Metallurgy Street (1994)

For months, I've been spending my nights in exactly the same way: sitting at the table in the dark, my fingers resting on the radio dial. Outside in the street, it’s more or less silent. Unlike during the daytime, there's no shouting or a din from clinking bottles. Every so often, someone walks past, or the beam of a car’s headlights skims the walls of my room, accompanied by the roar of an engine.

The radio keeps me company. It's a REMA Centuri 2060 from the 1960s, manufactured in East Germany. I bought it for thirty roubles and a handful of kopeks not long after I arrived in Kyiv, from a man who was selling the contents of his mother home’s from a tiny front garden two streets along. She had died in her sleep and was found by the police three weeks later.

'It’s not as if you can smell it,' the man said.

He turned down my initial offer of twenty-five roubles.

I turn the dial, scanning the talk shows. I don't care what's being discussed. Politics, history, popular culture, relationship advice; it's all the same to me. I'm not looking for content. It’s the voices that matter. No speaker is the same. I'm convinced that a radio presenter with the right voice attracts listeners, maybe by the thousands. God knows how many sleepless souls roam the airwaves at night, in search of distraction, or someone to lull them to sleep. A good voice is worth its weight in gold, especially in these times.

When a station is to my liking, I stick with it. I listen with my eyes closed to the presentation or discussion. Sometimes I doze off, I usually don't even notice. At such moments the ether loses its significance. What remains are the sounds. They harbour peace and calm, the idea that world will continue to rotate around its axis quite happily without me. People carry on,

with whatever it might be. Moaning or hoping, dreaming of better times. I'm present, and then again I'm not. Opinions float past me. I don't have to pay attention to them. And once in a while, when everything and everyone is aligned – the cars driving past, the passers-by in the street, the voices: they are there, but not too prominently –, something that resembles sleep takes hold. True peace, fifteen or twenty minutes at most. Even the noises disappear – until the inevitable moment when the commercials come booming into my room. I come back, awoken by the hirelings of Western companies rattling off brand names accompanied by feverish tunes. It's a racket that did not exist in the past. Products did not engage in battle. They were there, or not there, and that was it. There were the occasional announcements in the paper, although these were more for information than a form of advertising: how long to soak beans for before cooking them, how best to store buckwheat. Those kinds of things. Now the jingles of whisky distillers, shampoo producers, instant-service restaurants and clothing dealers blare around my room. Commendations that are as shameless as they are useless. They seem to have forgotten that no one has any money to spend. The best we can do is gawp at the products from the pavement, yearning for them, piled up in the shop windows. Perhaps the bosses of all those companies enjoy making us green with envy at their wealth. Or is it hope? Hope that we will change? That one day we will be rich? When that day arrives, we will undoubtedly remember these dark nights. We will leave the house to buy all these endorsed products, bags of them, to prove to ourselves that it none of it had been in vain.

*

It was during one of those nights – a week ago, to be exact – that I heard the voice of Pavel Oleksandrovych Doroshenko, my childhood friend from Taranivka. I had not seen or heard him

for almost five years. Now his voice entered my room on the radio waves, as if nothing had happened, as if no time had passed. The signal was weak and fell away at times – but it was him. I knew for sure. I was positive about this.

His voice had not changed. Instinctively, I thought of the last time I had seen him, the day he gave a speech at the University of Kyiv during the winter of 1989. We were twenty-nine years of age. Hundreds of students had assembled in the library. Fully upright, he towered over the balustrade on the first floor. There was something in his gaze. An admonition, a warning perhaps. Many speakers had stood in that same spot during the preceding weeks, facing the assembled students. Some had been nervous and had spoken, stumbling over their words. Others found it less difficult. Yet no one had spoken the way Pavel would speak that day. He began by giving an account of the previous weeks' events in a calm voice as if he was describing innocent gossip in a community centre. He spoke about the protests and about the police response. His sentences gradually increased in tempo and volume. The hubbub in the hall died down. His hands let go of the balustrade. Ever more frequently he chose words with equivocal meanings: responsibility, change, freedom. His voice meanwhile echoed around the stone pillars. His words flowed together of their own accord, as if they had lodged themselves in our language over the centuries in order to coalesce into perfect sentences at precisely that time and location. After weeks of debate, some form of order seemed to arise from the mishmash of opinions. The things he spoke about were recognisable; they appeared to be insights that had always been there inside you. You followed his gaze and the movements of his hands involuntarily. A message roared on the intonation of this voice that was so powerful it was impossible to escape. Even the KGB officers disguised as students, recognisable by their crisp haircuts and clothes that were just that bit too smart, listened with bated breath. Pavel spoke freely, truly freely, as if he was standing on a soap box somewhere in America. No

feigned controversy or praise cloaked in criticism issued from his mouth. It was the truth, his version of the truth. Moscow was being skewered and no one objected.

Then the father of the Soviet empire died. It was an extraordinary conclusion to his speech, an event of unprecedented symbolic significance: from its alcove, the bust of Lenin flew into the grand hall and shattered into countless pieces onto the library floor. The spell had been broken. While the shards scattered in all directions, the KGB men shot into action. Wrestling the students to the ground, they made their way towards Pavel. Uniformed police flooded in through the main entrance. There was screaming, fist fights. Batons waving back and forth tried to annul Pavel's words, to erase them – but it was too late. His message had lodged in the minds of hundreds of students, who were now more convinced than ever. The following weeks they would take to the streets. They would make banners and chant slogans. They would fight if they had to. It was time for something new, whatever that might be.

*

His message completely passed me by. I have no idea what he said because, sitting in front of the radio, I forgot to listen to his words. I only caught the sound of his voice, which took me back to the village of my birth, Taranivka. I saw the lilacs along the main road, the snowy plains in the winter. Days from our schooltimes floated past, when we used to roam the corn fields and forests. The old cement factory, our draughty classroom. Accompanied by his voice, I wandered through our past.

It was sleep, uninterrupted sleep; barely recognisable. Since then, I've been looking for him, turning the dial of my REMA, restless, maybe even more restless than I've ever been. I have to find him. Not because of my insomnia, but because I want to know what happened. He had

once been a convinced socialist. He claimed that the Union was a concrete pyramid. Immovable, because wide at its base. Able to withstand the passage of centuries – but not, as it would eventually turn out, his own words.

The work uniforms and overalls have meanwhile given way to nylon tracksuits. Officials are coming up with new street names. The party no longer exists. The Politburo old men have been forgotten; the cast-iron statue of Dzerzhinsky has been pulled down with chains. Socialism is a fallen giant – and I want to know how that happened, why an empire has died without us having received anything in return.

The village (1971-1972)

Pavel appeared in Taranivka one chilly day in September. Mother said that he was an orphan and that his uncle in Irgansk had looked after him for a long time, until he had suddenly died in his sleep. Now he was moving in with Mrs Janovich. She was his great-aunt and lived opposite us on the other side of the village street, in a small house at the foot of a metres-thick beech tree.

Mrs Janovich made every effort to take care of him as best she could. She had cleared out her former sewing workshop and put a straw mattress on the stone workbench. The day he arrived, I happened to be walking past in the street. I saw him lying on his new bed through the open window, reading a book. He had an elusive quality. It was something that struck me immediately, during the few seconds that I walked past his window and saw him for the first time. I could not define it, and yet it was there.

His arrival preceded what in school we called ‘the long wait’. Our village was situated between endless corn fields and forests, far away from the city with its fountains, department stores, manicured parks, local busses and cinemas. We were imbued with boredom. It was something you were born with in our parts, as if it was a hereditary condition. It was impossible to escape. During the summer it was a slumber, an indefinable feeling you tried to dispel by swimming, pillaging fruit and climbing trees. But then the autumn would follow, transforming the corn fields into marshes and making the roads impassable. As if this period was not bad enough, winter then arrived, which could hold us hostage for months on end with layers of snow piled metres high. There was very little to keep us occupied. Outside school, we huddled around the stove at home, or hung around at the community centre. We would just sit there, staring into space, sucking raw beans. We might exchange the odd word or draw some pictures or play a game of cards. We carved wooden figures with our penknives. Or we argued, about the smallest things. Then we would fight until blood streamed from our noses.

A few days after his arrival, mother sent me to the village shop for a bottle of milk. As I was passing, I saw Pavel in the front garden. His gaze was set far in the distance, somewhere beyond the treetops at the edge of the village. In order to attract his attention, I tapped my shoe against the garden fence. ‘I’m Dani,’ I said. He turned towards me. Because I had seen him side-on earlier, it was only now that I noticed that he had a patch over his left eye. It was held in place by an elastic strap that was largely hidden behind his black hair. His good eye was bright blue. He was holding the book I had seen him read earlier.

‘Hello, Dani,’ he said.

‘Who are you?’ I asked.

‘Pavel.’

‘Where are you from?’

'Irgansk.'

We looked at each other. I pointed at the book in his hand.

'What's it about?' I asked.

'About the naval base in Sebastopol.'

Just then, the postman, Nikolayev, staggered into the street. Although I had hardly ever seen him sober, that day he was more drunk than ever. He used his hand to seek support from the birch trees he passed. His flies were undone and his cap, which he had lost so often that he had tied it to his collar with a piece of string, dangled behind him.

Nikolayev was not exactly popular in our village. It was generally known that he stole roubles from the elder villagers' pension letters, a 'commission' to which he was entitled under the Postal Act, so he claimed. According to my mother, he lived up to the old Ukrainian saying: 'An hour's drinking turns you into a monkey, two hours into a vicious dog.' When he had had his fill, he would swear at everyone and everything. He called children rats, women pigs or cows. He kicked pets, spat on kitchen gardens, urinated in flower pots. Despite his intoxication he remained surprisingly able to recognise those who were his superior, physically or otherwise. It was as if his drunkenness had no effect on this ability whatsoever, even when he could barely put one foot in front of the other. Thus, he would not bother Mrs Chovnik, the community centre boss. Likewise ex-major Lavrinenko, who would often sit on the bench in front of his house in Red October street, could invariably expect a greeting in the form of a docile gesture. The full extent of his hypocrisy, however, would surface when he saw Tutko, a fellow villager who had once been the party committee's under-secretary. In fine weather, he tended to have a glass of wine at one of the tables in front of the community centre. As soon as Nikolayev spotted him in the distance, he would straighten his back. He would try to keep a steady gait, successfully or not. It looked ridiculous. I have seen him stride past the

community centre several times, nose high up in the air, hurling his legs forward shakily like a new-born deer calf. Once around the corner, he would slump with a sigh, continuing on his tottering way.

Nikolayev came to a stop at the fence. He smelled of sweat and drink. Letters were popping out of his open postal bag. I was on guard, ready to duck away if he decided to spit at me or hit me.

'Whwhwh… whwhat are you doing here, lad?' he asked Pavel.

Pavel did not reply.

'You… sssscoundrel… I… I asked you something.'

Silence. I took a step back.

'Dammit, ssscoundrel. I asked you…

The postman had not even been able to finish his sentence before Pavel's arm lashed out, the book about the naval base in Sebastopol slamming Nikolayev's cheek.

'Move on,' Pavel said. His voice was deeper than shortly before, when we had been having our brief chat. Nikolayev stood at the gate, frozen. While Pavel's words reverberated in my mind, I could see how wise they were. *Move on*. It was a perfectly rational command, a fitting end to the situation we found ourselves in. The postman would not need to scream and fly into a rage. The thin slats of the fence would not have to bite the dust, the plants and flowers in the garden trampled down. Any conceivable outburst seemed utterly inappropriate. It was crystal clear what should happen. Nikolayev should indeed move on, and this would mean the end of our encounter. A simple and correct course of events; a way out. I took a deep breath. With a smile on my lips, I looked at the postman, who had not moved.

The three of us stood at the fence for a while. A little further along, the wind rustled through the leaves of the beech tree. Pavel brushed his nose with his index finger. Nikolayev then turned around and continued on his way, his cap dangling behind him.

The following day, Pavel joined our class. I was standing by the conifers at the fence when he entered the school playground. He was wearing a spotless uniform with a crease in his trousers and a bright-red neckerchief under the collar of his shirt. No one looked like that; our uniforms had been washed so many times that they were grey and rough like jute sacks. Moreover, they were covered in stains and stitching. He looked like a schoolboy from the city who was about to take part in a parade.

Next to me stood my friend Igor, the strapping son of a forest ranger. He sniffed and pointed at Pavel, who positioned himself against a side wall and took his book from his bag.

'Who's that?' Igor asked.

'Pavel', I said.

'Is he new?'

'Yes. He's living across the street from us, with Mrs Janovich.'

'He's got a book.'

'Yes,' I said. 'About the naval base at Sebastopol.'

'What?'

'About the naval base at Sebastopol.'

Pavel opened the book and began to read. It was a strange sight, because I did not know anybody at school who enjoyed reading. As far as I knew, most kids hated the weekly reading period. The stories in our school books were positively boring. Always the same righteous characters – workers, Leninist pioneers, cosmonauts –, exchangeable like coins in a piggy bank.

Always the same crystal-clear dividing line between good and evil, always the same fight against capitalist racketeers. These stories invariably ended with a victory for socialism, couched in a predictable climax intended to teach us some kind of lesson. We used our pencils to vent our displeasure. When the teacher had her back turned, we would write swear words in the margin. We doctored the images of the stories' strapping heroes by surrounding them with turds or thought bubbles full of dollar signs. We gave women unkempt beards. We drew bracelets with swastikas and dripping trouser flies. While rattled off the sentences, accompanied by the rasping voice of our teacher, we ruined the pages with our pencils. That's how we treated books. Contempt was the only thing that entered our minds. And now someone in our playground was reading a book about the naval base at Sebastopol, as if it was the most normal thing in the world.

'He's not all there in the head,' I said to Igor.

*

At first**,** We paid little attention to his eye patch. Mutilations were quite common in our region. 'We don't promenade along the boulevards of Kyiv,' people would say when another accident had happened somewhere in the village or kolkhoz. Rural life was hard, and Pavel was not the only kid in school with a physical ailment. First there was Igor. In his skull, semi-hidden behind a strand of blond hair, was a dent he had sustained as a toddler when a horse that had broken loose had kicked him. (He believed that the kick had given him the ability to talk to animals, such as field mice and young jackdaws – although according to my mother this was nonsense, and that the kick's only effect was him having real trouble keeping up at school). Then there was a girl in a lower-down class who had a scar on her face because she had been hit by the

drive belt of a potato sorting machine that had slipped off. And finally, there was Fedir, a skinny classmate who had lost three fingers on his left hand while chopping wood with his drunk father. Life marks people, sometimes even at a young age. 'Some will scratch their soul, others their skin,' is another saying from our parts.

Despite the fact that we took wounds and scars for granted, Pavel's eye patch became an important issue, and it was all my doing. A few days after he arrived in the village, during the morning break, I gathered the boys from the more senior classes around me during the morning break. I proposed a bet on how his mutilation had come about. Bets could be staked in cigarettes or kopeks. Most boys jumped at my proposal. I kept a tally of the bets in the back of my exercise book. Konstantin: a rare eye disease. Denis: clumsiness with an air gun. Igor: a lightning strike (I briefly considered telling him that it would be extremely unlikely to lose your eye that way, but I didn't; I noted down his stake in my exercise book shaking my head). I myself betted that, during a street fight, someone had hurled a cobblestone at his eye, because I had once heard a story about a boy from Irgansk to whom this had happened. After I had processed all the bets, I put our joint stake in an empty jam jar that I hid behind a loose skirting board in the classroom.

It had been a long time since we had made a bet. The reason was simple: hardly anything worth happening ever happened in the village. The last time had been two years previously, when Kargayev, a retired machine worker, disappeared without a trace one winter's day. His neighbour had seen that his front door was open and had gone inside. He found smouldering embers in the fireplace, but the old man himself was nowhere to be seen. His coat was hanging on a hook next to the doorpost. That same day, half the village went out searching for him. The forests were combed, and inquiries were made with the authorities in Irgansk. Kolkhoz drivers scanned the roads. However, Kargayev could not found anywhere. There was serious

betting at school: he had gone to an old love in the city on the spur of the moment; he had been lifted off his bed by the KGB because of his questionable war past; he had eaten mouldy rye bread and had headed for the forests in a delirious state. In the end, the arrival of spring would solve the mystery. After the thaw had set in, a terrible stench rose up from the nearby well. With some effort, a few *oblast* workmen managed to haul Kargayev's body up from the depths. His limbs were swollen and had the colour of freshly made sausages. Later, it was established that he had lowered himself into the well with a rope around his waist to break the ice. Because of his gout, he had tied a weak knot. The rope had probably slipped, which landed him in the water below the ice, and he died not long after from hypothermia.

While the village prepared for Kargayev's funeral, we at school retrieved the jar with the joint stake from behind the skirting board. During the break, we totted up the balance. Because Anatoli had got closest – he believed the old man had fallen through the ice while pike-fishing –, it was decided he had won. Triumphantly, he held the jar aloft. The coins glistened in the sunlight. I surveyed his round head with envy. His hands held not only the kopeks and cigarettes but something much more important: the sweet taste of victory. Bets were serious affairs at school. They not only had the capacity to dispel boredom, they also offered the promise of elevation. We were just schoolboys, simple and unimportant – but because Anatoli had won, he could warm himself on the idea that he had been chosen, that he had transcended his peers within the village boundaries. The prize he had carried off was tangible proof of that. As losers we were left with the no other option than to console ourselves with the thought that his glory was brittle, and moreover temporary. Irrevocably, the moment would come when the flush of his victory would subside, probably before the cigarettes had been smoked and the money spent, and the sobering burden of daily life would regain possession of him. At that point, he would return to our ranks, that of simple village lads. Just

like us, he would have to resign himself once more to his fate, which largely consisted of an interminable struggle with time. Until the next bet, brawl or feast-day we would slog on together. Homework, chores, boredom. We did not know any better. Our lives did not revolve around choices or possibilities, but around the reality as it was, immovable like the concrete Lenin in the village square.

After we had placed our bets, Pavel became even more mysterious than before. We peeped at him from a distance at the school playground, as if the cause of his semi-blindness would manifest itself of its own accord if we stared at him long enough. He did not deign to look at us. He continued to read his book regardless, leaning against the side wall. Every so often, he would close it and note something in a red notebook. During the lessons, we indulged freely in all kinds of fantasies. We passed notes to each other with theories about his lost eye: it had been hit by a flying bolt during a car accident; one night, a beetle had crawled into his ear and gnawed its way out again through his eye socket; an alien had given him a going-over with an electric torture device. Our fantasies grew ever wilder. In our exercise books, we drew flying eyeballs and fountains of blood. Behind each other's backs, we pretended to stick pencils into our eyes. We created a world of perverse delight at Pavel's expense. His mutilation was a way to get through the endless-seeming schooldays. We didn't care that he did his own thing. Our aim was not to get a reaction from him. For now, we were satisfied with the secret pleasure we got from the bet. The minutes passed just that bit more quickly than usual, which was all that mattered.

*

Our teacher Miss Kravets, a grey-haired woman born on the day the October Revolution broke out, liked Pavel from the moment he first stepped into the classroom. I had never known her to like someone. To my way of thinking, she looked down on everyone and everything in her field of vision. During her good days, she tolerated us, like a gardener tolerates earthworms. At other times, she was simply unable to hide her dislike of us. By now we were able to recognise the signs of a bad mood: the corners of her mouth would sag, her face contorted in way that made it even more wrinkly than usual. The occasional groan would escape her throat, loud enough to convey her pitiful state even to the children at the back of the classroom. Everyone shrank. We would drone the texts and do our sums, but despite our efforts we knew that, invariably, an outburst would follow. The problem was not our performance, which was often below par, but our very existence. She would snarl at us at the drop of a hat, whether appropriate or not. If you had really gone too far in her eyes, she would lash out with a ruler, an iron slat with a vicious sharp edge.

Her affability towards Pavel was undoubtedly related to the impeccable uniform in which he entered the classroom that first day at school. The smartly tied neckerchief, his ironed trousers: he looked as neat as a pin. Perhaps the fact that he was an orphan also played a part although I had never been able to catch her having maternal feelings. Be that as it may, what definitely did help was that Pavel turned out to be an exemplary pupil. While we were still hunched over our exercise books, caught up in some kind of writing exercise, he had finished his long since, penned in a flowing script. As we were getting stuck in our sums, he would be staring into the distance. With increasing frequency, Kravets would hurl questions into the classroom knowing full well that we would not know what the answer was – with the exception of Pavel, of course. We had no idea how Lenin had come by his pseudonym, or what his most important works were called. We didn't know the difference between an imperative and a

conjunctive, how many litres of water went into a cubic metre, or on which day Marshal Zhukov had accepted the German surrender. But Pavel never disappointed her. In a calm tone, he would provide the right answer. In the silence that followed, our ignorance would surface remorselessly – and then Kravets would throw us a look halfway between contempt and self-satisfaction.

Less than a month after his arrival, Pavel induced Kravets to do something I had always thought impossible. One cloudy day in October, she was standing with her back to the class. She asked a question about the conjugation of a verb that she had just written out on the blackboard. Pavel answered without looking up, as, in his hands, he was holding a book. It's something I hadn't noticed before: him *reading* during a lesson. *On Architecture. Soviet Cities in the Making*. The others had only spotted it just now as well. A restless murmur filled the classroom. Kravets turned around with an irritated jerk. Silence immediately fell in the room. Her gaze shot back and forth to land on Pavel who was entirely oblivious to this, his eye gliding along the lines regardless. He turned the page with a calm gesture, the paper rustling softly. The class waited for Kravets' reaction with bated breath. Pavel had given the right answer just now, but that didn't alter the fact that he wasn't paying attention It occurred to me that the situation left her no other choice but to intervene – and exactly as I was expecting, that she would fly into a blind rage.

The unthinkable happened. Kravets' old, pale face, which was normally so wrinkled that it only emanated contempt, began to move. Her eyes screwed up; her teeth appeared from behind her thin lips. Wrinkles found new paths along her forehead and cheeks. The hairs on her chin moved sidewards and, from their depths, the corners of her mouth rose up, higher and higher, until they came to a rest right underneath her nasolabial folds, quivering with unaccustomedness. I could hardly believe it: *she was smiling*. For the first time in my life, I saw

Kravets exude mildness, or approval, or contentment – in any case something other than the contempt we knew so well. She looked like a different creature, completely unrecognisable. Anyhow, the moment lasted but a mere few seconds. Then Kravets took a deep breath. While lifting her gaze from Pavel and moving her eyes from one amazed face to the next, the folds of her skin returned to their usual position, spurred on by the misery of our existence.

*

A few weeks later, village life ground to a halt in *rasputitsa*, the cold muddy season that transformed roads into ditches and gave the sky the appearance of a giant concrete slab. The harvest was in, the fields lay barren. On the kolkhoz, production targets for the following season were raised. Evening dusk inched forward gradually. We swapped our shoes for felt-lined winter boots, the best footwear we had. After school, we stayed indoors more and more, often in the community centre, where I would play dominoes or cards with Igor, Fedir, Konstantin and Anatoli. We might also entertain ourselves with Kosmos, a board game that someone had once brought from Kyiv. Its box featured futuristic space ships and cosmonauts with shiny teeth. The game's instructions were missing, so we made up our own rules, afresh each time, without our sliding the pieces back-and-forth ever leading anywhere.

When it had not rained for a few days in a row, I might strike out with Igor, occasionally accompanied by Konstantin or Fedir. The cobbled streets would end 500 metres outside the village, so then we would trudge along the verge or across fallow fields. We would go to the old cement factory by the quarries that had since flooded. Positioned between the towering walls, we threw cobbles to try and smash the remaining windows. We hurled bricks at carrier pipes and wall tiles, that shattered with a thud. At other times, we would kindle a fire behind

the run-down *kulak* farm, or make the horses bolt by hitting them on their flanks with willow branches. We fought off boredom in all manner of ways, which nonetheless intensified with the passing of the weeks – the unremitting suffocating feeling only causing our pranks to increase in viciousness. One day, Igor and I stole a coil of steel wire from a barn at the kolkhoz. In the nearby forest, we gathered branches which were about one and half metres in length around each of which we wound a piece of wire. At the top of the branch, where the wire ended, we tied a loop. We then angled the branches against the oak trunks so that any animal that tried to climb up would get its head caught in the loop.

The following days, we rushed after school to the forest to check the traps. In a short time, we caught eight squirrels, as well as a stoat, already in its winter ermine coat. The animals had fallen off the branch and were calmly swaying back and forth in the wind. We roasted the two squirrels over the fire that we had laid in a pit in the forest floor. It provided barely anything to eat. We stuck later catches onto pointed sticks that we jammed into the ground along the village road, as the Huns had once done with their victims. It hardly made any difference. Boredom reigned supreme and would not allow itself to be dispelled.

When I returned home at twilight and passed Mrs Janovich's cottage, there was usually a light on in her sewing workshop. The curtains were invariably drawn, apart from on one occasion, on a dry but windy November evening. The old beech tree's branches were swaying in the wind. I stopped at the fence. Pavel was visible from the village road and was lying on his back on his mattress, his hands folded across his stomach. Above him was a bookshelf I had not spotted before. Placed between two bookends – carved wooden owls – were his books and red notebooks. He was staring at the ceiling without noticing me. I waited till nightfall and gingerly entered the front garden. I came to a halt about 50 centimetres from the window. He

still didn't see me. His pose, in its stateliness, reminded me of Lenin in the mausoleum. I studied his features: his Greek nose, black hair, jawline, ears. He was different, exotic almost, evidently not from here. I wondered what was going on in his head. His face did not reveal anything. Then, all of a sudden, he turned his head towards me, his blue eye fixing his gaze on me. I started and fell backwards onto the soggy lawn. I scrambled to my feet double-quick, shot out of the front garden. My trousers got caught on the fence and tore. His gaze had cut right through me. He had managed to do in a flash what I had failed to achieve: he had seen me, *really* seen me – while he remained as elusive as on the day I met him.

Excerpt translated from the Dutch by Suzanne Heukensfeldt Jansen