

Midway Upon the Journey of Our Life

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Translated
by Alex Zucker



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WE CAN BEGIN AND END anywhere, for we have not made a pact with victory, but with struggle. In the old days they began with childhood — yet how many mass graves have they filled in since then! What a terrible burden of vigilant loyalty has accrued to us over the years, what an effort we make to bear its weight, so we may still be capable of hope and love today, and, perhaps, again tomorrow!

But I am writing a book: *Somewhere in the middle of life comes a moment when a man must take his fate into his own hands*. For it comes to pass that the young woman we hope for from birth and remember to our final hour marries and gives birth to a child. You kissed her just once, in the rain, on a street corner, with the perfume of heroic lilacs still in the air. The child of course is a boy. And he looks like you, *he looks like you!* — your spitting image. And it comes to pass that they kill a poet before your eyes and a weary policeman, a gentle soul, brings home a sheet of paper from an unfinished piece



of writing, folded into a fortune teller for his children. And then it comes to pass one day that tender young seamstresses, their doll-like busts working in graceful rhythm, put in overtime to mend the red banner of the revolution using the finest thread. And that is that moment. It usually comes before sunup, and from that point on, lyricism is done for.

LYRIC POETRY — as everyone knows — differs from epic poetry in that it doesn't tell stories: its stories are hidden. But even back then I yielded to it only as a vice, in those first years after February, encased in wooden scaffolding — while she was still asleep . . . Afterward you end up with a pounding headache, sick to your stomach, but to miss out on your first love is something that stays with you all your life. So there can be no more lyricism. The essence of lyricism is the decanonization of themes, in other words, a muddle. Freedom, they say! But who will be our witness when the day comes, who, when we are completely and definitively alone?!

As for method, the method of prose is deceleration and the method of poetry is semantic reversal. Thus men slow down and women want to be done as quickly as possible. But that's just it, there's not enough freedom. We live in a man's world, the methodological and semantic context of prose, established and reestab-

lished over and over, ad nauseam, by way of awkward digressions. Of course. There were women who trained to be locksmiths and train engineers, so nobody writes prose on a whim. No one knows how it will all turn out. And in prose, you can end anywhere: “So that, when I stretched out my hand, I caught hold of the *fille de chambre*’s –” The end. Or he dies.

I WILL BEGIN, THEN, with my state of siege. Every two hundred yards along the road that leads from the Stalin Works to the Collective House in Litvínov, there is a date inscribed in the concrete. Behind the old slaughterhouse, amid a group of unplastered brick buildings constructed by French POWs during the war, worn by rain and sticky with sulfurous ash from the factories and open-pit mines, is the date 18. II. 1948. A little higher up, in the direction of the future, a child’s bare footprints are pressed into the concrete.

Long before they took us prisoner here in these model family homes, there was nothing beyond this but fallow land, pitted with bomb craters, and a few lone huts of rotting black plank, some forgotten groves of birch, barbed wire, tissue paper roses dotting the grass pink and blue — and on the site where my bookshelf now stands, a wild rabbit had its nest.

Back then we still walked the streets of Prague quietly singing an old Russian revolutionary song into

the night, the one Lenin supposedly whistled, leaning against the ledge of the open window that misty November morning in the hush of the long pause before the *Aurora* fired off its famous shot. Someone had adapted it to local circumstances, changing the refrain to “Lidice–Most–Litvínov . . .”

The Youth Union brigades had begun building homes and were doing a pretty bad job of it. Most of the walls didn’t meet at a right angle, so it was difficult to set up the wardrobes and beds when we moved in one November day — by that same fatal logic that in the end always convinces you that no word and no name can be taken in vain.

They were building in a hurry. There wasn’t time.

We recited Mayakovsky to taciturn landholders, owners of an acre or half an acre, in pubs that served weak beer, and most of the girls that summer lost their sad wartime virginity — for disappointment and grief were far, far in the future, and the murky dawns were only just beginning to collect, imperceptibly, in a slender strand of the first gray hair.

The doors didn’t close properly either, and would open on their own, thudding in the draft. To this day the neighborhood resounds with muffled banging on windy days, an organic sound, like the roar of surf or the hum of a forest. The countryside has yet to adapt

itself to the city. A few years ago there was a thicket of beech right behind the house, you could just pop out from the kitchen and a few minutes later be gathering mushrooms for soup among the electric cables and tin cans and baby carriage skeletons. It was no longer like that by the time we arrived, because the children had trampled down the mycelium and the forest soil had been covered over with humus after the last battle was won and people were finally authorized to have gardens.

AT FIRST THEY HAD IN MIND a uniform layout for the grounds around the blocks of flats. Back then most people still didn't have any sense of the difference in principle between Breton and socialist realism; back then, when this housing estate was being built, we all still believed in Rilke and free love.

So any individual modifications were prohibited. Inspections, unscheduled and unannounced, threatened severe consequences for anyone who violated the public nature of the space. Yet there were still many broken bricks, planks, cables, scraps of wire mesh, and the wind, which blows where it will, sowed haphazardly an aster here, a marigold there, so there was uncertainty right from the start as to what was actually intentional and what was not. Men with armbands on their sleeves stood in befuddlement over stray clumps of purple

columbine and silently beat their way through the bushes of black elder — anxiously wondering whether they might be betraying the cause of the working class.

Yet for a long time nobody dared. Only on dark, starless nights did they sneak out in front of the building with children's shovels, glancing around in alarm at the distant whoop of drunkards and the yowl of mating cats, planting radishes, parsley, and chives in the damp corners sheltered by the brickwork terraces. The children of course pilfered it, and this violation of discipline and the collectivist spirit was the topic of frequent heated debates at plenary sessions of the Party's local organs.

In the context of the struggle against formalism, as well as perhaps in recognition of economic necessity, people used low wire fencing to stake out household gardens in irregular rectangular plots.

Now it was time for enrichment. The earth was dry and rocky, and dug up by bulldozers, even hen and chicks barely took hold in it. People pushed baby carriages a mile and a half loaded with pails and baskets full of fertile soil. Our neighbor claimed to have trucked in seven hundred and thirty-six loads of forest dirt. He found his site in a hollow where some foxes used to have their den. The earth there was heavy, and rich in ammonia due to the rotting carcasses of baby



hares and mice and golden-plumed birds, and perhaps even a man shot down on the run. The furious growth of the peonies still brings to light a fragile little white bone every now and then.

So it was that everyone settled in, growing thick and putting out branches; so it was that we moved into the city under siege.

OUR NEIGHBOR THE VIGILANT outpost works in the garden all day long, to the point that in the summer it seems he hardly sleeps. I run into him at six thirty a.m. as he returns home from the night shift.

“Good night,” I say, according to local custom, as he lays his briefcase down on a bench beneath a truncated tree and roots around in the dirt, yanking up weed sprouts.

“Good night!” he replies guardedly, and I lower my eyes so he won’t catch me, so he won’t see that I know how irrevocably, how desperately irrevocably the rosy day arising above the dark hills fills the vale of May. And as I walk away, he sinks into reverie, gazing down on his little rock garden and beds of kohlrabi and onion.

I return in the afternoon to find him hard at work. He is transplanting some delicate young plants from a hotbed he built with his own hands with the help of his late brother-in-law, and at day’s end he handles

the watering hose with the meticulous precision of a calligrapher. His voice is soft, with a cultivated cruelty of diction. "The primrose," he says, "otherwise known as the primula, comes in many varieties. One would never have imagined. So for instance you have the *Primula pruhoianica*, the 'Springtime' primula, distinguished, as you see, by its pink notched petals, the dwarf primrose, the summer primrose, the purple . . . well, at any rate, I could go on and on, it's something of a hobby of mine. The way some people like a drink or two out on the town. True, there's always work to be done, but the boy does appreciate a taste of strawberries now and then, even if it's only a few."

Our own garden lies fallow.

"That's good black earth you've got right there, just waiting to be dug," he says to me sometimes with a look nothing escapes.

He was a policeman before the war. I don't like police, I don't like living under police surveillance.

"We saw plenty of their sort in our day," the policeman said one evening, lighting half a cigarette in a long cherrywood holder. "Hussies! But the men on the force, we knew how to handle them. We had this little implement, the spike we called it, like this, up our sleeve. And they came with us, yes sir. They came right along, like lambs. There were times — I'm telling you —

the things we saw, it was like a novel. Yes sir, a novel, only not the kind they write.” Then, having defined his poetics, he resumed: “This one time with my partner, Husárek — you remember him, hon, good-looking guy! — this one time we pulled a raid on this . . . one of these little hideaway joints. Busted in there, wham bam. You know, the usual, booze, cards — but one of the hussies, she wasn’t having it. Uh-uh, did not want to go. She bit, scratched. Little minx. So to teach her a lesson, as they say, we took her in as is. Just like that, in her birthday suit. Nothing but her high heels. That was the year of the big frost, when the trees froze over. By the time we got her to the station, she’d turned white as a ghost on us.”

Then the light went out. Power loss. That happened often. The policeman sat smoking, feeling indulgent toward the world because summer was turning to fall and he already had his crocus, hyacinth, and tulip bulbs stored away in the cellar. A cold wind was beginning to blow from Siberia, reeking of tar and the smoke of furtive fires. There were still men in concentration camps standing for night roll call. We listened tensely to the doors’ muffled banging, no one said a word. Then I went home and ate my cold dinner with my hands alone in the dark, because the shops were out of candles and it had been nine months since Christmas.

AT NINE THE ALARM CLOCKS start going off. Rise and shine for the night shift. Most of the children are already asleep. The women are coming home from the shops and canteens. In the doorway they share a fleeting kiss with their husbands, who smell of sweat, coal dust, and hydrogen sulfide.

I sit with my sticky fingers spread, watching the wintering flies settle onto them, and ponder the fact that there is barely coal for a week in the cellar. On the other side of the wall someone is playing Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture* on an old raspy gramophone. Suddenly the door opens and in walks a woman wearing my mother's wedding dress, a bouquet of Parma violets pinned to her bosom, with fishnet gloves and white leather boots. In her outstretched left hand she holds a blue porcelain candelabra ablaze with sallow tapers that singe a loose red lock of her hair with a sizzling crackle.

With a single abrupt gesture, graceful yet just hurried enough that it leaves a red scratch on her throat, she opens her dress and her tanned breasts slip out of the fine Valenciennes lace.

"We brought you some coal," she says, beckoning me to follow her.

"It's still a week till payday," I say.

“Not to worry, *mon cher!*” She presses my face to her warm, blue-veined breasts. “Poor Count de Lérrouville is footing the bill, of course.”

So I walk out in front of the house and pour my last coins into the black-stained palm of the old wagonman: “Careful, friend, you don’t want to soil the lady’s dress!” The coal is deposited in front of the house: a big beautiful walnut of high heating value. The woman in the 1924 wedding dress lays the bouquet of violets on top of the heap and walks away. She walks away: “*Adieu!*” And as she turns to glance back one last time, the chill white of her throat shines from the furs around her neck. Meanwhile the “Marseillaise” is drowned out in the thunder of bells from the Cathedral of the Annunciation in the Kremlin. And after that, nothing but silence, a whooshing void untouched by even the most distant memory of applause at the Prague Spring concert in ’48 where one of my old friends lent me an uncensored copy of *The State and Revolution*. Then Páleníček performed the “Appassionata.”

The door opens by itself. I am tense, as though at any moment I might be caught in the act, once and for all. And the dark stream flows on through the factory gate, the loudspeakers blare a marching tune, the punch clocks ding, a red star shines above the cooling tower, and gray buses filled with prisoners quietly drive