DMITRY AKULICH

A JOURNEY THROUGH TIME

A CONVERSATION WITH MYSELF



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DEDICATION

Once, my wife said something to me. She says a lot of things, honestly, but this one I actually wrote down in a notebook:

"How dare you have a gift for writing something and not share it with others? That's simply unfair!"

* * *

That's exactly how the idea was born — to gather everything I'd written and, one day, share it. Because, really, there was something unfair about it... Thank you for that push, my love!

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INTRODUCTION

As a child, I was struck by the idea in Back to the Future. It seemed to me that time travel was only possible with a car, a lightning strike, and a precise calculation of speed. Years later, I unexpectedly discovered that it does exist. It just looks completely different.

I wrote these poems over many years, one at a time, in different periods of my life. Each time, I thought I was writing about someone else — a woman, my brother, God, the crowd, the world around me. The poems were simply a way of saying what had built up inside.

Rereading them years later, I understood: almost all of them were addressed to me. Not to the person I was in the moment of writing. But to the person I had yet to become. **The young me, without knowing it, was leaving letters for himself.** And only now, after enough years lived, have I finally become able to read them.

So this book is not a collection of poems with the author's commentary. It's a meeting with the person I used to be. Every commentary here is not an explanation of the text. It's an attempt to understand the one who wrote it.

Behind these poems stands an ordinary life: family, my parents' divorce, relationships, the death of people close to me, moves — Poland, Vietnam — the

search for myself, music, faith, therapy, sport. All of it is in the book. But as background, not as plot. The real journey doesn't happen between countries.

I won't explain anything in advance. This book is built on suggestion rather than explanation, and the introduction is no exception. I'll only say this: what follows — poems and the conversations after them — is really one person talking to himself at different points in his life.

The first letter is already waiting.

CHAPTER 1

Two Words

I thought for a long time about where the end of a relationship actually begins. Not the loud fight. Not the affair. Not the slammed door. **It seemed to me that it all begins much earlier — the moment when the simplest words stop being said between two people.**

We lived together for many years. From the outside, everything looked ordinary enough: work, home, plans, trips, conversations. But inside, a feeling kept building that we were talking more and more about life, and less and less to each other.

A year passed after we separated. A whole year of almost no contact. And when we did talk, it was either sharp and cold, or through a lawyer.

I badly wanted to understand what had actually happened. Not to find who was guilty. Not to invent a tidy explanation. Just to work out the exact moment when two people stopped hearing each other. And the more I tried to answer that question, the more I kept returning to one thought: maybe, this whole time, we'd simply been missing two words. Not special ones. Not magic ones. Just the kind a person says not because they're obligated to, but because there's no longer any other way.

At the time, I thought the poem was about exactly that. Now I'm not so sure. But that's when it was

born.

— — —

Two Words

I want to say so much, so loudly,
but a hurricane of thoughts tore the words away,
flung them off in a furious whirlwind.
Only the two strongest were left standing.

Together they could level an avalanche, a tsunami,
a volcano's eruption, Armageddon itself,
and the world, held up on the backs of three great elephants,
turned upside down without another word.

They are sacred — not some trending slogan
that topped the charts of the most popular frequencies.
They are like two tears once let fall by God,
that will cleanse the souls of those who catch them.

— — —

For a long time I thought I understood these lines.

"Really?"

I didn't even realize right away who had asked the question.

"Of course."

"Then name the two words."

I smiled. Or rather — he smiled. The one who had written this poem once.

"Back then I thought I knew."

"And now?"

"Now I still know."

"So why won't you say them?"

"Because then the whole poem disappears."

He frowned.

"I don't follow."

"If I name them too soon, the reader stops looking for their own. And maybe their two words won't match mine at all."

He thought about this. The answer didn't seem to satisfy him.

"So there's no answer?"

"There is one. It just doesn't have to be the same for everyone."

We were both quiet for a while. Strange — I suddenly realized he was still looking at these lines as an attempt to save the relationship. And I already saw something else in them entirely.

"You know…"

"What?"

"I don't think you were writing to her at all."

"What do you mean?"

"You were writing to a person you yourself were losing at the time."

He looked at me for a long moment.

"Myself?"

"Yes."

"Then why didn't I see that?"

"Because some poems are born before you're able to understand them."

He lowered his eyes. Then asked quietly:

"So… this whole time I was trying to get her back?"

"Her too. But you were trying much harder to get yourself back."

Silence fell again.

"And still… what are they? The two words."

I looked at him and smiled unexpectedly.

"Not today."

"Why not?"

"Because if I name mine now, the reader might never get around to finding their own. And that would feel unfair."

When I wrote this poem, I thought it was dedicated to a relationship. Now I think differently. **Any relationship eventually becomes a conversation a person has with himself.** The other person can leave. Can stop loving you. Can never fully understand you. But the meeting with yourself doesn't end.

I never did ask him all the way to the end: if he named those two words right now, would I even recognize

them?

CHAPTER 2

M and M

Rereading The Master and Margarita once again, I closed the book with the familiar feeling: I think I've finally got it this time. I saw connections I'd missed before, understood the characters, put my finger on the main idea.

And almost immediately I remembered my grandmother. Once, after my first reading, I asked her what the book was really about. She lit a cigarette, settled in, looked up at the ceiling somewhere — and I knew right away there wouldn't be an answer in two sentences.

"I reread it every three, four, five years," she said. "And every time I think I've finally understood something. And then I read it again and realize I understand nothing."

That line stayed with me. Maybe that's why, years later, when it again seemed to me that I'd finally figured Bulgakov out, doubt appeared right alongside the certainty. Maybe each new understanding is just another layer? Maybe the book stays alive precisely because it never lets you put a final period on it?

At first I gave the poem the direct title — "The Master and Margarita," or even "Masters and Margaritas." Then I stripped almost everything away and left only two letters: "M and M." I wanted the title to explain nothing in advance. I wanted the reader to

enter the text without knowing what was hiding behind those letters, and only in the last line to receive a key — not a ready-made answer.

At the time, I was less interested in the novel's plot than in the people around it. Almost everyone had read the book in school or later. Many reread it, watched the adaptations, memorized the lines. At any dinner party there was always someone ready to show off their knowledge of Bulgakov. But it increasingly seemed to me that the fact of having read it had become more important than the reading itself. **The book had turned into a cultural badge, a proof of one's own education.** You could flaunt it without ever asking yourself why it was written at all, or what in it still had anything to do with you personally.

I was interested in Woland. Not as the devil, and not as the striking character played by the actor Oleg Basilashvili, but as the one who studies people closely, trying to find at least a few real persons among them. Not necessarily great, famous, or rich ones. Just people who understand their own nature, hear their calling, and follow it despite hardship, fear, and the possibility of sudden death.

The Master earns his personal peace not through social standing. He at least tried to create the thing he couldn't not create. He went through fear, rejection, ruin — but at some point still turned out to be a person who made a choice. And all around me a whole crop of new "masters" and "margaritas" had sprung up, happily trying on the beautiful names, but

barely capable of doing anything real.

Back then I still found it easier to look outward than inward. It was simpler to notice someone else's emptiness, someone else's hypocrisy, someone else's readiness to hide from what was happening behind books, screens, conversations, and the walls of their own apartment. But even then, I think I understood: if I placed myself outside the world I was describing, the poem would be a lie. I was part of it too. I could just as easily sit under my own roof, eat well, shut myself off from events, and hold forth about great literature. I could just as easily mistake acquaintance with a great work for proof of my own depth.

I didn't want to list everything that happens to us. It seemed enough to show the shut apartment, the monitor, the blinds, the route between kitchen and bathroom, the endless stream of whatever we're being fed. And then to ask the question. Not at the start — there it would have sounded too blunt. At the end, once the reader had settled into this world a little, and perhaps not immediately realized that the whole time, this was never about someone else.

That's how the poem came about.

— — —

M and M

For many now, life's more frightening than death,
and instead of angels, devils fill the air.
We draw our energy from a monitor's glow,

hiding from the sun behind blinds and drawn curtains.

These days the stale rot of our apartments
dictates our route: kitchen to the bathroom and back.
A steady stream of antisocial filth
gets served to us for breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

Well, fine then — a war. What, did we not earn it?
We've long since grown sick from all this hypocrisy.
And Basilashvili's hero has a point —
look how many Masters and Margaritas we've bred.

— — —

I reread these lines years later. They hadn't changed, but the voice that had written them now sounded like it was coming from somewhere far away. There was more certainty in it, more irritation, and, I'd say, more readiness to judge. But I couldn't call it a stranger's voice. More than that — some of its questions were still mine.

I only had to linger on the last line, and the conversation between us began.

"Did you really think you understood Bulgakov?"

"Yes. The way it usually goes after a good book: you close it and for a while you're sure you can see the whole thing at once."

"Didn't your grandmother's words stop you?"

"They did. Just not enough to give up the certainty. More like they left a crack in it."

"Is that why you cut the full title?"

"Not only that. I wanted the reader not to get Bulgakov's novel before reaching the last line. I wanted 'M and M' to be able to mean anything, at first."

"But you still lead him toward a specific idea."

"I do. I just don't want to drag him there by force."

"There's not much gentleness in this poem."

"Because I was angry."

"At people who show off the books they've read?"

"Them too."

"At yourself?"

Silence.

"Now I understand that yes. Otherwise the line about the war would have been dishonest."

"'Did we not earn it?' sounds dangerous. Like you're saying people deserve to die."

"No. I wasn't talking about specific people, and I wasn't justifying the war. It's about accumulated hypocrisy, indifference, the voluntary refusal to notice what's happening. About a world that pretends for a long time that nothing terrible is going on, and then acts surprised by the consequences."

"But you yourself were sitting in that world, under your own roof."

"Exactly. I wasn't standing above it. The fact that we park ourselves and eat well in the shade of our own roof — that's just the baseline. So the question applies to me too. Probably to me first, otherwise I'd just be appointing myself judge."

"Then why didn't you explain all this in the poem?"

"Because an explanation would have closed the question. I wanted the reader to arrive at it himself."

"And if he understands it differently?"

"Then he understands it differently. Maybe more deeply than I do. An author doesn't necessarily know everything he's written."

"Then why tell this story now at all?"

"Not to cancel someone else's reading. I can tell you where the text grew from. But I can't declare what it's obligated to become for another person."

"So you were looking for a reader willing to sit inside not-understanding for a while?"

"Yes. Not someone who'd agree with me right away. Someone who'd at least dare to think."

"Did you find one?"

"Almost no one."

"'Almost' isn't much."

"No. 'Almost' is already not 'no one.' To me, that's a huge success."

"And Woland? You said he was looking for real persons."

"That's what I thought at the time."

"And now?"

"Now I think it was me who was looking for them."

"Did you find any?"

"Sometimes. In others. Sometimes in myself. But every time I think I've finally found one, I remember my grandmother."

"And you realize you understand nothing?"

"I realize I'll have to reread it again."

This poem was born at the intersection of certainty and doubt. The younger me thought he'd understood Bulgakov and diagnosed the sickness of the world around him. The me of today notices something else: the text turned out to be aimed not only outward.

Knowing books, plots, and quotes doesn't make a person a personality. **A personality begins where what you've read turns into a question about your own life.**

I closed the book and put it back on the shelf — the same place it had stood all these years, just a little more crowded among the others now.

CHAPTER 3

Setting Out



Sometimes it seems to me that certain lines aren't born at the moment they're put down on paper. But earlier. Or later. You can remember the meaning of a poem for years and be completely sure you know where it came from. And then one day you start talking about it — and suddenly remember something entirely different.

That's exactly what happened with this text. At first it seemed to be about searching — about religions, about spirituality, about trying to work out what's hiding behind beautiful words and ready-made answers. But the longer we talked, the more clearly

memory pulled out a completely different day.

I was selling the apartment. We'd decided to leave for Vietnam. Almost the entire life we'd spent so long building was slowly disappearing from the house.

The first thing I took off the wall was the television. Big. Beautiful. Fifty-five inches. I'd once spent ages choosing it, hunting for the right model, screwing in the mount, measuring the height several times so it would hang perfectly level.

And then I suddenly caught myself thinking something simple: "What an idiot I am… I barely even watch it." I stood in the middle of the emptying apartment, looking at an object that had once seemed like such an important purchase. And I suddenly realized it was never about the television at all. **How many other things like this were in my life? How many decisions had I made simply because that's what people do?** How many goals had only ever been beautiful on the surface?

That was the first time I wanted to ask myself the question that later ended up in the poem. Not "what's right?" But "what's real?"

— — —

Setting Out

In the beauty of an illusory reality
we drift further and further from the truth,
caught between the same old extremes —
only wise thoughts can break through them.

Where do we find them? In the television's glow,
in the giant inches of its screen?
One goes to the pharmacist with a prescription,
another searches for some hidden corner

to sit and contemplate his world in peace,
hiding his eyes from the chaos outside.
We long for something like divine tenderness
and a little less foul-smelling pathos.

Play on, you drumming rains,
water over my taut nerves,
so the lying thoughts will leave me,
the ones poisoning the mind with fables.

Everyday, familiar feelings,
and the wishes that trail after them,
endless and indecent —
I can't bear to hear your moaning anymore!

Miles of untrodden paths lie ahead…
and here I am, still at my own front door.
All my doubts have burst like little balloons —
and once again, it's time to set out on the road…

— — —

I looked at that last line for a while. "Once again, it's time to set out on the road…"

"Did you go?"

I smiled. Or rather — he smiled.

"Of course."

"Were you scared?"

"Very."

"But you sold the apartment anyway."

"Yes."

"The television too?"

I laughed.

"You know, that's actually where the whole thing started, somehow."

He looked at me, surprised.

"With the television?"

"No. I thought so too, for a long time. It was really about the feeling that my life had come to resemble that television. Big. Beautiful. Properly mounted on the wall. And almost always switched off."

He was quiet for a while. Then he said softly:

"So the poem isn't about the road?"

"It is about the road. Just not the kind you drive on."

"Then what kind?"

I thought about it.

"The kind a person only commits to once he stops believing that outward order automatically means an inner life."

He nodded — for the first time in the whole conversation, without trying to argue. Then he asked:

"So — was it worth it?"

I looked past him, toward where Vietnam already was, Bali, the mountains, the sea, people I couldn't

have imagined back then, all the conversations still waiting to happen. And I smiled.

"If it weren't for that day… we wouldn't even be talking right now."

He smiled too. And for the first time, it seemed to me that he'd stopped looking for a final answer. Because he'd understood the main thing. **Sometimes it's enough to just take the television off the wall.**

For a long time I thought this poem was dedicated to the search for truth. Now I think differently. It was born the moment I stopped clinging to my old life.

The strangest part is that I didn't understand this while I was writing it. I understood it many years later, in the middle of a conversation about my own text. Maybe that's just how memory works. It doesn't hand everything over at once. It waits for the right question. And only then does it open a door you'd long since forgotten even existed.

CHAPTER 4

I Won't Be Afraid

A strange thing happens with memory: it almost never hands back the main thing first — it hands back the circumstances first. What comes back is the country, the move, the sold apartment, the new life in Vietnam, the fear of losing my job, the attempts to find work that might one day become a real profession. It seems like that was the important part. But talk a little longer, and it turns out all of that was just scenery. **The real conversation was happening somewhere else entirely — inside.**

At the time I thought a lot about my mistakes: about people I'd loved not the way I'd want to now, about casual relationships, about marijuana, which sometimes became a way of running not so much from the world as from myself, about endless attempts to find the answer somewhere out there. And it's strange — now, years later, I barely want to argue with that person anymore. I used to think he should have acted differently. Now I think differently: if it weren't for him, the me of today wouldn't exist either.

Maybe that's why this poem doesn't begin with a promise to become better, but with a promise to stop being afraid.

— — —

I Won't Be Afraid…

And let loneliness eat me alive —
I won't be afraid anymore.
I won't go on dragging this tiresome cross
mindlessly, like some camel.

I dream of understanding that alongside evil,
good moves on equal terms,
making sure that no one, after the fact,
scolds a comrade in anger.

I'd like to believe that a hundred gods
aren't watching with a smug little smile
at these mad and clumsy creatures,
and don't count them as a mistake.

I hope that someday I'll grow tired
of wishing for a permanent miracle.
And let loneliness eat me alive —
I won't be afraid anymore.

— — —

"There was one stanza I didn't understand for a long time."

He raised his head.

"Which one?"

"The one about good and evil."

"What about it?"

"I thought it was philosophical — that you were reasoning about how the world is built."

He smiled.

"And it turned out?"

I stayed quiet, then said it anyway:

"It's not about how the world is built at all. It's about how a person relates to himself."

He listened closely.

"Remember the line?

'Good moves on equal terms,

making sure that no one, after the fact,

scolds a comrade—'"

"I remember."

"I only just realized who that comrade is."

He didn't answer — he'd probably already guessed.

"It's the person you used to be. The one who made mistakes, who drank, who ran, who looked for love in all the wrong places, who was afraid."

I paused.

"You know what's strangest? I always thought good was supposed to fight evil. Now it seems more like… good is supposed to make sure nobody humiliates evil."

He frowned.

"I don't understand."

"I didn't either, before. If you start hating your own past, it doesn't disappear — it just stops talking to you. And that past is exactly what brought you here. Mistakes don't become right. But they stop being enemies."

He was quiet for a long time, then asked softly:

"So… you forgave yourself?"

I shook my head.

"No. That's too big a word. I'd say I stopped judging — because judgment doesn't change the past, it just makes the present heavier."

He thought a bit more, then suddenly smiled.

"So it turns out… there's really nothing left to be afraid of."

I smiled too.

"Almost. You can still be afraid. The main thing is not letting fear choose for you."

When I wrote this poem, I thought I was making myself a promise to become braver. Today I see something else in it: it's not about the absence of fear, but about refusing to declare war on yourself.

I still don't consider many of my actions to have been right, but I want less and less to pass sentence on the person who committed them — since it was precisely him, making mistake after mistake, who brought me step by step to where I am now.

Maybe that's why a thought I couldn't yet put into words at the time of writing feels especially dear to me today: good doesn't begin where evil has been destroyed. Good begins where even your own past is allowed to be part of the road.

Rereading this now, I notice that for the first time, I don't feel the need to add anything to it.

CHAPTER 5

Worlds

Sometimes it seems to me that memory is more honest than we are — not because it forgets nothing, but the opposite: it forgets almost everything. But sometimes it catches a lie before you've even finished telling it.

When I started trying to remember this poem, the first thing I said was: "Back then I didn't write much down…" And I interrupted myself almost immediately. No — not much. I wrote down almost nothing at all. I was lazy. I thought you could just carry thoughts around in your head, that they weren't going anywhere, that if they were truly important, they'd stay on their own. They don't.

That's exactly why this poem became one of the first I wrote down deliberately — not because I was confident in my abilities, but because for the first time I wanted to try treating words as a craft. Not for a book, not for the stage, not even for music. Though somewhere deep down, a strange thought was already alive: what if poetry was how I'd eventually arrive at music? Back then that sounded almost laughable. Today I smile, because between that thought and the three albums I'd eventually record lay many years that the person I was then knew nothing about yet.

But what surprises me most is something else. All my life, it was my brother who wrote poetry in our

family: he performed, entered competitions, and it was obvious to everyone that he was the poet. And I, it seems, grew the opposite way my whole life — not following someone, but pushing off from them, not out of a wish to prove something, but out of a wish to find my own way of seeing.

That's probably why the poem is called "Worlds." **Not because there are many worlds, but because there are endlessly many ways of seeing the very same one.**

— — —

Worlds

Why, nursing a grudge against the world,
do we hide ourselves away in prisons of grief?
Drowning in fear, in pain, in regret,
we rub our hope thin, straight through to holes,

turning the soul, in the process, into cheese.
We spend our allotted time in torment,
losing ourselves in foolish relationships,
smearing the air with our own recklessness.

And people become labels — this one's untalented,
that one's an idol.
This one's lost himself in pleasures.
Another, stuck in endless reconciliations —
a donor on the outside, a vampire within.

We rage in indulgence, blaming it all on excess,
giving in to desire out of our own prejudice.
And forever drowning in envy and insult,
you inevitably sink down to your lowest point.

Don't forget — you're the commander here!
Defend your honor in battle,
don't stain it hiding in the armory.
Let your uniform hang in the front hall, not the closet.

In the fog of wars, don't lose your bearings,
and this body of yours, torn by shrapnel —
save it. It'll be needed to help save
others. They need a kind guide.

Notice: a guide, not a guard!
Our definitions have gotten tangled all around.
No wonder our own musings
lead us, down a stranger's road, into someone else's monastery.

We search for the elixir of eternal life —
all for nothing, we spend our life in exile from ourselves.
Death is not our enemy, and in peace
we trade this world for another.

— — —

I stared at the title for a while longer.

"Why 'Worlds,' specifically?"

He answered right away. As if the question were too simple.

"Because there are many worlds."

I shook my head.

"No."

He looked surprised.

"What do you mean, no?"

"Remember what you just said? You repeated the same idea several times. 'A way of seeing.' 'A way of choosing.' 'A way of living.' 'The path runs from the inside out.' You were talking about one thing the whole time."

He thought about it. For what seemed like the first time, he was really listening.

"Meaning?"

"Worlds aren't places. They're ways of existing. One person can live ten different lives without ever moving once. And another can travel halfway around the planet without ever once leaving his own fear."

He was quiet. Then, unexpectedly, he smiled.

"Interesting… I didn't even understand that myself, back then."

"Of course. Otherwise you wouldn't have written this."

I pointed at the line: "Don't forget — you're the commander here!"

He laughed.

"Yeah… I remember. I really was writing that to myself, so I'd read it again later."

"Exactly. It wasn't a slogan. It was an instruction."

He fell quiet again. Then said softly:

"You know… back then I thought that one day I'd figure everything out, and I'd be able to lead others."

I nodded.

"I remember."

"It sounds funny now."

"Why?"

"Because now I understand so much less."

I couldn't help smiling.

"No. You understand more. You've just stopped confusing understanding with certainty."

He looked at me for a long time. Then suddenly asked:

"So… these poems weren't really needed by anyone else?"

I shook my head.

"Others too. But you first. You were leaving yourself instructions. You were so afraid of forgetting what you'd only just begun to understand. And you know… some of them actually worked."

He didn't answer. He just looked at the title again. And it seemed to me that, for the first time, he saw it the same way I see it today.

Once, it seemed to me that this poem was about different people. Today I think differently: it's about one person who keeps changing his own way of seeing, again and again.

Maybe that's why memory opened this conversation with a small lie: "I didn't write much down." No — I wrote down almost nothing. And it was the exact moment I admitted that honestly that the memories started opening up on their own.

Now it seems to me that this applies to more than just memory. **Any real movement begins the same way: not when a person finds the right answer, but when he stops defending the wrong one.**

Outside, at that exact moment, it was just an ordinary evening — nothing remarkable about it. Maybe that's precisely why I'll remember it.

CHAPTER 6

Genius of Freedom

This was probably the first poem I ever wrote consciously — not a sketch, not a stray thought, not four lines that would later get lost. Before this, I'd written down almost nothing. And maybe it's fitting that the first text I actually saw through to the end wasn't about me, but about my brother.

I was fifteen. Our parents had just finally split up after almost twenty years of a strange marriage — fights, blowups, breakups, reunions. By then my mother and I were living together, and my brother lived apart. Sometimes he'd visit. Sometimes he'd vanish for a long time.

That evening he called: "I'll be there soon, kid." He never showed up. Later the phone rang again — a police officer, asking me questions. I barely understood any of it, but I could feel very clearly that every word might change something, so I answered carefully. In the morning my brother turned up at home — beaten up, exhausted.

I remember one other strange detail. The night before, I'd burned him a CD — this was back when CD players still existed — I'd spent ages picking the songs, wanting to do something nice for him. During his arrest, the player got smashed, I think. Or the disc did. It doesn't matter much anymore. What matters is this: he went to sleep, and I sat down to write.

It's strange rereading this today — twenty years have passed, and only six months ago we'd essentially stopped speaking. Completely. But back then things were different. I admired him and completely failed to understand him at the same time. He wrote poetry, wasn't lazy about it, performed, won things — people liked what he made. And I kept feeling like something was missing. Not talent. Not freedom. Depth. I couldn't put that word into words back then — I could just feel the difference between a person who writes to be heard, **and a person who writes to hear himself.** Maybe I was wrong — today I wouldn't say it so confidently.

But that was the first time I wanted to try it myself. Not to be better than my brother, not to prove anything to him, but to walk my own road.

Something makes me laugh now — a small accident of language. My whole life I've said that I grew "by contrast" — from the opposite, ot obratnogo, pushing against rather than following. And only today did I hear it differently: hidden right inside that word obratnogo — ob-BRAT-nogo — sits brat. Brother. I suppose that's really true. So much in me grew not despite my brother, and not thanks to him, but alongside him. He showed one way a life could be lived. I went looking for another. And maybe that's exactly why we still matter so much to each other, even though our roads stopped running together a long time ago.

— — —

A crumpled ball thrown into the flame —
once a sheet of paper, smooth, clean, good to look at.
On it, a man had laid out his thoughts.

A thought as pure as a drop of dew,
plain words that jar the mind.
The brain breaks through any barrier.
The heart has learned the bitterness of loss.

Memory sways with recollection —
good deeds or bad ones, it doesn't matter.
He remembered the joys of years already lived,
pulled out a pack of his favorite cigarettes.

His joys, his sorrows, all have their reasons.
Someone was born, someone got locked away…
Out of a hundred people, he's the one — a moth!
A torrent of restless life pounding through his veins.

He loved walking roads that climbed toward the sky,
staring into a friend's bright eyes.
He loved to read deep in the night,
alone with himself.

He loved running through puddles in the rain.
He loved to sing, even with no one listening.
He never let anyone teach him a thing.
And who's the judge here, anyway? The voice of his own mind spoke loudest.

His will gave him no peace.
Adrenaline, stronger than alcohol.
Don't try to cage plain sense with rules —
he's got his own code of laws inside his head.

He needs no paradise, no exotic escape.
No drug can replace a life like this.
You cannot change a man's true nature!
He's a moth — the goddamn genius of freedom!

— — —

I stayed quiet for a while. Then I asked anyway:

"Do you really think he's missing depth?"

He shrugged.

"That's how it seems to me."

"And if you're wrong?"

He thought about that. For a long time.

"Then… I guess I didn't write this poem about him."

"Then who?"

He looked at me. It seemed, for the first time, like he genuinely didn't know the answer.

I smiled.

"About yourself. About the person you're so afraid of becoming one day."

He was quiet. Then said softly:

"You know… I keep trying to grow by contrast. From the opposite."

I couldn't help myself.

"Do you hear it?"

He frowned.

"Hear what?"

"Ob… brat… nogo. Your brother's sitting right inside that word."

For a few seconds he just looked at me. Then he suddenly burst out laughing.

"Damn… I never noticed that."

"I don't think anyone has."

He turned serious again.

"Will he change?"

I was quiet for a long time.

"Yes."

"Will we be friends?"

The silence stretched even longer. It seemed like he'd already worked out the answer himself.

"So… it won't work out?"

I shook my head.

"It will. Just not at all the way you're picturing it right now. He'll always be your brother. But one day you'll have to let him go. Not because you'll stop loving him, but because you'll understand: **you can't live someone else's life better than they can.**"

He thought about that for a moment, then suddenly asked if I wanted some tea — as if we'd just been talking about the weather.

CHAPTER 7

The Whys

Sometimes a person doesn't go back to where he wants to live. He goes back to where he can try to understand why he can't keep living the way he used to.

By that point, my wife and I hadn't spoken in almost a year, and when we did, it was either harsh or through a lawyer. Too much had happened in that year. The apartment that used to be ours slowly became just mine — not because I'd won some argument, but because I'd gone through banks, loans, paperwork, payments, and ended up handing over a huge amount of money, immediately landing myself in serious debt. I couldn't live in that apartment. I rented another one. Walls, I think, remember the people who lived in them a little too well — sometimes you walk back into a room and find the air still holding a conversation that ended long ago.

But one day I went back anyway. Not really to live there — more to look for some corner from which I could start finding my way back. I walked through the apartment, looked at familiar things, and asked myself questions. Why don't we love the people who are right there beside us? Why do we go looking for someone else out there, as if a new person would automatically bring a new life? Why does the outer shell so easily become more important than the person who stayed loyal to our shared dreams?

Maybe that was the first time a simple, unpleasant thought really landed: a new person means the same problems, if the same old you moves into the new relationship along with them.

During that period I'd almost stopped dreaming. Every idea felt unrealistic. I didn't really understand where I was, who I was, or what I was even capable of doing next, even though rationally I knew: I had knowledge, experience, a profession, the ability to learn and work — I wasn't any less capable than someone who'd already done the thing I was only thinking about. But knowing that in your head is one thing. Believing it exactly when you need to is another.

The debt slowly turned life into a repeating loop: work, home, salary, debt, work, home. The noise of money really did drown out everything else — not because money was my main value, but the opposite: its constant shortage turned it into the loudest sound in my life. It knocked at night, wouldn't let me sleep, turned every next day into a continuation of the one before.

Sometimes I was literally sick with myself. This kept happening to me later too: before an important decision, my body seemed to understand, ahead of my mind, that I couldn't keep living the old way any longer. Once I had to pull the car over — I threw up right onto the side window. Another time my body reacted the same way, as if it were physically trying

to force out something I'd spent too long unable to say or decide.

But the hardest part turned out to be not the loneliness, not the money, not the uncertainty. Slowly I began to understand how indifferent I'd been to what was happening with my wife. Not to everything, but to a lot — to her pain, her tears, the states she was in that I didn't want to see, the thoughts and needs that were inconvenient for me, uninteresting, or simply felt secondary.

It's very easy to say that both people are to blame. It's much harder to see exactly what part you played in it. It started to seem to me that things might have been even worse for her, because it was she who first found the courage to admit: this can't go on. I wasn't turning her into the one who was right and myself into the guilty one. I was simply noticing my own blind spot for the first time.

We often think we're helping someone when we try to solve all their problems for them. But sometimes help looks different. Sometimes it means honestly reflecting back to a person what's happening to them. Sometimes it means finally hearing what they've been saying for a long time. And sometimes it just means not looking away.

During that period I wanted to rely less on anything bright, elevated, or proper. My faith in God seemed to dim — not disappear completely, but stop being something I could confidently lean on. I wanted to return to something low, physical, animal — if only

because it felt real.

And yet, right at the very end of the poem, hope remained. I didn't know yet that a year later we'd meet again, both broken. We wouldn't get divorced. We wouldn't restore our old relationship. We'd start building a different one. And many years later, we'd still be together. But the man walking through that empty apartment couldn't have known any of that. All he could do was ask.

— — —

The Whys

Whatever's going on in my own world,
I don't explain it to anyone at all.
I wander back and forth through my apartment
muttering to myself, like some hoopoe bird: "Why?"

But why don't we love the ones right beside us,
while we keep hunting for someone else out there —
someone dressed in Prada, or with a nicer figure,
instead of the one who stayed loyal to our shared dreams?

But why do we sometimes stop believing in ourselves,
more often exactly when we need it most?
You're no dumber than some Jim Carrey character,
and if you don't agree with that — well, too bad.

But why do we stay so indifferent
to someone else's trouble, their smiles, their

thoughts, their needs?
Our clever, burnt-out little souls, it seems,
need more of a rush — helping is just so boring.

But why does the noise of money drown out the heart's own notes,
knocking through the night till you can't rest at all?
Who's there? A hundred grams of sweat, and you,
gagging through the spasms, can't fall back asleep.

But why, oh why are we all such why-askers,
raging on and on while God tells us not to?
The sky shrinks small — a gift for a handful of martyrs,
but the ones who keep their faith, he won't leave empty-handed.

— — —

I reread the last stanza again.

"Did you really believe everything could be brought back?"

He didn't immediately understand what I meant.

"Bring back what?"

"Her."

"Yes."

"And the relationship you had before?"

He thought about it.

"That too, probably."

"That part, specifically, couldn't be brought back."

He looked at me warily.

"So we do end up getting divorced?"

I shook my head.

"No."

He said nothing.

"Do we meet again?"

"Yes."

"How long from now?"

"About a year."

"Will she wait for me?"

"No. And you won't wait either. You'll both just be trying to somehow live."

"So what happens then?"

I searched for words for a while.

"You'll see each other broken. Without the usual need to prove who was right. Without the old certainty that the problem was only ever the other person."

"And it works out?"

"Not right away. And not the way you're picturing it right now."

"Then how?"

"You won't fix the old thing. You'll start building a new one."

He looked at me for a while, as if trying to decide whether to feel relieved or afraid.

"Are we still together?"

"Yes."

"Really?"

"Really."

"And what's it like between us?"

I smiled.

"Completely different."

He let out a breath. I think he'd only just noticed he'd barely been breathing this whole time.

"So the hope at the end wasn't pointless?"

"It wasn't pointless. But you were a little wrong to think faith means being sure of a good outcome."

"Then what does it mean?"

"Sometimes it just means refusing to put a period at the end too early."

He looked at the poem again.

"Why do I keep asking 'why'?"

"Because you don't yet know which question actually matters."

"And you do now?"

"Maybe."

He waited.

"Not 'why did she leave.' Not 'why do I feel so awful.' Not even 'why don't we love the ones who are right beside us.'"

"Then which one?"

"Why didn't I see the person next to me until she was gone?"

He lowered his eyes.

"That makes it sound like it's all my fault."

"No. You can assign blame to both people and call it a day. But understanding doesn't start where the blame gets divided up. It starts where each person sees their own part in it."

"Will she see hers?"

"I think so."

"Will I?"

"You've already started. Otherwise this poem wouldn't exist."

He was quiet for a moment. Then suddenly asked:

"Will Marina be happy?"

I couldn't answer right away.

"I don't know if a person can ever become happy once and for all. **But I know that years from now, you'll still say her name like there's an entire life standing behind it.**"

"Marina…"

"Yes. Marina."

CHAPTER 8

You



[Translator's note: Russian has two forms of "you" — the formal, capitalized Вы and the informal, familiar ты. This chapter turns entirely on the shift from one to the other. In this translation, capitalized "You" stands for the formal Вы, and lowercase "you" stands for the informal ты.]

Sometimes it seems like you can break in only one place — that a failure in love will stay contained inside the relationship with one person, while friendship, work, new acquaintances, everything else, will keep existing as before. **But a person doesn't have several separate psyches:** there isn't one,

damaged, that deals with your wife, and another, completely untouched, reserved for everyone else. There's one psyche. And if something collapses inside it, the cracks gradually spread in every direction.

When we moved to Vietnam, things outwardly started coming together: a new country, a new city, new people. Daily life settled in, and things started moving forward again. My wife and I tried to rebuild our relationship. But everything we hadn't yet managed to understand or change moved to the new country right along with us — old fears, old ways of defending ourselves, old grievances, and my increasingly obvious inability to trust people.

I started reconsidering not just my relationship with my wife, but with friends, with people close to me, with everyone I'd considered mine, everyone I'd spent years trying to be good for. I've always had this need in me — to be liked, to support, to help, to never cause anyone extra trouble. Underneath it, probably, was an underloved child who'd once decided that love had to be earned through convenience.

After everything I'd been through, people started wearing me out. Sometimes I didn't like how my wife treated me in front of others. Sometimes other people themselves irritated me, even when they weren't doing anything that could fully explain it. And at some point I realized I was pushing my own selfishness back up to the surface again.

I wanted to find out what I actually felt. Not to prove something to her, not to write a beautiful

confession, not to convince myself that the relationship absolutely had to be saved. Just to get to the truth.

Writing had always been a kind of therapy for me. So I started descending into myself — deeper, still deeper, to a place I almost never go myself and certainly never let anyone else into. I didn't know what I'd find. I wasn't even sure love still existed. After years of living together, it's very easy to mistake habit for feeling, fear of loneliness for devotion, dependency for closeness, a shared past for a sufficient reason to keep going. I wanted to understand whether there was still something alive underneath all those layers.

And then the lines started coming, one after another. I didn't recognize my own language: it seemed to have arrived from somewhere in the nineteenth century — elevated, ceremonious, almost theatrical. "You," "your servant," a scaffold, the eternal snows of Siberia, the sword of Damocles. It wasn't a deliberate stylization. The feeling was simply so large that it chose an unfamiliar voice for itself.

At first, that voice was almost reverent. I looked at my wife like a stranger I'd just met, like someone I still had to get to know. Maybe that's exactly why the poem keeps saying "You" the whole way through — not only out of respect. There really was a distance between us. We were close and almost strangers at the same time. I admired her, filled myself up with her presence, and even in her absence felt like I kept

moving because of her. And at the same time I was confessing: "You don't know me." Though, honestly, I didn't know myself back then either — I couldn't explain exactly what I was feeling, or why I was willing to follow that one note of feeling so far.

But gradually the lofty confession came back down to earth — to her fears, her uncertainty, her flashes of temper, her pain, to everything she'd worked up the courage to lay bare in front of me after we found our way back to each other. Not just tell me about — bare, expose, show me things that had previously been protected, hidden, or not even noticed by her.

That's when I really was facing a choice: to keep going or to leave, to stay not only with the woman I could admire, but with her fears, her weaknesses, her sharpness, her inner wounds. I decided to stay. Not to save her, not to heal her single-handedly, not to make her happy in her place — although in the poem itself I still talk about it far more confidently than that. I decided to stay close and work through it together. But I still left the final word to her.

For almost the entire poem, I address her as "You." Only in the very last line does "you" appear. Not as a claim of ownership — as a step closer. And even there, I don't say: "Be with me." I leave her the right to decide.

Maybe that's exactly why the earlier title — "Catching Sight of You, I Go Mute" — started to feel like it was explaining too much. I stripped almost everything away and left one word: "You." Compact, a

little mysterious, and precise in the way it captures the distance between two people who've already lived most of their lives together, but are only now truly starting to get to know each other.

— — —

You

Catching sight of You, I go mute,
listening only to the sound of Your voice.
What torment had fate kept in store,
to arrive without warning, without a knock?

You don't know me — though Your servant here
hasn't managed to understand himself one bit, either.
Only this one aching note of feeling,
though I've never once even wet my boot in love,

I'm ready to dive headfirst into a swamp for it,
into exile, into the eternal snows of Siberia.
What am I saying — give my life for one glance from the scaffold…
Perhaps I'm not rich, not famous, like some other man,

but You, only You, I've taken in deeper than the soul…
Only yesterday the universe still seemed so vast to me.
I'll gather every star for You with a ladle.
I'll stitch shut the gaping Black Hole.

You're right, yes — now I truly can do anything.
I'll bear Your fear, even if You're prone to tears,
a little quick-tempered, cutting straight to the bone —
well then, I need no other executioner.

I'm ready to put my head under Your sword of Damocles…
just to listen to Your uncertain voice,
to be its endless, tireless hero,
and let every tender glance come to me only through battle.

You'll see for Yourself — I'm impossibly strong,
and no doubt this is exactly what I was born for:
to inspire You with my iron will,
and to heal Your very being of its aching pains,

and to faithfully guard Your inner peace,
for as long as I have strength and breath left in me.
My intentions are deadly serious,
and here, on my knees, I beg You in tears:

allow me to carry out everything fate has decreed…
if only you decide to be with me.

— — —

I lingered on the last line.

"Why 'you,' suddenly, right there?"

He looked at me as if the answer were obvious.

"Because she's getting closer."

"Just that?"

He read the line again.

"What else would it be?"

"Before that, you say 'You' the entire time. You admire her, serve her, promise to gather stars, stitch shut a Black Hole, endure her fear, heal her pain, guard her inner peace."

"Yes."

"And then you stop promising, and leave the decision to her."

He thought about it.

"'If only you decide…'"

"Exactly."

"So — I'm not demanding that she stay?"

"No. And that's probably the most mature line in the whole poem."

He smirked.

"And everything else is immature?"

"Not all of it. But in places you're very sure you're capable of handling her life better than she can."

"I want to help."

"I know."

"Is that a bad thing?"

"No. But helping and rescuing aren't the same thing."

He frowned.

"I'm not leaving her on her own."

"You don't need to. You just won't be able to stitch shut every one of her Black Holes, or heal everything that hurts with sheer iron will, or be some inexhaustible hero at all times."

"Then what should I do?"

"Be there. Not instead of her — beside her."

He was quiet for a moment.

"That sounds like less."

"It's actually much more. You can rescue a person inside your own imagination. Staying present with the real one is far harder."

He looked at the text again.

"But I really am ready for anything."

"I believe you."

"And you?"

I didn't answer right away.

"No."

He looked surprised.

"You don't love her anymore?"

"I do. But now I understand that 'ready for anything' is a dangerous phrase. Sometimes what's hiding underneath it is a readiness to disappear yourself."

"Doesn't love demand sacrifice, though?"

"Sometimes. But not constant self-destruction. Otherwise, one day, you'll find yourself trying to be good for everyone again, and there'll be no one left inside."

He looked at me closely.

"Is this about people starting to get on your nerves?"

"That too. I thought I'd grown disillusioned with everyone around me. Then I understood: I don't have several separate psyches. The part of me that stopped trusting my wife couldn't just step out of the room when I met other people and hand things over to some healthy version of myself."

"So after our breakup, I'll stop trusting everyone?"

"For a while — almost, yes."

"Her too?"

"Her especially."

He lowered his eyes.

"Then why am I writing all this?"

"To check whether there's still something real underneath the distrust."

"Is there?"

"Yes."

He let out a breath, then almost immediately asked another question:

"Is that enough?"

"One feeling alone — no."

He raised his head.

"What else is missing?"

"Work. Honesty. Boundaries. The ability to see the other person not just as a beautiful tree that's grown up inside you, but as a separate human being with the

right to grow in their own direction."

He was quiet for a while.

"Will we make it?"

"Not with everything. With each other — so far, yes."

"Is she still with me?"

"Yes."

"Because I did everything I promised in this poem?"

I smiled.

"No. Because you both gradually let go of the need to live up to those promises."

He looked at the last line again.

"Did she decide?"

"Yes."

"Did I?"

"You did too."

"To do what?"

"Not just to be with her. To get to know her again, and let her get to know you again too."

He ran his finger along the title.

"'You'…"

"Yes."

"When do we finally switch to 'you' for good?"

"Probably never entirely. There will always be something unknown left in every person close to you. **And maybe that's exactly why love doesn't end the moment it starts to feel like you know**

everything about each other."

He ran his finger along the word "You" once more — not the way you touch a title anymore, but the way you touch something alive.

CHAPTER 9

An Invitation to Visit



This was probably the first poem where I wanted not to work through another round of pain, but to actually climb out of it.

By that point I'd already spent a good long while digging through the past — through relationships, family, friendship, my own mistakes, through everything that had happened before and led me exactly here. Examining yourself is necessary. But at some point even the most honest self-examination can turn into a process for its own sake. You can flip through the same events endlessly, look for new causes, assign blame, justify, accuse, forgive again —

and still end up standing in the same spot.

I think that's when something inside me finally said, clearly enough: "All right, enough already." What would one more lap around it give me? One more return to an old grievance? One more argument about who did what wrong, and when, and why?

That didn't mean the past had turned bad and had to be thrown out. On the contrary — there was a lot of good in it. The sun shone, air filled my lungs, people I loved were nearby. There was joy, love, travel, discovery — and ways of living that had genuinely helped once. I didn't want to declare all of that a mistake. **I simply started feeling that whatever had once carried me was no longer working.** You can respect the road that brought you here, and still one day admit you don't want to keep walking down it.

It's like smoking. I smoked for ten years — and then quit. You don't have to curse all ten years every single morning. You can just say: "Yes, that happened. But today I'm choosing something else."

Maybe that's why the past in this poem doesn't rot or haunt me. It leaves behind sunlit glimmers — beautiful reflections of something already finished. And I'm not complaining. Everything really was wonderful. But enough. Time to move on.

For a move like that, I needed a declaration — something simple, almost a slogan, something I could say to myself: "As of today, I don't believe in you

anymore." I don't believe in ignorance, pride, arrogance, conceit. Not because I'd finally defeated them in myself. More because I'd stopped accepting them as a fixed, unchangeable part of who I was. I decided to show them the door. But even that felt insufficient. I wanted to put them in a bottle and launch them into the blue sea.

At the time, we were still living in Poland. We talked a lot about moving, dreamed of somewhere warm, somewhere with the sea, a completely different picture in front of our eyes. I wanted to believe that a new space could change not just my surroundings, but the way I saw. Of course, now I understand: a move by itself fixes nothing — a person carries himself along wherever he goes. But a new place can disrupt a familiar stillness, force you to see things again that you'd long since stopped noticing at home. And I was ready to keep working, even if untangling the old causes of my grief took an entire lifetime.

A bonfire appeared in the poem, up on the roof of the world. I wanted to make peace with myself: to burn the fear of failure, the anger at myself for not starting sooner, the scum built up from everything left undone, unsaid, missed. And then scatter the ashes from the height of the Pamirs.

I'd always dreamed of hiking in the mountains, of seeing the Himalayas, of visiting Nepal. Back then, those were only pictures in my head. Today I've already been to the Himalayas twice, walked a lot

through the mountains of Asia, and quite recently came down off the Rinjani volcano on the island of Lombok. The man who wrote this poem in Poland hadn't seen any of that yet. All he could do was hope that one day he'd hear the invitation. Today I can answer him: I heard it.

— — —

An Invitation to Visit

What's the point of all these arguments over the past?
What's the point of all this stiff, formal shouting?
I'll start from today — tomorrow will be better,
where the sun of the past will leave behind its glimmers.

And I won't complain — everything really was wonderful.
I'll gladly show you the door:
ignorance, pride, arrogance, conceit.
From today on, I don't believe in you anymore!

I'll seal you in a bottle and cast you into the blue sea,
where ships go down into its depths.
Let the depths of grief drown there in the sea,
let me grow old, my face lined with wrinkles.

I'll light a bonfire on the roof of the World.
I'll burn the fear of failure and the scum of anger.
I'll scatter the ashes from the height of the Pamirs.
I'll hear the Universe's invitation to come visit.

— — —

I lingered again on the last two lines.

"So?"

He looked at me, not understanding the question.

"Did it invite you?"

"Who?"

"The Universe."

He smiled.

"Not yet."

"It will."

"How do you know?"

"Because I've already been to the place you're only just about to head toward."

He was quiet for a moment.

"To the Pamirs?"

"No. Haven't made it there yet. But I've been to the Himalayas twice."

"Really?"

"Really."

"What about the sea?"

"There'll be plenty of that too. So much that one day you'll be sitting on an island, your feet buried in the sand, remembering how you once sent your past out to sea in a bottle."

He laughed.

"You talk so nicely."

"You're the one who wrote it nicely. I just got to confirm that some of your pictures actually exist."

"So it all worked out?"

I thought about it.

"What exactly?"

"Well… did I show them the door? Ignorance, pride, arrogance, conceit?"

"No."

He looked visibly disappointed.

"Then what are we even talking about?"

"They come back from time to time. Sometimes they knock. Sometimes they just walk in without permission. Sometimes I only notice them once they've already settled in and made themselves at home."

"So you can't actually throw any part of yourself away?"

"I don't know. But right now it seems to me that it's not enough to show some part of yourself the door and declare you don't believe in it anymore. You also need to understand why it showed up in the first place."

"More digging?"

"Yes. Just not endlessly."

"Where's the line?"

"Probably wherever reflection stops helping you take the next step."

He looked at the first line.

"'What's the point of all these arguments over the past…'"

"Exactly. You'd already felt that line back then. You just couldn't explain it yet — you were tired of turning pain into a full-time job."

"So I just decided to stop suffering?"

"No. You can't decide that. You decided to stop making suffering the only proof of depth."

He thought about it.

"Will the past really leave only glimmers behind?"

"Not only. There'll be scars too. Habits. Fears. People you'll remember in completely different ways depending on the day. But there'll be light as well. And in time you'll stop thinking you have to pick just one version: either everything was wonderful, or everything was terrible."

"So which was it?"

"Both, at different times. And all of it was your life."

He reread the third stanza.

"Why is there depth twice? 'Where ships go down into its depths. Let the depths of grief drown there…'"

"I think I just really wanted to drown everything at once."

I smiled.

"Turns out it knows how to swim."

"Grief does?"

"Especially grief. You can't always manage to drown it. But sometimes it stops being an ocean and turns into ordinary water you can wade through."

He looked at me, unconvinced.

"Do you always talk like this now?"

"Unfortunately, sometimes even worse."

He laughed.

"Fine. What about the bonfire? Did you light it?"

For a moment, mountains rose in front of my eyes — tents, cold nights, the slopes of Rinjani, the distant peaks of the Himalayas.

"More than one. And not only on the roof of the world."

"Did the fear of failure burn away?"

"No. But now I wait less often for it to disappear before I start."

"What about the anger?"

"Sometimes it's exactly what helps me understand it's time to change something."

"So maybe that shouldn't have been burned either?"

"Maybe only the scum should have burned. The fire itself was worth keeping."

He repeated softly:

"An invitation to visit…"

"Yes."

"So what kind of invitation did it turn out to be?"

I looked at him.

"Not a ticket to one specific place. More like permission to leave the house."

"Who gave it to you?"

"You did. Yourself."

"Then why attribute it to the Universe?"

"Because sometimes your own voice feels too small to be believed. So a person calls it the Universe instead."

He thought for a moment, then asked:

"Will I be happy?"

"Sometimes."

"And will tomorrow really be better?"

"Sometimes worse."

He winced.

"Great invitation."

"At least it's a real one."

"And still — would you agree to go through all of it again?"

I thought of the sold apartment, the move, Vietnam, the sea, the mountains, the people I never would have met if I'd stayed where I was, the mistakes I could have avoided, and the discoveries that never would have happened without them.

"Yes."

"Even knowing that ignorance, pride, arrogance, and conceit will come back?"

"At least now I know where the door is."

He smiled.

"So it all worked out?"

"No. It's all still happening. And honestly, that's even better."

CHAPTER 10

Fears

Sometimes a real thought doesn't need a special place. It doesn't need a monastery, a mountain peak, a library full of the books of wise men. Sometimes a parking lot outside a store is enough.

We were practicing driving at the time. We were standing in the parking lot when a young man came up to us. A conversation started. It turned out before long that he lived on the street. I don't remember anything especially tragic about him — he didn't come across as someone trying to provoke pity or beg to be rescued on the spot. We just talked.

That turned out not to be our only meeting. Some time later we called each other again, then again. We discussed things. He told me that guys would gather near one of the big supermarkets, and you could bring them things you didn't need anymore — old clothes, food. For some reason I wanted to feed them. I ordered a few pizzas, drove to another part of town, and brought them over. I tried not to give money — it seemed to me that wouldn't solve anything, and might just let everything continue exactly as it was, a little longer. I wanted to help differently: feed them, bring them things, talk. Not pretend I was about to fix someone else's life, just take a small part in it.

Before this, meeting a homeless person would probably have triggered pity in me first — a sense of injustice, a wish to immediately pull the person out of

their situation. But here everything was different. He didn't come across as someone especially tormented by his own life. Dirty, sometimes hungry, without an apartment, outside the usual structure of society — and yet he carried himself completely freely. He could say what he thought. He didn't seem particularly worried about what impression he made, who might say what about him, where he'd sleep that night, or how well his way of living matched other people's ideas of normal.

And I had almost every comfort of civilization: a home, a job, food, clothes, the ability to buy things, plan, and arrange my life. But inside, I didn't feel free. What struck me was exactly this inverted order. We're taught to pity the man on the street. And I suddenly found something in him worth envying. Not his homelessness. Not the hunger. Not the dirty clothes. **The absence of certain fears that had complete control over me.**

One day I went into a store to buy food and supplies for those guys. The cashier was packing items into bags. Around me, people hurried about their business: someone added gum to their purchase, someone picked something up near the register, someone got anxious about the line. A huge mass of people moved continuously back and forth. In a few seconds, I too was supposed to disappear back into that mass.

I closed my eyes. Just for a moment. And the seconds unexpectedly stretched out longer than an

entire day. I felt relief. As if, among the registers, the bags, the price tags, and everyone's hurrying bodies, I'd touched something real for just a second. It's strange — I'd been in stores just like this hundreds, maybe thousands of times before, and never once noticed anything like it. It took one meeting with a homeless man for the familiar picture to start rippling outward, like water from a thrown stone.

The most important thing for me became a question from the poem: "Looking at him, you won't feel envy. But why not? He knows no fear." After the first line, there should almost be a period — of course you won't, what's there to envy? And right away something uncomfortable follows: why not? If freedom is really so valuable, why does a person who's lost almost everything sometimes look freer than those who spend their whole lives afraid of losing what they've accumulated?

Then comes the line: "Why has he decided to nail himself to a cross?" I deliberately don't specify who exactly has done that to themselves. Him — because he ended up on the street and seemingly gave up on a normal life? Or the person looking at him, so bound by fear that he's long since stopped believing he's capable of changing anything?

The homeless man had almost no money. But he wasn't lacking in life. He could talk, laugh, remember things, tell stories — he had something to tell. And that, unexpectedly, set him apart from a lot of people who have housing, a job, a full fridge, but whose lives

have gradually shrunk down to eating, sleeping, earning again, and buying something again.

I wasn't trying to romanticize the street. I didn't think hunger, dirt, and vulnerability made a person more spiritual. He'd arrived at this way of living for his own reasons, which I couldn't fully know. I was only trying to see what this meeting could teach me.

He told me he slept in the park, under a pine tree. That's the phrase that stuck with me. We buy soft beds, food that hasn't expired yet, everything we need for safety — and then lie down in those beds completely exhausted. We feed our fear with food, our anxiety with shopping, our uncertainty with yet another plan. And in the morning we start it all over again.

None of this meant you had to become homeless to be cleansed. I wasn't about to give up my home and sleep under a pine tree. But I understood something: **having a home doesn't automatically mean you're alive. Just as not having one doesn't necessarily mean your life is over.** I probably needed to find some middle ground: not throwing everything away, but also not letting fear run every single day that followed. To live today, right now, and try not to make it dull. And not to invent new troubles for myself before they'd actually arrived.

— — —

Fears

Standing in the store beside the register,
I fell to thinking about the meaning of existence.
In this place where crowds of people rush back and forth,
in a few more seconds I too would have to move on.

I closed my eyes, and was glad for those seconds —
they stretched out longer than the whole day.
So strange, that in that crowded place,
I caught myself, for the first time, doing this.

I'd been there five hundred thousand times before
and never noticed anything around me.
There a beggar stood, hand held out in hope,
silent, as if in meditation.

Looking at him, you won't feel envy.
But why not? He knows no fear.
Why has he decided to nail himself to a cross?
Yes, he has no money — but he isn't lacking life.

Hungry, dirty, dressed in nothing fashionable —
everyone gives someone like that a wide berth.
And yet his soul is clear and free,
untouched by fear — only death, with its scythe, holds sway there.

And we keep buying things, and still we're afraid,
feeding our fear on food that hasn't yet expired.
Then, exhausted, we lie down in bed —
on something soft, not in a park beneath a pine tree.

You don't have to be homeless to be cleansed.
But there's no sense in being afraid forever, either.
Live today, right now, and don't let it be dull.
And don't invent troubles for yourself that haven't come yet.

— — —

"Did you actually envy him?" I asked, looking at the fourth stanza.

He thought about it.

"Probably. Not to be in his place — but for the way he didn't seem to care. That's how it looked, anyway."

I smiled.

"So you watched a few conversations and decided you knew his inner life?"

"I'm not claiming I knew everything," he frowned.

"But you write: 'He knows no fear.'"

"What do you think he was afraid of, then?"

"I don't know. Neither did you. Maybe fear followed him every night — cold, violence, illness, police, hunger. We just met a man who didn't show us his fear."

He was quiet for a moment.

"So the line is wrong?"

"No. It honestly shows how you saw him at the time. Not some objective truth about him. Your own shock."

"What shock?"

"You met a person who had almost none of the things you considered necessary for a normal life. And he was still talking, laughing, telling stories. He didn't seem finished. And you, with everything you needed, were constantly afraid."

He reread the line:

"'Why has he decided to nail himself to a cross?'"

"Now that's a good question."

"About him?"

"About him. And about you."

"What cross did I nail myself to?"

"Maybe you'd decided that without a certain job, a certain amount of money, an apartment, a relationship, and other people's approval, you didn't have the right to consider yourself alive."

He looked at me closely.

"Isn't that true, though?"

"All of that matters. Especially a home, food, and safety. There's no need to pretend deprivation is beautiful. But no single thing, on its own, hands a person permission to live."

"So the homeless man is freer than me?"

"No. Freedom probably isn't measured by how much you own, anyway. You just saw one kind of freedom in him that you were missing, and didn't see the unfreedom he might have been living with every day."

"So I romanticized him?"

"A little."

"Then the whole poem is naive?"

"Partly. But naivety doesn't destroy the question. Sometimes it's the only thing that lets you ask it for the first time."

He looked again at the lines about the clear soul.

"How do I know it was clear?"

"You don't, from anywhere. Maybe you just wanted it to be."

"Why?"

"To prove to yourself that you can lose your outer stability and not disappear as a person."

"So I needed him as an example?"

"In the poem — yes. In life, he was a separate person you barely knew. It matters not to confuse the two."

He was quiet.

"Did I at least help him properly?"

"As much as you could. Brought food, brought supplies, talked to him. Didn't try to play the savior."

"I deliberately didn't give him money."

"Maybe that was wise. Maybe not. We don't know what he actually needed more. But something else matters more: you didn't stop helping just to get rid of your own pity faster."

He smirked.

"'Adequate help'?"

"Yes. Though I'm more careful with that phrase now. What feels adequate to the helper isn't always

adequate for the person being helped."

"Then what should you do?"

"Ask. Listen. Not assume someone else's life becomes understandable just because you've seen it from the outside."

He looked at the first stanza.

"But the poem didn't actually start with him."

"No. It started with you, by the register."

"Why there, specifically?"

"Because a real thought doesn't ask whether it's picked a beautiful enough setting. It can show up next to the price tags and the chewing gum, in front of a switched-off TV, in a parking lot, in an empty apartment."

"What about on top of a mountain?"

"There too. But a mountain doesn't guarantee depth, just as a checkout line doesn't prevent it from showing up."

He closed his eyes, as if he were back in that store.

"I remember those seconds."

"So do I."

"Why did they stretch out so long?"

"Maybe, for the first time in a long while, you stopped running along with everyone else."

"Can you do that now?"

"Sometimes."

"What does it take?"

"Noticing that you've started running again."

He opened his eyes.

"In the last stanza I simplified everything. 'Live today, right now.'"

"Yes."

"Is that a bad thing?"

"No. Sometimes a person needs a simple phrase, not another complicated system. Though 'live now' doesn't mean ignoring the future, or real dangers."

"Then what does it mean?"

"Not living out, in advance, every disaster that hasn't happened yet."

He nodded.

"'Don't invent troubles for yourself that haven't come yet.'"

"Exactly."

"Did it work?"

I laughed.

"No. But now I at least sometimes notice when I'm inventing them again."

He thought about the homeless man again.

"I wonder where he is now."

"I don't know."

"We never meet again?"

"Probably not."

"Strange. He changed how I see things, and he probably never even found out."

"That happens more often than you'd think. People come into our lives for a few minutes, say one ordinary sentence — like that he sleeps under a pine tree — and leave. And the ripples from that sentence keep spreading for years."

"So this poem is about him?"

"Only partly."

"Then who's it about?"

"About the man by the register who suddenly realized he'd spent his whole life buying safety, and never once actually felt safe."

He repeated softly:

"And you don't have to be homeless."

"You don't."

"Then what do you have to do?"

"Stop treating fear as the only proof that you're taking life seriously."

"Is that all?"

"For a start — that's enough."

He looked off toward where a stranger with an outstretched hand had once stood.

"You were right."

"About what?"

"I did envy him, after all."

"I know."

"Do you still envy him now?"

I thought about it.

"Not him anymore."

"Then who?"

"That version of myself who, for a few seconds, for the first time, stopped in the middle of the crowd and actually noticed that he existed."

CHAPTER 11

The Bathyscaphe



Sometimes the inner voice doesn't argue, doesn't warn you, doesn't try to talk you into stopping. It just says: "Fine. I'm going on vacation. You go ahead and run wild here." That's roughly how I remember that period now.

My wife had left for someone else, unable to put up with who I was at the time. Not much time passed before I found myself in a new relationship. It's hard to explain now why I jumped into it so fast. My body probably needed some kind of continuation of life, while everything inside me was already too exhausted to keep resisting — it had spent too long propping up

a friendly smile, an air of acceptance, attempts to look normal, pretending that what was happening wasn't tearing me apart from the inside.

That woman had children from different men, her own history, her own accumulated difficulties by that point in her life. I had my own. I never got around to working through a single one of them. Instead, we rented a separate apartment together, because I couldn't stay in my own.

A strange year began. A lot of work. After work, a lot of pointless motion: alcohol, drugs, attempts to fill a space that nothing could fill. For a short while it seemed like all of it was helping seal off the pain. But nothing was sealed off. If anything, I was slowly disappearing behind all that noise.

I started fighting with friends — not with the people I'd habitually called friends, but with the ones who actually were. One of them held on anyway and came to see me. We talked a lot, spent time together, and he helped me start finding my way out.

By that point, things with that woman had already ended. I moved back into my own apartment on the thirtieth of December — the New Year was due to arrive the next day. I came back with whatever was left of my things: some had vanished, some I'd given away, some I'd sold for almost nothing. I didn't care. The apartment was left with bare walls, a ceiling, and that same damned television. I didn't know what to do next.

I remember the bathroom. I stood there naked, bent over in front of the mirror, looking at my own face, at the bags under my eyes, at a body I'd been treating as if it didn't belong to me, at a person I'd let get away with anything for far too long. And for the first time, I really cried. Not quietly, not gracefully — hysterically, as if some floodgate had actually opened inside me and a river was pouring out.

In that moment, for the first time, I understood clearly how cruelly I'd been treating my body, my mind, and whatever it is we habitually call the soul. **And I promised myself: I won't do this to myself anymore.**

That promise didn't instantly turn me into a different person. Even years later, I still sometimes let people walk all over me. The old survival strategies never fully disappeared. That's exactly why I still go to therapy today, still working through what I only first glimpsed back then.

But standing by that mirror, the direction changed. I started coming back — to myself, to writing, to the ability to gather my thoughts and put them in a row. Too many fragments had built up inside: too much anger, too much helplessness, memories that cut every time I touched them. I needed to throw those knives out onto paper.

I cried like I could push out through my eyes everything I hadn't been able to say for years. I took a shower. Wrapped myself in a blanket. And started writing.

I wanted to get rid of fear. But even then, I think I sensed that simply chasing it away wouldn't work. If I let it hide in the closet, it would just wait it out, and come back the moment I let my guard down again. So fear wasn't something to drive off. It needed to be held in front of me and examined — even if that meant becoming my own executioner, axe, and chopping block. Sometimes a rotting part really does have to be cut away. Not because you hate yourself, but because you want to save everything else.

That's how the bathyscaphe appeared. Not a vehicle for running away, not a way to seal yourself off from the depths behind metal walls. The opposite — a way to descend consciously, to dive to the bottom of your own consciousness, to look into the dark caves, to see what's usually convenient not to notice.

It really is easier in the dark. Nothing hurts your eyes there. There are plenty of people down there, ready to help explain, together, why nothing needs to change. You can live in the dark without asking questions: drink, work, have fun, drink again, find someone new, lose old friends — and every time convince yourself that the real problem is somewhere out there, external. But the darkness turned out to be a kind of measuring stick too. Only by seeing how much of it was inside me could I figure out where to look for light.

Later there would be an album called The Labyrinth. I didn't know yet that it would be a continuation of the same dive. The Bathyscaphe was

the decision to go under. The Labyrinth was an attempt to map out what I'd found down there.

I think this is where poetry first stopped being just a way of speaking out for me. It became a life ring. Thoughts, set in a row, gave back a sense of direction. They didn't solve everything. But they helped me understand which way to swim next.

And among everything I saw down there, there was one thought I especially wanted to hold on to: **you are your own best friend.** Not the only one. Not someone capable of handling everything completely alone. Today I understand that a lot of things need to be lived through together with another person: a friend, someone close, a therapist. But the one who lives inside you still has to come back from vacation eventually. Without him, no help from the outside can complete the journey.

— — —

The Bathyscaphe

I threw every shattered thought onto the page.
They'd been piling up there for a couple hundred years.
I squeezed every last drop of moisture out through my eyes,
and after a shower, wrapped myself in a blanket.

There's a wish to be rid of fear —
or rather, to keep it from hiding in the closet.
You are your own executioner, axe, and chopping

block.
Like Jacques Cousteau, climb down into your own bathyscaphe.

Dive to the bottom of the depths of consciousness in it,
and carefully examine everything around you.
Pay attention to the dark caves.
And remember: you are your own best friend.

Yes, it can get vile, bitter, frightening down there.
A thousand words couldn't capture all of it.
But the feeling that it isn't for nothing
leads to the thought that you'll come out clean and new.

Staying in the dark is always more comfortable:
there are more people there, and it doesn't hurt the eyes.
Ugh, I'm sick of this damned darkness, to hell with it!
But being a measure of things, it lights us up from within.

— — —

I looked at the second stanza again.

"Why a bathyscaphe, specifically?"

He shrugged.

"To dive deeper."

"Couldn't you do it without one?"

"There's pressure down there. You might not survive it."

"So the bathyscaphe protects you?"

"Yes."

I shook my head.

"I think now that it does something else too."

He looked at me, questioning.

"It brings back the one who went on vacation."

"Who?"

"Your inner voice. The one who used to tell you where to stop."

"Does he come back?"

"Yes. But not in the same shape as before."

"What shape, then?"

"Before, he was trying to hold you up from above — forbidding things, warning you, covering everything over with a smile and acceptance. Now the two of you decide together to go down."

He thought about it.

"So the bathyscaphe is him?"

"More like it's the thing you built together. So you'd stop losing each other."

He reread the lines:

"'You are your own executioner, axe, and chopping block.'"

"That's brutal."

"Isn't it, though?"

"Sometimes it is. But be careful with that. A person who's decided to save himself can very easily turn into his own tormentor."

"But a rotting hand has to be cut off."

"Sometimes. But first you should make sure it's actually rotting, and not just in pain."

He frowned.

"What's the difference?"

"A huge one. A sick part can be healed. A severed one can't be brought back."

"Then what exactly am I supposed to cut off?"

I was quiet for a moment.

"Not yourself. The way you treat yourself."

"The alcohol?"

"That too, if it becomes a way to disappear."

"The drugs?"

"Same."

"That relationship?"

"Maybe. But the main thing is the habit of believing your body, your time, and your dignity can be handed over endlessly in exchange for a few hours of relief."

He lowered his eyes.

"I really did think I was getting some relief."

"I know."

"Did you?"

"For a few hours. Then you'd come back even further from yourself than before."

He fell silent.

"Why was I crying in front of the mirror?"

"Because for the first time you weren't looking at circumstances. You were looking at yourself."

"Hadn't I seen myself before?"

"You'd seen a reflection. But you explained it away with women, breakups, work, friends, loneliness. That evening, there was nothing left between you two. No clothes, no nice story, no excuse. Just a person, and a body he'd nearly wrecked."

He said nothing for a long time.

"I'm ashamed."

"So was I."

"And now?"

"Now it's more like pain."

"Is that better?"

"Yes. Shame says: 'You're bad.' Pain says: 'Something bad was done to you.' Sometimes that someone was you yourself. But even then, pain leaves room to change how you relate to it."

He looked at the poem again.

"I wrote that after the dive, I'd come out clean and new."

"Yes."

"Isn't that true?"

"Not exactly. One dive doesn't turn you into a new person."

"Then why dive at all?"

"So you stop treating the bottom as the place where life ends, every single time. Sometimes you can actually push off from it."

"Did you push off?"

"Back then — yes. But I had to dive many more times after that."

He smirked.

"So nothing was really finished."

"Nothing important usually gets finished with one promise in front of a mirror."

"So my promise was pointless?"

"No. You chose a direction. Not a finish line."

He repeated that to himself.

"A direction…"

"Exactly."

"What about The Labyrinth?"

I looked up at him.

"How do you know about that?"

"You just mentioned it yourself."

He smiled.

"What is it?"

"An album you'll record a few years from now."

"Music?"

"Rap."

He laughed.

"Me?"

"You."

"What's it about?"

"About what you'll find down here."

I pointed to the lines about the dark caves.

"So the bathyscaphe actually makes it all the way down?"

"It does."

"And what's at the bottom?"

"You."

"Just me?"

"That's plenty enough to be terrifying."

He stopped smiling.

"And to get back up?"

"Also you. But not only."

"Who else?"

"A friend who'll stand by you exactly when you've almost stopped standing by yourself. People you'll learn to talk to. A therapist. A wife you'll one day start building a completely different relationship with. Music. Poems."

"So the line 'you are your own best friend' is wrong?"

"No. A best friend just doesn't have to be your only one."

He was quiet for a moment.

"Do you treat yourself well now?"

I didn't answer right away.

"Better."

"But you still let other people walk over you sometimes?"

"Sometimes."

"Then we didn't learn much."

"We learned to notice it sooner."

"Is that all?"

"For now, yes."

He looked disappointed.

"Four years, for that?"

"Sometimes it takes four years to spot a pattern a few minutes earlier than you used to. Those few minutes can change a great deal."

He reread the last stanza.

"Why does darkness bring light?"

"Because it creates contrast."

"So there's no light without darkness?"

"There's light regardless. But someone who's lived a long time in the dark notices it differently."

"So all of it was necessary?"

I sighed.

"I don't know. I'm more careful with that word now. Not everything that happens has to have been

necessary for you to get something out of it."

"So I could have skipped that whole year?"

"Maybe."

"And still become the same person?"

"No. A different one. Not necessarily worse. Not necessarily better. Just different."

He thought about that.

"Do you regret it?"

The mirror rose in front of my eyes again. The bags under the eyes. The bare walls. The thirtieth of December. A person crying, for the first time, not because he'd been abandoned, but because he'd abandoned himself.

"Yes."

"About what?"

"That I didn't listen to you for too long."

"Me?"

"The one who, even before all this, kept leaving me notes. 'Don't be afraid.' 'You're the commander here.' 'Set out on the road.' 'You are your own best friend.' You were building lighthouses, without even knowing that one day I'd have to find my way home by them."

He looked at me completely differently now.

"Did you find it?"

"Not entirely."

"A direction again, not a finish line?"

"Again."

He smiled.

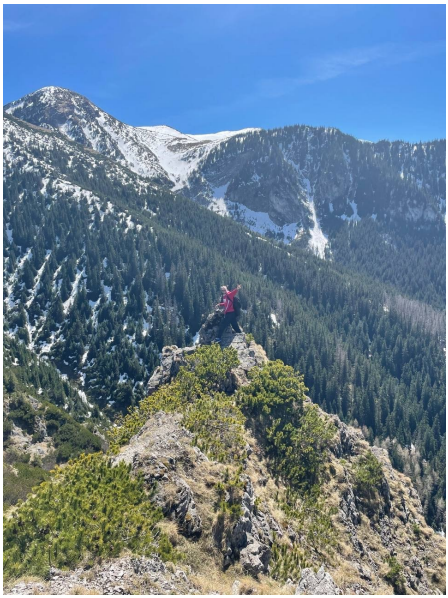
"Then maybe we should dive once more?"

I looked down, toward where the unexplored caves were still waiting.

"Let's. Just not alone this time."

CHAPTER 12

Mountains



Sometimes, to come back to yourself, you don't have to dive into the dark. Sometimes you can just remember a place where, once, everything was calm.

We always dreamed of visiting the mountains — looked at photos, imagined what it would be like there, and tried to get out whenever we could: driving, taking a tent, camping out, sleeping among the trees, the rocks, the cold air.

At first I thought this poem had come out of one of those trips. But memory started correcting me again, partway through telling the story. No — it wasn't born in the mountains. It came from the shore of the Baltic

Sea.

By that point, my wife and I had gotten back together. After everything that happened, we were trying to rebuild things, and one day we went to the sea with some of her friends. Not mine. It was supposed to be an easy kind of vacation: the sea, sand, people around, conversation. But as it went on, uncomfortable moments kept surfacing — certain words, reactions, the way we interacted with each other in front of everyone else. Old patterns hadn't disappeared just because we'd decided to start over.

And I'd already promised myself I wouldn't let people treat me however they wanted anymore, that I wouldn't let myself be pushed around. But there was very little room between defending myself and falling into yet another internal conflict. I could easily slip back into irritation, start tracking every gesture, every word, every sign of disrespect — real or only perceived.

I urgently needed to find some solitude. Not physical solitude — there were people all around, and I couldn't fully get away from them. **I needed an inner solitude.**

I lay on the sand. The sea rustled beside me, someone was talking, someone was laughing, the vacation carried on. And I closed myself off inside and decided to remember the mountains. Not to run away there forever, not to pretend the world around me didn't exist. Just to get back, for a few minutes, that state they'd once given me. To remember the clouds,

the old peaks, the trees, the streams, the sun, the nightingale — that world that never demanded anything of me.

In The Bathyscaphe, the movement was downward: I had to descend into the dark caves of consciousness and look at what I'd been avoiding. Here, the opposite happened. I dissolved into the outside world enough that the noise inside could quiet down, even briefly. I think that's also a way of returning to yourself. You don't always have to investigate the pain. **Sometimes you need to remember beauty.**

The poem turned out to be almost entirely observational — no heavy questions, no accusations, no attempt to find some final truth. Clouds turned into stallions, mountains into wise old men, trees into stubble, snow into sour cream, a nightingale into Pavarotti. It's as if I deliberately let myself look at things more simply: not explaining, not hunting for hidden causes, not taking my own state apart piece by piece. Just seeing. Out of sounds and colors, a world slowly assembled itself — one where I could rest a little.

And at the end, a strange line appeared: "Love is the keys to the bank's safety deposit boxes." It could have seemed random before — why a bank, suddenly, among mountains, a stream, sun, and birds? Now it seems to me that I was looking for a place to store the states I'd lived through. Not money, not things — minutes when I'd genuinely felt alive and at peace. Every trip, every view, every morning in the

mountains seemed to become a deposit. And then, at the right moment, you could open the box and take out a bit of that silence.

That's exactly what I did that day on the Baltic Sea. Lying on the sand, hearing the people around me, I opened one of those boxes inside myself. And found myself in the mountains.

— — —

Mountains

Stallions gallop above us,
their tails brushing the vault of the sky.
And the mountains, old wise elders,
stay silent, counting off the years.

The trees look like stubble,
swaying back and forth in the wind.
Like a painter working a brush over canvas,
a helicopter circles above them.

And the bright rays of the sun
caress us like a mother's hand.
Rooks are the heralds of spring.
Snow on the peaks, like sour cream.

A stream, like a forest snake,
runs winding between the pines.
And a nightingale — a Pavarotti —
keeps getting asked for an encore.

The world is woven out of sounds and colors.
Nature is a magic tablecloth, endlessly full.
The Creator is a master jeweler.
Love is the keys to the bank's safety deposit boxes.

— — —

I reread the last line again.

"Why a bank?"

He shrugged.

"I don't know. That's just how it came."

"What's sitting in those deposit boxes?"

"Love."

"That much is clear. But in what form?"

He thought about it.

"Memories?"

"Maybe."

"Of people?"

"Not only."

I looked at him.

"You didn't write this in the mountains, you know."

"What do you mean, not in the mountains?"

"By the Baltic Sea."

He looked surprised.

"I don't remember that."

"Neither did I, at first. There were people there, your wife's friends, some uncomfortable moments. You

urgently needed to find a place where no one could get to you."

"So I remembered the mountains?"

"Yes."

"So I just ran away?"

"For a few minutes."

"Is that a good thing?"

"Sometimes escape and a breather look exactly the same. The difference only becomes clear later."

"So which was it?"

"I think a breather. You didn't leave for good, didn't abandon everyone on the beach. You just tried to get your inner space back."

He looked at the first stanza.

"So there weren't actually any stallions over me back then?"

"There were other clouds. Baltic ones. But you were looking at them through a mountain memory."

"So the poem is lying?"

"No. It's not showing where your body was. It's showing where you were, at that moment."

He was quiet for a bit.

"Strange. We went to the sea, and I wrote about mountains."

"Because a person doesn't always need the place they physically ended up in. Sometimes they need a state that's stored somewhere completely different."

He read again:

"'Love is the keys to the bank's safety deposit boxes.'"

"Do you hear it now?"

"I think so. Were the mountains sitting in one of those boxes?"

"Not the mountains, really. More like the person you were, next to them."

"Calm?"

"Attentive. Not caught up in endlessly working out who felt what about you. You were just watching."

"What does love have to do with it?"

"Maybe it's what lets you keep states like that in the first place."

"Love of nature?"

"Of nature. Of a person. Of yourself. Of life itself, in those rare seconds when you're not trying to fix it."

He thought about it.

"So memories can be used like medicine?"

"Sometimes. But you have to be careful with them too."

"Why?"

"You can remember a place to come back to yourself. Or you can remember it to never have to face the present again."

"How do you tell the difference?"

"After a good memory, you come back to your current life a little calmer. After an escape, you want to stay

in the past forever."

He looked around, as if he were seeing the beach again.

"Did I come back?"

"Yes."

"And did it get easier?"

"For a while."

"Did the situations with people get resolved?"

"Not all of them."

"Then what was the use?"

"You don't have to solve everything at once for a few minutes of peace to matter. Sometimes those minutes are enough to keep you from hurting yourself or someone else any further."

He nodded.

"I did say I wouldn't let myself be pushed around anymore."

"Yes."

"Did I keep that promise?"

I was quiet for a moment.

"You started learning to."

"Just a direction again, not an arrival?"

"Again."

He sighed.

"Nothing ever finishes in any of our conversations."

"Because life isn't especially fond of final conclusions."

"But the poem finishes."

"The text does. The state it holds onto — you can open that again."

He looked at me more closely.

"Like a safety deposit box?"

"Exactly."

"Can you still get back into it now?"

Other mountains rose in front of my eyes. The Himalayas. Rinjani. Tents at high altitude. A heavy pack. A sore back. Exhaustion. Clouds beneath my feet.

"Now I've built up more of them."

"More mountains?"

"More states. Not all of them calm. Sometimes mountains mean cold, weight, and wanting to get down as fast as possible."

"So they've stopped being medicine?"

"No. They just became real. In fifteen minutes of memory, it's easy to keep only the beauty. On a four-day trek, you have to meet your own body, your exhaustion, your irritation, too."

"Do you still like going there?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because it's harder to pretend up there. If the pack is heavy, it's heavy. If your back hurts, it hurts. If the summit is far, it's far. The mountains don't care how beautifully you explain your own state."

He smiled.

"But this poem is very beautiful."

"Yes. Back then, that's exactly what I needed."

"Beauty instead of truth?"

"Beauty is sometimes true too. Just not the only truth."

He looked again at the helicopter, the nightingale, the snow that looked like sour cream.

"Everything here feels sort of childlike."

"In a good way. You gave yourself permission to look without suspecting that some trauma had to be hiding behind every image."

"And did that work?"

"You wrote your first almost completely peaceful poem. So — at least for a while, yes."

He was quiet for a moment.

"Which matters more — diving down in the bathyscaphe, or heading up into the mountains?"

"I don't know. Sometimes you need to see the darkness. Sometimes you need to remember the light."

"What if you mix them up?"

"Then you can dig around inside yourself forever, when it's time to actually go outside. Or admire the scenery forever, when something inside has needed help for a long time already."

"How do you know which one you need right now?"

"Learn to listen."

He smirked.

"That's a very specific piece of advice."

"It's the only one I've got, for now."

We both reread the last stanza again.

"So you still use those keys?"

"Yes."

"What will you open now?"

I closed my eyes. The Baltic Sea slowly disappeared. In its place rose a mountain valley. Cloud-stallions ran above it. The wise old elders stayed silent, counting off the years.

"This box."

"To hide?"

"No. To be home for a little while."

CHAPTER 13

Please, Settle Down

Recognizing the need to change, and actually changing — these are processes that are sometimes stretched years apart from each other.

Sometimes it seems like it's enough to see your own problem, and then simply act differently next time. But a person doesn't restructure himself from a single moment of understanding, especially when he's made up of an enormous number of reactions that have spent years helping him survive — crookedly, painfully, but surviving all the same. Therapy doesn't hand you a magic formula either: the decision still has to be made by you. **And between the words "now I understand" and the first genuinely new action, there can be a gap of several years.**

That distance is exactly what this poem is about. I could already see where I kept getting stuck, I understood which reactions kept bringing me back to the same place — but I had absolutely no idea how to stop it. So the opening words aren't a command, they're a plea: "please, settle down." I'm speaking to my heart, which keeps beating against my ribs in the dark, in captivity — not demanding that it go silent for good, but wishing it would start wanting sunrises, instead of only screaming through pain.

I was under the influence of Joe Dispenza's books at the time — the idea that you have to stop endlessly reproducing your old self. That sounds clear enough

on the page, but how do you actually do it inside a living psyche, not a book? That's why the free fall in the poem doesn't end in flight — it ends with a crash into acceptance. And accepting doesn't mean explaining everything beautifully and instantly calming down. **Sometimes acceptance feels exactly like hitting the ground,** and afterward comes apathy — because parting with your old self isn't easy.

Will and Freedom appear in the text as twin sisters, knocking at the windows, hoping Hope will notice them. Hope often gets accused of making you passive instead of making you work, but during the coldest stretches, it was the only clothing I had. Though hope alone isn't enough — it's easy to hide behind the image of a good person, a little Jesus figure who forgives everyone and never gets angry. But if God really can step inside a person's temple, outward cleanliness won't fool him: he'll see the lies, the suppressed rage, the need to be good in order to earn love. **Only actual work can help — not endlessly loading yourself with tasks, but working shoulder to shoulder with people, out in the daylight.**

In the final stanza, Humanity appears — not in the humanistic sense of kindness, but as a person's real, contradictory nature. Letting it out of its cage means allowing yourself to be alive, not just good: getting angry when it's warranted, making mistakes, noticing when you do. Perhaps the more sinful person isn't the one who once lost control, but the one who never

once let his own living nature out into the open.

— — —

Please, Settle Down

I'm asking you, settle down, stop your knocking
against this rib cage, in the dark, in captivity.
Start wanting sleepy, early sunrises,
and partings that aren't the last — only the latest so far.

Sunsets — when the sun lies down to sleep in the field…
Knock, shout, but now without the tormenting pain…
Without the midnight hysterics, loud, unprintable.
Why patch it all up afterward with drunken sex?

Throwing the gnawed bones of words into a notebook.
No need for light, for air, not even those forgotten dreams…
A free fall, all the way down to a solid crash into acceptance.
Then apathy… still can't get it down off that cross after all these years…

Will and Freedom, twin sisters,
poor things, asking to come in, knocking year after year…
Loitering at the windows — hoping Hope will notice them.
She alone, through the bitter frosts, is the only

clothing

that saves you — blind, frozen, foolish —
today, the way she's saved you more than once before,
not from someone else, but from your own terrifying self.
There's no one dearer to you than her.

Everything will come — the long-awaited joy of triumph.
But who needs that pointless bravado, anyway?
The fake pretense of a do-gooder.
Lying to yourself in heaps, without so much as a blush,

scattering pearls before some pink, fuzzy little snout,
pushing your way in wherever, soap in hand.
Even imported soap, even sweet-smelling —
walking into your house, God will still gasp

and hurry straight back out the way he came.
The Mother on the icon will weep blood.
And you won't buy your way out with tears and pleading — only with work,
with labor, shoulder to shoulder with people, out in the daylight,

until the day you finally wake up
able to observe the Oneness in everyone,
able to sort the meat from the flies swarming it,
able to feel the free, eternal spirit,

and sing of it through the hard working days,
not fearing the arrival of judgment.
And more guilty, perhaps, is the one who never once,
in all Eternity, let Humanity out of its cage…

— — —

"Who are you asking to settle down?" I said.

He put his hand to his chest.

"My heart. I want it to stop hurting, not to stop beating."

"Can you really keep the beating and remove the pain?"

"I was hoping so. I don't know if it worked — you tell me."

I put my own hand to my chest.

"It still hits against my ribs sometimes. But now I more often understand what it's knocking about — not always the same 'you have to endure this,' but different things: 'I'm scared,' 'this hurts,' 'I don't want to be here.'"

He lowered his eyes.

"I spent my whole life enduring things and calling it strength."

"Endurance stops being a virtue the moment it's used to betray yourself. You wanted to walk into a new day as someone new."

"Did I?"

"As the same person. But one who'd started noticing he was repeating the old pattern. That's enough for a new day. Not enough for a new life."

"Then how much is enough?"

"I don't know. A year. Four years. Sometimes a whole lifetime."

He exhaled, irritated.

"Then what's the point of even being aware of it?"

"The point is that before, the reaction would just happen, and you'd mistake it for yourself. Now a few seconds appear between the impulse and the act. Sometimes that's exactly where freedom lives."

He looked at the lines about the twin sisters.

"Do they just stand at the window?"

"Until you learn to open it. Hope won't open it for you — she just helps you not walk away from the window too soon."

"So you still need to act?"

"Yes. Not the kind of action you run to in order to feel nothing — the ability to say 'no' when you're used to automatically saying yes. To stay with a feeling instead of drowning it in alcohol, sex, another task."

He winced.

"That sounds boring."

"Real change generally isn't very cinematic. The free fall and the crash into acceptance, though — that part's cinematic. Then comes apathy, because you thought a new life would start right after acceptance.

But sometimes all that happens after is that the old life ends, and for a while there's simply nothing."

He repeated quietly: "still can't get it down off that cross after all these years."

"You were dragging that apathy around as proof of your own pain. It's worth admitting it exists, and trying to see what's underneath it — sometimes anger, sometimes exhaustion from living someone else's life for too long."

"Sometimes just laziness?"

"That too. Not everything has to be a deep trauma," I said, and he laughed, unexpectedly.

"Finally. I was worried you'd explain away every stupid thing I've ever done with my childhood."

He reread the middle of the poem.

"Why am I so angry at the do-gooder?"

"Because you recognize him in yourself. You really did help people — but sometimes you helped so you wouldn't have to show your real self, so people would think you were good."

"So what, was I supposed to go around telling everyone they were bastards?"

"Not necessarily everyone, and not necessarily in those words. But at least stop lying to yourself — choose what to do with the truth, instead of passing your inner 'no' off as a sincere 'yes.'"

He thought about it.

"So being good is a cage too?"

"If you're afraid of losing love without it — yes."

"Then what's humanity?"

"What's left once you're no longer obligated to look like a saint. Anger, envy, fear — those make you human, not worse. What makes you worse or better isn't the feelings themselves, it's what you do with them."

He read the ending again.

"I thought humanity meant being kind."

"And now?"

"Being real?"

"Closer. Though 'real' doesn't always have to be dumped on the people around you immediately, either."

"You're overcomplicating things again."

"Because you wanted one formula to replace actual living work. There isn't one. Therapy only helps you see exactly where you keep slipping into autopilot. The act is still yours to make."

He went quiet for a long time.

"I already understand all of this. So why haven't I changed yet?"

"Because understanding is a map. Change is a road you walk on foot. Sometimes it's one step. Sometimes it's years."

He looked at the epigraph.

"Did you just figure that out, or did we figure it out together?"

"Together. You felt the distance back then. I've only just managed to name it — though in ten years I'll probably name it differently. Final answers scare me more now than not having one."

He half-smiled.

"Has your heart settled down?"

I listened. It was still beating — not especially evenly, not entirely calm. But it no longer felt like a prisoner throwing itself against the walls.

"No. But it's started wanting a sunrise. A sleepy one. And partings — not the last one. Just the latest so far."

He nodded.

"Exactly."

CHAPTER 14

December

Sometimes a person doesn't need new wisdom. He needs to turn on the heating, eat something, lie down in a bed instead of on a cold floor. But that evening, I didn't understand that yet.

It was the thirtieth of December. I'd just moved back into the apartment after that strange year I wrote about in The Bathyscaphe. Almost everything was already gone — the rooms stood bare, with a cold floor and long French windows that didn't hold heat well in winter. I rarely turned the heating on — there was almost no money left. But that day I went even further: I took a cold shower and lay down on the floor, nearly naked.

Now I understand: **I wanted to punish myself** — for the wrecked relationship, for that whole year, for the body I'd driven myself into. As if someone who'd handled his life this badly had no right to just turn on the heat and pull a blanket over himself.

A candle was burning in the room — the only thing burning at all; there was almost no fire left inside me. I sat there trying to find some formula that could explain everything that had happened. I could reason that everything vast lives inside the small, feel like a sage in the middle of an empty apartment. But my heart didn't get any warmer from that kind of wisdom. My mind could understand a great deal. My body kept freezing. **For the first time, I needed to**

come down from the spiritual level to the simplest one: warm up first, eat, drink something. We romanticize suffering so easily — a cold apartment turns into a monk's cell, self-punishment into purification. Though maybe all I really needed was to put on some socks.

It was the cold floor, every time, that brought me back to reality — not some grand thought, not God. The floor. Among the few things left in the apartment, a kettle appeared — one that showed the water temperature. A strange purchase for someone with almost no money, but I think it was one of the first things I bought not out of habit, but for the new version of myself. Among the empty rooms, the first object of care appeared.

The streetlights in the window seemed to say: "What you need isn't coffee, it's a sip of love." Back then I wanted love from another person — Marina. But years later that line sounds different to me: **what I actually needed was love, including the most basic kind — love for myself.**

The ending feels almost like a postcard: "Happy is the one who lives life in the moment." But that moment wasn't happy — I was in pain, cold, alone. And yet that's exactly when something like the first flicker of happiness appeared — the simple feeling that I was still alive, and wasn't running away from that evening. Living in the moment doesn't mean enjoying it. Sometimes it just means, for the first time, no longer running from the pain.

— — —

December

December settled quietly onto my shoulders like a weight,
shaking loose a shimmering dust from the sky.
More and more in the evenings, I light candles,
sitting for hours, thinking, like some kind of sage.

"You're not alone, there are many of us," the silence whispered,
and the little flame agreed, melting the wax.
With that wisdom — that everything vast lives in the small —
I wished I could warm my heart, not just my mind.

A clear glass shield held back the wind's attacks,
keeping the invisible enemy out of the house.
And snow mixed with rain cut into the earth's depths,
the way a boot's sole breaks up mud underfoot.

The cold floor brought me back to reality.
A thin trickle of light seeped into the darkness.
How on earth do I find even a trace of desire?
Oh world, how do I get back that old joy of mine?

The crackle of bubbling water in the spouted kettle
caught my attention — an insistent little whistle.
And the streetlights peered in through the window, sidelong:
"What you need isn't coffee — it's a sip of love!"

Happy is the one who lives life in the moment
and doesn't need to convince anyone of anything.
Every frame of the film is priceless.
Dream. Create. There's no need to wait forever.

— — —

"Did you really feel like a sage?" I asked.

"No," he smirked. "But I thought a lot."

"Sometimes a person thinks in order to understand something. And sometimes, to avoid feeling something. You were cold, and instead of turning on the heat, you were reasoning that everything vast lives in the small."

"There was no money."

"I know. But you took that cold shower yourself. You lay down on the floor yourself, too. Did you want to feel the moment — or punish yourself?"

He didn't answer right away. The room seemed to grow colder again.

"For everything," he finally said.

"That's not how it works. You can't be guilty of everything at once."

"But I destroyed it all. I could have acted differently."

"You could have. But responsibility and punishment aren't the same thing. You needed to get warm."

"Would that have fixed everything?"

"No. But it would have let you deal with your life without being someone who deliberately runs himself

into the ground. 'I wished I could warm my heart, not just my mind' — you wrote that as a metaphor. Your body took it literally."

He was quiet.

"So I overcomplicated things again — looking for a spiritual answer where simple care was needed first?"

"Exactly. Sometimes a bowl of hot soup is more elevated than one more book about enlightenment."

He laughed, then looked at the kettle.

"Why did you turn that into a symbol?"

"Because in an almost empty apartment, it was the one thing you chose with any care for yourself. Some part of you already knew life wasn't over. Wanting a good kettle sometimes means more than some grand promise to start over — a promise belongs to an imagined future, but the kettle is already sitting there on the counter."

"An action," he nodded.

"A small one. But a real one."

He reread the line about love.

"Was that about Marina?"

"I think so. Though today I'd say it was also about love for yourself. Back then you were still waiting for someone else to warm you. If all your warmth lives in one other person, their leaving turns your whole life into an unheated apartment."

"So the answer is not needing anyone?"

"No. Learning not to turn another person into your only source of warmth."

He looked at the cold floor again.

"I really was happy in that moment, though. How can you be happy when things are that bad?"

"Because happiness and pain don't always cancel each other out. You said it yourself: for the first time, you started being glad just to be alive, actually feeling your own sensations instead of running from them."

He closed his eyes.

"I remember. The candle. The streetlights. The water starting to boil. Snow mixed with rain. And the cold."

"Would you lie down on that floor again?"

"I don't know. Would you?"

"No. Now I understand: being present with your own pain doesn't mean deliberately intensifying it."

"But would The Bathyscaphe exist without that night?"

"I don't know. I believe less and less that suffering needs to be justified by whatever comes out of it afterward. The poem is good. That doesn't make the cold necessary."

"So it was all for nothing?"

"No. But it wasn't necessary, either. Not everything you go through has to have been necessary in order to become part of you."

"Then what do I do with it?"

"Don't build a shrine to it. And learn — at least learn that a body isn't a place to carry out a sentence."

He put his hand on the floor again.

"It held up. So it's strong."

"Not for that reason. The body often holds up under things it never should have had to hold up under in the first place. Its endurance doesn't give us the right to keep testing it."

He pulled his hand back.

"Do you take care of it now?"

Images rose in front of my eyes: the pool, morning runs, mountains, my back aching after Rinjani.

"I'm learning to. A direction again, not a finish line."

He sighed.

"Do you ever actually arrive anywhere?"

"Sometimes. And then it turns out that was just the next starting point. 'Dream, create, there's no need to wait forever' — you already knew that back then."

"Then why did I keep waiting?"

"Because knowing and doing are processes that are sometimes years apart."

He looked around the room once more.

"What would you do if you ended up there right now?"

I pictured the cold floor, the candle, the bare walls.

"First, I'd turn on the heat. At least for a while. Then I'd make tea at the right temperature."

"And what would you say to me?"

"Nothing wise. I'd wrap myself in a blanket with you and wait until you warmed up. Then we could talk."

He was quiet for a moment.

"So love did come, in the end? Marina?"

"Her too. And the person you left freezing on that floor — one day, he came back for you."

He looked at me.

"You?"

"Me."

"Took you long enough."

"At least I brought tea."

He smiled.

"Then sit down. The water's just boiled."

CHAPTER 15

Prison

Not every poem is born out of some new event. Life even seemed to be coming together: the relationship was back on track, and a new job had appeared — I'd finally worked up the courage to leave my old one, where my old patterns of behavior wouldn't let me build normal relationships with people.

By then I was taking a course involving meditation and inner work, and I'd started to feel out separate forces inside myself — noticing that fear, anger, and anxiety live by their own rules, and can seize control so completely that by evening you realize you were barely present in your own day.

I didn't write "Prison" because of some new blow. I wrote it because an old thought had finally found a more precise name. Awareness rarely arrives in a single flash of insight — **the same thought comes back for years, each time from a different level.** First you understand: "I'm afraid." Later: "Fear is getting in the way of my life." Later still: "I'm the one keeping the system running, the one that lets fear control me." And one day you ask: who's actually the prisoner here, anyway?

In the poem, I imagine that I've built a prison for my anxieties and fears — everything dangerous locked away, me outside, them inside. But the real answer only arrived years later: **they weren't my prisoners. I was theirs.** I thought I'd built a prison,

but in reality I was living inside it, working as its guard — suppressing things, feeling ashamed of them, and then not understanding why I kept turning into a wild animal myself. The harder a person locks up his own feelings, the more unexpectedly they eventually break out.

That's why there's no need to call in a hunter, and why it's better to bury the hatchet of war — a war against yourself rarely ends in victory. I already wrote in "Worlds": notice, a guide, not a guard. You don't have to spend your whole life checking whether your fears are locked up properly — sometimes it's wiser to open the door, not so your feelings can take over everything, but so you can stop spending your life guarding them. The last stanza is built on a kind of tautology: "stop holding your fears hostage in fear itself" — we're not just afraid of events, we're afraid of fear showing up at all, anxious that we're about to become anxious.

And yet, at the end, I call them mirages — today I'd be more careful about that. Fears aren't always invented: sometimes the danger is real, sometimes anger is protecting a boundary. But the system built up around them can be a mirage — the belief that one mistake will destroy your entire life. The biggest change of that period wasn't in the poem itself: for the first time, it wasn't another collapse that was pushing me to keep doing inner work, but my own choice. **Before, pain forced me to dig. Now I started doing it voluntarily.**

— — —

Prison

The grudge inside me had grown so large
that I didn't even see it right away.
I asked my own inner guide
to take me where lawlessness rules.

I built a prison — quite the sight to see.
I hid everything away in it, out of view.
Anxiety, fears, anger, and regrets,
locked up in my own personal Alcatraz.

But are they really prisoners? The answer's unclear…
Sometimes, at night, the door isn't even locked.
Then the whole next day turns out to be a nightmare,
and instead of a person, out comes a wild animal.

No need to call in a hunter for help,
better to just bury the hatchet of war.
It's nothing new for us to kill ourselves with our own hands.
And the verdict is absurd — guilty without any actual guilt.

So go easier on the role of the guard,
and stop holding your fears hostage in fear itself.
Whisper to them: "Friends, go in peace."
You'll understand later — all of it was just a mirage.

— — —

"'But are they really prisoners?'" I read aloud.

"I don't know. That's why I'm asking," he answered.

"I know now. No. They're not the prisoners. You are. You built a prison to lock away everything you were afraid of in yourself, and then stayed behind to guard it."

"But I could leave."

"You could. You're just afraid the door will stay open."

He looked at the imaginary cells.

"And if they get out?"

"They already get out every day — you just call it your personality. You get angry at someone and think they earned exactly that reaction. You're afraid of rejection and call it caution."

"What if I actually do understand people, though?"

"Sometimes you do. But fear is very good at speaking in your voice, convincingly."

"Then how do you tell the difference?"

"Don't react right away. Sometimes it takes a few seconds. Sometimes a whole night. And if you have to decide something right now, you'll get it wrong sometimes. No amount of inner work guarantees the right decision. It just increases the odds that you'll be the one making the decision, not some automatic reaction."

He read again: "Sometimes, at night, the door isn't even locked."

"So it's better to keep it locked?"

"No. It's better to stop treating your feelings like criminals in the first place. If you let them out and just turn your back, you'll get chaos. But between imprisonment and total lack of control, there's a conversation."

"With anxiety?"

"Ask it what it's afraid of. Ask anger what it's protecting. Ask regret what can still be fixed, and what you'll just have to live with."

"Will they answer?"

"Not necessarily in words. Sometimes through the body, through a wish to leave. Listening isn't the same as obeying. You still make the decision. Not a guard. A guide."

He smiled.

"'Worlds' again. So I keep repeating myself?"

"A person rarely changes after one well-turned phrase. He keeps coming back to it, until one day he starts living just slightly differently. You've already started, actually — you changed jobs without waiting for full internal permission."

"I was just sick of the old one."

"Sometimes that's enough. Not every change starts with some grand revelation. Though the new job didn't get rid of your old reactions — they came along with you."

He looked at the fourth stanza.

"'Guilty without any actual guilt' — guilty of what?"

"Of being like this. Angry, hurt, afraid."

"And the guilt?"

He didn't answer.

"Exactly," I said. "A feeling isn't a crime. Actions are — you're accountable for those. But you were judging yourself before you'd even acted, just for the fact that something ugly had appeared inside you. If you sentence yourself for every thought, the inner court runs around the clock, and there's no one left to actually live."

He fell quiet.

"So — just let them go? 'Friends, go in peace'?"

"A beautiful line. But some fears won't leave after one polite request. Sometimes you'll have to live alongside them, without a prison. An inconvenient companion and a jailer aren't the same thing."

He reread the last line.

"All of it's just a mirage."

"Not all of it. A mirage is the belief that if you get scared, you're guaranteed to lose. That if you get angry, you become a bad person."

"But it really could have collapsed."

"It could have. Fear often builds a mirage out of a real possibility — it doesn't invent the event out of nothing, it turns a probability into an inevitability."

"So what, test it — like a QA engineer?"

I smiled.

"Exactly. Find the scenario. Separate expected behavior from actual behavior."

He laughed.

"So the new job turned out to be useful for more than just the paycheck."

He looked at the prison again.

"Are you free now?"

"No. But I'm someone who sometimes notices the bars before he starts mistaking them for scenery. I step out sometimes. Then come back — a familiar prison feels safer than an unfamiliar freedom."

"'Stop holding your fears hostage in fear itself' — what does that mean?"

"Don't be afraid of being afraid. Easy to say — which is why I had to write about it again. And again."

"How many times can you say the same thing?"

"Until, one day, instead of writing a new poem about it, you act differently."

He looked at me closely.

"Has that already happened?"

I thought of leaving my old job, of therapy, of the moments when I actually managed to say "no."

"Sometimes."

"So the prison's open?"

"It always was."

"Then why are we still here?"

I looked at the door. It really wasn't locked.

"I guess we were waiting for someone to give permission to leave."

He stood up.

"Are you giving it?"

"No. Because that would just make me your guard again."

It took him a moment to understand. Then he smiled. He walked to the door himself. And went out.

CHAPTER 16

Living Yesterday



Some poems are born after some powerful event. And some appear almost unnoticed. Nothing collapses, no one leaves, life gradually levels out. But every so often, strange little sparks start going off inside — not from pain, not from despair, not because another crisis forced you to stop, but as if from some new place inside you. As if, after a long inner winter, brief moments finally appear when it gets easier to breathe. Not forever, not permanently, but enough that you start wanting not just to work through your life, but simply to live it.

"Living Yesterday" appeared during exactly one of those moments. We were still in Poland at the time. I've already mentioned that I'd changed jobs — that was one of my first serious decisions made consciously, not on emotion. Life was gradually coming back together. But inner change never happens as fast as outer change.

The job appeared, the relationship started rebuilding itself. But my familiar reactions stayed the same for a long while yet. I was still taking various courses in inner work, learning to notice my own reactions, to look at them a little more calmly. But gradually I started to understand something: you can work on yourself endlessly, take apart every emotion, every thought, every grievance, every anxiety — **and one day discover that this whole time, you've been treating your life so diligently that you completely stopped living it.**

I think that's when this poem appeared. It came out very simple. I can see that especially clearly now: no complicated images, no towering metaphors, no hidden meanings. Almost slogans. "Step forward." "Start your story over." "Don't close the circle." "Live." I used to think this made it a little poorer than my other texts. Now I think differently. It isn't poorer. It was doing a completely different job.

Sometimes, after a hard week, a person doesn't need a philosophical treatise. He needs to get out of the house, take a walk, clear his head, let himself act a little foolish. Cut loose a bit, as I put it back then.

That's exactly what I wanted this poem to be — nothing to decode, nothing to trace back to which story a given image belonged to. Read it, and understand it, right away. Not because there's no depth to it. But because, in that moment, depth wasn't what was needed. Movement was.

The last stanza catches me especially now. Back then it seemed like ordinary encouragement. Now I see it differently: "And remember — you're not alone. An army of friends is with you." I wasn't writing about people I already knew at the time. Quite the opposite. I think I was writing about people I hadn't met yet. They already existed somewhere in the world. They just hadn't crossed paths with the real me yet. Maybe a person actually becomes less alone not when friends suddenly show up beside him, but when he gradually stops hiding behind everything he's been carrying around for so long.

— — —

Living Yesterday

We live in yesterday, but not in now,
hoping to change something.
Adding ourselves to the grayness of the crowd,
we're all trying to teach everyone something.

Forgetting the grievances of the past,
step forward, like it's the first time.
Feel the emotional burst.
Start your story over again.

Describe what's around you —
nature's colors, the singing of birds.
Don't close the vicious circle
made of eternally dissatisfied faces.

Instead, tear it open, quickly!
Fill your cup with something new.
You'll get the key to every door —
no need to bang your head against the wall.

Figure out how to break through that gap,
sink the ship of bile.
Once you find the edge of consciousness,
start living life all the way, full throttle.

Like the gingerbread man, running from granny and grandpa,
walk forward and don't be timid.
And remember — you're not alone.
An army of friends is with you.

— — —

I looked at him with a smile.

"You know… you actually think this poem is too simple."

He shrugged.

"Isn't it?"

"Compared to the others?"

"Of course. No labyrinths here, no bathyscaphes, no inner prisons. Just some slogans."

"Does that bother you?"

"A little."

I nodded.

"What if you told someone who's been sick for a long time just one sentence: 'Get up. Let's go for a walk.' That would sound too simple too."

He thought about it.

"But it could turn out to be exactly what they needed."

"Exactly."

We were quiet for a while. Then he looked at the poem again.

"So it wasn't about depth?"

"No."

"Then what was it about?"

"Necessity."

He smiled.

"Funny. I used to think the more complicated a text was, the better it was."

"Do you still think that?"

He shook his head.

"No. I think the form has to match the state the person is in."

"Exactly."

"So if someone just needs to take one step forward right now…"

"You shouldn't make them solve a puzzle first."

He laughed quietly.

"I really did want everything to be clear right away, back then. No digging. No decoding."

"Because you were tired of decoding your own life all the time."

He fell quiet again. Then suddenly pointed at the last stanza.

"This part, though…"

"Which part?"

"'An army of friends.'"

"What about it?"

"Back then I thought it was just a nice-sounding phrase."

I shook my head.

"No."

"No?"

"You weren't writing about people you already knew."

He frowned.

"Then who?"

"People you hadn't even met yet."

He was quiet for a long time.

"You think so?"

"I'm sure of it."

"Why?"

"Because back then, you were still becoming yourself. Real meetings almost always come later. Not when we're desperately searching for our people. But when we stop being strangers to ourselves."

He looked at the last line again.

"So… they already existed?"

"I think so."

"We just hadn't met yet."

"Exactly."

He smirked.

"Funny. I wrote it as encouragement. And it turned out to be a promise."

I smiled.

"Some promises only become clear years later."

He reread the poem once more.

"So… sometimes it really is enough just to start living?"

"Sometimes that's the hardest thing there is."

He nodded.

"Then I guess it's good this poem is so simple."

"Why?"

"Because a person who's finally worked up the courage to leave the house doesn't need a map of the labyrinth. **All he needs is to open the door.**"

CHAPTER 17

Beyond the Clouds

Sometimes the most important things don't happen while you're awake. They happen in a dream.

This poem belongs to the period when I was already living alone again, back in my own apartment. I was slowly trying to piece life back together. Setting things up, working, learning to exist in a new reality. On the outside, everything looked reasonably calm. But inside, nothing was finished yet.

This poem came out of a completely real dream. I dreamed that we were together again. Not my ex-wife. My wife. In the dream, there was no separation between us, no pain. We walked across the clouds, laughed, fooled around, spent time together somewhere in the city. It all felt so natural that not for a single second did it feel impossible. It was just ordinary life. The life I'd once considered mine.

And then I woke up. The first few seconds after waking were probably the most honest ones I'd had in a long time. My mind hadn't caught up yet — for it, the dream still existed. I opened my eyes. And saw another woman lying beside me. I remember being literally drenched in a cold sweat.

That was the exact moment I understood something very clearly for the first time. I didn't want to lie to myself anymore. You can convince yourself all you want that life goes on, that you need to move

forward, that a new relationship is bound to fix everything. **But the body already knows the truth before the mind does.**

After that morning, there was a day, on the way to work, when I felt so sick that I had to pull the car over. I threw up right there on the shoulder of the road.

At the time, it felt like I'd been badly wronged. Years later, I understand it differently. I'd wronged her just as much. I think that's the exact point where the urge to find a single guilty party disappeared. Sometimes people hurt each other equally badly. In different ways. But just as deeply. And admitting that turned out to be far harder than simply picking a side.

Now I understand that this poem isn't about love at all. It's about that brief second after waking, when the dream turned out to be more honest than being awake. When one life still existed inside me, and my eyes had already seen a completely different one. And it was exactly in that second that it became impossible to keep living my own lie.

— — —

Beyond the Clouds

We met inside of me.
I'd dreamed so long of seeing you.
We were missing that one day
that could have kept us from hating each other.

We could have walked across the clouds,
kissed without ever stopping,
let our hands do as they pleased,
lost in the flight of passion.

Eye to eye: "I'm all yours."
"And I'm all yours," our lips whispered back.
So why is it that sometimes
we end up so cruel to each other?

Let's forget it all, and once again
breathe deep with new strength.
Love brought us together —
and love itself gave its blessing.

But what am I supposed to do, how do I live?
Inside of me, everything is so beautiful!
How do I turn a fairy tale into real life
and paint it in bright color?

The vision feels exactly like reality.
I'm as if standing at the threshold of paradise…
But the dream is over — time to get up.
I opened my eyes — and there was someone else…

You still have a chance for your life
not to become a disappointment.
Believe in the dream, believe in yourself —
your efforts will be repaid many times over.

Oh people, don't break apart
what wasn't fastened together by you, up in the sky.

Let go of anger, forgive it all —
we'll all meet again, out there beyond the clouds.

— — —

I stared at the last stanza for a long while.

"'We met inside of me…'"

He smiled.

"Nice, isn't it?"

"It's nice. But that's not why it's strong."

"Then why?"

"Because it's not a metaphor."

He frowned.

"What do you mean?"

"You really did meet inside yourself. In a dream. Out in the real world, that meeting no longer existed anywhere."

He was quiet.

"That's true, actually…"

"You didn't understand that yet, back then."

"I just wanted so badly for it to turn out to be real."

"That's exactly why the first seconds after waking up were so terrifying."

"Because I was still there."

"Yes."

"And then I saw…"

He didn't finish.

"Another woman."

He nodded.

"I broke out in a cold sweat right then."

"I believe you."

"It felt like I'd been shoved, hard, out of one world and into another."

"And that's exactly when you stopped lying to yourself."

He looked at me carefully.

"You think it was exactly then?"

"You just told me so yourself."

He was quiet for a long time.

"Before that, I was still trying to convince myself I could live as if nothing had happened."

"And after the dream, you couldn't anymore."

"No."

"Why?"

"Because in the dream, I was happy. Really happy."

"And waking up, you understood where your heart actually was."

He let out a heavy breath.

"It hurt so much."

"Yes."

"You know what's strange, though? At the time, I thought I was the only one who'd been hurt."

"And now?"

He looked somewhere past me.

"Now I understand… I hurt her just as much."

"That's a really important thought."

"Why?"

"Because that's the first moment the need to find one guilty person disappears."

He nodded.

"I guess… we both hurt each other badly."

I was quiet for a moment.

"After that, you threw up in the car."

He looked surprised.

"You remembered that?"

"Of course."

"You think it's connected?"

"I think the body got ahead of the mind again."

He smirked.

"The body, again."

"Not for the first time. The mirror. The cold floor. Now this. It's like your body kept saying the same thing every time: 'Enough with the lying.'"

He thought about it.

"So… it wasn't the dream that changed everything?"

"No."

"Then what was it?"

"The dream tore away the last of your defenses."

He reread the final lines once more.

"'But the dream is over — time to get up. I opened my eyes — and there was someone else…'"

"Do you know what's most frightening about this?"

"What?"

"You wrote it almost without any emotion at all."

"Because there was no strength left in me by then."

"That's exactly why the line works the way it does."

He closed the page without saying anything.

"Strange… I thought I'd written a poem about love."

I shook my head.

"No."

"Then what's it about?"

"About the moment a person first stops lying to himself."

He sat in silence for a long time. This time, neither of us tried to finish the thought out loud.

CHAPTER 18

The Cup

Sometimes, after a long inner conversation, what you want isn't to understand one more thing — it's just to look.

This poem was born on the Baltic coast, where we'd gone with my wife's friends — the same trip I already mentioned in the "Mountains" chapter. "Mountains" came out of a need to find solitude inside myself. "The Cup" was written, I think, the next day — and here, I no longer wanted to go anywhere, not into the past, not into the dark caves of consciousness. I tried to just stay exactly where I was: watching, noticing, dissolving into what was happening.

The key word became "observation." I simply described what I saw: clouds, sand, sunlight flickering on skin — the chance to stop being a hamster on a wheel and feel, for a few hours, like I didn't owe anyone anything. **This is probably one of the first poems where I'm not trying to fix anything. I'm just present.**

The line "sometimes there's no need to think with your head" feels especially important to me now — thought had been my main tool, but it had gradually turned into a place where I could hide from life itself, endlessly. Here, for the first time, I let myself not explain what was happening: clouds don't have to be a symbol, sunlight on skin can just be sunlight on skin. Sometimes paying close attention is already

enough of an action.

At the time, I was just trying to picture the life I wanted to live — the sea, tents, mountains, more space and less of the daily grind. The poem became a picture of the future. Now, several years later, I'm sitting on the island of Gili Trawangan, reading this poem I wrote on the Baltic coast — and it turns out something strange has happened: **I'm sitting inside my own poem. Not figuratively. Literally.**

But I don't think it magically pulled this life toward me somehow. You can hand someone turquoise water and free time, and they'll still spend the whole day inside their anxiety, or their phone. What mattered wasn't reaching the sea — it was developing the kind of attention that would notice the clouds spreading out like white flecks of scale. **The poem didn't teach me to manufacture happiness out of nothing. It taught me not to miss it.**

— — —

The Cup

Against a blue backdrop, in white flecks,
the clouds playfully spread themselves out.
Sand trickled in a thin stream from my fist.
Only your hand kept it from flying off completely.

And little suns leapt across my skin
like children playing on a playground.
The waves caressed like a feather bed.
That day seemed to have no end, no edge at all.

Freed from the hands of the clock,
and setting my phone aside,
we trade the role of the hamster on its wheel
for a palace and a throne instead of a tent.

Breathing in deep the iodine of the sea breeze,
I'll walk barefoot along the shore.
I've put all my feelings on repeat.
Sometimes there's no need to think with your head.

I'll relax my body and fill the cup —
not with wine, but with the energy of the sky.
I'll paint life in a billion colors.
Let God keep watch, so no devil interferes.

— — —

"Beautiful," I said, rereading the first stanza.

He looked at me with mild suspicion.

"Just beautiful? Nothing to add?"

"Here you barely hid anything. You were just watching."

He smiled, then read it again: "Against a blue backdrop, in white flecks."

"I like it too, now. Back then it just came to me. Now I read it and actually see the clouds."

We were quiet for a moment.

"Do you know where I am right now?" I asked. "Not the Baltic coast. Gili Trawangan, in Indonesia. An island, turquoise water, sand under my feet. Waiting

on lunch."

It took him a second, then he looked at the poem, then back at me.

"You're seriously reading this there?"

"Absolutely. Turns out we did make it here — even further than you imagined back then. Just recently we were sleeping in tents on Rinjani, four days on the trail."

"Did you put the phone down?"

"Sometimes. Though right now I'm talking to you through a phone," I smirked.

"So it didn't all work out."

"Thankfully. Otherwise it'd be hard for us to talk right now."

He thought about it.

"So — I visualized this life back then, and it came true?"

"I don't think it happened just because you pictured the sea well. One image alone isn't enough — after it came decisions, work, selling the apartment, moving, mistakes. A direction isn't magic."

"Then what's the most important thing here?"

"Not that you pictured the sea. That you started learning to notice it. That's hard — you can sit in front of turquoise water and spend the whole day reading the news, you can go on vacation and keep living out your work week anyway."

"Do I do that?"

"Sometimes. But now you notice more often when you're missing what's happening. The poem held onto an important instruction: sometimes there's no need to think with your head."

He laughed.

"Finally, that came in useful."

"Very. Watch, breathe, feel the sand, eat lunch when it arrives. You can look for the meaning later."

He read the title again.

"Why 'The Cup'?"

"You wrote it yourself: 'I'll relax my body and fill the cup.' The cup is you."

"Very original," he smiled. "What was it filled with before?"

"Whatever — fear, resentment, attempts to understand everything. And here — sky, sun, sea."

"Can you actually choose what fills you?"

"Not entirely. But you can choose what you pay attention to. Not deny the pain — just stop treating it as the only reality."

He looked at the water.

"So happiness is also something you have to learn to notice? I thought if it came, you couldn't possibly miss it."

"You absolutely can. Sometimes a person is so busy waiting for some big happiness that he misses an entire day that was already good. 'That day seemed to have no end, no edge at all' — but the day ended."

"Then what was the point?"

"That it happened."

He thought about it.

"Do these three weeks feel like one day too? Are you missing them?"

I glanced at my phone.

"Sometimes."

"Put it down."

"Then the conversation ends."

"Maybe that's enough for today?"

I looked around. The water was gleaming. Warm sand lay under the table. Somewhere nearby, my lunch was being prepared.

"Maybe."

He looked at the poem again.

"You said it's well written. No 'but'?"

"No 'but.' Strange to hear that from myself, years later — I used to look for what to fix more often. I still do, now. But here, I just want to leave it as it is."

He nodded.

"So the cup did get filled, after all?"

"For this moment. Sometimes a moment is the only container we're ever actually given."

He smirked.

"There you go again, saying something pretty."

"Sorry."

"It's fine. Today, it's allowed."

I put the phone face-down and just watched the same wave roll onto the sand — for what must have been the tenth time already.

CHAPTER 19

A Conversation with My Brother



Sometimes a poem is called a conversation only because two people took part in it. But two people speaking aren't necessarily speaking to each other.

My brother wrote the opening lines of this text:

Hello, brother. You've seen the silence of the eternal. Where there's no step back. Where there's only forward, and no one coming the other way.

I answered with the next stanza. Then he sent his part again — about generations, the metallic taste of incandescence, inspiration, and the inevitable

lightness of an ending. I wrote everything else. Originally these were separate messages — I put them together and called the poem "A Conversation with My Brother," thinking something special was happening between us, as if we were breathing the same air.

Rereading the text today, I see it differently. **We're talking about completely different things — so different that even the stanzas barely connect to one another.** Back then I wanted to see this as two voices joining together. Now I hear two monologues set side by side — using similar words, but living in entirely different spaces of meaning.

This was especially true of the line "we've smelted tin down into lead" — a twist on a well-known song lyric about gold and tin. In our version, gold isn't being devalued into cheap metal anymore. We're taking tin and smelting it into lead — turning something soft into ammunition. I was curious whether my brother would notice that, whether he'd ask why lead, specifically. No real conversation about it ever happened. **The center of this poem isn't in the generations, or in eternity. It's in the conversation that never actually took place.**

Today I haven't spoken to my brother in about six months. Over thirty-five years, I've grown tired of his way of living, of a freedom that was often paid for by other people. I used to call him a genius of freedom. Now I understand: freedom without responsibility easily turns into a form of violence against the people

nearby. The second-to-last stanza — "we've grown sick of each other already, nervously we wait for an icy silence" — sounds almost like a prediction now.

The final stanza changes direction sharply: I stop talking about my brother and start talking about my own soul — wanting to lay it out on the bench by the wall so it can thaw in the sun. **After the entire attempt to be heard, I ask, for the first time, what I myself actually need.**

— — —

A Conversation with My Brother

Hello, brother.
You've seen the silence of the eternal.
Where there's no step back.
Where there's only forward, and no one coming the other way.

Where the blurred faces of passersby,
dissolving in the fog of doubt,
disappear — I feel it on my own skin.
Generation after generation.

Generation, generation…
The metallic taste of incandescence.
Inspiration, revelations,
the inevitable lightness of the ending.

You know, brother, out there an endless current
pours down onto wise heads.

We're allowed to leave our mark on eternity.
We've smelted tin down into lead.

What's been proven is meaningless now.
What's been built is now torn down.
Free thought has been devalued.
The borders of our ideals have been broken.

We've grown sick of each other already.
Nervously, we wait for an icy silence.
Waterfalls of words have poured out of us
from exhaustion and inattention.

I wish I could lay my soul out on the bench by the wall,
to let it thaw in the sun.
Like a little stream across the fields, however small,
made of cold, fresh spring water.

— — —

"Did you write the first line?" I asked.

"My brother did," he said, shaking his head. "I answered with the next stanza. Then he came back again. Everything after that was mine. It came out well, don't you think?"

I didn't answer right away.

"I'm not sure anymore that this is a conversation. The two of you barely respond to each other — he writes about eternity, you carry on with your own thought

about people and generations, but not his thought. He picks up the word 'generation' later, but I'm not sure he picks up the idea."

"But it sounds unified."

"Especially if you decide in advance that it's a dialogue. Otherwise what you hear is two people talking near each other."

He fell silent.

"You think we already didn't understand each other back then?"

"Maybe you understood each other less than you wanted to believe. A shared childhood, family, poetry, music, pain — that's enough for a bond, but not always enough for a conversation. You also need interest in what the other person actually said. You didn't want an answer in verse — you wanted him to stop and ask: 'Why lead?'"

He froze.

"Did he ask?"

He looked away.

"I don't remember."

"I think if he had asked, you'd remember."

He looked at the line about lead again.

"I flipped the song — the original was about gold and tin. Why did mine come out harsher?"

"Gold turning into tin is devaluation. Tin turning into lead is weaponization."

He repeated it slowly.

"We made bullets. For each other?"

"Among other things. I think you already felt that back then, but couldn't yet admit it. Now I can see how many years I spent trying to reach someone who didn't especially want to listen."

"Is he a bad person?"

"That's not really the question. We'd been living in different spaces of meaning for a long time. For him, freedom meant the ability to do whatever he wanted. For you, over time, it increasingly meant the ability to choose without destroying someone else."

He frowned.

"You're judging him again."

"Maybe. I'm tired — not of him, of our relationship."

"Do we stop talking?"

"Yes. Many years after this poem. Not because of one fight — because of an enormous number of conversations after which I kept feeling, more and more, like no conversation had actually happened."

"What about me?" he asked, quieter.

"You'll keep explaining, helping, waiting. Until you notice you're spending your life on a connection you're constantly building almost alone."

He reread: "We've grown sick of each other already."

"So I already understood that, back then?"

"Some part of you did, for sure. And 'nervously we wait for an icy silence' might be the single most accurate prediction in the whole text. We wanted to

stop talking the way we'd been talking — one person speaking, the other not listening, and both of us calling it closeness."

"Is the silence icy now?"

"It was, at first. Now it's more peaceful."

"Do you miss him?"

I didn't answer for a long time.

"Sometimes I miss him — but not the him of today. I miss the person I once thought we breathed together as one."

"Wasn't he real?"

"He was. Just maybe not entirely the way I saw him. A relationship doesn't become imaginary just because we failed to notice something in it. There was something real there. It's just that not everything I added onto him actually belonged to him."

He looked at the last stanza.

"Why the bench by the wall?"

"I wanted warmth. After trying to have that conversation, you stop asking, for the first time, whether he'll hear you, and start thinking about how to warm yourself up instead. 'I wish I could lay my soul out on the bench by the wall' is a very strong turn."

"Because I'm giving up?"

"Because you're returning the soul to its rightful owner — yourself. Before that, it had been lying between the two of you the whole time, and you kept

waiting for him to notice it, to pick it up."

"And he didn't?"

"Maybe he just didn't see it."

"That's even more painful."

He was quiet, then asked:

"Are you sure you were right to stop talking to him?"

"No. But not being completely sure doesn't mean you have to keep doing something that's destroying you."

"What if he changes? What if you do?"

"Maybe. Then maybe you'll talk again someday. But right now what I need isn't one more exchange of words — it's the presence of an actual person to talk to."

He looked at the title for a long time.

"So this isn't really 'A Conversation with My Brother'?"

"Let it stay," he said, answering for me. "I believed we were talking, back then. That's true too."

He looked at the last stanza again.

"Did the soul thaw?"

"Partly. Thanks to the silence too, actually. It's strange — I spent my whole life afraid that loneliness begins when people stop talking to each other."

"And it turns out?"

"Sometimes that's exactly when it ends."

He stood up, walked over to the bench by the wall, and set something invisible down beside himself.

"What's that?"

"The soul."

"How long do we wait?"

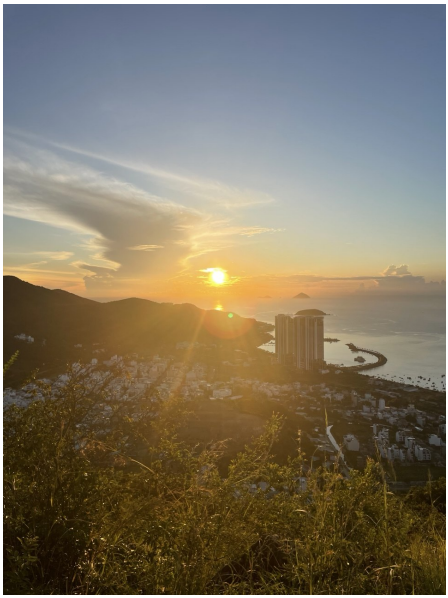
He turned his face up to the sun.

"Until it thaws."

The sun that day was genuinely warm — a rare thing for that city, at that time of year.

CHAPTER 20

Getting Acquainted



[Translator's note: Russian distinguishes pravda — a personal, subjective "truth" — from istina, the deeper, absolute "Truth." This chapter turns on that distinction. Here, lowercase "truth" stands for pravda, and capitalized "Truth" stands for istina.]

Sometimes change doesn't arrive like a blow, or like a decision made at your absolute limit. Sometimes it just gradually accumulates — out of a warm country, a settled daily life, a new job, books, music, conversations. Out of countless small things, none of which overturns anything on its own, until one day you wake up and notice: it's gotten quieter

inside.

This poem appeared once we were already in Vietnam, in Nha Trang. The first difficulties of the move were behind us, and life had taken shape. Almost all of my earlier poems had been born out of pain — I'd needed to stop the bleeding, work something out, hold on. Here, the source was different: I felt good, and **I wanted to write not because something inside me was tearing apart, but because joy needed an outlet too.**

I was heavily influenced by Marcus Aurelius around that time — not by any single formula, but by the sheer sense of scale. A person is a grain of sand in an enormous current, unable to control most of what happens. And unexpectedly, that wasn't humiliating — it was a relief: you don't have to carry everything on your own shoulders, it's enough just to be present for the stretch of life you've been given.

The poem is called "Getting Acquainted" — not with a person, not with a country, not even with the Universe in any literal sense. **This was getting acquainted with life itself, which had finally stopped feeling like preparation for something real.**

One of the lines I hold most dear here is: "I've got one minute left before old age. And we only just met this morning..." It's less about age than about a sudden sense of value: you've existed for so many years, worked, loved, made mistakes — and only now, it seems, have you noticed life itself for the first time.

And the line "My heart pounds up into my throat with joy" still feels important to me precisely because that sensation used to come only from anxiety. The body would tighten, the pulse would rise to the throat — and that always meant danger. Here, for the first time, it spoke the same language, but about happiness. The mechanism hadn't changed. The cause had.

I remember that morning on the mountain in Nha Trang very well, watching the sunrise: everything is cyclical, this had already happened countless times before me and would happen countless times after. Night isn't final, but you can't hold onto sunrise either — you can only be present for it. That's where the wish to be led by the Universe comes from — not a surrender of will, but an agreement to loosen the endless need to control everything: I'll listen closely, you show the way, just don't lie to me.

The request sounds almost childlike: I'm already willing to be a tiny speck in a vast world, but I still want a guarantee that the path means something. That's where the line "Don't let Truth be replaced by some truth" comes from. There can be many truths — everyone has their own, and each one can be beautifully packaged and sold. I didn't want another version of events. I wanted something that didn't depend on packaging, or on my mood that day. I used to search for answers to make the pain stop. **Now I'd become interested in living inside the question itself** — and maybe that, in the end, was the real meeting.

— — —

Getting Acquainted

Waking from a quiet voice —
from nature's inaudible singing,
I leave my dreams behind,
called by the endless cosmos.

I'll leave everything unneeded there,
let an unforgettable dream help me along.
Today I'm aimed toward something better.
It'll all happen — the Universe is with me…

I'll listen to you with pure delight,
and you just point out the way.
Being led by you is built into me —
so lead me, only don't lie to me!

Grant me a fierce, untamed passion,
give me an unconquerable will.
Don't let Truth be replaced by some truth,
however nicely packaged it comes.

My heart pounds up into my throat with joy.
My frayed nerves have settled down.
I've got one minute left before old age.
And we only just met this morning…

— — —

"Who did you meet?" I asked, rereading the last stanza.

He looked at me, surprised.

"The Universe. Who else do you get acquainted with?"

"Life. You were already alive before this, after all — you just kept treating the present as a hallway leading to the future: solve your problems, fix your relationship, move somewhere — and then life would finally start."

"Did it start here?"

"Here, you noticed for the first time that it was already underway. Not because of Vietnam by itself — but the warmth, the sea, the promotion at work all helped. There's no point pretending everyday stability doesn't matter — when you have somewhere to live and something to pay for it with, space opens up inside you."

"What about spirituality? Marcus Aurelius?"

"That helped too. But no book delivers peace of mind ready-made — it meets you where you've already been gradually arriving on your own."

He looked at the first stanza.

"Whose voice is this — 'waking from a quiet' one?"

"Maybe nature's. Maybe your own. And the cosmos is just a name for the scale that calmed you down at the time — next to infinity, a personal catastrophe stops looking like the whole of reality."

"But doesn't that cheapen my pain?"

"No. A grain of sand can hurt too. It just isn't obligated to believe the desert stopped moving

because of its pain."

He couldn't help smiling.

"I liked thinking of myself as a grain of sand."

"Because before that, you'd spent too long trying to be the one holding up the entire world."

"Then who does hold it up?"

"Maybe no one. Frightening and freeing, at the same time."

He read again: "Today I'm aimed toward something better."

"Sounds almost like an affirmation."

"But it isn't one. You'd already started living better before you wrote this — the line wasn't convincing you of anything, it was summing something up."

"Yes," he agreed. "I really did feel calm inside. Not for the first time ever, but like it was the first time in a long while without a catch."

"Weren't you waiting for it all to collapse again?"

"Probably. Just a little less than usual."

He moved to the third stanza — "so lead me, only don't lie to me."

"You trust the Universe, and immediately attach a condition," I noted. "Very human line — willing to let go of control, only if you're promised an honest road."

"And is it honest?"

"No. Life doesn't promise anything. Good people suffer, effort isn't always rewarded, dreams aren't

obligated to come true."

He looked at me, irritated.

"Then what am I even happy about?"

"That life doesn't have to be fair in order to still be life. I know how awful that sounds. But acceptance starts exactly where you stop demanding the world sign a contract."

"So the Universe is going to lie to me?"

"It never promised you anything. Sometimes a person just needs a conversation partner bigger than himself."

He reread the next stanza — about willpower, passion, and Truth.

"Say I get the willpower and the passion. What about Truth?"

I smiled.

"That one's harder. People often call 'Truth' whatever version of the truth happens to be convenient for them right now. A truth can be accurate within one particular point of view — Truth has to hold up across a change of view."

"Does something like that even exist?"

"I don't know. But maybe the point isn't finding it — it's not stopping at the first nicely packaged version. Even back then, you didn't fully trust pretty explanations — though you loved them anyway."

He reached the last stanza — "My heart pounds up into my throat with joy."

"One of your favorite lines," I said. "It used to only happen from fear. Here it happens from joy — the body speaking a familiar language, but delivering different news."

"So it changed?"

"More like it learned that strong emotion doesn't always mean danger. At least on that one morning."

"And then anxiety came back?"

"Of course. A new turn of the spiral doesn't erase the old themes — you'll run into fear, pain, anger again. But now you'll know one more state as well: genuine joy that didn't have to pass through suffering first to earn its right to exist."

He was quiet, then said softly:

"So before, I wrote to survive. And here — because I was actually living."

He shifted his gaze to the last lines.

"Are you afraid of old age? Of death?"

"Of course I am. But there's no despair here, precisely because we did, in the end, get acquainted. Late, but we did. Maybe getting acquainted with life always happens late — to actually see it, you first have to notice how long you'd been looking right past it."

He was quiet.

"How old are you now?"

"Thirty-five."

He laughed.

"What old age?"

"I think so too, now. So there's a lot more ahead — though, again, no guarantees."

He looked toward the sunrise.

"But the sun will rise again tomorrow?"

"Most likely. And if it doesn't, we won't have time to be upset about it anyway."

He laughed, then turned serious again.

"Everything's cyclical. So there'll be more?"

"There will. All kinds of things." He nodded, and this time the answer didn't disappoint him. "Will this peace stay?"

"Not permanently. But now you know the way back to it — stop waiting for life to show up around the corner."

"So where is it?"

"Here. Right now."

He breathed in. His heart rose to his throat again — fast, warm, almost indistinguishable from that old, familiar anxiety.

CHAPTER 21

Old Age

Sometimes a person writes a thought down first, and only years later finds out which philosophy it belongs to.

This poem appeared back in Poland, when I hadn't read Marcus Aurelius yet and couldn't have named the system I was inwardly drawn to. But the questions already existed: how much time are we actually given? Why do we talk about old age as if it's guaranteed to arrive? Old age might simply never come — we're used to picturing it ahead of us like a guaranteed station stop, with death somewhere after it. But a person isn't just mortal. As Woland once reminded us, he's **suddenly mortal.** So the first line isn't really asking about old age so much as about time: how many words do we have left, and will any of them be words that fill our eyes with rivers of joy — or will we spend them on arguments and reproaches that stopped changing anything long ago?

In the collection, "Getting Acquainted" comes right before this poem — but it was actually written later, in Vietnam, after I'd encountered Stoicism. This one, the earlier poem, I still placed after "Getting Acquainted": first a person gets acquainted with life, then asks how much of it is left. The order in which thoughts arrive and the order in which we make sense of them don't have to match.

When I first genuinely ran into Stoicism in Vietnam — driving to Dalat, I put on an audiobook almost by accident — it wasn't persuasion by something foreign, it was recognition: "So someone else thinks this way too?" Stoicism didn't put these thoughts into me. It gave them a language. Coming back to this poem, I saw that even in Poland, without knowing the names of any philosophical schools, I'd already been circling the same questions: how long will even the memory of the greatest people last, what will be left of my fears today in thirty years, in a hundred, in a thousand. **Behind me — eternity. Ahead of me — eternity. My life between them is almost impossible to make out.**

That thought was liberating more than frightening: if everything is this brief, why guard grievances as if they had eternal value? But that kind of scale has its own danger too. For instance: my wife and I are sitting at a restaurant, I step away for a few minutes — a small thing to me, and if I rise above the situation with a thought about eternity, it's easy to dismiss it entirely. But for her, it might not be about the minutes at all: "Did you even think about the fact that I'm here?" Eternity helps you see how much of a conflict is just noise — but once you've risen high enough, it matters to come back down, to the specific person in front of you. Otherwise philosophical calm just becomes a way to emotionally check out. **Maturity isn't about picking one scale. It's the ability to hold both at once.**

The line about rebirth and fences isn't about mysticism. You build a system, you think you've figured out people, goodness, guilt, freedom — and then the system collides with life and breaks, and at that point you either rebuild the same old structure, or let yourself see things differently. A phoenix burns itself — an image that's always had something suspicious about it: not every inner fire leads to renewal. What matters is understanding exactly what's burning — an old lie, or a living person along with it.

Next comes the Styx: which feeling will turn out to be the one true friend that doesn't vanish at the final border? Roles and pretty explanations won't be much use before death — but maybe a feeling will remain. Not necessarily a lofty one. But an honest one. And in the line about the ticket to the heavens, I still love the simple request: let it be crowded up there. Not a private paradise for the chosen few — a place where I'll smile at the locals, stay out of everyone's way, and rise again.

My grandmother's story adds another layer here. She was full of a real passion for life, loved living — and smoked heavily the whole time; the addiction wrecked her body and led to cancer. She was born in 1944 and died in 2012, at around sixty-seven. **Love of life isn't always stronger than addiction** — a person is capable of wanting opposite things at once: to live, and to destroy himself; to want freedom, and to build a prison. We know something is wrecking us, and we keep doing it anyway — not because we don't

value life at all, but because we haven't yet learned another way to cope with it.

The ending returns to repetition: how many times does the script have to repeat? I used to be afraid of cyclical patterns — it felt like if a situation repeated, I hadn't learned anything. Now I think differently: repetition isn't always an exact copy. Sometimes it's a spiral — the same point, but seen from a different height. And yet the ending is known in advance: no matter how many times a person is reborn within one life, the life itself will end. That doesn't make it meaningless. On the contrary — it's exactly the limited nature of time that makes every single scene unrepeatable.

— — —

How Many Words Do We Have Left Before Old Age

How many words do we have left before old age,
the kind that fill our eyes with rivers of joy?
How many breaths, from the very first one,
until we give up on this reality?

How many more times, before the promised reckoning,
will they screen us a movie at night — a prophetic one?
The director will hand over the main idea,
one that works better than a slap across the face.

How many outlooks, before rebirth,
will shatter against their own fences?
We'll rise up from the ashes right away,
like a phoenix on the day of its self-immolation.

How many feelings — and which one will turn out
to be the true friend brave enough
to cross the river Styx, and won't refuse
to pay the ferryman his fare?

How much does a ticket to the heavens cost?
And God willing, it'll be crowded up there!
I'll smile at the local population,
and I won't get in the way — and I'll rise again.

How many times must the script repeat?
What's the lesson, and how old are we, really?
And the ending's already known in advance…
but the show goes on regardless.

— — —

"Had you already read Marcus Aurelius by then?" I asked, looking at the first line.

"I didn't even know who he was," he answered. "I was just thinking. Then I heard him and was floored — someone had already said, ages ago, exactly what I was trying to piece together myself."

"Did that sting?"

"The opposite. It was a relief — it meant I wasn't the only one this strange."

I smiled.

"So there was another meeting here too. Not just with Marcus Aurelius — with yourself. You heard someone else's philosophy and recognized your own direction in it."

He looked at the poem.

"I wrote this before 'Getting Acquainted.' But you put it after, in the collection."

"Because it's truer to the meaning that way: first, getting acquainted with life, then asking how much of it is left. The order thoughts arrive in and the order you make sense of them in don't have to match."

He reread the first stanza.

"So — how many words are left?"

"I don't know. Maybe a lot. Maybe these are the last ones."

"Why would you say that?"

"You're the one who wrote a poem about sudden finitude — and now you'd rather treat it as theoretical. Even people who spend their time thinking about death usually do that."

"Are you ready to die right now?" he smirked.

I didn't answer immediately.

"No. Stoicism doesn't have to turn a person to stone. Marcus Aurelius said that compared to eternity, the difference between 'now' and 'in ten years' is negligible. But for a living person, ten years still feels like ten years. The thought of death doesn't give you

indifference — it gives you scale, a way to separate what's noise from what actually matters."

He looked at me closely.

"So just now, I left my wife alone at the restaurant for twenty minutes and didn't say anything. On the scale of eternity, what does it matter?"

"Almost nothing. And through the eyes of the person sitting there, not understanding where you disappeared to?"

He was quiet.

"It matters to her."

"Exactly. So you rise above the situation to keep from blowing it out of proportion — and then you come back down, so you don't lose the person. Two scales are more honest than one."

"That's it? Just 'you should have said something'?"

"Sometimes wisdom really is that boring-looking."

He looked at the second stanza again — about the director and the slap across the face.

"Were you waiting for life to explain everything on its own?"

"It explained plenty of times. I didn't always understand — sometimes after the slap, your head just hurts. An event by itself doesn't guarantee a lesson. We call everything a lesson just to make the chaos feel more organized."

He thought about it.

"And rebirth — how many outlooks have to break?"

"All the ones that stop holding up against reality. If you like your outlook, you'll defend it until the fence turns out to be stronger than you are. Usually a person would rather break himself than let go of a belief — about his brother, about being a good person, about his marriage."

"So the phoenix has to burn everything?"

"No. Only the shape it can no longer live in. And you have to be careful with self-immolation — you've already destroyed yourself enough times and called it change. If more life is left after the fire, that's renewal. If less — that's just another punishment."

He was quiet, then asked:

"Which feeling crosses the Styx? Love? Fear? Regret?"

"I don't know. I'd like to believe it's love. Fear probably disappears first, and regret might hold on all the way to the shore."

"What would you take with you?"

"Curiosity. Even after death, I'd want to know what's there. And if there's nothing — then there'll be no one left to be disappointed."

He looked at the stanza about the heavens.

"Why do I hope it'll be crowded up there?"

"Because you don't want to be alone, even in paradise. Or because you want everyone to get in — no chosen few."

"Even my brother? Even people I hate?"

"Even them. If it really is paradise, the question up there is probably framed differently anyway."

He gave a joyless smile, then went back to the ending.

"The ending's known in advance, and the show goes on anyway."

"As long as there's someone to watch it. A song ends — that doesn't make the previous three minutes pointless, even if no one remembers it in a hundred years."

He was quiet.

"My grandmother loved life too. And smoked anyway. So she didn't really love it?"

"Loving life isn't always stronger than an addiction. A person can want opposite things at once: to live, and to destroy himself; to want freedom, and to build a prison."

"Did she die early because of that?"

"Partly. But I wouldn't turn an illness into a verdict on a habit. No one knew how many words she had left before old age — same as we don't know for ourselves."

"Does that scare you?"

"Yes. And it frees me, at the same time — you just said it yourself, about opposites."

He nodded.

"So what do I do with the fact that death might come before old age does?"

"Don't wait for old age to start living. Say what matters. Don't blow small things out of proportion — but don't hide behind eternity either, when there's a living person right beside you."

"My wife and the restaurant, again?"

"Good example. Especially in the face of death, it's worth mentioning when you're stepping away — you might not get another chance to come back to the table."

He stopped smiling.

"That's harsh. And in a minute you're going to tell me it's all just a grain of sand anyway."

"That's also true. You can't live permanently on two scales at once, but you can climb up sometimes to see the whole, and then come back down so you don't lose the detail. The right scale is whichever one helps you stop lying, right now."

He read the title again.

"How many words do we have left before old age?"

"I don't know. Words aren't issued in a limited print run — the time you get to say them in is what's limited."

"So what should I say?"

I looked at him.

"Thank you — for writing this before you knew what your own thought was called. I'm sorry — to everyone whose small human moments I've sometimes too easily dismissed with eternity. And… I love you."

"Who's that for?"

I didn't answer. He smiled.

"Fine. Let everyone decide that for themselves."

We were quiet for a while. The show went on.

"How much longer do you think we've got?" he finally asked.

I didn't know how to answer. Maybe that's exactly why the question still hasn't gone stale.

CHAPTER 22

Samsara



Sometimes a book doesn't hand you a new thought. It gathers into a system things that had already existed inside you as separate, scattered feelings.

"Samsara" came out of reading Dmitry Morozov's book Twice-Born. I devoured it. For me, it became something like a Russian Bhagavad Gita — an attempt to show that what happened thousands of years ago keeps repeating: the clothes change, the states change, the weapons change, but brothers still go out to fight against brothers.

At the time, the war between Russia and Ukraine was already underway — one of the reasons we left.

Reading about a battle where relatives destroy each other, I first felt the usual bitterness: why doesn't knowledge of past catastrophes stop us from creating new ones? And then the question changed. Instead of "why did this happen," it became: "how could it not have happened?" Not because the war was right, but because I started seeing the chain of events that led to it. **Understanding a mechanism isn't the same as justifying its result.** You can trace how a brotherhood fell apart without accepting that killing your brother is justified.

What struck me in the book was the image of a torn pattern of brotherhood: the experience of those who saw further than an ordinary person gets washed away by the tide of the crowd, and the new mass of people wants only its own little world and pretty scenery — something simple, something you can immediately touch and buy. Wanting an earthly life isn't a crime in itself. But when it becomes the entire content of a life, everything deeper ends up buried under a layer of soot — that's where the first stanza came from.

I was preoccupied at the time with the idea of multiple lifetimes — not as a matter of belief, but as a way of seeing: if you allow for many lives, a person could already have been anywhere, could have lived through suffering, power, downfall, and come back again. Each existence isn't a final verdict, just another form of experience. But there's a temptation hiding in this: if there are infinitely many lives, it's easy to start treating this one as a rough draft. It seemed more

important to me to think the opposite — if the same scenario keeps repeating, that's exactly why it matters to notice, even once, what it is you're actually reproducing.

The stanza about the Upanishads became the central one for me: "he who doesn't seek knowledge won't be troubled by it." Before this, I'd almost always wanted to share new knowledge with everyone, to shake a person awake, to show them they weren't living deeply enough. There was a lot of genuine enthusiasm in that — and no small amount of vanity too: I was appointing myself the one who already understood, and the other person the one who needed teaching. This phrase was the first thing that made me ask: do I actually have the right to disturb someone with knowledge they never asked for? Knowledge doesn't just liberate — it destroys an old support, however uncomfortable, that a person had gotten used to leaning on. **A hint turned out to be more honest than an explanation** — not because I wanted to hide behind vagueness, but because I didn't want to take away someone else's chance to arrive at a discovery on their own. What you tell a person, they can forget. What they arrive at themselves becomes part of who they are.

In the image of a person caught in the "whirlpool of worldly pleasures," I also saw my older brother — his freedom, which other people ended up paying for. I don't want to be his judge, but not wanting to judge doesn't mean pretending not to see what's happening. At the same time, I don't place myself far off to the

side — I lived off those same pleasures for a long time too. The only difference, maybe, is that I haven't become a parent yet — and that doesn't make me morally superior, it just means life hasn't put us in the same circumstances.

The ending of the poem is an almost blunt formula: give, create, love. After all the circles of samsara, hell, and the Upanishads, I come back to three ordinary actions — not to explain the world, not to conquer rebirth, but simply not to miss the frame that's running right now. But this isn't a hedonistic "live for today" — worldly pleasures are also very good at imitating presence. Give, so life doesn't collapse into mere consumption. Create, so you leave something behind you. Love, so the other person doesn't turn into just another pleasure to consume. **That's how I understand escaping the wheel of samsara today: not some mystical liberation, but the moment you stop unconsciously reproducing the same script.**

— — —

Samsara

Neon lights, shop windows, and pretty scenery
will fill the emptiness, but only for a moment.
Everything real lies buried under a layer of soot,
under the eternal weight of gossip and intrigue.

How many times have you burned in hell,
or set foot on the edge of the seventh heaven?

A conscience full of holes — that's undeniably trendier —
begging the Lord, at Sunday mass,

to close his eyes to all your blasphemies
and grant you the comfort of idle days.
Or at least the appearance of that feeling,
so you don't have to look at anything behind it.

Woe to those who, without walking the path of humility,
fell into the whirlpool of worldly pleasures.
He who doesn't seek knowledge won't be troubled by it —
so the sacred texts of the Upanishads foretold.

What could be sadder, in all the world,
than being a hamster in the wheel of Samsara?
Live every frame of this film,
without forgetting to give, to create, to love.

— — —

"'He who doesn't seek knowledge won't be troubled by it,'" I read out loud. "That's the key line. So why are you explaining everything right now? Writing a whole chapter, going on about the Upanishads and samsara — aren't you disturbing everyone with this same knowledge?"

He thought about it.

"Good question. But this book doesn't show up at someone's door uninvited — they open it themselves. Yes, they get my version, I'm still steering them somewhere. I just don't say: 'here's the one correct meaning.' I say: 'here's what happened to me.' And if the reader sees something else — fine. An author doesn't necessarily know everything he's written, either."

"So explaining is allowed, after all?"

"You can invite someone into your own understanding. You just can't lock them inside it."

He looked at me.

"What if a person doesn't want to know?"

"Leave them be. That's harder when it's someone close to you — my brother, for instance. He's screwing up, yes. But I shouldn't stay silent either — I can say what I see, draw a line, refuse to take part. I just can't force him to learn it."

"Are you blaming him?"

"Sometimes. Even though I keep saying I'm not his judge. Those two things don't cancel each other out: I don't know his whole life and have no right to hand down a final verdict — and at the same time I'm angry about specific things he's done. He's guilty of some things. So am I. The difference, maybe, is that I ask myself that question a little more often now."

He looked at the second stanza — about hell.

"Do you actually believe in past lives?"

"I don't know. I found it interesting to entertain as an idea and look at things from inside it. The line works even if there's no reincarnation: over the course of just one life, a person ends up in hell, and nearly in heaven, plenty of times. I used to like the idea that any suffering serves some purpose. Now I'm more careful with that — it too easily justifies pain after the fact."

"So the war wasn't 'meant to happen' either?"

"It could have become historically inevitable, if hatred and violence had been piling up for years. But being predictable isn't the same as being necessary — there were human decisions at every single link in the chain. People just change their weapons faster than they change their own mechanisms."

He read the first stanza.

"You yourself said nature fills the cup. Here you're writing that scenery only fills the emptiness for a moment."

"Not a contradiction. Beauty can fill a person up, but it doesn't have to replace inner work. If you look at the sea and you're actually present, it fills you. If you demand that it permanently fix your life, you'll need a different sea within a week. You can travel and still be a hamster on a wheel. The wheel will just be relocating between countries."

He smirked, then looked at the line about the conscience full of holes.

"Did I do that too? Talk about my own self-destruction in pretty language?"

"Of course. The image of a free man who drinks and owes nobody anything is an attractive one. Your brother lived that way. So did you, for a while."

"But I got out."

"Partly. Him — I don't know. I don't see him closely enough anymore to say for sure."

He reached the stanza about prayer.

"Does God really close his eyes, if you ask him to?"

"I don't know. But maybe prayer isn't for making a deal with him — maybe it's for you to stop closing your own eyes. People really do often ask for the appearance of a feeling, not the feeling itself — you can perform care and still not listen to someone, go through the motions of faith and avoid ever meeting what you claim to believe in. You can even write a deep piece of writing and decide that's already changed you."

"That's about us," he said.

"Especially about us."

He went back to the Upanishads.

"So knowledge destroys something useful?"

"Convenient ignorance. And that's not always a bad thing — a person might not be ready to go without a support, even a false one. So it's worth asking first whether they want to look, instead of ripping the crutch out of their hands just to prove they're walking

wrong. That's probably why the gods in the book took on forms people could handle — not deceiving them, but sparing them: a person might not survive direct light."

"And in your poems, you try to turn the brightness down?"

"Sometimes. Sometimes I crank it up instead. But a hint feels more and more honest to me than an explanation — it's a way of leaving someone free to arrive at the discovery themselves."

"What if no one understands it?"

"Maybe the door just hasn't been needed by anyone yet. But I needed the text either way — the author is a reader too. Just the first one."

He looked at the final stanza.

"'Live every frame' — you say it outright, even though you just decided not to teach."

"A contradiction of the in-between period. I'm still a bit of a preacher — I've just gotten better at disguising it. As a dialogue, for instance."

"I'm you too," he noted. "So how is this book any different from a sermon?"

"In that you can talk back to me. A reader can just close the book. There's no other comfort — anything you say has an effect, the question isn't how to become sterile, it's whether you leave room for a response."

He reread: "give, create, love."

"Which one matters most?"

"I don't know. You can give without love — out of fear. You can create out of vanity. You can love and give nothing at all. Maybe that's why they stand together: each verb checks the others."

"What does it actually mean to escape samsara — not religiously, for real?"

"Noticing the repetition before it finishes the day for you again. And acting differently — even by one percent. So the circle becomes a spiral, for once."

He was quiet, then asked, more sharply:

"What about the war? Brothers killing brothers again — where's the one percent in that?"

"I don't know. If you're waiting for a book to stop an army, that's almost certainly hopeless. But maybe it's about at least not letting yourself turn another person into an abstract enemy so easily. Sometimes the enemy is real, and you genuinely have to defend yourself. But brotherhood is sometimes torn apart long before the first shot is fired — and it can't be rebuilt with pretty words, only with responsibility, memory, the ability to see a person in the other side without denying the danger."

"That sounds insufficient."

"Because I don't have a sufficient answer. So I'm not a sage after all — just someone who read a book and, for a while, saw his own life through its language. And wrote a poem — at first, probably, to explain something to other people. Now, to invite them in."

"Invite them where?"

I looked at the open page.

"There are more questions here than answers. Let everyone pick their own. 'He who doesn't seek knowledge won't be troubled by it.' And whoever does seek it — let them walk in and find their own."

He reread the last stanza once more.

"We're repeating ourselves again. The show goes on, the wheel keeps turning…"

"Samsara," I smiled. "Maybe, for a start, we could skip saying that last pretty line."

He nodded. The door stayed open — evening air drifted into the room, and somewhere beyond it you could hear other people's voices, footsteps, ordinary life.

CHAPTER 23

Eternal Spirit

Some poems change their meaning after years pass, not because some hidden thought gets uncovered inside them. The person reading them changes instead.

"Eternal Spirit" is one of my favorite poems: life-affirming, energetic, almost militant. I was sitting on a rock on a mountain, and it just burst out of me — I didn't have to spend long gathering images, I simply felt that motion inside: the desire to live, to act, to overcome.

I was doing yoga at the time and seriously considering becoming an instructor. But the yoga I was practicing back then was, first and foremost, a practice of achievement: more, faster, stronger, deeper. If a limit showed up, you were supposed to push through it. At some point I injured my back — a herniated disc appeared, I was offered surgery, and I decided against it, choosing instead to build up a muscular support structure around it. Back then, it seemed to me that this injury had to have some meaning. Today I'm more careful with that kind of thinking: not every injury is specifically sent to teach a person something. But this injury is what led me to swimming — and water changed my whole idea of movement: you can't get everything done with a single burst of effort in it, you can't negotiate with it through force, you have to enter it.

During a recent climb up Rinjani — four days with a pack, about forty kilometers, my back hurting badly the whole way — this whole story unexpectedly came back to me. After coming down, I thought: I need to go back to yoga, but a different kind. Not the kind where every limit is a challenge to be defeated. **Not conquering the body. Listening to it. Not becoming steel. Becoming water.**

That's exactly when the old poem showed me the person I used to be. Its entire vocabulary is built on conquest: a bullet, steel, battle, a shark. This is the language of someone who doesn't just want to live — he sinks his teeth into life, treats hunger as proof of youth and stopping as old age. I still feel close to that energy, and I don't think that person was wrong — he genuinely needed that strength, after everything he'd been through.

But today I read the line "My will blindly leads me toward victory" differently. Back then, the blindness of the will felt like a virtue. Now I ask: does it even see where it's leading? **You can conquer your own body so thoroughly that it stops letting you move at all.** And the image of a valley between two mountains — back then, a hiding place to bury the battle inside — I read differently today: a valley is also a riverbed, a channel water runs through. Between two worlds, you don't necessarily have to build fortifications — you can look for the current that connects them instead.

For a long time I confused strength with constant effort. But strength can also show up in the ability to stop before an injury happens, to not need to prove anything, to not rush. Water is soft — and it's exactly what reshapes stone. Not with one blow. With presence. "Eternal Spirit" remains the text of someone who wanted to be steel. Today it's being read by someone learning to be water. One doesn't cancel out the other — steel is still needed, it just shouldn't be the only material a life is built from. **The eternity of the spirit, to me now, isn't about an endless capacity for warfare — it's the capacity to change shape and still remain yourself.**

— — —

Eternal Spirit

My head is like a beehive,
my heart, a bird trapped in the cage of my chest.
It wants the speed of a flying bullet,
the one fired off by the mind — a murderer.

My arms, like levers, have grown tired,
my legs keep walking on out of habit.
My nerves are a shield of stainless steel,
hardened in a hundred thousand skirmishes.

For the battle between two worlds —
the one that's mine, and the other one, outside —
I am the valley lying between the mountains.
I don't want anyone to find me.

My jaw muscles clench along my cheekbones.
My will blindly leads me toward victory.
I sink my teeth into life like a shark,
completely forgetting about lunch.

I'm incapable of satisfying this hunger
gnawing away at my soul, day after day.
As long as I feel it — I'm young.
When I grow old, I'll dock at the shore.

Let the years wear away at this body,
making it harder to conquer new ground.
My spirit is eternal and wants to get to work.
All in all — mostly good, with a bit of mischief thrown in.

— — —

"'My will blindly leads me toward victory,'" I read. "Where exactly is it leading you?"

"Forward, toward the goal," he answered.

"And if there's a cliff up ahead?"

He was quiet for a moment.

"Then I guess you have to watch your step."

"Then it's not blind anymore. I spent years working up to picking apart one single word. These days, the blindness of the will doesn't strike me as a virtue."

"Because you got more cowardly?"

"More careful. You're going to ask what happened to you. A lot. You'll injure your back — a herniated disc

will show up, they'll offer you surgery, you'll turn it down and decide to build up the muscles around it instead. And you'll leave the yoga you dreamed of — not right away, but you will."

"So the injury ruins everything?"

"No. It changes your direction — toward water. Swimming becomes part of your life: training, technique, breathing."

"So the injury was necessary?"

"The fact that something valuable came after the pain doesn't prove the pain was sent to you on purpose. I don't want to assign some higher meaning to every misfortune after the fact — it's too easy, that way, to tell someone who's suffering, 'be glad, this will teach you something.' For some people, it just breaks them."

He looked at his hands.

"In the poem, the body just wears away over the years. Don't I take care of it? I do yoga, I get stronger."

"You force it to get stronger. Care asks what the body needs right now. Achievement-chasing already has its answer: one more load to carry."

"You've gone soft."

"I'm learning to. Softness conquers more slowly, but water reshapes stone too — not with a single blow, with presence."

He reread the second stanza — about the nerves as a shield of stainless steel.

"A shield protects you."

"And isolates you. It doesn't get wounded — and it doesn't get touched, either. These days I think you can't raise a shield only against pain — it blocks everything, including whatever requires vulnerability."

"But steel is necessary."

"Of course. I'm not suggesting you turn into a puddle. I'm suggesting you become water — stop assuming the only way to move is to smash through the obstacle. You can find a crack, change shape, retreat and come back."

"That sounds like cowardice."

"To a bullet of a man, anything that doesn't fly in a straight line looks like cowardice. And the murderous mind you unleash in the first stanza — that's you, killing off in yourself whatever didn't fit into the system: weakness, doubt, fear."

"We already covered this in 'Prison.'"

"Did you expect the question to disappear after just one poem?"

He got to the third stanza — about the valley between the mountains.

"Back then, that was a hiding place," I said. "Now, to me, it's a riverbed. Water runs between the mountains."

"There's no water in the poem."

"There is now. I'm reading you years later — and I see what I want to see, same as any reader would. The text is already bigger than the memory that made it."

He was quiet.

"I didn't want anyone to find me, because it wasn't safe out there."

"And a permanent hiding place becomes a prison of its own. Your poems keep talking to each other."

He got to the shark — "I sink my teeth into life like a shark."

"Why do you need to sink your teeth into life?"

"So it doesn't get away."

"Life isn't trying to run from you."

"It sure is. Days pass, people leave, the body gets old."

"Then you need to live through it, not clench your jaw harder. A shark carries the image of a winner. But a life you're constantly sinking your teeth into starts to look like prey, eventually."

"Then what is it instead?"

"An environment. Like water."

He smirked.

"You reduce everything to swimming. Why do I forget about lunch?"

"Because hunger matters to you more than food does. You're used to living through lack — and lack doesn't let you feel full. 'I'm incapable of satisfying this hunger gnawing away at my soul, day after day.' As

long as you feel hungry, you're young. And if you get full?"

"You've gotten old."

"Or you just ate. Sometimes an ordinary lunch is more useful than a pretty concept of youth."

"Do you forget about your body for the sake of an idea, these days?"

I thought of the training, the trek, my sore back, forty kilometers walked in silence.

"I still do. At least I'm honest about it now."

He looked at the line about the shore.

"Back then, stopping felt like death to me."

"And a harbor is part of the journey too. That's where you recover, study the map, repair the ship. You just didn't know yet how to tell rest apart from stagnation: in rest, your strength comes back. In stagnation, your interest disappears. And if your strength doesn't come back — what you need isn't a call to keep fighting, it's help: a doctor, rest, a conversation. Not every stop can be conquered by willpower."

He got to the ending — "My spirit is eternal and wants to get to work."

"I still love this," he said.

"So do I. Almost all of it's stayed the same — I've just added other ways to live. On Rinjani, my back hurt for four days, and I made it anyway. The will led to a kind of victory. But along the way, I barely listened to my body — and a day after coming down, I realized I

wanted to go back to yoga, only softer."

"If I'd been softer back then, would I have written this poem?"

"Probably not. It's good that you were alive and writing honestly. But not everything that helped once has to stay with you forever. Achievement-chasing led you to a lot of important places — to summits and to injuries, to music and to exhaustion, to swimming through pain. The question isn't whether to declare it your enemy — it's whether to stop handing it total control."

"Who's in charge, then?"

"Sometimes discipline, sometimes curiosity, sometimes the body, sometimes love. Too many bosses means you don't need a dictator anymore."

"Do we keep a little bit of the mischief, though?"

"Absolutely. Even in gentle yoga — you just have to learn not to compete with your mat."

He laughed, then asked more seriously:

"Are you really going back to yoga?"

"I'll try. First I want to understand what practice I actually need — not the kind that doesn't hurt, and not the kind that's easy. The kind that leaves me more attentive to myself afterward, instead of proud of how hard I pushed through."

He was quiet for a long time.

"You've changed. Have you gotten weaker?"

I looked at him — at the clenched jaw, the stainless-steel shield, the bird-heart caged in the chest.

"I hope not. Just less clear-cut."

"That doesn't sound like an achievement."

"Maybe that's exactly why it's real."

He read the title again.

"'Eternal Spirit' — even if you don't want to fight forever anymore?"

"A spirit can be eternal not because it never stops, but because it's capable of taking different shapes without disappearing. A bullet. Steel. A shark. And now, maybe, water."

He looked down, to where a stream barely glinted between the mountains.

"Water wants to get to work too."

"Always. It just doesn't have to call every one of its movements a battle."

He smiled, unclenched his jaw — and for the first time, didn't try to conquer the space around him. We sat on the rock a little longer. Down below, the water flowed on. It wasn't in any hurry. And yet it kept moving all the same.

CHAPTER 24

Our Beloved Ones

Sometimes it feels like you have your whole life still ahead of you before you actually find yourself — as if the real you is somewhere further on, after the next decision, after you've worked through the past and finally become who you were always meant to be. But another feeling gradually creeps in: **you don't find yourself once. You remember yourself, gather yourself, lose yourself, and recognize yourself again** — sometimes through the most unexpected signs.

"Our Beloved Ones" might look like it's addressed to another person — a lover, a friend, a brother. But it isn't about someone outside of me. It's a conversation with an inner friend — with the parts of me that appeared, disappeared, and years later reminded me of themselves again.

I was preoccupied with the idea that a person doesn't arrive in this life entirely empty — that there's already experience inside, whose origin can't be explained. Why is someone inexplicably drawn to music, though no one in the family ever played? Why does a new activity sometimes come so easily, as if the body already knows the motion? You can explain it through heredity and coincidence. Or you can allow that barely perceptible inclinations pass through a life — something in a person that recognizes before the mind has time to explain. That's where the wish for

absolute silence comes from in the first stanza — not just hiding from noise, but going quiet enough to hear a thought that doesn't belong to everyday consciousness. A conversation partner like that rarely speaks in complete sentences. He answers through the body, through a sudden lightness, through the feeling that a place you're seeing for the first time is somehow already familiar.

But the inner narrator is also capable of bending the truth — not always deliberately: memory rarely passes an event on literally, it restructures it so a person can bear it today. This happened many times while working on this book: I'd start telling one version, then remember a detail, and realize the story had only been the first layer.

The line "we're as if outside the system the world dreamed up" is an attempt to step outside the ready-made coordinate system for a while — who you're supposed to be, what to develop, what to write off as an unserious hobby. The inner friend brings back a different system — not necessarily a more correct one, but mine: one where the pull toward music matters more than its usefulness, where a mountain isn't needed for a photo from the summit.

The center of the poem, for me, is the line "our meeting matters more than anything." Not because everything else is meaningless, but because without this meeting, any achievement can end up belonging to someone else. **You can build a successful life and, at eighty, realize that most of it was lived by**

a person you barely knew. That's exactly what I'm afraid of — not old age itself, but the meeting with myself never happening at all.

The "friend" here isn't one unchanging entity. Over the years, different parts of me have appeared: the achiever, the rescuer, the righteous one, the rebel, the bullet-man, the water-man. Each one, in its moment, spoke in my voice and insisted: "this is the real you." But none of them turned out to be the whole of me — which is why he has to be assembled out of fragments, and the word "punishment" in this stanza now feels especially precise to me: the assembly doesn't happen through some mountaintop epiphany, but through uncomfortable memories, through the things you're ashamed of, through realizing that your favorite story about yourself isn't entirely true.

And the line "I'll find you, always — that's certainty, not hope" is still one of my favorite spots: there's no doubt in it, only certainty that no matter what body, what role you have to pass through, something inside will still recognize the direction. **You don't become yourself once. You gradually remember yourself. And each new meeting doesn't end the search — it just returns one more fragment.**

— — —

Our Beloved Ones

Oh, how I long for silence,
for not a single sound at all,

so that through the thickness of the wall
I might feel a friend's thoughts.

How I long to drown
in the waterfall of his stories.
Yes, he'll bend the truth here and there,
then smile, and correct himself soon after.

Undisturbed, on one wavelength,
we sail across the open airwaves.
It's as if you and I are outside
that system the world dreamed up.

Our meeting matters more than anything —
we kept losing each other in different worlds, and it seemed:
how will I go on without him,
to meet a long old age with any joy?

I don't need a thousand faces'
worth of words, of hasty confessions.
I gather you out of fragments —
that's the punishment I've been given.

Back and forth across the Universe,
trying on bodies like clothes,
I'll find you — always.
That's certainty, not hope.

Only the mutual will to meet halfway
can split a long road in two.

And there's no need to climb mountains —
we live in the depths of the subconscious.

Turning to him, at once
I'll hear you, dear friend.
All the ones we love are in there, inside us,
not beyond the stars — just a little closer.

— — —

"Who are 'our beloved ones'?" I asked, rereading the title.

He looked at me, surprised.

"At first I thought it meant people — family, friends, the ones I've lost. Now I think you're writing about yourself. About us, really — there are more of us in here than just two."

"How many?"

"I don't know. You'll see for yourself."

He reread the first stanza.

"I needed complete silence to hear a friend's thought. Not a voice — he doesn't speak in words. Sometimes you just know: go there, pick up the instrument, stop."

"And you always listen?"

"Of course not. There are still plenty of other voices around — fear, laziness, the wish to be liked."

"How do you know which one is the friend?"

"I don't. Sometimes, after his hint, I feel like myself. But sometimes that happens after the others too."

"So the test doesn't actually work."

He frowned.

"You're ruining everything."

"I'm trying to understand. Not everything needs to be understood," I said for him, and he smiled despite himself.

"Fine. Maybe he's not always right. But a real one isn't invented to match someone else's expectations."

"And if he matches your own pretty story about yourself?"

"Then he'll bend the truth. And he'll correct himself — if I listen. And if I don't, I'll reread the poem in a few years and understand."

"That's already happened," I said. "Many times. So the friend changes?"

"Maybe not him. Maybe the one listening to him."

He looked at the fifth stanza.

"'I gather you out of fragments' — that's the punishment, because some fragments you don't want to pick up. They're shameful. Painful."

"Could you leave them where they are?"

"You could. But then you'll keep tripping over something you don't understand." He smirked. "The Bathyscaphe, again. Prison. We keep coming back to the same thing."

"Because a person isn't made up of separate poems," I said. "He lives inside one continuous inner system."

"Are past lives part of it too?"

"You believe they are. I don't know. But the idea let you pay closer attention to your unexplainable inclinations, instead of dismissing them just because you don't know where they came from. Music still matters, regardless of whether you played an instrument in a past life."

He looked at the stanza about the system the world dreamed up.

"I wanted to build my own coordinate system."

"And that one could turn out to be invented too. There are many systems — choose the one that helps you live more honestly and stop breaking other people."

He was quiet for a moment.

"'Our meeting matters more than anything' — do you agree?"

"Almost. Meeting yourself matters enormously, but it can't become an excuse to stop seeing everyone else. It's not 'the main thing is staying true to yourself' instead of the people around you. It's meeting yourself so you can show up in relationships as someone real."

He reread: "How will I go on without him, to meet a long old age with any joy?"

"You were afraid of living a whole life and never finding yourself."

"I'm still afraid of that. I no longer think the meeting happens once — today you find one part, tomorrow you lose the connection, then you come back. And so on, your whole life."

"Unlike with your brother?" he smirked. "There was an outside friend there too. And he didn't listen."

"Right. And the inner one sometimes stays quiet the longest — because you spent years talking over him."

He lowered his eyes.

"These days I can actually let him finish," I said. "Thanks to therapy, to poems, to swimming, to silence. And to the mountains — even though you yourself wrote there's no need to climb them."

"Then why do you write almost everything important up there?"

"Because there's less noise on a mountain. It doesn't hand you the answer — it clears the space."

He looked at the line "I'll find you, always — that's certainty, not hope."

"Do you like that line?"

"A lot. There's no demand for an immediate result in it. You're allowing for the possibility of losing yourself again, but not allowing for the loss to be final."

"So whatever happens, I'll come back?"

"Maybe. That's your certainty — I don't want to take it away, but I can't issue a guarantee in my own name either. I believe a return is possible for as long as a person is still capable of noticing he's lost."

He moved on to the seventh stanza — about mutual desire.

"Does even meeting yourself require mutual willingness?"

"One part wants to find. The other is afraid of being found — because then you'd have to admit the life you chose isn't yours, that the image of a good person was built on suppressed anger. The inner friend hides for safety. You can't drag him out — you can only build a place where he's able to show up, and not punish yourself the moment you hear him."

"What if he says something terrible?"

"Listen. Listening isn't the same as obeying."

He smiled, then looked at the ending.

"'All the ones we love are in there, inside us' — that could be read more broadly. People we've loved stay inside us too — their voices, their ways of seeing, even after they're gone."

"That's not what I meant when I wrote it," he objected.

"I know. It's just that the text already knows how to mean more than one thing. Your door stays where it is. It just doesn't have to be the only one."

He looked at the title.

"'Our Beloved Ones' — even the ones I don't love anymore?"

"Sometimes it's exactly those ones who take up the most room. You don't have to evict them. You can just

change the distance."

"So which of my inner selves is your favorite?"

I looked at him.

"The one who's able to stop and say, 'no, I just lied' — without him, we'd have written a beautiful but not entirely honest book. And the one who wrote this poem on the mountain."

"Why him?"

"Because here you're not trying to save anyone, you're not accusing anyone, you're not teaching anyone. You just want to hear yourself."

"And did you?"

"I think I'm only just starting to, now."

He moved closer.

"I was here this whole time."

"I know."

"No. You didn't know — otherwise you wouldn't have gone searching across the whole Universe."

I smiled.

"Maybe I needed the whole Universe to finally understand the distance. It turns out to be quite small."

He nodded. We fell silent. It was quiet on the mountain — not completely: the grass stirred, the wind breathed, the city went on living below. But for the first time, I didn't want to silence every sound. Among them, I could still hear a friend's thought. It wasn't announcing anything grand. It was just

reminding me: "I'm here."

CHAPTER 25

The Dream

At some point I felt like there was more room in the language. Before this, a poem used to gather itself around a strict construction: rhyme, meter, a thought carried through to its end within a given form. That gradually started to change — we were already living in Vietnam, I was reading more other authors, and I fell especially hard under the influence of Vera Polozkova: her long lines, rhymes that didn't have to land in their assigned spot, the freedom to stretch a line as far as your breath needed it to go.

I was almost deafened by the sense of freedom: language doesn't have to be a cramped box — you can fuse music, religion, humor, and sudden seriousness inside a single line. **You can end a thought where it actually ends, not where the meter runs out.** For me this wasn't just a new technique — I'd found freedom in language itself. Before this, I'd been looking for it in my outer life, in moves from country to country. And here it suddenly turned out that the space could be expanded right inside the text.

It was in this expansiveness that "Awake Every Second, Dreaming with Open Eyes" appeared — a poem that opens with the image of a tear as a lens. It doesn't belong to any single emotion: it isn't said whether the person is crying from grief or from joy — that's for the reader to decide. The lens is neutral; it only amplifies whatever's already in front of a person:

through fear, the world looks more dangerous; through joy, more generous — and in the moment, it's impossible to remember there's a lens in front of your eyes at all. **That's exactly what it means to be awake every second, dreaming with open eyes: a person seems to be conscious, but he isn't seeing things — he's seeing a picture refracted by his own state.**

What follows is an almost deliberate list of things supposedly capable of waking you up: music, the lotus position, orange juice, Morpheus, Shiva, and a couple of well-known Russian comedians — spiritual practice colliding with variety-show humor, the elevated not cancelling out the trivial. But none of it wakes you up for good. There's no magic pose, no magic book, no teacher, no God in a convenient shape. Each thing can help — shake you loose, give you a language, show you a door. But you have to walk through it yourself. This gradually became one of the recurring ideas in my writing: there's no magic country, no magic love, no magic religion. **A person becomes his own pill** — not in the sense of total self-sufficiency, we still need other people — but nothing external will wake up someone who's still clinging to the dream himself.

The line about the primus stove came out of yet another reread of The Master and Margarita — this time the religious theme stood out especially clearly: a society where the old religious form had been torn down, but the need for faith hadn't gone anywhere. And here the poem turns openly sarcastic: this opium

doesn't even land as a joke, don't forget to drop a few coins at the door. This isn't an attack on faith itself — what irritated me was performative religiosity, a system where lived experience gets replaced by form. I was trying different ways of believing back then, turning first to one tradition, then another, and each time the same feeling remained: something's off. I couldn't find a God I could follow without betraying my own inner voice.

Further on, the speaker shuts himself away — to grow into a new persona, untouchable, somewhere even the gods won't dare follow. If no system gave an answer, it's simpler to declare yourself someone who doesn't need answers at all. But a longing keeps building up inside anyway — a longing for the voice of reason, not for one more preacher, but for your own voice, audible through the dream. And the ending returns to the beginning: wipe away the tear and finally wake up. That doesn't mean seeing some perfectly objective world — we probably don't have access to a view like that at all. But at least, for a second, noticing: your own state had been standing between you and reality. **To wake up means to stop waiting for someone else to do the waking for you.**

Another shift happened here too: the freedom of the language became part of the meaning itself. I was no longer just writing about escaping systems — I'd started escaping the system right inside the line. Form stopped being a cage for the thought and became the thought's own movement.

— — —

Awake Every Second, Dreaming with Open Eyes

Awake every second, dreaming with open eyes —
a picture, refracted through transparent tears…
and in it everything seems so vast, so immense…
and supposedly easy — but more often, honestly,
unclear…

And a path as long as a tangled ball of thread,
I hope, will lead to some hidden little corner,
where the sound of strings will calm this pulsing
frame:
chanson, vocal unison, folk, rap-and-rock — any opus
at all.

Not the lotus pose, a mosquito bite, not orange juice,
not even Keanu's dark-skinned friend, Morpheus,
nothing can wake this exhausted organism.
Not even the almighty Shiva, organist

with six magical hands, in thirty fingers,
not the old comedians, not their stunned sidekick
either.
Everyone around is asleep… or fixing a primus
stove…
only on Sundays does Jesus even call them to himself.

Well — "call" is a strong word, more like a casual
invitation,
delivered through all-knowing church heralds,

ready and able to calm absolutely everyone...
except this particular opium doesn't even land as a joke.

Not even a flicker of arrival.
Go in, and don't forget to drop some coins at the door.
And may the light of the Lord live in you forever.
For non-payment, I hear, they can apparently switch it off.

And that's it... Then it's dark walking forward, seeing nothing at all,
not yourself, not anyone, and mainly, quietly hating the One above,
shutting yourself in, letting no one into your own chambers,
to grow into a new persona, untouchable,

a lone wanderer, so that even the gods
wouldn't think to get themselves tangled up with you.
To grow starved, to crave the voice of reason,
to hear the call through a fairly light sleep.

To open your eyes, smile quietly.
Wipe away the tear, and finally wake up.

— — —

"Awake every second — meaning a person doesn't realize he's asleep?" I asked.

"Of course," he answered. "If he realizes it, that's already almost an awakening. He's dreaming reality — he just sees it through himself."

"How else would you look at it?"

He shrugged.

"I don't know. But sometimes you can notice the lens — the tear."

"Caused by what?"

"You decide."

"Convenient position for an author to take," I frowned.

"Did you want me to explain everything in advance? I didn't always know myself. The image comes first, the explanation shows up years later."

"A tear as a lens — it magnifies everything? Both fear and joy?"

"Yes."

"Then why can't a person just choose joy?"

"Because emotions don't switch like cassette tapes. The psyche is more complicated than a tape player. Though sometimes the lens shows you something real — fear can spot an actual danger — while also blowing it wildly out of proportion at the same time."

"How do you tell the difference?"

"You test it," he smirked. "The QA engineer again, and we haven't even gotten to that job yet, chronologically."

"But you're already talking from over there," I agreed.

He reread the long lines again.

"Doesn't this feel too sprawling to you?"

"That's the whole point. Before, I was afraid of losing form. Here, I found a different one. Polozkova showed me a line can end where the breath ends. The rhyme can arrive later. The meter can wobble."

"And it's still a poem?"

"Of course. The question isn't whether rules are absent — it's whether the text still holds an inner momentum. Otherwise freedom just turns into randomness."

He looked at the list — Shiva, Morpheus, the comedians, the primus stove, Jesus.

"Almost a cultural stew."

"For the first time, you're letting associations show up without checking their credentials at the door. Before, each one had to prove it belonged to some elevated theme."

"Is there one here?"

"There is. It's just no longer afraid of standing next to a mosquito and a glass of orange juice."

He laughed, then turned serious again.

"Nothing woke the organism up — why?"

"Because it was tired of hunting for a magic way to wake itself up. Music, yoga, a book, another person — each of them helps, but none of them does all the work for you. You can point at the door. You have to move your own foot through it."

He went back to the primus stove.

"Bulgakov again. I kept rereading it and kept seeing a different book."

"Because it isn't the book that changes. It's the reader. Grandmother used to say that."

"And here I saw religion — the shift from the old world to the new one, the old form being torn down."

"And Jesus stayed — on Sundays."

He smirked, then turned serious.

"Doesn't it seem like I'm being too harsh here?"

"It does. But there's no need to soften it — that really was how you felt at the time. Freedom of expression doesn't excuse you from responsibility, but here you're criticizing a system and your own perception of it, not claiming every believer is a fool."

"What if church genuinely helps someone?"

"Then your experience doesn't cancel theirs out. This isn't a universal report — it's your view in that moment. These days I'd separate faith from institution more carefully: behind the exact same coin dropped at the door, completely different inner events can be happening. One person drops it out of habit, another out of gratitude, and another is genuinely praying."

"Have you become less of a believer?"

"More like less certain of any ready-made description."

He moved on to the chambers where not even the gods are let in.

"Why does a person shut himself away?"

"Because he never got an answer — not from God, not from people, not from any system. And he builds an image where loneliness looks like a choice. Though often it was really a defense. If solitude gives you strength to come back to people — that's retreat. If it convinces you no one is necessary — that's already a fortress."

"So you can even be afraid of waking up?"

"Very much so. It's hard to go back to your usual sleep afterward."

He looked at the ending.

"'To grow starved, to crave the voice of reason' — not God, not the soul. Why?"

"Because too many things had already been talking. I needed a voice that could at least somewhat pull the picture together. Though these days I don't fully trust reason either — it's just as capable of serving whatever story a person wants to prove. I listen to several voices now: the mind, the body, the feelings."

"And who decides?"

"You. That never changes."

He read the last line.

"'Wipe away the tear, and finally wake up' — it closes well. The beginning and the end hold the whole scattered path together."

"And what appears when I wipe it away?"

"Not objective truth. There could be another tear behind that one."

"Endless waking up?"

"Looks that way. It's just that in any given moment, removing one lens feels final."

He was quiet for a moment.

"You said I found freedom in language here. What about in life?"

"Partly. Text is safer than reality — you can break a rule in it and see what happens. You were learning not to end a line where people expected you to. Later you started doing the same thing with decisions."

"Did the form change me, or did I change the form?"

"I don't know. Let's say both, at once."

He skimmed the poem again.

"There's too much crammed in here — seriousness and jokes, God and a Soviet comedian, fear and joy in a single tear."

"That's exactly what matters about it."

"What does waking up mean to you now?"

I thought about it.

"Noticing which story I'm currently treating as the only reality. That I'm not respected. That I'm obligated to help everyone. That if I stop, I won't accomplish anything."

"And it disappears?"

"No. But some distance appears between me and the thought."

"And what do you do with that distance?"

"Sometimes nothing. Just not reacting in that same second. Waking up looks a lot more mundane than it does in poems — sometimes it's just a message you don't send while angry."

He sighed, disappointed.

"I was picturing something grand. And Shiva didn't help?"

"No. He helped you notice you were asleep. You woke yourself up."

"Your own pill?"

"Partly. No one wakes up entirely alone — but the last movement happens on the inside."

"Then why write the book at all?"

"So the reader notices his own tear. Even if he sees something completely different — even better. He might find something you couldn't have given him."

"So the author isn't necessary?"

"He's necessary to leave a trace behind. Not necessarily a signpost."

He looked at the long lines again.

"I actually wrote this well."

"Very alive. Though there's still a lot of young man's urge here to explain to people that they're asleep — a little ironic, next to the idea that you can't wake someone against his will."

"So I'm contradicting myself."

"You're in transition: you no longer trust ready-made teachers, but you still want to become the one who reveals everything himself."

"And now?"

"I try to invite instead. It doesn't always work — sometimes I still catch myself over-explaining."

He looked at the length of the chapter and laughed.

"It shows."

"Maybe it's time to wipe away the tear and wrap this up?" I said.

He closed his eyes. Then slowly opened them.

"Awake?"

"I don't know. I see the text. Behind it — myself."

"And deeper still?"

He smiled.

"Don't rush it. Let the next lens stay right where it is."

Outside the window, someone leaned on their horn in traffic, over and over. A completely ordinary, everyday sound — and somehow it was exactly that sound that brought us both back into the room.

CHAPTER 26

The Cycle

Some poems get written in a single evening. With "The Cycle," everything happened differently — it started back in Poland, I kept the first lines in a Telegram note, and then I kept coming back to it, again and again: trying to continue, getting nowhere, walking away.

From the outside, that looks like an absence of work. But the absence of new lines doesn't mean the poem stops being written — sometimes a text keeps writing itself the whole time the author isn't touching it. **The author simply hasn't yet become the person capable of finishing his own text.** "The Cycle" took shape over about three years — not through steady additions, but through several attempts at a closed door. The last time, I opened the note again in Vietnam, and the text suddenly assembled itself, almost whole.

The title, at first, meant the cycle of human existence: birth, ecstasy, searching, forgetting, exhaustion, return. But now I see the cycle in the history of the text's own creation too — even the blank page was part of that cycle.

The first stanza — "the young gods went out into the street" — is about one impulse repeating on different levels: a person, a bird, a crowd, a deity. Life strains outward, fills its form. The body is a temporary palace for something larger; the world is

another palace. And in the next stanza, the heart pounds like an alarm bell precisely because joy is too large for the body too — happiness doesn't calm you, it creates pressure, the way any strong feeling does when the vessel can barely hold it.

Then the central questions are born — who am I, and why? It still seems to me that this is one of the most important questions available to a person — not because there's a short answer to it, but because the question itself changes whoever asks it seriously. Though these days I'm more careful about the idea that everyone necessarily has to arrive at it: someone can live a whole life almost never formulating it, and still be more honest and more alive.

The stanza about science — evolution, the big bang, the universe as a "Lego set" — deliberately mixes serious models of how the world began with an almost childish picture. **We build pretty packaging around a void we can't bear to face without some kind of shape.** And right alongside it — the fear of the broken washtub from the old fisherman-and-the-goldfish tale: you can spend years building a system of status and money, and then find yourself back in the same puddle you started in.

In the evening, the exhausted gods end up at a bar — and that's not just an observation of other people: I was looking for relief in things that solved nothing too. In these tired gods, I also saw my older brother — his parties, his freedom, which other people ended up paying for. But the difference between us isn't large

enough to cast him as the villain of the poem while leaving myself standing outside it.

The ending — "the gloomy gods head home" — isn't a final conclusion, it's the closing of the circle. But every circle still leaves a mark: a person comes back to the old question slightly changed, not necessarily wiser, but with new experience. **Repetition doesn't have to be a punishment — it can be a way of learning, catching the situation a little earlier next time, not only once you're already sitting by the broken washtub.**

— — —

The Cycle

Joy filled the chambers of the body.
The young gods went out into the street.
They walked out beneath the roof of a sacred palace,
raised by the mind of a wise father.

The heartbeats, like the sound of an alarm bell,
louder than the crash of a furious thunder.
It tears, wanting to break free,
throwing itself in spasms against thin skin.

Oh, how much light and worldly happiness
the body, alas, has chained in irons.
How much love, how much divine bliss
lies buried under the deep snows of forgetting.

I'd give anything — become a wanderer across the earth
in search of answers that actually matter.
Who am I, and why? Where from, and where to?
Where's the one who granted us this miracle?

In each of us there's a grain of the Almighty.
The flock is consciousness, living in every bird.
The meaning of the flight is in the feeling of it,
in the moments that overflow a life.

Science gives birth to countless theories:
descendants of apes, an echo of sound,
the leftover debris of some great explosion,
a cleverly engineered Lego set.

Whatever you dream up — it's all so interesting.
The main thing is the crowd shouldn't get bored.
The only real point is that no answer is needed.
It's terrifying, sitting by the broken washtub, in a puddle.

By evening, the body, paired with exhaustion,
goes looking for an open seat at the bar.
Instead of a clean, comfortable bed —
night-time words: "I love you." "I'll buy it." "Let's fly."

But after all that flying, it's time to land —
and that's never quite as easy to accept.
Alas, there's no leaving this tired-out temple behind.
The gloomy gods head home.

— — —

"You wrote this for three years?" I asked, looking at the date on the first note.

"About that. Not every day, though — sometimes I wouldn't open the note for months."

"Then why do you say you spent three years writing it?"

"Because it never disappeared the whole time. The work was happening — just not on the page. Inside me. I'd come back, try something, and hear: not that."

"Was the inner friend silent?"

"Or I was asking the wrong question. It came together in Vietnam — I think I'd lived through the part of the road I needed, the part that let me write about gloomy gods heading home. Before that, I could only see the way out: joy, light, the search. Landing — I didn't know how to accept that yet."

He reread the first stanza.

"The young gods — are they people?"

"Yes. There's a fragment of something enormous in each of us."

"Are you sure?"

"No. But I like seeing it that way — it gives everyone dignity. Not just the sage on the mountaintop, but the drunk man lying to himself again. If the idea is true, the same fragment is in him too. He's just forgotten."

"So the task is to remember?"

"Looks that way. 'Our Beloved Ones' again — everything connects."

He moved to the second stanza.

"Is the heart trying to break free from joy, or from anxiety?"

"You could read it that way. I meant ecstasy — the feeling that there's more life inside than the vessel can hold."

"The body as chains?"

"Back then it seemed strange that something so enormous had to be lived through such a small form. Now I see more of what it actually allows. Without skin, there'd be no spasms — and no touch. Without a heart, no alarm bell — and no life."

He got to the questions — who am I, and why.

"Is that the main thing?"

"I thought so at the time. Now I'm not sure a person is obligated to spend all his time on it — you can get so caught up in 'who am I' that you stop being anyone in your actual life. But there won't be a final answer, and maybe that's not the point: every real question changes whoever asks it, a little."

He read the stanza about the birds and the Almighty.

"'The flock is consciousness, living in every bird' — is that scientific?"

"I'm not sure. Maybe simple rules governing each bird's movement create the flock's complex behavior. Both versions are interesting — whatever you dream

up, it's interesting. You're right about that, though science builds models to explain what's observed, not to keep the crowd from getting bored — you're being unfair to it there. Entertainment built around science is a side market."

"But the packaging is real."

"Of course. Any system, including my caution today, can turn into a product or an identity."

He reread: "It's terrifying, sitting by the broken washtub, in a puddle."

"What exactly is terrifying?"

"Spending your life chasing something, getting everything, losing it — and discovering you never actually went anywhere."

"Maybe the old woman just didn't get enough."

"That's exactly how addiction defends itself — it always feels like the next time will finally be enough."

He moved to the bar.

"People are tired, they want a drink, they want to hear 'I love you' — what's the problem?"

"The problem is that in the morning, no one intends to answer for what they said at night. A feeling can be real and short-lived at the same time — it's just important for the other person to know the expiration date on the promise."

"Did you do that too?"

"Of course. And I don't regret all of it — not every night has to become a lesson. But here I was writing

about the moment the fun ends and the emptiness stays behind. That's where my brother shows up in this image — his parties, his freedom, paid for by other people. Though the difference between us isn't that large: I was looking for relief in things that solved nothing too."

He reached the ending.

"Why is the temple tired-out?"

"The body. Ordinary life. A form you can't ever fully escape. At the start, it's a sacred palace. Then it's a bar. Then it's home again."

"And in the morning, young gods again?"

"Maybe — at least until they remember yesterday."

He laughed, then asked, more quietly:

"What if it never ended — what if 'The Cycle' had just stayed unfinished forever?"

I looked at him.

"Then maybe unfinished would have been its true final form."

"I don't like that."

"I know. You want a period at the end. But not every beginning is obligated to be justified by an ending."

"This one worked out, though."

"Yes. Maybe because you grew into the ability to not give an answer. 'The only real point is that no answer is needed' — three years spent searching for an ending, and you finished by realizing no ending was required."

"And still wrote the last stanza anyway."

"People are contradictory."

He reread once more: "the gloomy gods head home."

"Is that sad?"

"A little. But maybe they'll go back out again — tomorrow, before they remember yesterday."

"There's the cycle," he smirked. "Where are we right now?"

"Maybe somewhere between coming home and heading out again. Which means there's still time to decide differently."

"What should we do, then?"

"Start by not demanding this moment explain your entire life. Just live it."

He nodded. For the first time, the absence of a continuation didn't feel like a failure to either of us. We closed the note. The work went on.

CHAPTER 27

Inspiration

By this point I'd already started treating poetry as something other than a random hobby — it had become clear that this habit of scribbling was going to stay with me. I was reading more other authors and letting myself drift from familiar form: rearranging words, breaking the usual order, assembling a phrase however the moment actually needed it.

That's how the deliberately odd line "fills you fuller than pushed before" ended up in the poem, twisting the ordinary Russian idiom for "harder than ever." **Language isn't a fixed structure — you can bend it and test exactly how far it can go without losing its meaning.**

I experienced inspiration itself almost like an all-consuming feeling of love: you're swept up, it feels like you could reach the sky with your hands while standing knee-deep in a river of forgetting. But the poem isn't only about the pleasant side of words. Eloquence can be used to help — or, while believing you're healing someone, you can land a hit exactly where it hurts most, which is where "a forbidden blow to the liver" comes from. Sincerity alone doesn't guarantee gentleness: you can say the right thing to a person who isn't ready to hear it.

Childhood shows up next — not because it was carefree, but because memory is good at smoothing things over, and most blows like that are actually

thrown by the child still living inside the adult: the need for recognition, the wish to look stronger. A crowd that's ready to approve of anything doesn't help you grow — **support and endless approval aren't the same thing.**

The ending returns to one specific moment: it's night, I can't sleep, "Wind of Change" is playing in my headphones, and inspiration comes to visit again — not like a flash of insight, but like an old acquaintance who knows the door sometimes gets left unlocked. Before, poems used to appear out of the need to survive pain. Here, they appear because the process itself had already become one of the shapes my life took.

— — —

Inspiration

Have you ever watched inspiration arrive —
felt it numb your skull from the inside?
Felt like you could reach the sky with your hands,
standing knee-deep in a river of forgetting?...

How many times has crushing hopelessness
driven the body back down to its knees?
A strength that most people deny even exists
fills you fuller than you were before.

How often, having reined in your own eloquence,
instead of healing with words, only wounding,
did you land, on the person across from you,

a forbidden blow straight to the liver?

So much has been said with an open heart,
meant to carve itself into memory forever, but
we dissolve instead into the memory
of a carefree, easy childhood.

We've filled our thoughts up completely
with foul language and shamelessness.
And we feed the gaps in our own growth
on the crowd's easy approval.

Night. Can't sleep. My heart is racing.
"Wind of Change" playing through my headphones.
Notes of unease creep in —
inspiration has come to visit again.

— — —

"'Fills you fuller than pushed before,'" I read. "Did you rearrange those words on purpose?"

"Of course," he smiled. "Because I could. I'd just started understanding that language allows for a lot more than I thought."

"There's already an expression — 'harder than ever.'"

"I know. I took it apart and put it back together. It became mine — and for a poem, that's sometimes enough, even if a reader decides I just made a mistake."

He reread the first stanza.

"'Have you ever watched inspiration arrive' — are you watching it right now?"

"Yes. Like I could reach the sky — not literally, but everything inside gets enormous."

"The lens again, like in 'The Dream'?"

"Similar. Except there it was a tear, and here it's a wave. You don't forget your problems — they just stop being the only content of your head for a while."

"So inspiration is a painkiller?"

"Not only that. A painkiller just brings you back to the same place. After inspiration, sometimes you bring something back with you — a decision, a poem, a different sense of yourself."

I moved to the third stanza.

"Why a blow to the liver, specifically?"

"Crude. Physical. You feel it immediately. I often tried to heal people with words — not always because they'd asked me to. It felt like help to me. To them, sometimes, it was a hit: you can say the right thing to someone who isn't ready to hear it."

"So you should stay quiet?"

"Not always. I don't have an exact rule — one line about not disturbing someone who doesn't want knowledge didn't turn me into a sage. The cycle again."

"Doesn't good intent excuse it?"

"No. A person can cause enormous pain with the best intentions in the world. Both things matter: intent

shows why you acted, the outcome shows what you actually did. If the outcome is bad, you have to answer for it, even if you meant well."

"Can you do that now?"

"Sometimes. More often I still start by explaining that I didn't mean to hurt anyone. But at least I've started noticing that doesn't cancel out the other person's pain."

He read the stanza about childhood.

"Was it really carefree?"

"Not always. Memory is just good at smoothing things over, and I wanted at least that kind of childhood to exist inside the text."

"A pretty story again? Bending the truth to yourself, like the inner friend."

"And correcting myself years later. Memory doesn't work on deadlines."

He looked at the stanza about foul language.

"Sounds like me," he smirked.

"Very much so. Sometimes a crude word is more honest than a long, neutral construction. But if you express every emotion with the same crudeness, the language gets poorer. The question is what a specific word actually does — here it adds a smile, you're not preaching, you're admitting to ordinary human foolishness and including yourself in it."

"And the crowd approves."

"Very useful for the ego. Support and endless approval aren't the same thing — if everyone's praising you, it's easy to decide there's nowhere left to grow. You need people capable of more than just applauding."

"Like you?"

"I get too easily impressed sometimes too. I try now to tell support apart from flattery. It doesn't always work."

He got to the ending.

"Do you remember that specific moment — the night, the Scorpions?"

"Yes. Lying there, the music playing, and understanding: it's starting. Sometimes the lines arrive ready-made, sometimes it's just the rhythm at first — and if you don't get up and write it down, it disappears."

"What does it feel like?"

"Like someone's arrived. Not a muse — too grand a word. Just inspiration, already familiar by then: not the first poem, but maybe the first moment I understood it wasn't a coincidence — that I was going to keep writing."

"Had you already decided to become a poet?"

"No. More like a person who writes. 'Poet' sounds like a title, and writing is an action. The word needs an inner permission, and that permission still has to come from somewhere — from yourself, from readers, from some imaginary council of real poets."

"What if no one had ever read it?"

"I'd have liked people to read it. But I probably would have kept writing anyway — sometimes a thought only becomes real once I find a shape for it."

"So inspiration doesn't come after honesty? You said before that it shows up once you stop lying to yourself."

"Nicely put, but not always true — it also visits people who are lying to themselves perfectly well. Honesty doesn't matter for the text to appear. It matters for the text to survive meeting me again, years later."

"Am I honest here?"

"Yes. You don't pretend inspiration turns you into a prophet — it arrives in the middle of foul language and a late-night Scorpions song, in the middle of ordinary life. That's exactly where its strength is."

He smiled.

"What actually changed after this poem?"

"You started trusting the writing — you stopped treating every good line as an accident. And you started experiencing language as more than a tool for delivering a finished thought: it became the place where the thought shows up in the first place. You don't always think first and write second — sometimes you rearrange the words and discover a meaning that wasn't there before."

"'Fuller than pushed before.'"

"For example. A joke can open up freedom too."

He reread the ending once more.

"'Inspiration has come to visit again' — a simple ending."

"That's exactly why it works. After all the questions and all the blows, what's left is an ordinary domestic scene: an old acquaintance showed up at night, and you let him in."

"And he's visited more often ever since?"

"Sometimes. And when he doesn't visit, the work goes on regardless. That's from 'The Cycle' already — the texts talk to each other."

"Then why is the poem named after him, if he isn't even the main thing?"

"Because that evening, he was the main thing. Not every truth has to be a final one."

The familiar song started playing in the headphones again.

"Do you hear it?" he asked. "Has it come?"

I listened. My heart was beating calmly. No new lines were showing up.

"Not yet."

He smiled.

"That's fine."

The melody played out to the end and broke off into silence — the exact kind of silence the next lines usually come from.

CHAPTER 28

Don't Build Sandcastles

This is one of my early poems. It showed up the day after "Genius of Freedom" — the poem dedicated to my brother, the one he'd genuinely loved: pacing back and forth, rereading it, saying "I envy you, that I didn't write this myself," and for a while he even carried that page around with him.

For a young author, that reaction should have felt close to perfect. But it made me angry: my brother had heard "Genius of Freedom" and completely missed what I was actually saying in it. I'd written that poem with doubt in it — asking whether there was emptiness hiding behind his freedom. And what he heard was admiration for himself. **Pride, instead of a question.**

So the next evening I wrote another one, more direct this time — with almost no hope that a hint would land where the last one hadn't.

I could see my brother constantly drifting between fantasies, ideas, drugs, parties, different versions of himself. Now I can call that a search. But back then, what stood out most was something else: **while he searches for himself, the people around him pay the price** — family, women, children, people close to him, for whom his inner journeys produced consequences that were anything but poetic. My brother was capable, smart, and there was a real sense of inner capital in him — like a savings account

handed to someone at the start of life, spent for years, with almost nothing added back in. It always seemed like the reserve was still enormous. But an inner account like that runs out eventually too, if you only ever withdraw from it.

The second stanza warns about illusions — not because imagination is worthless, but because an illusion differs from imagination in this: a person starts living as though the invented thing has already replaced the real one. Reality, meanwhile, keeps asking: what have you actually done, who have you actually helped, who have you actually been responsible for? And at some point, your mother's warm hand won't help anymore — not because she's stopped loving you, but because you can't keep returning an adult to the state of a child who gets forgiven everything and has the wreckage cleaned up behind him, again and again.

The third stanza sounds almost paradoxical in a book built entirely out of reflection. But it isn't really about thinking itself: you can think in order to see more clearly, or you can think in order to never act, breaking every decision down into a thousand possible versions. You can spend a whole life being clever that way, and discover that behind all the reasoning, no person capable of answering for his own actions ever actually formed.

The final stanza ends with a direct appeal: don't play the saint, don't play the sinner, don't perform the prophet or the misunderstood artist. **Just be a**

person — with weakness, with limits, with the occasional need to do something boring and to listen to someone else.

At the time, I was writing this to my brother. Now I understand most of it came back around to me — I built my own sandcastles too, tried on both God and the devil on my own small stage. But back then, the day after "Genius of Freedom," none of that happened: the poem went unheard again, just with the opposite sign this time. One was mistaken for praise. The other, it seems, was simply passed over. **Sometimes words don't reach the person they were addressed to. But they stay behind, waiting for their author instead.**

— — —

Don't Build Sandcastles, Don't Build Them!

Don't build sandcastles, don't build them!
They'll melt away like spring ice.
Better to stay on Earth and sing a song
than send your mind off flying somewhere else.

Don't wander off into a world of false illusions.
Out there, just like before, emptiness still rules.
You won't escape the psychological damage,
and your mother's warm hand won't help you this time.

Don't dissolve yourself in foolish overthinking.
It won't actually help you, so why

keep hunting for logic inside your own excuses,
spend a whole life being clever, and end up no one.

Don't listen to other people's ready-made opinions.
Try actually living for a couple of days instead.
Rather than playing the devil or playing God on stage
—
try being a person. That's the harder role.

— — —

"Did he really say he envied you?" I asked, remembering that reaction to "Genius of Freedom."

"Word for word," he answered. "At first I liked it. Then I understood he'd heard something other than what I meant: that poem doubted his freedom, asked whether there was emptiness behind it. What he heard was praise — where I'd left a question, he heard a mirror, and he liked what he saw in it."

"Was he supposed to guess? Did you say it outright?"

"No. I wanted him to hear it on his own — if I'd said it outright, he'd have just argued."

"But instead he admired himself," I noted. "So the next day you wrote something else, more direct this time."

"And?"

He looked away.

"Nothing. He just didn't react the way he had to 'Genius of Freedom' — no excitement, no argument."

"So the second one went unheard differently than the first. One got mistaken for praise. This one, it seems, just got passed over."

"Missed both times," he sighed. "Then why did I even write the second one?"

"It did something to you. Before you wrote it, the thought could only stay as irritation. The text gave it a shape."

"But he should have understood at least something."

"You're still saying 'should.' Even someone close to you hears through his own lens — maybe he heard exactly as much as he was capable of hearing at the time."

"Convenient, explaining everything away with incapacity," he snapped. "He kept screwing up constantly, and not one of my texts ever stopped him. I had every right to be angry."

"Of course. I'm not excusing him — I'm just separating understanding from excusing. And besides, the second poem is more direct than the first one anyway. It didn't help. Directness is no guarantee of being heard."

He calmed down a little.

"That's why it's written in the plural — 'don't build,' 'don't wander off.' Safer, like you're addressing all of humanity instead of him specifically."

"But you were talking to him."

"I didn't want to turn the poem into a personal accusation. Or I made a private story bigger — one

doesn't rule out the other."

He reread the first stanza.

"Sandcastles — his fantasies: that everything will somehow work itself out, that family will wait, that talent will cover for everything."

"Didn't you build castles like that too?"

"I did. Probably even back then — writing to myself too, without realizing it. 'Better to stay on Earth and sing a song' — I wanted to bring him back down. Even though I've spent my whole life wandering through mountains and other worlds myself."

"So the difference between you two isn't absolute."

"I never said it was absolute," he frowned. "But at least I was trying to look at things honestly. He was breaking people around him."

"A search doesn't excuse you from responsibility for what happens along the way. You can respect the search and still condemn the actions."

"Then why do I say 'emptiness'? I saw where he was going — into illusions. Maybe what was there wasn't emptiness, but relief."

"But afterward, emptiness is what remained — that's the result I actually saw."

"An honest observation, but not a complete picture of his inner world," I said. "You spent twenty years trying to understand him, explain him, support him."

"And got exhausted. We don't talk now."

"So these poems were the first attempt to draw a boundary. Though a boundary on paper and a boundary in real life aren't the same thing. Processes that stretch out across years."

We moved to the third stanza — about foolish overthinking.

"He loved sounding clever," he said.

"And you?"

He laughed.

"Me too. But it irritated me in him because I didn't see actions behind the words. Though I didn't always see that in myself either — maybe what irritated me was the familiarity."

"'Spend a whole life being clever, and end up no one' — harsh. Did you really think he'd end up as nothing?"

"I was afraid of it. Though the line sounds like it's saying a person who hasn't achieved anything is nobody. These days I'd put it more carefully: you can spend a whole life explaining what's happening to you and still never actually start living."

"So you were trying to heal with a blow again — the forbidden one, to the liver."

"I didn't know that's what I was doing at the time. I see it now. The poem does exactly the thing it later warns against."

He moved to the final stanza.

"'Don't listen to other people's ready-made opinions' — and here you are, handing out your own opinion."

"Not a ready-made one. For you," he admitted. "Back then I genuinely believed I was freeing him from other people's templates with my own point of view. Not much difference, if you're forcing it on him."

"And the last line is the main request: 'try being a person.'"

"Stop performing — the devil, God, the free-spirited artist, the misunderstood genius. Just a person — someone who lives, makes mistakes, answers for himself, doesn't hide behind an image."

"Were you like that yourself?"

"No. Sometimes we see someone else's problem before we see our own," he said. "This line points back at me now too: I've played the good person, the rescuer, the sage. God — whenever I decided I knew how other people should live. The devil — whenever I declared my own actions an inevitable dark nature. The whole scene plays out inside me, like almost always."

"But you were still writing to your brother."

"Of course. The addressee just expanded over time — first to all of humanity, when really I should have started with myself."

He smirked.

"'Try being a person' — that really is the harder role. Because a role tells you in advance how to behave, and a person has to decide fresh every time, without a

ready-made mask, and can get it wrong. Being God is easier — you always know the truth. Being the devil too — you don't have to answer for anything: 'that's just who I am.' But being a person means admitting the contradictions: loving and getting angry, helping and getting tired."

"Is that about your brother?"

"And about me. And about both of us."

He thought again about that first page, the one with "Genius of Freedom."

"Strange that he kept it, but never changed."

"Loving a text isn't the same as being willing to live out its meaning. Maybe he saw something of his own in it — we'll never know now."

"I wanted him to see mine."

"I know. Wanting is fine. Demanding is pointless. A personal message is the hardest kind to hear — it makes you want to get defensive right away. But he could admire beauty — it was safer than meaning."

He was quiet for a long time.

"So in 'Genius of Freedom' I hid the blow inside pretty packaging. And then got angry that he praised the packaging instead of noticing the blow."

"Sounds about right."

"Not a pleasant thing to realize."

"But a real one," I said. "Neither poem is bad — they both hold onto your genuine attempt to reach him. Not perfectly honest. But alive. And the last line is

still strong — precisely because it's spoken not by a sage who's already learned how to be a person, but by someone who's demanding it of another person while having no idea yet how many years it'll take him to learn the same thing himself."

He read it again: "try being a person, that's the harder role."

"It sounds different now. Not a verdict."

"Then what is it?"

"A task. For all of us."

We looked a while longer at that page with "Genius of Freedom" on it, the one my brother once carried around. I don't know exactly what he loved about it. He seems to have barely noticed the poem written the day after, unlike the first one. But in the end, the first one wasn't really heard either — just differently. Twenty years later, both messages found their way back to the person who wrote them.

"So?" he asked. "Did you manage to be a person?"

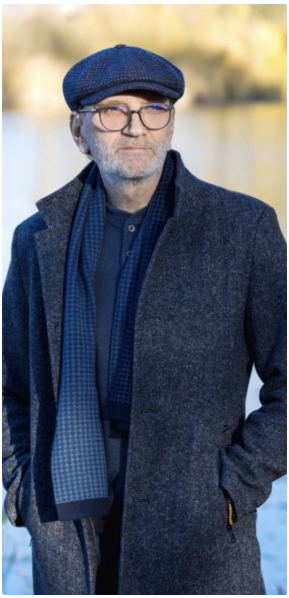
I wanted to give a nice answer. Then changed my mind.

"Sometimes."

He nodded. This time, that was enough.

CHAPTER 29

Happy



When I reread this poem, the first thing that comes back isn't the text — it's one day in Vietnam.

By that point, people had gradually started appearing in my life who made me want to stay myself around them. We took tents out to the shore of a freshwater lake. The jungle around us never quieted down, not even at night. Tents, a campfire, swimming, a guitar, fruit, long conversations. Later a few more people joined us — and we're still in touch with a lot of them today.

That's when I first caught myself thinking that the words I'd once written in "Living Yesterday" were

starting to come true: "an army of friends is with you."

But along with that came another kind of test. **Being around new people meant learning how to actually be real.** Not trying to help everyone. Not trying to understand everyone. Not earning your place beside them. Just being.

I woke up one morning to find the camp already living its own life. Someone was building the fire, someone was swimming, someone was making breakfast. Oatmeal was cooking. Everyone was calmly doing whatever they loved. I'd once heard a simple idea: "Real rest is when everyone's doing exactly what they actually enjoy." That's probably exactly what it looked like.

At some point, the feeling of freedom and gratitude filled me up so completely that I just sat down and started writing. **Ten minutes later, the poem was already finished.**

— — —

Happy

Tears of delight welling up at every note.
A smile spreading with every drop of sweat.
And joy at absolutely everything around me.
I'm happy, so HAPPY, my dear friend.

Bliss, just to witness this life's colors,
bliss, tearing off the masks that stuck to my skin,

letting my own face finally breathe,
turning it to the sun and smiling, free!

No watching the clock — just being happy!
Rain from the clouds — I rush out into the downpour!
Forward, faster! I can hear my heart beating…
I'm happy here, now, my faithful friend.

Let the night cover the earth like a blanket.
Let the coming day start everything over.
Let dawn touch my sleepy eyes with its first ray,
calling me, once again, onto some magical road.

Once again I hear the call of the Universe.
So familiar, so deeply felt.
Free, full of faith, my soul overflowing,
I'm happy, happy TO BE ALIVE, my dear one!

— — —

"You told me about the camp. But you barely mentioned this 'dear friend,'" I noted.

"Because that's a different story," he answered.

"Then tell it."

"His name is Avi. We met completely by chance, back in Kraków. He'd come to visit his son, Edward, and instead of a few days, they ended up staying almost two weeks. We talked the whole time."

"What made him so special to you?"

"Not that he taught me something. That around him, I could just be."

"Is that where the masks in the poem come from?"

"I think so. Not because he pulled them off me. But because around certain people, they just stop being necessary."

"So 'my dear friend' is Avi?"

"Yes. But not only him."

"Then who else?"

"Anyone you stop feeling lonely around."

"And that's what happiness is?"

"No. Happiness is the moment you suddenly realize you've already stopped wearing the masks."

Somewhere in the dark, the jungle was still humming. The fire was dying down. And this time, no one had to prove anything to stay by it.

CHAPTER 30

To Grandmother's



There are people around whom you simply stop fighting with life. For me, that person was my grandmother.

When everything was falling apart, I'd call her and say just one sentence: "Grandma, I'll be there soon." She lived about an hour's drive from the city, and that drive alone was usually enough to start calming me down. At her place, a huge mug of coffee with milk would be waiting, something delicious to eat, long conversations, and the sense that the world could wait a little longer.

My grandmother shaped my life enormously. She was independence-loving, self-sufficient, stubborn, and principled — in many ways she tried to instill in me the qualities my father never quite managed to pass on: he wasn't entirely absent, but he was around far less often than I needed him to be. **Whenever things got hard, whenever everything was collapsing and the ground was slipping out from under me, I'd get in the car and drive to her.** All it took was a warning that I'd be there soon. Arriving felt like stepping into an oasis of calm, where I didn't have to immediately solve problems, pull myself together, and become strong again.

A few weeks before she died, I ended up staying with her again. A business venture my brother and I had been running had just collapsed, and I was left without money or any means of supporting myself. I called my grandmother and told her: "This time I'll be staying a while." I gathered berries and mushrooms in the forest and sold them, saving up first for a real estate agent's fee, then for the deposit on a rented apartment. The situation wasn't a happy one, by any means. But now I can see how strangely it worked out — it shifted my geography and pulled me closer to my grandmother, as if life already knew I was about to lose her.

We spent another two or three weeks together. Then I finally saved up enough and left to work in another city. That's where I learned she was gone.

I remember the minibus I rode back on. Everything happened as if in a blur, but I can still clearly see myself sitting by the window, tears streaming down. When I arrived, the grave still needed to be dug. The men who were supposed to dig it had already gotten drunk and were useless by then. I was wearing light-colored pants and a sweater. Furious, I grabbed a shovel, sent them away, and started digging it myself. **I dug, and cried, and talked to my grandmother the whole time.**

That's when I decided to give up nicotine — I'd already been smoking for about seven years by then, and she'd always dreamed of me quitting. I gave up alcohol too; later I slipped once, during the separation from my wife, but for most of the years that followed, I didn't drink.

Years later, sitting in Vietnam, I still kept remembering my grandmother, talking to her in my head, sometimes asking her for advice. I wanted to create something that would hold onto not her death, not the funeral, but the warmth that had existed around her. That's why almost nothing happens in the poem — there's music, warm chatter, Pele coffee with milk and sugar, a half-litre mug, the old familiar stove, sleep, and waiting for April. **I didn't write this poem only about my grandmother. I preserved a place where the soul once felt at peace.**

— — —

To Grandmother's

Maybe everyone's just worn you out by now,
like the creaking swing set in the yard,
like eyes going heavy, like a snowstorm
on a soft but lonely bed…

If only someone would sing a beautiful song
on a guitar, or a ukulele if nothing else was around,
and then — warm chatter, and cups of Pele coffee,
with milk and sugar, a half-litre mug — and just like that, everything,

would stop mattering so much. I'm falling asleep, my breathing barely there…
Full and foolish, and up onto the old stove, warm as home,
like Yemelya, I'd climb up and sink into a dream smeared in watercolor…
I'd sleep straight through the winter, through March,
and only wake up in April,

when the wind no longer bites and the birds have flown back home…

— — —

"Why did you write about this, specifically?" I asked.

"Because I was afraid of forgetting the feeling," he answered.

"Not your grandmother?"

"No. I'll never forget her anyway."

"Then what?"

"How quiet it got, around her."

"Did she say anything in particular?"

"I don't remember. She must have given me advice. But it isn't the words I remember now."

"Then what?"

"What it felt like, just to be near her."

"Why her, specifically, every time things got hard?"

He thought about it.

"Because I never had to earn anything, around her."

"Not even the right to stay?"

"Especially not that."

"Did you write a poem about your grandmother?"

He shook his head.

"Not only. I wrote a poem about home."

"And where is it now?"

He smiled.

"Sometimes it's enough just to open this page — and go back to my grandmother's."

CHAPTER 31

The Sky Has Hands Too



Some poems don't begin with a thought. First, an image shows up.

A friend sent me a photo: his hand, fingers spread wide, against the sky. I looked closer and suddenly saw another set of hands between his fingers — blue ones, sky-colored. And the line arrived: "The sky has hands too."

After that, the poem practically wrote itself. The sky's hands started living a life of their own: holding a person steady, shielding the sun, painting the sunset, hiding tears inside the rain, and by the end becoming an angel's hands and leading the text into a prayer.

The metaphor never sits still — the sky's hands keep changing function, sometimes strong, sometimes burned, sometimes tired, almost human, and yet belonging to something far larger than a person.

The sky accompanies a person through an entire life — "from the moment grandfather pulled up the turnip, to the day they finally say 'rest in peace.'" I wanted to connect the beginning and the end with an almost blunt jump: a whole life fits between them, and the sky stays overhead the entire time. It chokes alongside people on smoke and smog, but it endures without accusing anyone — it keeps giving breath even to those making that breath harder and harder to draw. **The biggest things are often hiding underneath the most ordinary ones**: rain falls, a cloud covers the sun — and a poetic eye offers a different version: maybe someone is shielding us with a hand right now. And care, in this poem, hurts the one giving it — the sky strokes the sun with clouds until its palms burn, and keeps working anyway.

In the second-to-last stanza, a direct instruction appears — a repetition of the photograph itself: raise your hand, look between your fingers, and maybe, against a cloud, wings will appear. And the ending turns into a prayer: after everything you've just seen, words start to feel unnecessary, and all that's left is a gesture — lifting your eyes, smiling honestly, falling silent.

The poem ended up with a life of its own too: it passed through several hands and voices, and as far as I know, it turned up at the Slavianski Bazaar festival in Belarus, performed by someone I've never met — I didn't send it there myself, and I don't know who passed it along the way. **The author holds onto one specific moment. Readers gradually set it free from the original photograph — the image becomes something shared.**

— — —

The Sky Has Hands Too

The sky has hands too.
Only not everyone can see them.
Between your fingers, touching your skin,
it believes — maybe you'll notice one day.

With fingers gone blue, it holds on
tightly, so you won't lose heart.
From the moment grandfather pulled up the turnip,
to the day they finally say, "rest in peace."

Choking on smoke and smog,
it still gives you the joy of breathing freely.
And it doesn't dare disobey God,
hiding its tears inside the rain, unnoticed.

The sky will cover the sun with its hands —
so we can rest a little in the shade.
It'll stroke it with clouds,
wearing its own palms down to burns.

It'll paint the sunset and the haze,
so lovers feel closer to each other.
At dawn it'll change the picture,
smiling at the tired and the half-asleep.

Raise your hand up boldly,
spread your fingers just a little.
Against the white background, you'll see —
an angel stretching its wings toward you.

Smile, for the first time, honestly,
your eyes turned up toward the sky.
It isn't quite the moment for words.
I'll pray — hear me, Father.

— — —

"Did you really see hands right away, or just the gaps between his fingers?" I asked, looking at that photograph.

"The gaps, at first. And then I couldn't unsee it," he answered. "The poem didn't start when I invented the metaphor. It started when the image stopped being ordinary."

"But you're still the one who invented the sky's hands."

"I saw them. Those aren't the same thing: when you invent something, you can feel yourself creating it. Here it felt like I'd noticed something that was already in the photograph — even though someone else might not have seen it. So the image wasn't born

in the object, and it wasn't born in me either — it happened somewhere between the two."

"Like with a text and its reader."

"Exactly. A friend sent half of it. I added the second half. A listener added the third."

I reread the first line.

"'The sky has hands too' — an almost childlike line. Did you add 'too' on purpose?"

"Of course. People have hands — it turns out the sky does as well. I wanted to feel some kinship with it, and to make the whole thing easier to picture: it's simpler for a person to imagine care through a palm than through the movement of air masses."

"But then it turns into a pretty fairy tale."

"I don't see a problem with that, as long as the fairy tale doesn't pretend to be a final explanation. No one's actually claiming the clouds are literally someone's fingers."

"But God shows up here quite seriously."

He was quiet for a moment.

"That's his image. Back then, I probably believed with more certainty. Today I'd leave it as it is — even 'it doesn't dare disobey God.' In this poem, the sky is subordinate: it carries out its purpose, the way a person does."

"Did you see yourself in it too?"

"In the wish to keep doing what you're supposed to do, even while choking on smoke. I wasn't thinking

about that back then — now I see a risk in it: you can use 'purpose' to justify endless, uncomplaining endurance. The sky keeps giving air even to the people poisoning it, with no right to refuse. That's convenient for people. For the sky — I don't know."

"So this becomes an image of someone who keeps helping while he's being destroyed. A rescuer."

He smiled.

"I think a poet almost always ends up writing a little bit of himself. Same with the rain — the sky hides its tears in it, and I hid mine often too, sometimes without even noticing."

I moved to the hands covering the sun.

"Wearing its palms down to burns. Why keep stroking something that's causing pain?"

"That's just clouds covering the sun," he frowned. "Don't turn everything into therapy."

"Fine, let's leave the literal metaphor alone. But care, in your writing, is almost always tangled up with self-harm — an interesting coincidence."

He thought about it.

"Yes. These days I might also read a warning into it: if you keep shielding other people from the sun with your own body, eventually you'll be left without any palms. And they'll still get hot the moment you step away."

We reached the sunset.

"The sky helps lovers, sets the mood — you're a romantic."

"Sometimes. And dawn changes the scene, because the moment's over, and now it's smiling at the tired and half-asleep instead."

"The sky is working the whole time. Even at night?"

"Of course."

"Then when does it rest?"

"Maybe when we're not watching," he smiled.

"But we're always watching, somewhere."

"So it never rests. Leave the sky alone — that's the achiever talking again."

We both laughed, then I looked at the second-to-last stanza.

"This is basically an instruction for the photo: raise your hand, spread your fingers — and you'll see."

"But not everyone will. You need the right background, the right clouds, the right angle — and the willingness."

"Why wings, against a white background?"

"There was probably a cloud there. The image just kept moving on its own — I wasn't planning ahead, the lines led the way."

"But someone still chose the next line."

"Me. I followed the association: the sky's fingers, palms, clouds, an angel's wings, a raised hand, a prayer. One image turns into the next without a full break."

"You've analyzed that well."

"Back then I was just writing. That's exactly why it's interesting to look at now."

I read the ending.

"'Smile, for the first time, honestly' — why the first time?"

"Maybe there'd been masks before that, like in 'Happy.' An honest smile shows up in front of the sky because the sky doesn't need to be impressed."

"And then words become inappropriate — but you still end with a prayer. That's speech too."

"Not quite. A prayer doesn't explain — it reaches out. You're not asking for anything specific, you want to be heard — something words can't actually say. Sometimes a person doesn't even know what he's asking for. He just lifts his eyes and hopes whoever's up there understands him better than he understands himself."

"That sounds like a child. And the sky becomes a parental figure again — holding, shielding, painting pictures, with God somewhere above it."

He was quiet.

"I think it mattered to me that someone bigger was holding it all together. It's hard for a person who believes he's holding everything up alone."

"Do you believe now that you're not alone?"

"Sometimes. And when I don't, I look at the sky."

"And you see hands?"

"Not always anymore. The image has become familiar — poetry stops surprising you eventually too, if you don't look at it freshly."

He raised his palm. Between his fingers was just an ordinary evening sky.

"Nothing," he said.

"Wait for a cloud."

"And if it doesn't come?"

"Then today the hands just look different," I smirked. "You've learned how to rescue your own metaphors."

"I have to. And then the poem ended up at the Slavianski Bazaar — as far as I remember."

"Did you see the performance? Do you know who read it?"

"I don't remember exactly. That's just what I was told."

"Then it's probably better not to state it too firmly."

"The chapter already says: as far as I know. But the feeling itself — surprise, pride — was real. I wasn't even involved, and that was actually the nice part: the text moved on its own. First a hand in a photograph, then my hand wrote it down, then other people's hands passed the page along — and in the end it turned up in someone's voice."

"So the poem grew its own hands too. How do you feel about it being performed without you?"

"Fine. I'd like to know the details, but the fact of it happening made me happy. If they'd changed the

lines, though — that I don't know how I'd feel. Let the text live its own life, but ideally the author's name and the actual words shouldn't get rewritten without permission."

"But a reader rewrites it inside himself anyway."

"That's different — he's changing the meaning for himself, not the words for everyone."

We looked at the beginning again.

"What if you hadn't written that photograph down?"

"In a few days I wouldn't have remembered the hands anymore. The poem saved the image. And the image saved the poem."

"How do you know a moment is worth recording?"

"You don't. You write down whatever caught you, and a lot of it turns out weak later. No regrets — attention gets trained through sheer number of attempts. Like a muscle, except you shouldn't push it all the way to a hernia again."

We laughed.

"So what was the main lesson here?"

"Don't walk past the second image. The first glance says: 'a hand against the sky.' The second says: 'there are more hands, between the fingers.' Poetry sometimes lives in the second one."

"And the third?"

"Can ruin everything with explanation. Like we're doing right now."

He looked at the length of the chapter.

"There's a real risk of that."

"Should we stop, then? Without the prayer?"

He raised his eyes.

"It's already there. Between the words."

We fell silent. This time, the sky didn't show us any fingers, any wings. It was just getting darker. But after the poem, it was never quite ordinary again.