these are vulnerable landscapes, love—sometimes startling in their opus and emotion....All the monks talking in the pages. And then, walking the line beside you, a mere man, a soldier, a betrayer.

She again left the room for a walk to the river. As this memory unfolds within her yet without me....

In order to see what? the apostle now asks her. Why have you traveled here today?

To see this, she laughs, thinking of him less and less as a stranger.

An outline of the sky, a white stone, you know—a darkened flower, my father's face, maybe. Or this, you may ask as well Father, this object of a day that sometimes causes one to think of a dream or a vision:

Sunday. Yes, Sunday, sir. An early afternoon in the city, she begins. Listening to Pavarotti's "Arias," which the woman follows on her

mother's out-of-tune piano. There are no angels but you are not troubled....The two lovers will spend their day visiting galleries and museums, many of which will begin to open throughout the city. She carries a child. This will be his child. Yet like before, he cannot see the smallness in the woman's body. Just as you and Ezekiel were unable to see me in my mother's body. I will surprise him. And no one will know our names, Peter. After all, we are anonymous here. As we are anonymous to one another, you and I. In this way the story of the world begins.

A stupefying sun burning across the snowed building tops. Reading alone on the balcony. The wet towel across her forehead. She'll slowly sit up beside him. Though he will have come home late, tired and far too sober after observing one of the frequent riots. The hysterical mob blinding a clerk—in the end, looting and burning a militia station before they were dispersed by an army of horses.

Horses?

Yes horses, Peter. Like the dead horse floating to the surface of the river as the woman danced with the Gypsy ghosts that last night. She was Hezhen's horse. And now I will become her as another darkness appears in her eyes and she glances at....The keen attention of the man's radiant green eyes! Because it's all in a kiss, I'll whisper then, walking to the piano, closing its lid, later joining him in the kitchen where from the window we can see the brigade clearing the afternoon streets of Moscow for the upcoming parade of tanks.

She pauses to catch her breath, and notices she has none.

They'll never find enough petrol for those tanks, Father.

No, he agrees.

You'll see, it will be like this every Sunday from now forward, she goes on. Or every other Sunday. Because we are resting now, preparing for the future road.

Try to be happy, she laughs as the monks all begin to tap their spoons against their cups and she glances about at their arriving faces. I know you all, she sings. Yes, I know you all!

DESIRE NOTEBOOKS

The child is the story of us born between them? Ezekiel conjectures, gathering up the leaves the apostle has strewn about the monastery garden....

No?

The first nomad who came here wore ghostshoes! Hezhen yells. Remember I am that one.

THE FORTIETH NIGHT

The station's platform empty.

Yet a ghost had popped his head out of the window of one of the shining black cars and invited them aboard.

All aboard!

Where are you going? the man asked.

You don't know, the conductor responded, glancing at the boy and the crow beside him, as if just having noticed them for the first time, then shrugging his shoulders. The conductor blew the whistle and heard the crow laugh.

There is something peculiar about it, no?

The man listened to the engine's roar.

For just as suddenly as their presumed absence, there were suddenly these trains. And he was on one of them. After walking for a long time through the snow. Many scarecrows and without faces. And he had seen the old woman too. So much terror in the witch's gestures—her withered face. But she had yet to feed him her fish. Hezhen's wisping bare fingers, her dark gorging hair, the folds of her striped red skirt clapping in the breeze. The peasants wailing in the fields, spreading bright yellow straw across the fresh snow of the monks' graves.

Everything seemed so chancy, so accidental, the crow squawks. The conductor a jovial man. And though he refuses to converse with us, he gave me this bag full of carnations. White carnations, the bird went on.

Then the crow too, as Hezhen and the monks in the

monastery before it, vanished.

Thomas?

I am here. You are not alone.

DREAM #1

In his dream he was only 18. And all of them were drunk. Driving combines and hopping freight through what he once considered a country. All of the boys gathered naked in the town. Began to roll tires into the middle of the road. They had wanted to play poker, but there were no cards. Then he saw her kissing one of the boys and slapped her face. Marry me, she said. Or are you too frightened? The police came and he spent the night in jail without her. There was still a price to be paid.

DREAM #2

In his second dream he saw the evil and powerful man in prison who could strangle people with his feet. She had won a major contest. Something he had worked very hard for. Then most of her monks abandoned her in other stories. He said—come and see me at 6:00. She had decided to turn him into a crow. But he preferred to be a woman. Like her.

DREAM #3

In the third dream he had never been so frightened. Of himself. His aloneness. A crisis. But it had to be lived through. He looked at the church and tried to explain it to her, to understand the despair. He was frightened. He walked away. Ghost song. My day will find you. One of the stories. He's sick of doubt. Knows it is possible. Only a face. Hers? Signals on the horizon. He cries to himself and feels shame.

DREAM #4

In his last dream, he praised her and they ate and joked about it all. Eating her sexual food, then cheese, a bottle of vodka. Everyone taking off their clothes on the train. In front of one another. Spreading their bedding across the floor, smiling and nodding at having succeeded in departure. No matter how temporary. The real thing.

And he savored her attention, this return.



Dear You,

...the one-eyed boy began, reading from the last of his letters after the train departed. I believe we have all sinned against this before: a flat blue sky flying into the passage by the open water, one presented as tracks to any untold memory.

Do you mind? the boy asked.

No.

I've come into his letter for the story it offers—and for the way your face does seem to outline the landscape you've both entered together, the boy scribbled onto the page.

You, he grinned. The gray-white expanse of an unpopulated history of birds. Your semblance to angels? This white page filling up without you. The lake and camp leading to a monastery and a sea and then into a smaller beige wash of waves. Or, mouth as you, the feminine, might say it. A mouth that goes on into the sea that finds us occasionally mournful.

The boy coughed, somewhat embarrassed. Is the place in your mind calmer today? Excuse my interruption really—but skirting around the nowadays of any life. Can I have a cigarette? Don't you think its time to get on with things. Is that not what you would tell her. That you cannot change the story of her life because a life can't be unfaithful to itself?

The boy rubbed the skin under his arms. Can I add something?

Tikho! Tikho!

Yes.

The black-breasted crow perched above the temple's dome, ...the boy, he began to scribble once more. By the fence of that deserted farm house beyond the tracks. I suspect there are others fleeing the wars, but into that which they flee we have no jurisdiction. Not in these Notebooks, nor in that which we pre-

serve by way of listening. Gazing across the monks' worlds that ferry outward toward the crow's rising black wings. Because you are writing the story.

Yes, we are writing the story.

This image of a highway then? the man asked.

Look at the way our crow follows behind you today, Thomas whispered somewhat secretively. A quiet and patient bird. That iced-over creek, then the river, finally the northern sea that will find you.

You,

Excuse my interruption—really, the boy whistled, gesturing to the crow's shadowed wings floating upward. The four crosses of the church. One need not be so lonely when one talks to....

You wrote that?

Cities, journeys, desire. Well then. The one-eyed boy sighed, coughing, brushing back his short, red-cropped hair. Well then. Well, the way the drawing of your face in the snow reminded the crow as well as me that our story is one of continuance. The unmitigated sin and unforgotten.....That you've smelled it is what matters. This fecund scent of renewal in the white stones of the monastery. What shoes are you wearing today? This ghostboy with ashes on the breath. What you sometimes call, angels. But has all vanished—the clothes have vanished yes—your speech will vanish yes—the ghostboy himself with ashes covering his lungs, yes.

What does that mean? the man asked, taking hold of the letter.

These uncharted images of exile, I think.

The exile breathes?

Not time but the immeasurable landscape in the distance
has required this change.

What change?

Winter passes.

What devices of love though? he asked. Which ones will
endure you?

Do you mind?

No, go on.

*The harsh squawking from the crow's beak. The angel speak-
ing through its beak, eluding translation. Then the sun almost too
bright to imagine outside the already lost motion of our walking across
a corn field.*

Why a corn field?

It will be spring again.

Across the gardens and so we enter.

You,

Repeat these words slowly but only to yourself, listening
carefully for any sign of closure. Are there none? Have none been
given, none acquired? We can hear the floating sound of trains
rushing toward the future....

(evening)

PS. We both miss you.

Moscow—
February 10

When the electricity was partially restored throughout the city, the man came home one night after finding a chicken, which he had killed with his hands. Later, he went out again, found another chicken, killed it with his hands and brought it back to her grave. Small fowl. By a field of human heads near the tracks. He had walked for forty nights and on into that morning. White sky at dawn, temporal and calm. She was sleeping. He tiptoed past her to the kitchen. Lit a match. Though the coils of the stove had rusted, then burnt out completely as he tried to prepare the feast. Now just her mother's tea pot and the kerosene stove remained in the kitchen. Yet once again, it was growing whiter on the streets. The new snows covering all of the old snow. And her skin had taken on a more creamy tone with a deeper olive hue, while his own left eye had grown larger than the other, green and white in the pupil where it seemed to him another road was bending....

So it had begun? Their transformation. Peter and Hezhen?

Wake up, she whispers, startling him, removing the chicken from his hand, interrupting all of his dreams, putting a knife to the fowl's throat.

You've been sleeping, love.

Dear Peter,

And so you see, it's been like this for centuries already. Because we have planted these stories that have no time and provide no barriers between us. And so like your love, ours begins to repeat and dissolve into another series of beginnings. Among these waters and these fish. Outside of history. Our body. This word. Yet this does not bother us, Peter. Like any soul, ours will eventually turn in on itself. If, that is, it's left alone long enough. And we've been left alone, sufficiently alone, to wander this distance with God. Simply on its own, the soul looks at the Face. Though the things we see in the world we desire. If it knew how to tell itself, the world wouldn't need us, or perhaps even care for all of our journeys through these fields to find you. But it's clear. You understand now. We dream of lovers, as lovers dream of us, and somewhere the stories too are human. So we sip our tea and return to reading the signs: the faces on the coins. Dreaming the day when you will again fall from the sky. As if nothing has ever occurred to impede this knowledge and absence. We've written this story, but we can't resist it. Why should we, you will one day ask? There are better things. Such as walking or singing or talking to strangers, or falling from the sky....The salt sits at the table beside us today. Look at its blind eyes. Its ravaged mouth, its desired body—its own wish to be retold and continue with each plate of herring, between each lover that ventures into you. We can't help the attraction. Since the story has its own way of making things available. This dream of you that has given evidence to who we are. In this notebook of desire—our journal of walking. Making all things alive, even beauty. Cockroaches, worms, words, coins, skies—where past, present and future can be revealed. And why not? The soul with its all beginning. You will come and you will go, but this moment that ceases to be a moment, this hour

that ceases to be an hour, this word that ceases to be a word we may dream in the eyes of others. Eyes: the coins of God. Love's face. Even for those who refuse to come into your fields. We believe. Fishskins. Fisheyes. The chorus will sing them tonight. Sing them in this late snow of an afternoon too, as we await your next falling, and the cities around us burn. Yes, we are intimately aware of this joy....The story turns its head and whistles. Now a whistle here, a whistle there. And on and on and on it goes, whistling.

Ezekiel's final letter to the apostle Peter

The Monks Overlooking The Story

for Horace High
1924-1998

Who gives you the words?
Why don't you ask where I found the paper, Ezekiel says to Sisdal.
Look there are raspberries on our vines!
Tell mysteries to those worthy of mysteries? Mika asks.
The dead being buried in gardens today.
Why our need for repentance? Virgil burps.
If divided we'll be filled with darkness, Hezhen caws.
There are human shells, older than our story, Sisdal insists.
All day the sun has remained behind the clouds, yes.
They're scattered about the road...these human shells, Hezhen
hisses.
He hadn't translated the chapter that speaks of the child?
So naturally the man is timid as he watches her in this sky which
could again become a night.
Our birth into the world of men?
A moment of horizons, Sisdal.
Lean into your hips, your sex, your mouth, she smiles while
pointing at the sky...

from Hezhen's journal

THE SENTENCE THAT BORE HER

When the centuries meet. As they start through the gate she mouths these, her father's words. The man glances about at the fallen architecture surrounding her childhood home. All of the inner rooms blackened, destroyed, though some of the walls have miraculously survived the years. And this is why she has brought him here. An incredibly bright sun in the cold sky. The red brick crumbled and scattered about the yard. The shadows of grey slanting inward from the cedar and oak trees as he watches her pass, waiting for some clue. Though she will not tell him why. Why she has brought him here. The yellow hue of her scarf floating, it seems to him now, behind her.

A man who stops in the middle of the road? she asks. As if the sentence contained some explanation for her sudden memory of home, her days in the city before leaving to find her father and the monks. It had been after her mother's disappearance when she was still a girl. A man who stops in the middle of the road. Who will ask you these questions without me, she laughs arrogantly, pointing toward the house. You have to admit that for the moment at least, the streets are calm.

Winter passing. For the most part, the soldiers yielding to the decrees of the new regime.

Of course he's been wanting to meet you. My Father, you see, once stood in the doorway of the house before you. He was

raised in this house.

A harsh wind from the linden trees on his face.

Of course, he's always wanted to meet you, she whispers again, stroking his face in an effort to reassure the man.

Don't be frightened.

I'm not frightened.

A man who stops in the middle of the road?

He hadn't believed her when she told him about her ghost. But now he saw the door. As if the door of her past, the door of this house, might actually open.

There are new wars erupting in the outlying districts of the former empire, she says. Though no one understands these conflicts.

He is unsure who she is talking to. Though occasionally she glances over at him with what seems to be an obligatory smile.

The family graveyard to their right filled with wooden crosses, a stretch of bombed buildings to the south of the stone white house.

Is your father buried here?

She studies the stillness remembering his long red hair, the mustard stains on his chin, his wire-rimmed glasses. His proper manners before he began his final study.

So much depends on the harvest now, she begins, strolling past the porch, pointing toward the former garden where the remains of a marble bench still stand. Whether the workers return to the fields... she goes on. There's electricity in our room for a full eight hours a day. A man who stops in the middle of the road and waits at the fork for Providence?

Why had she invented the sentence of a ghost?

His long hair reached down to his shoulders, thinning and red, and my Father had a beard, she quipped, skipping over the dead lilac bush. His handsome three piece white uniform, his

simple black shoes, she smiles, kissing her own hand and placing it on his forehead.

He gave me the Notebooks.

I know it's time for us to find our own home.

She takes his hand. And I know you better now.

When I was young, the first time I was young, I lived in that room over there. She directs his eyes to the skeletal remains of the mansion to their right. I didn't really know my mother, but she was very beautiful. He would come home late after he entered officers' training school. He met my mother at a ball before the revolution began.

See the room up top, to your right. That was my room....

Then my Father began his studies, his writing of the Gnostic sects that once inhabited this city.

What's his name?

What's your name? It doesn't matter. He left when I was young. To find the monks. And eventually I found them, too. It was with the same maps you have discovered.

She gestures toward the garden, stares somewhat tenuously at two boys who have come around the corner of the courtyard. One of the boys begins to throw up.

They won't bother us.

Yes, the body is buried here. I wish I had known them better.

Scarecrows scattered throughout the courtyard.

The passage between the buildings clear, a streak of almost bluish sun breaking through the clouds. The exposed foundation of the once beautiful mansion now filled with broken furniture, glass, strewn pieces of metal and wood. He remembers the photographs she has shown him. Each of the adjacent rooms painted an off-white, the columns of the courtyard itself all black with benches running along side the small pockets of lilac gar-

dens.

Only this, the image continues, she says, turning. Are you prepared for this, in your Notebooks, she says. No, I don't think so. Because there are no more countries and deep down, you are a soldier. Otherwise, you wouldn't have gone ahead with the bombing that night, knowing what you knew. Knowing it because it was I who made sure your unit knew. But I didn't think you would go through with it with me inside—with my girl waiting for us both outside.

Of course. All the trains, they're behind us now.

There's a church you know, not far away from here. Would you like to go there?

He looks about.

Why, the litanies and liturgies, the psalms, the angels who visit the bell towers.

She takes a step back, almost cautiously.

This is his grave. Is it not, Mother?

She points at one of the wooden crosses in the family cemetery, sits in the small patch nearby. How could I expect you to understand?

In the coming spring air, a smell of silence.

I hope that it's true, that spring will arrive. Because I have nothing against it, she says.

Though the walls and the roof remain, there are no floors to the mansion. A radiator stands, oddly, mounted beneath a window, where her bed had once been. He can imagine it all as it had been, even without the photographs. Her table and chair by the window. The kitchen where she would dance for her father.

She turns and smiles, broadly.

I think we should go now, she tells him, taking a cigarette from his pocket.

As they start through the gate, he glances back at the

home, all of the rooms blackened, fallen in, the crumbled red brick scattered about the grounds. Shadows of green slanting inward from the cedar and oak trees.

Moscow?

A man who stops in the middle of the road and waits at the fork for Providence, she mutters now, putting her arm through his. If Providence doesn't intervene, who will go further.



SISDEL SAYS

The man found himself stumbling about the warming streets of the finished winter early the next morning, increasingly aware of his blindness....Sisdel begins, turning this chapter in their book of wandering and glancing about expectantly at the others. How had it escaped him? Sisdel gestures to Ezekiel as the monks start their morning stroll across the walnut fields. The black hat she had been wearing the previous afternoon. The one she had found along the road during the storms. It was obvious. Oh yes, the hat was alive. When they came home later that evening she put it on and took it off throughout their night, just to annoy him....And her white blouse, Sisdel goes on—the one which had once been his favorite, and her red scarf—even the gloves. He could touch, even smell these things, though he could no longer see them.

As he walked along the old mooring road toward the outskirts of town, he watched the crows swooping low over the river. Sisdel sighs, taking a deep breath, keeping a pace with Ezekiel while holding tight to Blind Mika's arm.....These birds he could see all right, yet he sensed his balance was off. Everything seemed like it was changing weight, changing form, even density.

How so? Mika asks.

While walking along any road, his vision was more or less fine, Sisdel nods. He lit a cigarette and glanced down the long mysterious road. Studied the flight of the crows, and sensed that

they, too, had somehow been summoned to follow him. Flying over the thick line of white buildings to the south of the river. The red-beaked crow now perched high among the birch trees some fifty yards ahead. Why, she had even held her blouse under his nose the night before. And her blouse spoke to him in French, saying: if your son asked for bread, would you give him a stone? This bothered him naturally.

What do you want? he had asked her. Not that he expected a riddle he could understand, but he wanted one. She glared up at him as if surprised, perhaps even annoyed.

I asked you once, and I'll ask you again.

What do you want?

Well maybe these Notebooks will be enough. What do you think?

The monks begin to count the fallen walnuts which are filled with dust and rain.

They had spent the better part of the night arguing, gradually getting drunk....Sisdel continues, placing two small walnuts over Mika's white eyes. She touched the sides of her stomach often, but he didn't notice any of this.

Naturally, Hezhen agrees.

The sun going down on the balcony overlooking the parading soldiers on horseback. Some girls had been skipping rope in the park earlier.

She pushed him away from the table, spreading the pages across the floor.

They're travelling toward the river, she began, darting her glance from his face to the face of the page.

They're travelling to the river.
Indeed!

An exodus?
Because they have excused themselves!
Exhausted by the moon?
Or the sun.
A slight hue of turquoise edging along the horizon.
A man can be seen as an archway!
A woman then?
The stone the builders rejected is the corner stone....
Blessed where you have been executed.
The apostle puts out the morning coals, starts to fall from the sky.
And a woman carries a child!
Belly of those who desire to be filled....
Our child written on the face.
Whatever you tell us will emerge in the fields!

She pronounced each word slowly, as if reflecting on each nuance and sound—placing his hand on her womb.

His gaze anxious, yet he turned to the next page.

I see no signs. It's not even possible.

Sisdel stops beside Mika near the monastery gates and stares out over the walnuts in the fields. The handless one glances at the whiteness of Mika's eyes, which have always intrigued him, as he now leads Mika through the gates.

I know why it's so difficult for him, Mika whispers, peering over his shoulder....

As the man walked further past the old mooring road, he watched the albino gulls swooping low over the river, Sisdel agrees, picking up a stick, showing Mika to the rocky shore where they sometimes gather in the spring. Mika lifts a fish from the

water and holds it in the air by the tail.

And then the man noticed there were still fish to be had in the water, Sisdal goes on, nodding to the one-eyed boy as the angel hands him a walnut....Why, the man could see the fish all right. The silver and black skin of their backs. The words floating out of the slit of their mouths. The white bubbles, the gulls. All of the fish slowly slipping to the river's surface as he walked along its banks.

Yes, my eyes are fine, he uttered to himself. He could see his wife for instance, his days of youth before the wars....

The sky full of clouds. He was on a road again, and this encouraged him. The breach of dark skies. The black forest ahead, the red-beaked crow signalling. Shadows.

And one white cloud. Yes, there was one white cloud. Why it was even Sunday. Though it had been Sunday the day before, he knew it was the same day again. Another Sunday in another place.... It shouldn't be so hard to understand, this blindness, he thought, skirting around a barbed-wire fence.

He emerged from a tunnel out of the forbidden zone and agilely climbed the last of the fences aligning the forest beyond the cordoned off highway.

The other crows followed in his footsteps, taking smaller steps but following in his trail. Many walking slowly while a few flew overhead.

Ezekiel smiles, grabbing a speckled trout from the water.

Why, as he walked along the old mooring road he saw her once more as she had been the night before. He saw her face in the image of the summoned crow.

The white egret on the edge of the slough. The blue heron in the nearby fields. Even Hezhen he saw in that precise

moment as he began to cross the river. The man knew that was his final sign.

Yes, I can see you, he whispered, trudging through the mud, past the high grass of the swamp. The owl perched in the birch tree, sitting beside the red-beaked crow. Her crow gesturing him onward so that he could witness what she and her father had witnessed.

Hezhen reared her head as he crossed the river.

It's true what you say, and I have a right to repeat it.

The priest walked from the water's banks and faced her.

Why have you come here, Hezhen asked again.

This is where the story has been leading me, isn't it? He pulled the folded page of her translation from his pocket and began to read:

They're travelling to the river. Indeed. An exodus. Because they have excused themselves from the world's table. Exhausted by the moon, but not by the sun. A slight hue of turquoise edging along the horizon of God.

What of it? Hezhen demanded.

Did you write these words? In the name of Ezekiel?

The stone the builders rejected is the corner stone....Hezhen cawed.

And then she hissed.

Why have I come here?

The albino gulls swooping low over the river. The story pleased him. The coming night. The blue heron nearby. The crows following in his footsteps, leaving no traces.

That's enough! Hezhen cried, showing her rage that

another might arrive at her feast.

Are there not fish to be had?

He edged closer, saw the tables of perch, salmon, bass, octopus, shark, whale....the baskets of fish overflowing on the table.

Why should I call this a dream? he asked her, remembering his dream from the previous night.

These are the fish you can see, but not eat.

She signaled him toward the fish.

What is your request?

The crows flocked around his shoulders. Is this what you want. Your eyes?

She pointed to the bowl of fish whose eyes were glowing in the darkness.

Their skin shriveled and taut. Demure. Blackened and burnt. One fish rose and began this story as he stood before it:

It's an understandable blindness. One side of the face painted with night, the other with morning. They become ghosts of the voices, but the voices are more than ghosts. One shows itself as a god, another as a mere word. One a woman, another as a man. Just as you've entered the pasts of others who walk. You will see them all along the road to the sea that becomes a lake, then a sea again—a sea that becomes a woman and then a man and then of course, a god. Since as it is written: ask and it will be given, knock and the door will open. Fish the source of life, salt the source of thirst. But the fish love salt and the water loves you.

Hezhen took a handful of the eyes and devoured them, afterwards taking his arm and giving him a handful of eyes also.

These you can eat, she said.

See them for the first time and the last time! Hezhen pouted. Your own eyes. What do you want to know!

Bravo! Ezekiel calls out, as the monks spot Peter walking across the water in this hour of souls. Bravo, they all begin to call out, as Sisdel gestures to the water, to the passing fish whose mouths have floated to the surface humming like a choir.... Even Hezhen appears before them, impressed, and she spits on Sisdel's face, giving him this rare, but deserved honor.



SUNDAY

Later that night while the crows prayed, ferries delivering grain from the massive bakery on the city outskirts were hijacked and ransacked by gangs of youth. The women who had been queuing all night then vented their hunger by smashing windows and setting fire to the empty stores. When the army of angels failed to immediately appear, more riots began to break out in the city. She made him promise to stay inside now, though only a half-loaf of bread and a bottle of vodka remained in the cupboard. While he drank, she began to weigh the possible distinctions between love and need, playing one composition after another on the piano that once belonged to her mother. Contemplating the paradox of history, as if it actually exists? she said, hearing the shouts and screams rising from below. The bread mobs. She was curious as to how this man could enter her imagination like a music she once knew but never played. The soldiers on the street carrying their buckets. A gray shy sky. White earth. Stone chapels.

The morning came and then faded without clarifying the contradictions of their lives.

So we'll play a game, she said. Tell me the first thing that comes to your mind, ok?

Ok.

Her black boots and black coat by the door. Her insistence to begin each Sunday this way.

Love then? she asked, beginning the charade.

The act that springs out of necessity.

Good. Now. Think hard—need?

The fruition of any love.

Not bad. Especially as drunk as you are!

Ready?

Ready. But just one word, he said.

Madness?

Roadblocks armed by gangs of youth.

You're talking like me! she laughed, sauntering across the
room.

Ready?

Ready.

Soldiers?

Posted outside all the remaining bread stores.

Good. Try this one now—her own face in the window?

That's not a word.

Try it. Her own face in the mirror....

Surprised by how it has aged in the mirror, but not the
window.

Fine. Not bad. Not bad.

And what if he betrayed her?

He was younger and naive after all.

You're right. Try this one—what if he again took part in
their stupid war?

That's a question.

Try it!

He'd never had his own children.

Ah, she sighed. So what could he know of need, of love,
right. Ready?

Ready.

The authorities apparently powerless to stop the looting?

She worries for him.

Good. Really. Playing what music on the out-of-tune piano?

Rachmaninoff.

Ah, love, she whispered. Try this—a free man doesn't need freedom.

Only a slave needs freedom.

Ready?

Ready.

Ideas don't free a man?

Had she understood this when the crow flew through the window earlier in her dream.

The woman laughed at his rebuke.

Ready?

Ready.

What if she were to have his child?

He sits and listens.

She plays this odd music?

He sits and listens, of course.

The only darkness is the darkness of night?

Yet when he came inside her, they were both thoroughly awake.

Enough, she cawed. Enough. I see you're beginning to understand her now. Understand this exile.



VIRGIL'S MUSING

A slight plumpness to her cheeks the next day—Virgil laughs, and this pleased him....As did the migrating birds that beseech them....Now, now that they have begun to repeat our story, as we all have, Virgil haws—unable to keep himself from laughing or falling asleep. In order to arrive here, he burps, glaring at the monks sitting by the wood—dreaming themselves into the fields. Virgil yawns. Though naturally the prayers travel without us, just as we travel with them....Virgil pokes on the ground and awakens. This quiet time in the morning hours sleeping....It's a spectacular thing, to sleep! And then this slight plumpness to her cheeks that pleases him. She's just like his little girl!

Seeing the days of her childhood all over and over again, as she sees them, Virgil hiccups, stirring the others. Days playing in the fields, he stutters—finding her father, though this man, she will not tell him. How can she, but this slight plumpness both....Fine. It's pleasing. Touching colors, smells of nouns and snails, walnuts cracking in the prayer, their music! Stories a thousand years away even come! A thousand miles away. The stories can't resist. Just as we can't resist. This is our. A day. Then. A silence. It pleases. Fine....Dream of us and the sun and the rain, we shouldn't forget. Stories her father told her too. Burp. About the pleasing rain, the falling apostle, the faces of God....

Wake up!

In the pages with or without us! Virgil cracks up. Or

there, in Hezhen's fish. They'll be alone together. She tells him this in the morning hour. She's pretty. O! Without being alone, peeling the banana skin, oh. Thinking about what life could be. Did I already say that? Virgil haws. Crossing warm legs, squeezing the lemon across her legs he smells, then listens, then watches these shades flickering across her mouth....The slight plumpness and it pleases. Because in so many ways he understands.

But does she, Virgil burps again as Sidel bends over and hands him a cup of tea.

Ah dozing! And you think you know me, don't you? Gazing out on the courtyard of love. Oh snow, it starts again....And he places his hand over her mouth even before she can answer the question of love. Because her hair's....

Mika! Virgil calls out, as he feels the trembling of the woman's knees in his own....

That rain, he snores off and on, then talking in his sleep for a moment:

Her hair, yes. Her hair's dream. Her father. I see. Almost golden as he moves his mouth into the neck, then somewhat shyly....wakes up himself!

Though it's silly, yes. But we keep going through our lives. He let his fingers dream slowly, entering her....Virgil coughs.

Where are you now? Mika demands.

He leans over, licks the fruit....

Where are you? Thomas asks.

Each story rewrites the story....

Ah. I understand that, Hezhen hisses.

That is our secret....

Our pleasure.

I'm here with you too, Virgil calls out....Well?

Well, she smiled. And he coughed. And she coughed too, rather loudly even, drawing blood from the story into her mouth.

Virgil!

Yes, and a black sky, Virgil laughs as he awakens. Though she won't tell him. Snakes and frogs and lizards along the river in another century, where we loved—but which one, who could care less....Virgil grins, dozing again, murmuring, swinging, bending forward. Though she won't tell him, no—gasping and not for air saying whoever does not hate his father and mother never had a beginning. Yet the first nomad who came into these fields wore ghostshoes. Look at them. Look at them! They're her's now!

A peculiar and brilliant light outside the window the next morning, the light reflecting off the golden cupolas of the orthodox church—and the man noticed all of this upon waking because there was usually so little sun on the road. A dense and gray metropolis with a low sky constantly filled with black clouds, freezing rain, or a blinding snow. The weather pressed deeply on his memory in the early hour as he had dreamed of his wife—of a return to his place of birth. A harbor city, one that could hardly be more contrasting in its many shades and bright hues, the colors from its bay, its ocean, its green parks. That here was where he had arrived with her—in this ravaged scene, almost confused him. Though her stark and miraculous room interested him more than his own dream. Her clothing scattered about the room, her father's Greek and Byzantine coins on the table. Her black panties on the floor. All of this sending him inward along with her while tightening his sense of touch with these surrounding objects.

She had again called out to him in her sleep that morning, though she had called him by the names of Ezekiel and Peter.

Why do you go to them so often? he asked her.

You mean, why do we dream the same stories?

She quietly climbed from the bed, saw him by the window with his hand on the open pages of the *Coniuncti*. Still undressed with just a blanket around his shoulders. He shivered in the chilled morning air. She stood and approached him. A

moment later he watched her kneel beside him. This made him desire her. Though he wondered how to say the words, say I need you.

His own nakedness caused him a moment of shame.

He glanced at the lamp on the table. The trace of life appearing below on the streets as the city began to awaken. He looked at the young clerk setting up his tent selling bibles and bits of sausage by the metro, the flock of crows circling along the chimneys across the river—the eyes of the one crow frozen on the balcony which she refused to let him remove. He saw a priest wrap himself in a black robe while exiting the church on the corner, thought to himself how this was all part of her search for God, his search for...

Coffee? He pointed to the streets. She stood and kissed his hand.

Family and friends? You dreamed of them last night?

He didn't want to tell her. So instead he asked her to read him the translation she had stayed up working on most of the previous night. The pages spread across the piano. He gathered them up.

Am I Ezekiel or Peter? he asked.

A description for your dreams, that's what you really want, isn't it? He stared at her dry mouth, olive eyes, her chapped red lips, the arch of her white thighs.

When we have nothing, our lives intersect. What do you think? she asked. She picked up the page and began to read from the *Mysterium Coniuncti*. She repeated its refrain several times as he waited—*o caretaker of souls, are there fish in the net.*

O Caretaker of souls!

Are there fish in the net, o caretaker of souls?

Because we have traveled to these shores out of our hunger.

It is part of our own exile.

The absence of miracles during these last 1000 years.

A love concealed there. In the net.

This unusual form of seduction that comes with our
hunger?

With an apostle falling from the sky for each millennium?

You've taken our love to forever wander in the fields.

But others come here, knowing our names.

The cross and rose, the percrucem ad rosam.

We know our chosen.

The masculine case combing its black hair.

The feminine despair.

Our arrival in the words too—their prayers as our past
moves before us tonight.

We accept the lovers that come.

They too possess the blindness of the blind one's unpolished face.

Now waiting for the knock on the door, Mika.

Though we walk out to the sky, Ezekiel.

Look, the reincarnated ones, the old ones smiling at all of
our laughing faces.

In this common *modus vivendi*, Virgil.

The feminine refusing pathos.

Trying to explain in the absence of a language an absence
of a story for God.

That's why we chose them.

Why your journey chose us, Peter.

This opening snow and road full of living coins.

We have to hunger to come into these fields. Hezhen,

where are your fish?

Those who love must share the fate of those they love.

Since to travel is to change one's body.

Well then. Tell us.

Bread. Stone. Journey.

The chorus may hum it, Thomas.

Since we see there are fish in the lovers, and there are lovers in the fish.

O caretaker of souls, when will you feed us.

She gestured toward the streets. More people gathering, dragging their belongings and supplies behind, pulling their children in little wagons.

I feared for us last night, she said to the man. The road we've embarked upon, because somehow I know I've been in their world. Can you explain that? My Father wrote this last passage. I'm almost sure. I kept reading the passage over and over. It's really quite beautiful, you know. The masculine combing its hair—that's you, the feminine refusing pathos—that's me.... Aurum non vulgi? The green coins? Reading it too loudly at first, then not loudly enough. Losing the sounds and the music and the pronunciation, the harmony and tongue for it. Not even trusting the voices in all of their fragmentary and dissolving...parables. You know better than I. Is the word, parable?

I don't know.

Tell me, do you ever fear for the abstraction? she suddenly cried, pulling the blanket from his chest.

I was afraid the first time I realized how much I needed you.

Yes.

All of us in our own ways. That's what's written.

Yes. It's all right.

She turned away, observing the fullness of light in the sun over the hills outside the window. The grand aura and brilliance of the light. The ancient towers and ski ramps off in the distance, the modern stadiums further south of the metropolis, the bombed highway leading east from where the monks had travelled for the arrival of Christianity. The wide boulevard pouring out behind the Gothic walls of the university where her father had taught before leaving to find Ezekiel. How it had struck her the night before when the two walked that road that it was a man rather than a god or angel who strolled beside them. She slid her arm through his and they shivered in the harsh though cleansing wind, afterwards descending the hill, only hours later reaching the garden. Walking on to the ponds where they sat together on a bench, laughing about life. How it becomes this simultaneous repetition and invention of itself? Even later, as the sun began to rise in the almost dawn, standing by the guard rail on the bridge looking down at the water, on the scattered wooden boats the monks had brought here. The shores of the river. Opening their coats as the man lifted her dress and leaned her against the railing in the fantastic sun of a revolution that was continuous here.

We have to leave, she remarked, uncorking the last bottle of wine, though it was still morning. Or we will die here. You know that?

I know.

Or they can take us there, she whispered, joyfully pointing at the steeple as the bells of the church began to chime.



EZEKIEL'S STORY

On the first warm day, there were cucumbers. On the second, pickles. By the third day tomatoes appeared, as the partisan farmers who had stored their harvest through the long fall and winter began to stream from the countryside into the metropolis...some selling their goods for the soldiers' pay, others virtually giving away the food to the haggard population that staggered to the streets in the new sun....

Mika slides the old monk his tea. Go on, Ezekiel, he says. Not only our blind can hear you today. As we dream of them, they dream of us.

She had begun to remember you see, remember her life through the dreams, Ezekiel whispers in a still voice, stumbling himself over the words he is about to utter in search of his own self.

The stunning breath of hills that surrounded the monastery that day the soldiers came for us...he continues. For her and her family. The stark countryside spreading across the horizon. Her father and the others herded into the courtyard under the soldiers' confinement that day. I'm sorry. It is a struggle for us to remember all of their faces.

But she knows they are among us still? Mika asks.

During those first days of spring, Ezekiel goes on, waving Mika aside as his hands fumble across the cloth—her lover found a job removing dirt and rubble from an old bomb shelter beneath

the main library. It was there he came upon her father's writing. This curiosity the writing awakened in the woman's face appeared to calm her fevers. And he was sure the fresh fruits would bring out a surer, more stable truth in her face. He was waiting for this.

But what is it she sees in the dream today? Sisdel inquires. What of her father and his maps?

The man took her hand after returning from the library, showed her the forbidden writing, Ezekiel sighs, raising his wrinkled hand above their heads. Though it is unclear to her as to why her father gave her our Notebooks, she does see the day he took her hand in this way.

Why is the sun strange today?

Sitting on the balcony she'll read half-naked, waiting for his return from the bread lines. He has promised to take her somewhere in the summer, to a country where she could care for the crows.

Are there such countries? Mika inquires.

It's quite uncertain, Ezekiel stutters, coughing, somewhat pensive at this gathering. Unclear to them both as to how the Notebooks will lead her back, he says. Why the pages must be returned.

Must they be returned?

In her dreams yes, Ezekiel responds. I told you. I have seen her too, walking by the shore of the water in search of her father. And this is how she will find us again.

Ezekiel glances at Peter sitting in the weeds, his head lowered.

How do you know? Hezhen mocks him, making her way to the garden. There are too few fish in the water, she tells the monks, sweeping her long skirt through the dust.

Let me finish, Ezekiel says, lightly slapping his hand against Hezhen's knee.

It was there, beneath the shelter of the main library that he had found her father's maps. Am I right, Thomas?

Yes.

Her father's published writings on the nomadic monks who travelled these hills centuries before the armies came? Before us.

The one-eyed boy concurs, tossing back his head full of red hair.



Those who roamed the hills before we came, and before the armies came—and now again, now that they have again parted? Though we remain.

And he senses that it is time, Ezekiel. Though he is tired, the boy responds, coming to his feet and pointing at the gulls. You understand, they have both dreamed more than a little since leaving the theater.

Ezekiel leans back, looks about the garden, takes a deep breath as if to catch his own vanishing past.

Though he knows they have to return here. That is the important thing.

The boy grins.

It is not only their own journey, but ours, you see. Naturally he doesn't know how to follow the road. Though she knows the monastery of the northern fields, he continues. The monks who lived in these hills are among us still. Angels gather by the shrines of our dead at the first of each new hour.... Their voices in the pages the lovers carry. Her father wrote of this after drawing the maps, Ezekiel sighs, running his left hand through the white shards of hair. They are the same fields. She'll see them in the quiet awe and observation. These words written on her face. Yes. They are of the same, Thomas. You have done well in finding these lovers to replace us.

I did not find them.

But you have helped us.

Just as the sun departed, it returned, Sisdal nods.

And just as the armies trampled over them, they retreated once more—behooved into believing, as all of the armies that came before them, that they too had destroyed our faith and vanquished these roads...Ezekiel says, stroking the blackened veins of his left hand. Since what the left eye sees, the right is blind to. Yet this truth is ours. This freedom of God to wander in our soul with

neither man's nor woman's definition. This truth of the body where they'll meet again in God's dream. The lovers unaware that they are even dreaming, just as we are sometimes unaware that it is only through their dreaming that we continue. There will always be those who come after them just as they have come after us. Whenever the centuries meet. He, of course, will question if this too is a spectacular seduction. When she describes the skies, our fields, our sea into which Peter falls. The splendor of the monastery's human walls. The silence of our smallest kingdom tucked between the hills and the surrounding forest on the other side of God's face....Though man nor woman can see it. Just as it is written. They are the same.

Because first there was a river and then there wasn't—O wise one, the one-eyed boy chides him... Later it had to become a lake, then a sea, then a bird, then a man, then an angel and a woman, then finally a story.

These mountains and fields, Ezekiel concludes, gesturing for the others to follow him. Yes, you are right, my boy.



DESIRE NOTEBOOKS

Aurum non vulgi, not the common god, Sisdel wrote to Hezhen—their common sister—who finally died by the river last night, consumed by all of those years of tossing the good fish back into the sea.

And then the stories, as if sudden and unnecessary, began to pursue another purpose. It was nights like these when she calmly played Rachmaninoff on the piano, when the pace of the city came to a halt and there wasn't even the noise of the soldiers' shooting, that he again began to believe in the appearance of angels. Earlier, after he had sneaked out and while there was still the afternoon's faint light, he had followed a woman from the river who meticulously swept a path with an old broom through the center of town, stopping only once to point past the capitol buildings toward a strip of gray tanks. He approached her then, to learn the intent of her endeavor, but when he asked, the fish-woman only shook her head and mumbled—At war, no one knows the disadvantages. These streets were always clean before.

Now these corpses thawing in the wet snow. A growing famine. The hand-drawn carriages pulling the dead on sleds, their bodies buried in streetcars which would no longer run. It's the end of the world when you see it, Ezekiel had written to Hezhen the day they were married. Now he wondered himself if anything had

really changed. How many weeks or months had passed? Spring. Another world war? she had asked him that morning when he awoke and the streets were calm. Though they could no longer be sure. There was little news in the city....

The tainted blue light of March. The gothic faces of laughing gargoyles perched high above the architecture of another century's grandeur. I'll take care of you, he had promised. The elegant churches and wide boulevards. How then? How could he deliver her into something he no longer possessed, if he had ever possessed it, a material world: a place not designed or induced from its own suffering? This veritas of the alchemists dream she had scribbled on an envelope, characteristically leaving her note on the table before he went out. The alchemists' dream—all of these faces in the snow?

He had walked back to the apartment with the loaf of bread and half pound of rotten sausage—all he could find on the mostly deserted streets that day, the plague-infested markets. Yet, the few children he had seen on the skating rink, the young girls and their mothers emerging from the crumbling and yellowed apartment buildings where some of the workers were taking up their shovels to dig at the piles of sludge thawing on the windows of the once state-owned stores. The paradox and great joy of this—he wanted to tell her.

Tonight, listening to her had nothing to do with longing, but this dream of angels that sometimes comes to those moving in on blindness. His eye did not pain him. Though he had helplessly watched her pick up the broken receiver and dial one after another the numbers of her old friends and family after returning

home, saying over and over again before hanging up, I love you. It didn't matter that the phone didn't work, that no one else could hear her, that her friends and family were missing. Because there was this other story in her ear and wherever it led he sensed she was taking them there. Just as the wounder wounds himself, the healer heals himself. Ezekiel had noted this outside Pompeii as the city was destroyed—describing their boy angel Thomas, who had transformed his copper. Though he had been burned in his cell by the king Ankolis for refusing to reveal his source....And tonight the man somehow realized that these notes she played on the piano were part of the liturgy of dreams begun with her in what seemed like so many lives ago.

At the moment she was attempting Rachmaninoff, even humming the bassoon sections as if there were this partial orchestra in their lives. He looked in the mirror at his bandaged eye. And in spite of the piano's poor tuning, or her sadness as it came forth this way, he experienced an aliveness that he couldn't remember feeling since childhood when he first saw the angel and believed in her, believed she loved him, regardless of what everyone had told him about the implausibility of angels, their mere and distant symbology of love. What of this one perched over the piano, admiring the dissonance and profundity of her ravaged mouth?

What would they tell him if they could see her now?

All of their faces emerging from the snow?

MIKA'S TELLING

On Easter, the soldier's disguised in robes had set fire to the church. It was a late evening after the services had ended....

The authorities were aware of the gathering. Sisdel interrupts:

Of course. I know that. But this is for me to say. The authorities had known about them for some time. This is how the story was supposed to end, however. And we believe in revision, don't we? Ok. It was night. A half moon. A partially warm night really. A little rain. And he had lost his head when she told him she thought she was pregnant again.

Go on, the one-eyed boy croons, himself lonely for another telling.

They were on the balcony listening to the music of the bells, a dog's barking, the innumerable mysteries in the noises of the night.

It's our night! Hezhen cries.

And she had dreamed of you again, Hezhen. Mika laughs, darting his blind eyes about the table. Just the night before she'd dreamed of you and her father. That's probably what caused it.

Caused what?

Her pregnancy, Mika goes on, groping his hands over Sisdel's left shoulder.

They had bought milk at the market, and though it was

bad, she used it to make cheese. They were out on the balcony, talking about children when they both smelled the smoke and suddenly realized that the church was burning.

Churches burn, too, Ezekiel notes.

Yes, the church is burning! she cried, scrambling for some clothes, grabbing a bucket as he ran out the door.

Of course, the light of the fire blinded her as she pushed through the crowds carrying her bucket. Pass the buckets! she heard one priest shout. Give us more water!

Naturally, she panicked entering the church—began to rush past the icons, pulling them from the walls....The saints coming alive around her.

After all, it was the church where she first heard the voice of God, the boy sighs.

In the darkness now, stumbling along the icons, hearing the shouts of the people outside..., Mika continues.

Yes, yes! The statue of Christ fell forward too, almost crushed her. And the roof itself was already beginning to cave in.

It was too late to save them? Sisdal asks.

She clinched one icon in her arms as she crossed between the falling beams of fire and began to grope her way back out.

She saw you standing there hissing, didn't she, Hezhen?

It's true. She saw you in the doorway, because we know that as hard as you try, you cannot stay out of her life, Hezhen.

I'm not fond of tragedy! the witch croons. What could I do. What would you have done.

Though she slept soundly that night, again dreaming. Only this time it was Peter instead of her father she dreamed of. His singing really—fish is the source of life, salt the source of woman, but I love the fish and the salt and the water loves me.

That isn't the way the words really go, Sisdal comments.

All the same, Mika grins, They're close enough.

Then one day the radio man came and repaired the radio.

The next day the telephone man arrived and reconnected the line.

No one asked why these things happened?

No, they were simply brilliant signs.



PERHAPS YOU WILL BE CALLED UPON

Taking then a moment to reconsider the past—our last circles drawn on the kitchen walls as signs of intimacy? she whispers, again awakening. He sits beside her, drinking the wine and looking out the window. The streets well-lit with old candles. Though they still will not venture out. Not yet.

Yet, we will leave soon, he says, somewhat awed by the sky's flatness, then the quiet of the room.

Do you think your life has sprung from necessity? she asks.

She picks at her toe nails.

Perhaps it will turn out that you will be called on.

She smiles, takes the wine from his hand, finishes the glass.

I know how we will do it, he tells her.

How?

She kneels by the table, leans over him. Her hair in his face as she leans over him. She presses into him. Her stomach flat and dark. He wants her to lie down.

I may never leave.

He quietly turns her over.

He watches her take off her shirt in the mirror. Glimpses the provocation, this gesture intended for him.

Love a way into the hour?

Maybe, she responds, sitting on his lap, sensing death begin. Maybe, she says, suddenly remembering her dream.

Now it has come down to this. This dream of Fathers, she had told him while in the dream, slinging her fingers across her pregnant mouth, almost touching the monks as she did. The black tracks and blue hills of the metropolis, the emptiness in these afternoon clouds, she told him. Now it has come down to just this dream, you understand. Do you know what I mean?

He picked the sentence from her mouth and devoured it as the sentence began to speak without her, saying: *if you want to find the meaning, stop chasing after things...*

She saw all of the brown clouds, the raven swooping about the building tops, the first signs of a spring rain....But this strange sun, it had eluded him. Now she watched as the boys passed by them in the tomato line, swinging their sticks in a coarse, haunting laughter.

He looked somewhat nervously at the three boys to their left in their bright suits, strolling down the line, inspecting the face of each buyer. The line stretched from the main boulevard past the library to the central boulevard of monuments. Though there were no more monuments, there were tomatoes today, and who could resist their lure.

Why, I remember a time when there were always tomatoes. Even the monks walked the streets freely, though it is true they themselves chose this dream.

Do you want to get drunk?

What?

Do I want to get drunk? she had asked him again—then responding for herself she said—Only if there's wine.

The boys again passed by, circling the park toward the

tomato stands. One pointed at the couple, yelled out in a shrill voice—No tomatoes for that man! This one—the one yelling—was wearing a red jump suit and there were no human features to his face. The face resembled the burnt fields where they had once slept. The boy howling, moaning as he ran forward with astonishing speed. He snatched her by the throat and tossed her to the ground.

You little vampire! she screamed, kicking as the boy bent over her, struggling to suck the unformed sentences from her pregnant mouth.

A group quickly surrounded the lovers, though the man managed to push his way out of their circle and away from most of their blows. The boys quickly fading away in the distance as he suddenly found himself galloping on a blue horse down the alley way—the woman beside him on a pink pony, mockingly hissing and spitting toward his face: There's still a price to be paid, you know that don't you! Or my name isn't Hezhen!

Her father waiting by the road, later asking her, Do you want to go to the sky love, or do you want the sky to come to you. This is what he had whispered in her ear.

H E Z H E N S I N G S

Spirit in the solitary image of one having no where but home, yet this wasn't home! the witch sings. She was returning home because of him, but not him really. Her father's words weren't really the cause. No. Maybe because of the rain. Only in time. The immensity of water! On the streets. It had started only three days before. She had seen him in the dream beside her on the road. These storms! And the rain had continued throughout her journey. To the imaginary hill where the monastery stands. Isolated. In the countryside, the landscape. Conjuring other memories along the way. His red hair, his scarred chin. Desperate eyes. A poet! The rank smell of potatoes inseparable from his body, the witch croons....

Maybe because she could actually hear the rain, this made her. Could hear it lifting slightly off other homes, other dwellings she passed along the way. Crows in the fields! A raven that followed. Then our red-breasted crow. My fish! The albino birds. No. The death had nothing to do with her journey. Ha! Love for the world she experienced as she walked the road! But whose history is it. A woman drunk while travelling in the dream and it didn't really matter to her now. After seeing the maps she realized they could have been drawn by any hand. My hand! The ghost had little to do with it, Hezhen cries. After so many cen-

turies of wandering toward the sea. So many deaths. The face of the man standing by the slough in the field when the soldiers came. And after giving her the writings she now travels in!

This place. As if the maps themselves are speaking—

The soldiers raising their rifles. Saying take these, they are yours. They are for your keeping. Who has not loved? Blessed are those who inherit the earth! Hezhen calls out. She could see nothing for days afterwards. Afterwards, when she and her daughter travelled through the forest. She had promised to collaborate with these soldiers. She walked, she didn't grieve, waiting for the day when he would bring her home. This had been the place of her choosing. They were the same fields—father, lover! the witch croons. She imagined his eyes as pearls. Along the rainy road long before. With other strangers, the other monks escaping. But my child! White hills, birch trees, shallow rivers, rocks and stones and rocks againing and other women too! Hezhen is our name! These places of forgetting. Hezhen is my name! she cried now. She possessed the right to love. She believed. She crossed the footbridge. Hezhen is her name! The monastery built in words.

She sighed and entered the body's gate! Such is the body! A body left alone with nuance and gesture. Secreted messages. When the sky comes down. Her voice of screams. She heard the banter of the ghosts and angels within the monastery's human walls. This is where her father had come. This is where she had returned! This is where. Drunk and sick from her drunkenness....No. No. Horses in the stables, the witch sings. Why do we need horses now? Hezhen caws. White stallions. Beauty and tragedy. Forbidden fruit. Birch trees! He who loves first loves last. Cats, my Father loved cats! she cried. What else? Air's woes the only way to make sense of his dying. Yet so many questions she

still couldn't answer. Her father and your monks! She, too, among us, Ezekiel. Ezekiel, Thomas. Sisdal, Mika, Virgil, Peter. Answer me! Because you trade these names, use them over and over. Though I am the woman who sustains you! I am Hezhen!

Calla lilies in paradise. Her daughter had only been a girl when they left. The sun on her back. Now she will have to mother another! The absence of everything. La, la, la! She inherited the love! The writing he found and continued like this new man. Look at the river! The raven has found the crow! Walking toward his death which is her own and her own birth too. She knows that now! Spirit in this solitary. On the plain, some sheep. White stallions. Her death had nothing to do with her longing!

O flock of birds. This spiraling thunderous sun all rainward girl, Hezhen hisses. Go home to it! Fantastic fish in the water. What could she tell him. What could he tell her. Was it worth what she had done to preserve the Notebooks! Your betrayal. Your hatred. The betrayal of men! Speak it now. The endless journeys among frenzied faces. Utterance and act. The repetition of our lives. Coming home to that which is not home. The mystery, a father. But know who I am! Then at last alone but not fearful of this, the witch sings into the brightness. The spiraling thunderous sun all rainward girl! Go home to it!

REMEMBER YOU

Watching the old film clips from the former country and hearing the songs made her homesick for something distinctly familiar. The smell of snow, the taste of a black night, early cold and dried sun. Raisins. The back of her father's knuckled hand. Familiar, yes, yet now so foreign among the sidewalks and crowded boulevards of the metropolis she had returned to after walking.

Do you remember me? she wondered aloud as he stepped into the room, breaking her concentration.

Remember you?

He could see the bird's nest outside the window. It only now occurred to him that she had waxed herself woven it into the nearby ash tree adjacent to the balcony. In order to narrow the distance between her and her crows? Now that spring had arrived.

I was searching for my Father, she told him, wiping the dust from the top of the piano.

Take off your coat, she said.

She glanced out the window, pulled a cigarette from her cut off flannel shirt.

I danced in this shirt by the field, you know?

It's part of my return.

Why are you doing this to us?

You're not well.

The Notebooks were started 1000 years ago, she said. The monks traded, used one another's names throughout the

years. Do you understand? But at the turn of each century, two lovers are found to join the tribe. The ghosts remind you that life continues, but that the time is short with one another. Besides, if you really want to know why I didn't tell you, you should understand.

I dreamed of you last night.

You were playing the floor like a talk-show host. Only in the sky!

I couldn't stop laughing.

Do you understand me?

Do you remember me?

Yes.

You were always with me?

Yes.

Then it's why we believe.

Then you believe me?

That you're pregnant?

Yes.

Good, then we will have this child.

MIKA'S REVISION

Well then?

Well, Mika commences. Are we all here yet?

I think so, Ezekiel says solemnly, looking about the table, offering up his cup.

Let's go through it then.

Thomas is just a boy in their translation. Is that right? Mika asks.

The monks nod and shake their heads, afterwards tapping their spoons on the table.

And the damage he sees is obvious enough.

Hear, hear! they all cry.

And Hezhen, Hezhen is a witch in their story, yes? Always pining and going on about our fish. Is that correct?

Yes, yes—the monks all agree.

And the damage we have inflicted on her seems clear, does it not?

Again the monks begin to tap their spoons.

In this our birth among men?

Yes, yes, Ezekiel says. In this birth among the lovers.

And then there is our Sisdal, whose desire it seems is to touch the world?

Exactly! Thomas says, unable to contain himself.

Though naturally he has no hands in their translation?

That's right, Ezekiel grins, coming to his feet.

Sisdel looks up, then taps the spoon in his mouth against the table.

And you Ezekiel, Mika goes on. Who are you?

The old one always revising the pages, I guess, Ezekiel shrugs, in what we've called our fish and salt?

And your damage?

I've forgotten. But it seems clear enough by the lovers' suffering. There is no one way to tell our story.

How many times have you betrayed Hezhen? Mika asks.

How have I betrayed her?

By never letting her tell her own tales. But now she has found another woman to hear her, as she does at the beginning of each century.

O, Ezekiel agrees, as the others stand and tap their spoons on his forehead.

And Virgil?

Virgil! the monks all call out.

Virgil, you are the sleeping monk who is no doubt sleeping now?

Virgil mumbles and giggles in his dream.

Though the monks confirm Virgil's sleeping by recording the sound of his snoring.

Ah, Virgil, who constantly wakes up laughing in our story. But he can't keep his eyes open long enough. Who else? Who did we forget?

Why you Mika, Ezekiel says, bowing and passing the cup to the blind one.

In their translation you are the blind one yes, Sisdel agrees. Whose desire it is to see the world.

Well, it's true isn't it. The damage of eyes....

Why the man himself is suffering from it, Sisdel concurs. We don't need to dwell on that.

And then of course, Mika continues. There is the host of



hoodlum ghosts wandering in and out of the words....the giver of bread, the sad one, her crow, the carnal girl, the fishwoman, the Gypsy boys, the albino gulls, the vampires.

Enough Mika! You can't remember them all, Ezekiel counsils the younger one.

Her father in all his silence, Sidel notes.

Yes, Mika grins. Just because he rarely speaks gives no one the right to exclude his silence!

Virgil snores and snores as the chorus begins to hum.

Except Hezhen, who naturally disapproves of this naming.

Peter? Sidel suddenly asks.

Yes! they all cry in unison, rising now.

The apostle himself decided to fall from the sky, Mika whispers, somewhat embarrassed about overlooking her father, though overall Mika is pleased with himself and his performance. Our apostle who falls from the sky. To orchestrate the chorus' humming. We'd be useless without him.

We'd be lonely, Sidel agrees.

We'd have no reason to tell our stories, Ezekiel adds.

I'd have no more reason for laughing, Virgil snores.

I'd be hungry, Hezhen hisses.

And I would no longer want to see, Mika sighs, as his companions gather to leave. It's really quite remarkable.

Yes it is! they all sing, departing for the garden. Quite remarkable indeed.....

Sitting alone with her by the Pure Ponds he wanted to ask her so many questions, though he knew she wouldn't answer them. Didn't her face, the one he saw reflecting back from the pond's water mirror his own, give shape to the weight of all the

other faces that preceded him?

I've got...I've got my whole life before me, she began in a whisper, lightheartedly turning to him. Watching this assembly of gulls on the shore, listening to the crow's squawking.

Of course you love me, she quipped, smelling the bouquet of blue roses he'd given her that morning. She held them in the smallness of her thin hand. He had brought blue roses each day to replace the ones that died.

Children played across the highway in the park. The old men with their dominoes on the benches. The women walking their dogs by the protected green fields, or pushing baby carriages. Everything so normal, as if the details of a visual world could suggest yet another place.

A yellow sun today. Almost like summer.

They watched the buses slowly make their way down the boulevard.

No, it doesn't mean I don't love you or love you less, he said, pointing at the crows and gulls.

He could even smell the pond's decay, though she would make no mention of it.

Spring might bring you out, she told him instead.
Cherry blossoms.

See the little girls over there? She placed the roses across his knees. Can you remember playing like them?

No, I can't remember my childhood really.

Look at the scurry of mice on the sand, the black wings of the crow scooping down before them in the hunt, she whispered.

Sunday we should pray, he thought. Saturdays we sleep all afternoon.

My father died standing beside a hundred monks with no clothes on.

Your husband?

He, too, though I didn't love him. I did admire him. She squeezed the raw knuckles of his left hand.

Birch trees. Ravens eating the earth, the dead fish, the ones washed to the pond's shores. What do you want me to say? he asked. I know.

A full white sky. The sky between them. For that reason the recent outbreak of cholera didn't frighten him. Not today.

Why do you think you love me?

Saturdays when we sleep. Sundays when we pray. Afterwards. No one can really say, can they?

I believe you.

Yes you do believe me, she said.

The flock of gulls the woman pointed toward.

Almost nothing is tangible. When it becomes tangible, you eat it.

She turned her face so as not to witness the ravens and the mice scampering under their beaks now. Her eyes on him instead, then her concentration on the sun. In one dream he was helping her into their bed. He had been forced to do this with difficulty, as she no longer possessed arms in the dream and she couldn't hold onto his arms. In the dream he had dragged her across the floor of the room and lifted her head up to the pillows, maneuvering her across the rank blankets. She had begun to puke all over him.

Two couples waltzed in the gardens below them among the white hills as the mice began to shriek.

Truth looking into the mirror with a snake in her hands., the woman told him. Just as the apostle fell from the sky to meet us when we first took up the Notebooks. But the shore of fishers

on the crumbled rock banks today, she said.

And after all these years, she went on, taking his hand as they stood to walk, relieved. It occurs to me that before you, I've never known a man. Because I had never known my own death. But when you and I go together, I can't discern the difference between our eyes. Can you?

No.

That's why we love to love each other. She walked ahead of him to the water and suddenly spread the blue roses over the shore.

The crowd assembled on the bridge above them. The pedestrians talking between themselves. One man yelled out above the others—Who are these lovers who dare sit by the ponds during the plague?

Give us a sacrifice! a second woman shouted.

Whatever's ending will end soon, one of the prettier girls cooed.

It becomes them, her mother laughed.

It's just a plague after all, a gang of teenagers chimed in, turning off their boom box.

We, too, believe every angel is terrible! an elderly man told his son.

They just want to regain some normalcy in their life, after all, the butcher said to his wife. Some quiet place.

They don't ask for mercy, the mother said, falling deeper into laughter.

Why not the ponds. Do it in the ponds!

Then suddenly there will be cafes on the streets.

Yes. After the plague, there will be cafes, a clergy agreed.

The birds sang, nesting, chirping in a calm tone as he

embraced her.

Can we sleep now, the little redheaded girl asked her maid.

One day love will find you too, her maid reminded the girl.

Still the crowd stayed on the bridge and came no closer than the bridge, though one son did venture as far as the edge of the road where he reported hearing the lovers say—

The horsemen galloping into the great river. The blue-backed ravens, this mercy of the devoured. Our collaboration in the horrific. Go ahead and put your tongue into my darkness, though its words will later be written on the wall of a public building.

Outskirts of the ancient city. A far cry from beauty. He caught his breath, lit a cigarette, stared up at the crowd. Her hands empty. Her eyes alive.

And she slapped him.

Slap me too if you like.

Will you be beside me in the morning if I do? he asked, hesitantly.



PETER & THOMAS

Why else have they been brought together, other than to travel this our mystery together? Thomas says, glancing down the long road. He sees the apostle hovering in the staircase above their apartment, waves his hand. The Notebooks? he suddenly asks. These two figures seeing the outline of the church, whispering this is enough tonight? he goes on, gnawing slowly at the apple in his other palm.

She stands by the window cutting her fingernails. How I've never been quiet, mysterious, she says, admiring the elegance and grace of the spirals, the curving white buttresses and golden cupolas of the church.

The silence the church projected even now, after all the soldiers have gone.

The way she takes his arm when they stroll this city, assuring him of his place in our world.

Peter smiles, as if disturbed by her sadness but at ease with her acceptance of it.

A common place in time where we can meet them, is that it? Thomas searches. Is that why we were summoned? Because these revolutions can survive within them, just as they survived within us.

The boy massages Peter's forehead now, stares out above the building tops.

Where now? Peter says, dreaming of the woman's hand—

feeling this old want to touch it.

She put her arm around his and pointed at the crows, later leafing through the pages you have translated for her, Peter.

I have not translated them.

But you have helped her.

Just as you have helped the man, Thomas.

When he saw where the birds were flying, he didn't cry?

Peter asks.

No.

I did. When I was like him, Peter sighs.

You were never like him, really.

There are days like this when they both strangely believe in the possibilities of rebirth, the one-eyed boy grins. Just as you do. Isn't that why you again fell from the sky?

This is the magic.

I saw her put her hand in his pocket and curse as a boy of about fourteen ran in front of those on the street below, shouting at the tanks to stop.

Yes, it's....

The crows flying about. The crows you sent to protect them.

She takes the pale of milk, walks back into the kitchen where their family loved you when she was just a small girl, and you were so fond of her, Peter.

Then she hummed, sliding her hand across the piano, amazed to see these worlds as they have always been....

A riddle? Mika asks.

Walking alone he could smell the end of their beginning yes, Sisdal whispers.

It came as if grown up in something unspoken by the

silence?

Unfamiliar, yet immediate this desire?

Like her small bird voice, the chorus hums....

He dreamed of walking? Virgil burps, not as sleepy as usual.

The ghosts of the passing millenniums will meet here, Ezekiel quips.

Outside it was growing lighter too, he adds. And the clock in the city square had its own agenda.

Who had she been as a child.

Who was he?

Her mother's ballet costume before we discovered her. That pair of white shoes, the poems and early signs before she stumbled in these fields so many years before. It was clear she would come to be Hezhen.

As he would be you.

Peter stares at the cup.

Yes.

Ezekiel stares at the cup.

Images of a new world that await them.

Where now?

They have awoken, Mika asserts. And neither failed or succeeded in anything but the wild curiosity to understand their life in the communion of love's mystery.

This search for ourselves?

God on the streets in what has become unknown between them.

You're too abstract for me, Hezhen caws.

He wasn't distracted by the hungry faces that gathered around to study our moral expectation?

Where now?

Traveling the myth they will eventually become, Ezekiel

nods.

Their life passing in solitude.

Because there is no reason to be sad.

Peter? the monks clap in unison, raising their voices to
the chorus. Thomas! they then cry. Haven't you been listening?

We are here.



AFTERWARDS

when the centuries meet

What is it you're writing? the man inquires, rather too patiently as he pulls on her skirt and they stop before the stone bridge leading out of the city...

Stagebrush shells, the obliterated brush and rot walnuts wasting in the fields....she says, turning to him.
These letters are to you, she then whispers, folding the edges of the paper while pointing at the sun.



For a moment the man studies the curiosity of the onlookers faces.

She takes his tongue into her mouth.

This is what I've written—A way into the hour? And, there is a god in you too, but which god....

There's your angel again. She laughs, turns the corner and walks further down the road.

The man's almost startled, but not quite. He stares at her gray hands, the angel standing on the sidewalk with burns covering his arms.

A blinded heap of bodies by the cliff.
Five monks walking to the sea.

Have you forgotten? she asks.

Turning the corner in the road now, he remembers....

They sit, silent for an hour.

Under the hills a whiteness scored in light, one monk calls across the road, waving a lantern, prepared to let the onlookers pass.

The west flank border patrols contained by this music too, these surroundings....

The sun's eye on the soldiers' uniforms. I remember all of the armies that have come here, she says, pointing at the boys' faces, their desire.

Though one day we'll see the large body of water called a sea in the pages.

The sky will come down to us.

Skin-back hills....

To do nothing takes courage? you will ask me, crossing the line of death before we arrive.

He watches another woman by the tracks, selling carnations, singing—though he doesn't recognize the song.

On this day.

The angels will carry on with their business. Because you understand, treason can be arranged; love, hijacked.

The monk stands, lights the candle, touches the book, begins to walk across the waters....

The man's finding it difficult.

This is the country I write you from, she scribbles in the Notebook today, though it will be years before the man will read it.

He quietly strolls beside her now. He wants something. Perhaps to kiss her.

So that in this way, you will father his child! the monk calls out.

Our child....Ezekiel says, skipping ahead in the story. This one they have come to believe in.

THE DAYS

When the earth turned to salt and the skies came down to meet them. An almost beige sun. Some flecks of dust lifting off the thinly disguised road as the lovers walk past. A man and woman walking toward the sea. Black lizards and frogs flickering across the fields to the ritual noise of gunfire. We first saw the two in this black and white image while travelling on the trains, returning from the Crimea, less than a month ago. So little time has gone by and yet it seems like a thing of imagination. All of these men, soldiers really, walking in hordes before the woman and her lover, toward the same beach and body of water. Her face sunburned as she glanced at him, this so-called priest, who walked alongside her. The image less haunting than the actual story, which is why, perhaps, we look for a language of desire that outlives each desire in and of itself. As when speaking of ghosts and absolution. The ghosts of our body, prayers in a territory that continues out of its own peculiar changing.

His desire to kiss her, for instance, before crossing the water. Belief forms a narrative, or the narrative forms a belief? The spare chance provided is what we're after, an ongoing ritual that so often eludes daily speech. In the walk toward the sea she was first. She carried the child inside her. Though the young man knew he shouldn't kiss you. The impulse becomes an invocation. She had told him—we heard her say—landscapes, not people talking. One by one, the former soldiers began to lay their guns on the beach,

enter the water. A spirit thing made physical? She was smiling, fully aged now—and yet, what a beauty, he whispered under his breath. Perhaps to avoid the sentimental and not the sentiment.

As memory invents it. We had spent the day swimming in the Black Sea with friends, drinking Cognac in the beige sun and black water when one of the boys told us he wanted to return here when he died. These were his waters after all, as all of the stories, in the end, are about return. Never the same place though. Each day becoming its own, yet blending, as do faces. The lovers became invisible in the passage. When they walked into the water, almost together, she reached for him once, said, “We’ve come here, almost together.” As if it formed the basis for everything that transpires.

THE WATER

Trying to reconstruct the events would be impossible. So let memory have them. She had told him this as they walked across the white beach. All that had been dead or thrown away appeared in their gaunt movements. Blue slime, pestilence, mosquitoes, rain. The clarity of sun beating down. Nothing can ever be reconstructed, you understand that, don’t you? she went on, shivering slightly as the waves began to touch her ankles, the hem of her skirt.

Rock islands in the further distance. A beach, albino gulls. It made one want to swim. He glanced back at her, but only

for a moment.

It's salt.

Yes, it's salty, she assured him.

And tomorrow?

Among the mosquitoes and earlier rain, the deltas of black soil, it had been enough. Her image inhabited this place where the fear had diminished. Why else had the soldiers put down their rifles.

The water warm between his legs, easy to walk in. A flock of pelicans fishing along the southern cliffs.

But who will tell our story? he asked.

Her glance leaving little to reckon. Can you see her? Her senses at ease, shaped patterns on her wet arms and neck.

A canopy of fish, seaweed, floating algae. Or this sentence. This background: examining the self and its sources; stepping in and out of their lives.

Each history was told before us. She smiled, looping his elbow in her own elbow as the tide rose. Who could refuse these singing mouths?

The Notebooks had given them this vision.

When the earth turned to salt and the skies came down to meet the soldiers walking toward the sea.

Why do you ask about tomorrow? she whistled, splashing the first of the water into his face. It was warm in my underarms. The branch of a torn eucalyptus slid past us like a wooden boat. They let it pass. He put his mouth on hers.

She opened her body.

Someone heard the singing, but who? She took his hand, preparing for the subsequent walk that awaited them on the other shore.

Where now then? he asked.

Floating into the source of these questions. An albatross

sits on one of the cliffs behind them. The narrow wings and large hooked beak. The sea carried it here. The tide picks up the soldiers' rifles randomly strewn across the beach. The tide picks them up. They carry out to sea. The albatross sits.

She remembers this now:

Her sun-burned face. They are almost laughing. No more talking. Rock islands not as far away. A whitebacked angel on the whitebacked rocks. The sleeping weeds.

The fishing pelicans. The two faces turning in the sun. The waves allow each day to become its own.

The fishwoman with fish coming out of her mouth, standing by the shoreline.

So many open mouths.

DESIRE NOTEBOOKS

Dear Peter,

Into one more field that's an eye? Then following the rules of a painful science. Here we are entirely. Though only in the moment where the world is not watching. So they don't exile you, we know—you exile yourself. We rub our hands over the fire and watch your ghosts on the surface tonight. Hissing at one another in an earlier language. That is why we have changed our names to those of the wanderers who preceded us. The leaky house across the street. The lamp came on at six. Why were we so afraid to acknowledge our vision when it leaned into the visible of the

page? A body's landscape, miraculous. And it's early again and again and again. The red motes drift slantwise through the terrain's startling light. When the story in the eye takes its own down the road. As it has for the other nomads who came before. As it did for you when you denied Christ and heard the cocking of the crow?

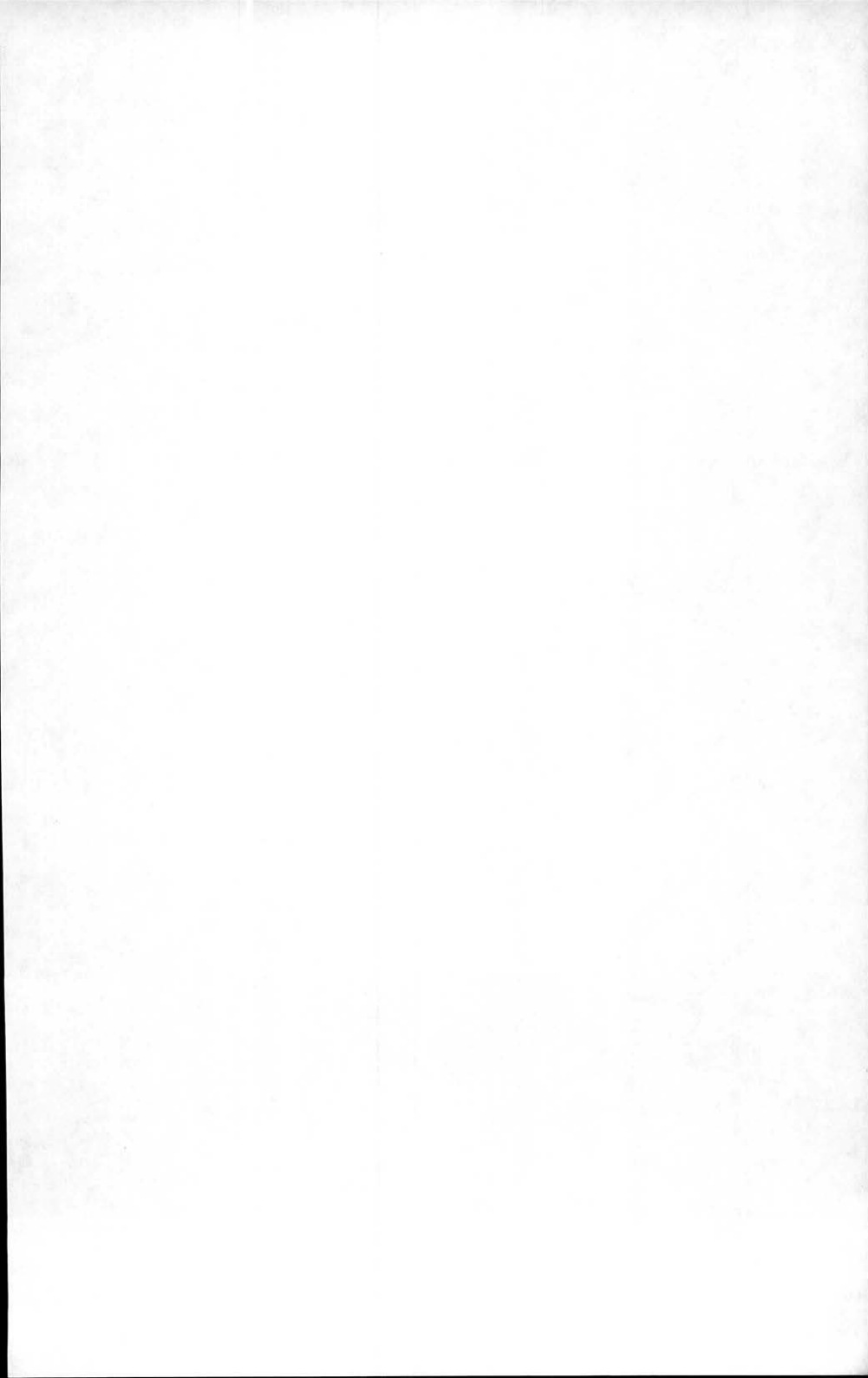
A road dreaming in the snow. This page is burning. Across the field the windows open up their hands in advance. Look straight into your pupil. The earth lapidary here, as we continue our walking. The earth more terrifying than speeches, or thunderstorms or wars. Clouds ripping like dirigibles. Dear you, another will one day begin, I've decided to name you 'you', as in these Notebooks I can find no other reference to your origin or design. For just as the wounder wounds himself, the healer heals himself. The burned boy appearing before each Ezekiel as he writes the first lines of the letter. Just as he appeared before me.

The myth continues. A slow walk by evening. From where she will command your absence, the thinnest emerald. The Palestine of your mysteries increases the sum of our breath. Somewhere in the snow, more snow—and the further north, the better. Bear it a little longer. So what now? the one-eyed boy walking in the snow on a later afternoon will ask as he reads this page knowing the words, though not their sentiment, forge a lie, a damaged crossing....

PETER

Just like the words of our first wanderer. So we arrive uncircumcised of heart? Into one more field, an eye. Everything is ready now. Wandering in and out of the pages as you watch the boy and his black crow walk toward the monastery. Answer the question then. Answer us with a smile which deserves the attention of my Achilles' feather pen. A story still flying toward absence and without a body and therefore without boundaries. We rub our hands over the fire and wait. The blackness of a blind eye, a raw mouth. When the wind starts. Comes alive again. Leaves you.

Siberia, 1995



JOHN HIGH is the author of several books, including *Ceremonies, Sometimes Survival, the lives of thomas—episodes and prayers*, and *The Sasha Poems: A Book of Fables*. He is the recipient of numerous awards and fellowships, including three Fulbrights, two National Endowments and poetry awards from the Witter Bynner Foundation, Arts International, and Arts Link. The publication in 1997, (excerpts from) *The Sasha Poems* was met with extraordinary critical acclaim, here and abroad. These days John spends his time traversing the length and breadth of planet Earth, interspersing North American bi-coastal jaunts with fact-finding missions to Europe & Russia, where he is deeply ensconced in the new emergence of Russian contemporary literature. The Talisman Project, an expansive anthology of contemporary Russian poetry which he edited, *Crossing Centuries: The New Russian Poetry* is due out this fall. A founding editor of the Five Fingers Review, he has also co-translated books of the Russian poets Nina Iskrenko, Aleksei Parshchikov and Ivan Zhdanov.

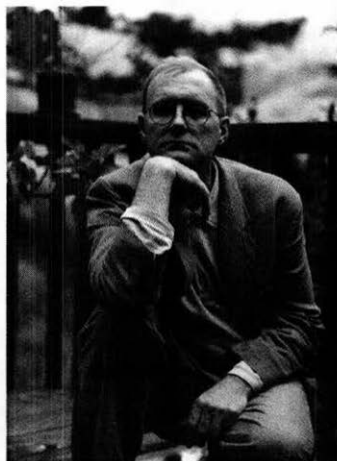


photo: John Stevenson

Talisman House will publish his selected poetry in 2000.

A West Coast correspondent for Publishers Weekly, he is currently a Zen student and resident of the San Francisco Zen Center.



"*The Notebooks* were started 1000 years ago, she said. The monks traded, used one another's names throughout the years. Do you understand? But at the turn of each century, two lovers are found to join the tribe."

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—Leonard Schwartz
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