Damir Karakaš

Remembering Forest

Translated by Tomislav Kuzmanović

The TV

I walk into the muddy yard and notice a cardboard box with a sign in big, black, capital letters. AMBASSADOR it says. I run into the house and shout, “When did the TV get here?!” Mother’s calm voice answers from the kitchen, “Just now.” I sit down on a chair, staring adoringly into the depths of the dark screen. I lift my arm and slowly extend my finger close to the square knob. I step away from the TV and close my finger back into my fist because I hear my father’s footsteps: he’s coming down the steep stone path. I glance out the window: Father carries a white pole on his shoulder, he removed the twigs and the bark from it, then he stops by the plum tree, turns his back towards the house, urinates in an arch and whistles happily. “Where is he?” he shouts. I run out into the yard, ready to run in all possible directions. “You’re gonna watch the screen. I’ll be on the roof, setting the antenna. Tell me when the picture’s good,” Father says, walks into the room and turns on the TV with his thumb. After a few seconds that seem like eternity, the screen rustles in black and white shivering dots. Father says, “I’m gonna climb to the roof. You watch carefully.” Mother walks into the room: now we both stare into the snowy picture on the screen, we’re silent, we’re not breathing, we’re just listening to Father’s steps: we hear him turn the antenna looking for the best position. “Good?!” Father shouts after a while; his voice from the attic sounds different. Impatiently, I tap my feet on the ground and shout back, “No!” After a couple of minutes, Father shouts again, “Now?” Mother shouts back, “It shows, then it goes away!” Then, “Wait, wait!” I shout too, “Wait! Wait!” Picture finally appears on the screen: a man sitting in a wicker chair. He speaks something into the microphone to some other man; his head bent, probably from his heavy hair. The other one with the round microphone, when he smiles, with his teeth, his gums and his voice, looks like someone’s horse laughing in the distance. “Still good?” Father shouts. “Good, yes, it’s good!” I shout back happily. Father climbs down through the opening in the ceiling of my small room, he folded both legs of his trousers while he was up there: his white calves strained on the staves of the ladder. Mother says, “It’s gone a bit.” Father looks at the screen and says, “If it stays like this, we’re good.” He comes up to the TV in two long strides, puts his hand on the volume knob, turns it up, then down, then adjusts the brightness, comes up close to the screen again, turns up the contrast, nods and says, “There, good!” In the evening, just before 7:30, Father ceremoniously turns on the TV once again: a clock appears on the TV, it’s full of tense silence, then there’s a meshed globe which, when the music comes on, starts revolving around its axis. Right after that, a dark-haired host, glasses on his nose, greets the viewers with his mesmerizing voice. Father and Mother sit up straight in their chairs, Nana sits on the ottoman, my sister and I on the warm firewood crate: the only things visible in the room are the ones lit up by the flash of the TV. A dog barks outside, someone calls my name from the dark. I keep quiet, gaze at the TV, and the voice from the outside once again tries to steal the images out of my eyes. Mother says, “Go out, it’s Pejo.”

I wave my hand and say, “I’m watching TV.” Father snaps, “Go out and tell him that!” I run out and shout, “I’M WATCHING TV.” I watch it, and every time before the daily news when that clock appears on the screen, I quiet down and secretly pull my hand under my shirt: I collect my heartbeats into the palm of my hand. If only my heart would beat – tick, tack, tick, tack – like that clock, but it beats much faster, more than eighty beats per minute, and I read in *Arena* that, when calm, the normal heartbeat is sixty to eighty. One day I decide not to do it anymore, it ruins my watching TV: whatever I do, eat, play football, the whole day I only wait for it to get dark so I can watch TV. Father sometimes allows us to watch a film, or a show, not only the news.

One day he came back from the town and brought a blue, plastic foil, he glued it on the screen and said, all proud, Maybe we’re not the first in the village that got the TV, but we are the first with the one in color. Once again, mesmerized, we all sit in front of the TV. Some of the neighbors who want to see the picture in color come over: a film is on the screen. Some man in a blue raincoat says to another man in a blue raincoat, “Scumbag.” On the screen, the shoes are blue, the rifles are blue, the eyes are blue, the potatoes are blue on Sunday morning agricultural show.

Old Vuna

I raise the plum sapling with my both hands and slowly stick it into the dark emptiness of the hole: Father pushes the soil into the hole with the sole of his shoe. He bends down and tramps around the sapling's root in mouse-like steps. "You can go," he tells me, takes the shovel and smooths out the dirt around the newly planted tree. His motions are so skilled it seems like the shovel is an extension of his arm. I wipe my palms against the wet grass, and when I'm already kneeling, I smooth out the crumpled legs of my trousers. I walk, staring into the pale sky: it has spilled into the landscape; sharp hills stick out of the fog like god's tits. "Marija!" my father calls out, stomping the molehills. When my mother comes to the planted sapling, he makes a painful grimace and says, "I'm not feeling well." Father walks to the wooden slide door with enforced iron frame, puts the shovel inside. "What's wrong?" Mother asks worriedly as he steps out of the shed, he says, "I don't know." I walk into the house. I wait for 7:15 in the evening to watch TV; Father still doesn't allow anyone to turn it on, and he does it just before the daily news because my sister begged him: it's time for a cartoon. It lasts about five minutes, after that there are the commercials. We watch them because Father says it is not good to turn the TV on and off every so often. I glance through the window and see him: he puts his hands on his head, he staggers. I walk out and hear him say to my mother he needs to lie down. Father works even when he's running a fever and when he has a problem with his tooth, his leg, his head, but now he needs to go to bed. Slowly he walks into the room, lies down on the ottoman; Mother puts a wet cloth on his forehead even though he is not running a fever. "Would you like something to eat?" she asks. He thinks for a second, then says, "Give me some fried bacon." Nana walks in to see Father, and I stick my head in behind her. Nana asks him softly, "What's wrong?" He replies angrily, "If I knew, I'd be a doctor." He tries to get up, but he only lets out a helpless sigh and gives himself in to the ottoman with a hole in the mattress. Nana says, "It'll go away, you need no doctor, what do they know." Father swears and slaps his hand against the wall; I worry he might break the TV. For three days, he cannot get up from the ottoman, on the fourth, he says, "I'm all bruised." We all look at him, he pulls up his sleeves, his shirt: blue marks all over his body. The light has crammed up into his bloodshot right eye with which he keeps looking for new bruises on his left arm, on the left side of his ribs. "Are there any on my head?" he asks. Mother comes close to look and says, "A few." He says, "I dreamed last night that some woman or some man came over, then choked me, crushed me, beat me, and I could not defend myself." Mother say, "Do you want to go to the doctor's?" "I need no doctor. What does he know?" he replies. "He might send me to the nut house." Nana walks into the room and says, "We should call Old Vuna." Mother snaps at her, "We need a doctor, not a witch!" Father cuts her short, "Call Old Vuna!" It suddenly gets cold outside; chicken soup boils loudly on the stove in the kitchen, Mother says, "How about some soup?" Father moans, "I can't." I have left to the dark hillock

above the house; I lie in the grass and watch the red sky for a long time; it gets even colder, so I go back to the house. Tomorrow, a gray-haired woman wearing a black apron and rubber boots comes to our house: it's Old Vuna. She sits down next to Father, feels his forehead, his neck, gazes deep into his glassy eyes. Father only moans in pain, shivers, occasionally swears the good God. Old Vuna says, "Don't cuss." She scratches her wide cheekbones, lights a cigarette and asks my mother, "So, every night this woman or man comes to him?" She sighs and says, "Not every night, every second, third." "Ah, almost every night," Father corrects her. Old Vuna says, "Put a knife under your pillow." "What knife?" Father glares at her. "The biggest and the sharpest you've got," Old Vuna says calmly; my sister stands up, starts crying, probably because of the knife; who knows what has gotten into her head. She cries even harder, farts, and Old Vuna laughs. She pats her head gently and tells her, "Dear child, you just fart, less money to the doctor." Mother brings a live, calm chicken, Old Vuna puts it under her arm and says, "The knife is going to help. For sure." Father keeps the knife under his pillow for days, it's the one he uses to slaughter pigs, that woman or man no longer appear in his sleep, but he still can't get up from his bed: he no longer wants to eat; his every shirt is soaked through with sweat. Mother keeps changing his wet shirts. "I'm gonna die," Father says, "Nothing can help me." The skin on his neck has gone yellow and wrinkled, he doesn't have a fever, but he coughs terribly; Nana goes to the stove, puts a log into it, and the swarms of red sparks rise up from inside. "Why are you stoking the fire? Can't you see he's burning!" Mother snaps at her, her eyes all glassy. My sister goes to his bed too; she watches him, sorrow in her eyes, and eats a piece of bread. Mother cries, Father asks for water. Mother brings a jug of water, pours some for him from a shuddering spout; I stand there and watch from under my eye as he strains to swallow, gurgling, choking on it; I feel sorry for him. He closes his eyes, crosses his arms across his chest, like they do with dead people. But he does it in anger, as if these are someone else's arms he blames for everything: he stops moving. I sit down on the bench, and as the shadows slowly grow thick on the walls, I keep glancing at one point: the knob on the TV. It must be close to seven o'clock, so I get up and silently tiptoe past my father, turn down the volume and gently switch on the TV with my thumb. He suddenly grabs his heavy boot that stands next to his bed, picks it up, lets out a groan, and throws it at my back. It actually doesn't hurt, it's his groan that startles me. "Turn it off!" he shouts. Then he lets out a cry from the abyss of his throat, "When I die, all of this will go to waste!" Mother turns off the TV in an instant, and I just walk out quietly. I go to my room, sit down on the edge of my bed, it's like I'm riveted to the spot: I stand up, go out, and walk around the village, among the houses sunken into heavy evening lights.

A little later, under the lamp light of a house by the road, I see a simple, red rubber band that women put in their hair; it's pulled through the paper label of a sausage you buy at the store. I pick it up, go back to my house and pull it over one of the fence poles: in the semidarkness, with this label that from up close

shines with some unknown shine and under the stars that have settled onto the nearby treetops like birds on fire, the post looks like a giant, black sausage.

I kneel down, plant my lips on the label, and, tears in my voice, I whisper into it, “God, make him die.”

In the Big City

Mali's grandfather made him a wicker egg to collect hazelnuts; we pick ours and put them in our pockets; there are so many hazelnuts around us we throw them at each other. "If only plums gave this much fruit," Father says. He's recovered completely, he says, "I'm even better than before." Then he walks into the house and says he's heard they buy hazelnuts in Zagreb. He looks at my mother, but he tells me to pick as many as I can, then we'll sell them. He says and looks at me, "You need new shoes, new trousers, and I have no money." For the next couple of days, I pick hazelnuts all the time; I dream of them. I've gotten sick with them from so much picking, so much so I can't even eat them anymore. I pick them and shove them into a nylon bag; at home, I put the nuts into a large linen sack we use to harvest potatoes. When it gets filled, Nana shakes it and ties its top with an old shoelace. Mother walks to the town; she need to go to the post office to telephone my aunt, to tell her I'm coming. On Monday morning, Father takes the oxen and takes me and the sack full of nuts to the town; Mother sits on the wagon with me. She keeps asking me if I can do it. Father turns around and snaps at her, "Woman, leave him be, people his age are already getting married!" I grab the sack and put it on my back, my legs buckle under its weight. I take it to the edge of the road; this is where the bus stops. When it arrives, the sweaty conductor tells me to put the sack into the hold; they both shake my hand, and Father adds, "Don't get robbed." I nod, I ride in the back seat. I take pleasure looking out the window, watching the road, cars; I'm looking forward to the big city where I'll be able to watch shop windows: ride on those movable steps in the department store, and maybe I manage to talk my aunt into taking me to the zoo. The driver has turned on the radio, so I listen to the songs. One of them speaks about a young man going to the army. *He says goodbye to everyone that's his, glancing, once more, at the hills,* it echoes from the speakers. I press my face against the glass and imagine my farewell when I will be going to the Yugoslav National Army; I glance at the hills, one more time. Sometimes I'm overcome by fear, what if they don't accept me in the army. If they don't, it'll mean I'm unfit. And my father thinks, like everyone else in our village: who's unfit for the army, he's unfit for life. Pejo's father also says, who's unfit for the army, he's unfit for a woman; army recruitment, it's going to be the most important day in my life. Luckily, there's a lot of time before that. Some other song now plays, so I sit up in the seat and I no longer think about the recruitment, I watch the green river. Later, in the distance, I catch sight of the cathedral's double tower; when the bus arrives at the main station, my aunt cheerfully waves at me from the outside. I get out, we shake hands, she suddenly kisses me on the cheek, and I get baffled because that's not what I expected. Father and Mother never kiss me; they only offer their hand. They never kiss me on my birthday either, because I never celebrate my birthdays. In my village, I've never seen anyone kiss. And I've never seen Father cry either; I can't even imagine it. Then my aunt helps me pull the sack of hazelnuts out of the stuffy hold. She hails

a taxi and then the driver, after he has barely managed to put the sack in the trunk, takes us to her apartment. We don't say one word along the way, except that she asks me when we stop at the traffic light if I know how much I will get for the hazelnuts. "I don't know," I say and shrug my shoulders, to what she replies, "You'll get what you get." We drive, I gaze out the taxi window at the skyscrapers, at the cars of all kinds and makes speeding past and honking, at the torrent of people: my eyes are clogged with so many people. In front of a gray building, we each grab our side of the sack and carry it into her apartment. Luckily, my aunt lives on the second floor: she inherited the apartment from her late husband. She has no children, and she was very ill. I heard Mother say Father the doctors had removed her uterus. In front of her apartment door, she holds the sack with one hand and with the other searches for her keys in her handbag. I slowly take the sack out of her hand and put it on my back. I wait until she finally unlocks the door. I walk inside before her and drop the sack in the hallway. She bends down, walks behind me and picks invisible crumbs; her apartment is like a museum. Nothing should be touched, she says this as I walk in. I sit down in the first armchair and do not move from it. I don't feel well in this apartment. It seems like I'm not allowed to even breathe. "Are you hungry?" she asks. "A little," I say. She quickly fries two eggs, brings a piece of bread, a jagged knife, a fork, and pulls a bottle of coke out of her fridge. "Here's the glass, have as much as you want," she says. I first take a sip of coke, then I eat, careful not to make a mess. I chew, careful not to open my mouth too much. Aunt goes to the bathroom to take a shower, blow-dry her hair, she opens and closes some kind of boxes. She walks out looking completely different: wearing a little coat and a skirt the color of chestnuts, with a yellow fox around her neck; her face made up, smelling of some sweet perfume. She picks up the phone, calls a taxi and says into a black, shiny receiver, "We'll be in front of the building in five minutes." She strokes her fox, glances at her watch and slowly hangs up. We leave the apartment; by the time she puts the key in the lock, locks the door, checks if it is locked, I'm already waiting with the sack at the bottom of the stairs. Then the driver comes, takes the sack from me and carries it in the car. Aunt takes the passenger's seat next to him, I sit in the back, he asks, "Where to?" Aunt says, "Kraš Confectionery." H nods and glances at my aunt's large tits: he starts slowly, and the tall, trimmed trees run faster and faster in a column next to us. The ride is short, the driver helps us take the sack out of the car, my aunt pays him and says, "Goodbye and thank you." Then she approaches the entrance into the factory, she leans down and says loudly into the glass opening in the doorman's booth, "Hello, we're here to sell hazelnuts. Can you, please, direct us." A fat man tells us to go to room 14. I pick up the bag, put it on my back, and follow my aunt: a man in a long white coat meets us in front of room 14. The moment he sees my aunt, and then her large tits, he perks up, jumps in and happily helps with the sack. It's he who carries the sack down the dangerously steep stairs, holding it firmly in his arms, it's he who opens the door with his shoulder, then lets us pass in front of him, to what my aunt says loudly, "What a gentleman!" He leads us into a spacious square

room, full of basement freshness. In the middle of the room, there is a large pot on metal legs. It has holes all over, so it looks like a giant strainer. Under the pot, there's a plastic bucket, just as large: several of my sacks full of hazelnuts can fit into it. Then he says, "We'll put the nuts here. What stays in the sifter, we'll keep, what falls through, we won't." Once again it is he who picks up the sack, brings it to the pot, tips the hazelnuts into it, and everything from the sack slowly falls through those little holes: a single hazelnut remains. It keeps spinning: it dithers. Then it finds its little hole: it falls through it. The man shrugs and it seems as if he is trying to hide this motion from himself. He first glances at my aunt, then at me, and says, "I'm really, really sorry, they're too small, we can't keep them." Aunt and I keep looking after that single hazelnut, and the fox around my aunt's neck bares its teeth at the man in the white coat.

The Wounded Piano

The bus makes slow progress: the small bend is called the small turn; the big bend is called the big turn. In the small and the big bends, the driver carefully turns the black bare wheel; he hits the brakes because by the big bend there is a deep ravine. On the road that leads into the town, the driver once again sits back in his seat, much larger and more comfortable than all other seats on the bus. It makes a stop at several scattered villages so the pupils who got on stand in the aisle and stare jealously at the rest of us sprawling in the seats: the bus rattles along and drags the sun behind itself. Then it reaches the blacktop; I look through the window and enjoy the soft ride. In the distance, through the glass, I see a hillock: the walls of the castle rise up high on the barren ridge; underneath it, two gray, apartment buildings, the only ones in the town. The view from the bus is different than the view when I go to the town from our village on foot; but now, even when I walk there, I can tell where the town actually starts. Every time it seems it begins at the ruins by the road where the old hospital used to stand; gray pigeons often fly out from there. As the bus approaches the town, the houses cram towards the center; we get off and shove each other as we walk along the road towards the school. There are still no traffic lights or crossings in the town, so we are careful when we cross the road. The first class is music; for me, that's the easiest class in school. It's the same for Karlo too; we sit together. The music teacher is called Comrade Miloš: he gives us a sign with his head to start singing, he plays a small dark red accordion, he sings *Through Valleys and Over Hills*, the old partisan song, we keep up with him, stretching the muscles in our throats. Anyone in the class singing or just opening his mouth has an A in music, so everyone in the class has an A in music. Comrade Miloš stopped coming to the school because he got ill, so the science teacher replaced him. She always comes to the class ten minutes before the end; she sits down, orders us to do something for the next class and then writes something into her notebook. Later on, because Comrade Miloš didn't come back, we got a new music teacher: his name is Comrade Weis, he wears a suit, has a beard, as shiny as the corn silk, and his high brow has eaten up his light, curly hair. Ever since he has come to school, music has become one of the most difficult subjects: Fs are falling left and right, and Comrade Weis threatens that those who do not know how to draw the circle of fifths are going to flunk his class; he and his wife live in an apartment at the second floor of the run-down building, and that's right next to Karlo's building. After school, when I go to the bus station, I sometimes run into the beautiful, blonde teacher's wife. She finds a bench in the park, pulls out a book from her handbag, and immerses into her reading, while my eyes try to sneak between her lean, long legs. Then, all of a sudden, a piano appeared in our school: black with three legs, when I first saw it, it looked like a large animal that had lost one of its legs in a trap; five men carried it into the music classroom. Comrade Weis walked around the piano happily and rubbed his large, gentle hands. The piano made the already small classroom even smaller, so

Comrade Weis ordered all the desks to be brought together, close. Every time we have music, he plays Beethoven, Tchaikovsky, Bach. He plays the tune, then suddenly stands up and wants us to guess what he has just played: his eyes scan the classroom looking for our heads. The large watch on his hand ticks and fills the classroom with even greater silence; luckily, he hasn't called my name, so I didn't get an F. When school finishes, Comrade Weis often stays alone in the school and spends hours pounding on the piano. He lets notes and tones run loose, first deep and dark, then high. The school is at the center of the town and everything echoes: the music is on the road, in the treetops, in the wind that makes those piercing sounds even louder. Karlo lives in the town, he laughs and says that lately people have been walking along the road with fingers in their ears; he says Comrade Weis sometimes plays late into the night, so the police came to warn him. One morning, still sleep-eyed, I hurry towards the school: I see Officer Predrag in front of the building; he's standing there holding his own arms behind his back. When we approach him, he signals with his eyes we have to stand back. Then Anka, our school janitor, comes out and when she comes near, we ask her in a whisper, "Why can't we go inside?" "Ah, children," she says and shakes her head in disbelief, "some bastard broke into the school last night and took a crap in the piano." Karlo soon comes to the school; he learns from me about the piano; later, he tells us in the school yard, helping himself with his arms, that the piano won't be easy to fix. He says, "There are wires in it and when the crap gets among the wires, no one can wash it out." Later on, those five men show up in front of the school in their blue truck. They take out the piano, carry it and turn their heads away from it in disgust. Behind them, like at a funeral, Comrade Weis walks slowly. A couple of days later, he and his beautiful wife and their suitcases go on a trip somewhere; he never came back.

Legends

Turtle and Mladen ride Turtle's moped towards our village; the exhaust sends a series of hollow bangs, like shots fired: Kornjača is behind the wheel, Mladen on a seat behind him. He's got two blue-green tattoos; a scorpion on his right shoulder and a wolf on his left; none are from the army; both tattoos were made with a sawing needle and ink when he was in prison. Turtle has just one tattoo, similar to my father's; on his forearm there is an arrow-pierced heart, and in it, YNA, Yugoslav National Army, in thick letters. One day, I'd like to have a tattoo of a wild animal. Maybe a tiger, a lion, a puma, but definitely the YNA next to it: so that everyone can see I was in the army, just as I can see it on Turtle's left forearm even though I am up at the top of the tree. I climb down from the plum tree in a second, I jump down and run to meet them: I come up to them and slowly offer my hand to Mladen. He gets off his moped suddenly, turns around like dancing, and my extended arms is painfully pressed against my bent back. Turtle circles around the moped, laughing, and Mladen slowly lets go of my arm and says, "Okay! All right!" Then he laughs too and scratches his wide, flattened nose with his thumb, which makes his face look squashed. Turtle stops, stares at the moped: he goes to the garage. He brings out a wooden box filled with rattling tools on his shoulder, and another such box under his arm: it's filled with nuts and bolts. He and Mladen squat down and start messing about the moped: they stick their greasy fingers into the engine's cavities. Mladen stands up, turns on the engine, opens up the throttle, closes it down, then squats down next to Turtle once again and peers into the engine. Then Turtle's mother slowly makes her way from the house; a tabby cat rubs against her legs; without standing or looking up, he pats the cat's back and asks his mother, "Do you maybe have some cabbage and meat?" She replies, "Of course I have." Turtle asks for some water, he's thirsty, I jump over the cat, run into the house, and bring him a red little pot full of water; I stand up and bring my hand to that square light at the back of his moped, which is why many people call Turtle's moped a TV. A couple of minutes later, I walk home to take the plums to my mother so she can make dumplings, I forgot them by the tree; I keep my ears pricked to hear if Father is coming. He went to stalk the bear that had come back again and slaughtered some Letinac shepherd's cow: and we almost forgot all about it. The other day Father even told me I would go back to the woods because the grass around the village, as he said, was licked clean, and the hay in the barn needed to be preserved for winter. Early this morning, when he was loading his rifle in the yard, Nana approached him slowly and said, "That's hunters' job, they should get together, organize a hunt, what do you have to do with it?!" Father first walked out of the yard, then shouted into the forest, "I told the ranger, I told everyone, but they don't give a fuck about us!" Ever since he left, I keep listening for the shots from the forest, but the only shots I've heard today are the ones from Turtle's moped. I go back to him and Mladen, and suddenly there's Nenad: we shake hands because we haven't seen each other in a while; he quit

school and went to live in some gypsy village outside Karlovac, and Turtle asks him, “I hear you got married?” Nenad thrusts his hands deep into his pockets, moves the cigarette around his mouth and gives a mysterious answer, “Well.” Turtle stands up, stretches his legs, wipes his hands against his trousers and tells Mladen to go for a ride to try the engine. Mladen washes his hands in a wooden bucket of rainwater, smells them and wipes them against his worn-out jeans; I’d like to have a pair of those one day. He fixes his tight T-shirt that seems like molded by his muscular torso, climbs on the moped and starts it. He speeds away, gets lost behind the houses, and we slowly turn around following Turtle towards the nearby plum orchard: we gaze at a dog humping a bitch. He slams her from behind, but his head is turned away from the bitch, as if the fucking is none of his business. Turtle laughs and suddenly asks Nenad: “Are you getting any?” “Every day,” Nenad replies with a smile. Turtle bends down, picks up a stone from the ground and weighs it in his hand. “Good for you,” he says, skillfully tossing the stone from one hand into another. Then he suddenly tilts to one side and throws that stone towards the dogs that are now biting and attacking one another as if they are fighting over that round stone. Mladen comes back, gets off the moped, nods and tells Turtle that the engine is now good. Turtle replies, “Ah, it’s a beast.” The two of them then slowly walk into Turtle’s house. Nenad and I stand alone in the yard, and Turtle, that cat in his arms, shouts across his shoulder, “Keep an eye on my bike, boys.” Nenad flips his gas lighter and slowly brings the flame to his cigarette, he blows the first smoke above his head, other smokes down. “Did you really get married?” I ask. Nenad smiles, squints into the sun and then nods: “Of course I did. And where’s Pejo?” “At home, I guess,” I say. He takes another puff and looks into the tip of his cigarette, “I’ll go see him.” I tell him I might drop by later; I haven’t seen him much lately. Besides, he failed a couple of classes and lost a year in school, so he stayed in Letinac where they have only four grades and I moved to the fifth grade in the town; my new best friend is Karlo. I stroke the shiny chromed handles for a while more, they remind me of horns, then I hear my father calling me; I hurry home. He sits at the table in his muddy shoes, his eyes dragging along the wall. “Sit down,” he says, pointing at an empty chair with his chin. I slowly approach the chair and sit at my grandpa’s place where I always sit at lunch. I’m cautious, he might swat me like a fly across the table. “How do you know that Mladen?” his eyes graze my face. “From the town,” I reply. “He’s a criminal!” Then he takes out his hunting knife and cuts off a thick slice of sausage, breaks off a piece of bread, tells me that Turtle is a lazy dog, a slacker, good-for-nothing, that he had a good job but he abandoned it; Father chews, breadcrumbs falling from his mouth. “If you did something like that, I’d take an axe and put your head on the chopping block,” he glances at me, and his hand is an imaginary axe.

Malaika, Nakupende, Malaika

Mladen chooses a song on the jukebox, he dances, sways, even though the music has not started yet. He sits down, grabs the cup by its ear and waits for it to start. We listen: “Malaika, nakupende, Malaika.” Mladen leans back in the soft seat, puts his hands behind his head and hums along; he knows all the lyrics; Turtle nods his head to the rhythm and sings only the chorus. When the chorus is finished, he licks his fork and waits until the chorus plays again. He eats his baclava, Mladen sips his coffee, I lick my ice cream, and Karlo wolfs down his meringue slice. The two of us has skipped the first class; this is already the fifth time in the last month I skipped school: the first time I ran away when I learned that during the third period we’d have a physical exam instead of home economics; I’m worried someone might learn about my illness; no one outside of my family knows about it. Still, Grandpa Mile baffles me somewhat: a year ago, when Pejo’s dog died, Grandpa Mile said it was the dog’s heart, and then he laughed loudly. Pejo quickly glanced at me: that’s when I thought Grandpa Mile and Pejo knew, and if Pejo knew, Nenad knew too. Luckily, Pejo and Nenad no longer go to my school, so even if they do know, they’re not going to spread it around school. I know nothing about this illness of mine and no one talked to me about it: it’s as if it doesn’t even exist. When someone mentions the word heart by accident, Mother changes the subject quickly and then starts talking about it: that’s the only time she just can’t stop talking. I don’t want anyone outside of my house ever find out about my illness, even though sometimes I console myself: maybe I’ve gotten over it. I lick my ice cream and think: I’m faster than most in my class, I’m stronger than most in my class, I can run farther than most in my class; maybe I don’t have it anymore. I glance at the plastic clock on the wall, pull my hand under my shirt, fix my eye on that fastest dial and count the beats in a minute: seventy-three; I’ve counted them countless times, but I’ve never gotten under eighty. I yell out under my breath, “Yes!” I clench my fists in victory under the table, but my face is a stone. I’m careful, I don’t want the three of them to notice, so they’d ask me what I’m so happy about. Five minutes later, I glance at Karlo then back at the clock and I say quietly, “School.” He gets up slowly and says, “We’ve got to go to school.” Mladen lifts his arm and says, “Okay! All right! See you tomorrow.” We nod, say goodbye, get out and walk along the sunny side; we pass by two soldiers on the road. I stop and turn after them. I imagine myself in a uniform; when we run into them again, I’d like to ask one of them to give me his hat to try it on, to see how it’s going to fit me one day. As we walk, I tighten my belt and glance towards the school; the bell will soon mark the big recess. Then, when we reach the intersection, Karlo tells me he needs to stop by his house for a second; his building has three floors, we climb up quickly. This is the first time I’m at Karlo’s place; on the walls, there are paintings of places by the sea and a black-and-white photo: a tall man, with a partisan hat, thrown back somewhat on his head, with a machine gun across his chests, it’s the same gun Mirko has in the Mirko and Slavko comic. “Who’s that

with the machine gun?" I ask and come closer to the weapon. "My grandpa," Karlo says, sits on the toilet bowl, counting his coins, "he died." Next to the TV, leaning against an earthenware jug with artificial flowers, I notice a small oval color photo; Karlo's parents have just walked out of the sea, they're laughing, and he is wearing flippers. In our house, in a tin box for documents that has a little lock on it, there is a small photo with jagged edges on which my father carries me on his shoulder just like this. Every time that photograph comes to my mind, I feel like crying. Then I glance at a giant, wooden clock on the wall; shiny, iron pinecones hang from it. Underneath it there's a pile of magazines: army magazines.

They

Father is the first to see them: he's just making breakfast for Medo in the yard; he lifts his head a bit and, his voice strained, he says, "I bet they're going to get Turtle." Dogs are barking. Medo doesn't bark. He knows he'll get what he doesn't like for breakfast so he doesn't feel like barking; his muzzle dejected, he just stares at the scratched bowl: if he weren't hungry, he would've tipped it over immediately. Father notices this and shouts, "What, you'd eat meat every day?!" Police vehicle, Zastava 750, comes to a stop right in the middle of the village, the engine turns off and it just stands there in eerie silence; no one comes out of it. Father squashes boiled potatoes in a bowl full of water, shakes his hand and says to my mother who is passing through the yard, "Turtle, Turtle, your father's turning in his grave." Then he adds a cupful of bran into the bowl and mixes it with his index finger, but he keeps looking up curiously, he peeks behind the wall to look at the police car. The officers have come out, they are standing by the car, talking to one another: it's Mirko and Predrag, wearing their thick winter uniforms, automatic rifles once again hanging from their shoulders, they slowly pass along the path by our house, and Officer Mirko, with those trimmed brown moustache, asks my father in passing, "How's it going, neighbor?" Father answers briefly, "Fine." They are already making their way across the meadow, moving much faster along the steeper climb.

"Who knows why they came?" Nana says, peeling the carrots with a knife. Father says, "It must be the bear, what else." "What if...?" Nana mutters quietly. Father glances at her and says, "Leave the politics out of it!"

Grandpa Pave once told me that many years ago in the woods above our village there was a group of nine insurgents who planned to blow up railways, bridges, kill police officers; there were two men from our village among them: before this they had lived in Australia, all of them got arrested and given a long prison sentence.

The Hospital

Father and I walk down the long hospital corridor; it echoes; the stench of medicine fills my nostrils. I don't even like the look of the building from outside; I can't wait to get out. Father suddenly stops, extends his neck and stares at the numbers at the door. Then he walks on, and I follow him close behind. The soles of my shoes echo along the polished floor, so I walk on my heels. Father doesn't care, his step is steady and loud; we're looking for the room number 11. That's where Nana has been for the past six days. Father walks and keeps peering at the numbers. Some rooms have no numbers on the doors, on others there are numbers written in felt tip pen. I walk behind my father and carry my schoolbag filled with books on my back. In my hand is a nylon sack with a warm bowl of chicken stew. I'm careful not to tilt it and spill the stew: Mother cooked it for Nana. I whisper, "Should we ask someone?" "We'll find it," Father says. The door of one of the rooms is wide open. I take a peek: it's empty. "She's not here," I say. Father says, "Fuck them and their numbers." We've reached the end of the corridor; now it forks left and right, so the two of us are standing at the top of the letter T full of light. I point right and say, "No doors here." Then I turn left, here the corridor is once again almost completely black, slim shafts of light making their way from under the doors. Father takes a better look at the number on one of the three rooms and says, "Here, eleven." We walk in; Nana is lying on a white, slightly elevated iron bed. She perks up when she sees us; there are two empty beds next to hers, on the third bed, there is a man in his pajamas, sleeping; his lips are green like on a cow that has chewed clover. Without a word, I put the stew on a cabinet next to her bed, Father asks Nana, "How are you doing?" Nana says she feels much better, but her slim voice has a hard time moving away from her face, as gray as the dirt; that perkiness evaporates out of her quickly. The air in the room is sour, Father says we should open the window. He opens it, but the wind outside picks up the smell of burning and brings it into the room. His lips full of unspoken curses, Father closes the window shut. That man mutters something in his sleep and shouts, "It's us! It's us!" Then he falls back into a peaceful sleep. Nana points at him with her eyes. "His brother got killed, and he got drunk on brandy from all the sadness and almost died," she says. "And how are you, dear?" Nana looks at me. "Fine," I say, "we have a teacher-parent meeting today." "I'll come back in a couple of days and bring something for the doctor," Father says, takes the plastic jug from the cabinet and pours Nana some more tea. "We've got to go," he says. We say goodbye to Nana whose eyes are filled with tears. "What's with the crying?" Father says, somewhat angrily. "You'll be back home in a couple of days." I wave at her one more time, without looking if she waves back at me because it's easier that way, and I quickly walk out into the corridor. He says, "Now, to that school of yours." I'm glad Father will be at the teacher-parent meeting for the first time since I started school. I have no bad grades, only As or Bs, and my story *Autumn* has recently won the municipal competition. I hurry up to catch up with Father who has moved ahead;

we cross the road together and walk into the school: the classroom is full of parents and pupils. Comrade Mišo, our homeroom teacher, takes the green grade book and reads the name of each student and then, glancing over his glasses, our grades. I secretly glance at my father while Comrade Mišo reads my grades: he sits straight, his face is rigid, nothing can be read on it. I'm sad Comrade Mišo did not mention my story, but I guess he didn't have time. After the meeting, Comrade Mišo with his barrel-like body steps up to me. He removes his glasses and asks my father if he could stay and talk: I guess he is going to tell him about the story. He puts his glasses back on his nose and asks Karlo who is just passing by, "And where are your parents?" Karlo replies, "At work, they couldn't make it." "Tell them to come tomorrow. No excuses!" Comrade Mišo shouts after him, his voice shaky. "So, I didn't want to say anything in front of everyone," he tells my father after everyone has finally left the classroom, he closes the door and comes back to us. "You see, his grades are really good," he says, pointing his chin at me, "he's an excellent student and Karlo is a good student too, but the other day the two of them stole one pupil's pen from her bag."

"It's not true," I say and step back.

"It is," Comrade Mišo says, walks to the window and opens it. Then he adds, "Don't make me call the police." I look out the closed window, anything not to look at Father. "Wait, wait," Father says, his voice all sweet, and I know that's when he's most dangerous, "Don't you have your own pen?" "Yes, he does," Comrade Mišo says, takes a bunch of keys out of his pocket, spilling them from one hand into another, "but this one can write in five different colors." "We haven't stolen anything," I say. "Yes, you have," Comrade Mišo says and puts the keys back into his pocket, "a pupil saw you playing with it in the park, go ahead, spit it out, your father's here, where is the pencil." "Ask Karlo," I reply. Father approaches me slowly and says, "So, I give you money for school so you could learn how to become a criminal?" I keep quiet, I look out the window, and the sun distances itself from my eyes. I speak up, "I haven't stolen anything." "And I can tell by your face you're lying!" Father yells; I sense a blow coming, I try to escape, but his hand knocks me down to the ground. Father grabs me by the hair, picks me up from the floor, slaps my face, then again, after which I burst into tears, I protect my head, even though his hands are now idle. "Where's the pen?" he shouts. "I'll bring it back tomorrow!" I shout back and try to crawl away and run. Father grabs me by my ear, drags me around the classroom. He slaps my face again, and when I put my hands over my head to protect it, he starts hitting me even harder; he yells, swears, Comrade Mišo grabs him from behind and shouts, "Stop, don't, you're going to kill him!" Father stands up straight, his breathing fast, and flattens his clothes, he says, his voice completely empty, "Comrade Mišo, I've got to work, I have no time, you beat him like he's your own, I don't have time, to make a man out of him."

Then he grabs the big wooden ruler we use to write on the blackboard, starts chasing me with it among the desks, so I slip out of the classroom and run home.

The View from Within the Armor

I sit by the stove, my curious fingers leafing through the new issue of *The Frontline*; it got dark quickly today. Father wants us to save electricity so it's dark inside and it occasionally gets lost in the narrow cracks of the blazing stove; I look at the pictures because the smaller letters are hard to read in the flash of the stove. It's been raining for hours, it comes from the deep ravines and pours down the steep roofs of the houses; Nana slowly opens her eyes in her bed. "Nana, do you need anything?" I ask. Without moving, even a little, she says, "Bring me another blanket, my feet are a little cold." I get up, call my mother, tell her to bring a blanket. She brings a crumpled pile of a blanket to the door and mutters under her breath, "If only the dear God would take her." I pretend I haven't heard this, angry with my mother. I take the blanket into my arms, go back to the kitchen; I turn around and tuck Nana into the blanket from all sides. "How's that?" I ask. "Good, now put another log into the stove," Nana says. "It's already full," I say and point my head at the stove in which the wet logs churr and hiss. I once again sit down on the warm wood crate and in the shimmering light of the stove carefully leaf through *The Frontline*. I made a dog ear where I stopped; ever since that day when I took this army magazine from Karlo's apartment I haven't missed one new issue; I don't buy a sandwich, I save money and then buy it at the post office. I tell Mother Karlo borrowed it to me because she once asked me where all those army magazines lying around the house came from. I bring the letters close to the tin door of the stove, this is where there's most light; my eyes hurt from the strain. I stop, rub my forehead with my forearm and go back to the previous page, then I turn to page five and spend a long time studying a file of tanks in motion: in my ears, I hear the metallic echo of their steel tracks. I turn the next page and the next and through the shadowy pages of the magazine imagine what I will become when I grow up. Once, in the first grade, I drew a car mechanic in blue felt-tip pen; all boys in the class drew car mechanics, all girls hairdressers. Lately I've been dreaming of signing up for the military school. It crossed my mind when a while back a man with a black briefcase appeared in our school and said, "All of those who enroll in the military school receive free housing, meals, books, pocket money, clothes, tickets for movies, and the pride of belonging to the Yugoslav National Army, the best army in the world." After this I read *The Frontline* even more carefully; not a day passes by without me studying different kinds of weapon, guns, tanks, hand-held rocket-launchers, and, in the end, doing a crossword puzzle with countless questions about the weapons: I fill almost every square. But I wonder if the regular, ordinary army would have me. I take a deep breath, close my eyes. It bothers me that you need to pass a strict medical exam to enroll in the military school; I leaf through *The Frontline* and imagine myself returning to the village one day: epaulets with gold stars on my shoulders; Father, Mother, Nana, Sister, they saw me on the road, and then, like at the end of

some war movie, when the hero returns home alive, they rush towards me, hug me, kiss me; proud. Besides, if I'm a regular soldier, then I'm healthy, if I'm an officer, then I'm super healthy.

A little later, when Mother walks into the kitchen and turns on the light, I say, "You know what school I'll go to after the eighth grade?" "What?" she asks, taking the dough from the table and rolling it out with a bottle. "The military school," I say. She glances at me sideways, some look in her eyes as if she hasn't heard me right. Nana says to this from her bed, "Oh son, they're not gonna let you in, don't you know whose side your grandpa was on in the war?"

The Mirror

When I look at myself in the mirror hanging on the wall above the kitchen sink, I can see my head; now I'm standing at the same place: I no longer have a head. I've grown so much I'm half a head taller than my father. When he went to the cattle market in the town, I went to the deserted road and, with the help of some wire and nails, attached an old, rusty bicycle rim on an apple tree. Every day I shoot a rubber ball through it; it's orange so it looks like a real basketball; I keep one eye on my father, he might show up with the pitchfork. I mostly play when he's in the field: when he's at home, he finds something for me to do, so I don't have time for basketball. The other day he made me pluck grass in the yard for hours; as he told my mother, it was supposed to help me develop my working habits.

When he's not at home, I grab the ball and run straight for my hoop; the other day, he suddenly ended up in the hospital, he had to have his gallstones removed and he's still there. These are my best days at home; I'm tall, taller than anyone in the class and I want to become a basketball player. Pejo doesn't like basketball, I don't want to play with Mali because he's short, Nenad is no longer in the village, and my sister is little and boring; I play against myself; I score from every position. Mother says, "The school's almost over, you better take the book into your hands." A couple of days later, some people come to our village to pick mushrooms; this is the third time in a week they came to pick mushrooms; the first time they came, Nana told them about the dangerous killer bear, but they just waved their hands. Nana said, "See, that's townsfolk to you, and when something bad happens to them, it's always someone else's fault." A tall, stooped man with a French beret on his head now comes out of a white Mercedes, perks up, stands by the side, and watches me play; whenever someone watches me, I give it everything I've got. I score every ball I throw towards the hoop: in the end, I take the ball and dunk over my head; then the man approaches me and asks if I would like to play for Kvarner. I say in disbelief, "Yes." He pats my shoulder, tells me he will call back, and walks into the grove with his basket. I go home, hug the ball, go into the barn and lie down in the hay: I'm so excited I can't even think; later, I can't sleep a wink: I train even harder, even at night. As soon as everyone is asleep, I tiptoe my way out of the house, take the ball and head for the basket. I roll up the legs of my trousers, strip to the waist, run for hours on end with the ball in the dark: I jump, I aim, I score. When there are no stars and the moon, the hoop cannot be seen, but every time the sound tells me if I scored: I practice and train, tirelessly; the man never shows up. But Father does come back from the hospital, as yellow as wax, and, even before he walks into the house, he orders me to pluck the grass in the yard: I pluck the grass and listen. Every sound of a car, every sound resembling a car makes me snap and run to the nearest hill. I try to make out the white Mercedes, but only trucks overloaded with tree trunks pass along the dusty road. The man doesn't come, so I train less

and less; when I throw the ball towards the hoop, I no longer look up to see if I scored; the sound tells me I missed. I take the ball and throw it towards the trough from which the cattle drinks: miraculously, I manage to miss. Later on, I sit down under the hoop and tell myself, to make it easier, that the mushroom the man with the French beret picked that day were poisonous.

How to Become a V-Taper

This morning, Karlo brought a brown, oval box full of protein powder and a five kg dumbbell; he's been training for months: he's taking proteins. The other day, when he removed his shirt in the park and took the expression and the stand of the copper bodybuilder on the protein box, mesmerized, I stared at his V shape; he gave me the address to order the proteins and the deal was, when my three boxes arrived, I would return the one he'd given me; the small dumbbell was a gift: two empty cans filled with concrete with a wooden stick wedged between them; he'd bought the real iron dumbbells. The moment Comrade Mišo finishes his speech and gives us our report cards, I wiggle out of my desk and, a heavy schoolbag on my back, in which today there are only the dumbbells and proteins, Karlo and I head for the pastry shop: Turtle's moped is parked in front of it, and inside there's no one except Turtle and Latif the owner. "What are you having?" Turtle asks. We sit down at his table and reply at once: "Baklava and meringue slice." Latif finishes his cigarette and, with pretended niceness, brings us the cakes; we eat while Turtle slowly sips his coffee. "Where's Mladen?" Karlo asks and cuts a slice of baklava with his fork. "He'll be back in six months." Karlo glances at him as if he's found something bitter in the baklava. "How come?" he asks. "He'll be back," Turtle says. Then, as if he doesn't want us to ask any more questions, he gets up, drops a coin in the jukebox, it echoes: *Malaika, nakupenda, Malaika.* Turtle finishes what's left of his coffee, pays Latif who gets lost behind the curtain, turns towards me and says, "I'm going home." I say, "I'll go with you." We get up and, when we're outside, Karlo lightly punches the bag on my back in place of a goodbye. "See you later," I say and nestle on a seat behind Turtle: with a sudden jerk of his whole body he kick starts the moped: he opens the throttle and extends the ear-splitting sound of the engine. We speed past people, houses, trees, fields full of scattered flowers; on the road behind us only clouds of smoke; I ride behind him, my eyes closed, thinking about one thing only: to start training as soon as possible; I'm skinny, I've never been skinnier. I'm so skinny that looking at myself in the mirror makes me sick: my legs are especially skinny, so much so I'm ashamed to wear shorts. The other day, Karlo suggested we go to the seaside; he's got a girlfriend. I like a girl too; every day I jerk off thinking about her; as soon as I beef up a bit, so she can see me in my swimming trunks, I'm going to have a girlfriend just like Karlo: next summer I'll take her to the seaside; the new body will be useful come recruitment time because I've heard some are completely healthy but get rejected because they're too skinny; my legs with sharp knees disgust my father too: the other day, when we went to the coppice above the house to haul out firewood, he cursed the whole way that the branches were going to scratch my legs, but then he blurted himself out and said, "Go home and put some pants on, I can't look at those pitiful legs of yours!" The engine rumpling, we've arrived into the village and the first thing I look for: can Father see me. He's not there, so I smack Turtles shoulder with my hand and, that heavy bag on my back, ran towards the

house; Mother has been waiting in ambush. “Climb on that motorcycle one more time and you’re as good as dead,” she says. I quickly hand her my report card, she looks at it, her lips smile, even though I’ve already told her twice I’ve got all As and a B in math. She wants my grades to be good, so I can enroll in the high school in Senj. When he’s had one too many, Father stares at our broken TV and mentions the occupation *precision mechanic*. He says, “Fixing TVs, that’s the future.” There’s a lot of time before that, so I don’t think about it too much; as long as there’s not a lot of math. “I’ll leave it on the table so your father can see your grades when he comes home,” Mother says. I nod, go to the little room: I take off my bag and cram it under the bed. I wait until it gets dark and then I climb along Grandpa Joso’s roofed yard and take the dumbbell into his barn: I hide it in the hay, open one side of the window; the air around me is stale, foul, like it’s a thousand years old. In the morning, the moment I wake up and see Father has gone to the field, I take one empty potato sack, fill it with sand, tie it up, and, without anyone seeing me, I drag it to the barn. I rest for one more day, making a detailed plan of exercises in my old notebook, I do the adding, the counting, I get lost in the numbers. The next day I carefully open the protein box, pour a spoonful of that brown powder into a glass of water, mix it, drink it; it tastes bitter. Then I slip into the barn and, all enthusiastic, I begin my exercises. I train every day: when I’m up, I inhale – when I’m down, I exhale, my eyes shiver from the strain; I drink my proteins and I eat more: I’ll gobble down whatever comes into my hands, eggs the most. I take the needle, sneak into the chicken coop, pierce two holes in the husk with the tip of the needle, slowly bring one hole to my mouth: I close my eyes and suck on it, with an expression on my face like I’m taking some bitter medicine.

The Harvest

Nana pulls out a kernel out of sheaves on the wagon, it's as thick and yellow as my late grandfather's thumb; she rubs it between her palms, squints at the shiny grains and finally says, "Like gold." I pick a couple of stalks of crunchy straw from the ground, I nibble at it, impatiently waiting for our turn: my eyes are moving left and right from expectation. Even though I've done my exercises just a little while ago, I don't feel tired at all; I feel the muscles on my chest, arms, legs: they've never been harder. Then Joja from Letinac signals with his arm and I get the oxen going and bring the wagon with the wheat next to his thresher wedged on four tires above the smooth floor; I feel such strength since I started taking those proteins and training that it seems I could pull the full wagon on my own: I'm strong. I've never been stronger. I crack my whip a couple of times and separate the oxen from the wagon together with the yoke and tie them up some ten meters away against a tree with a large top surrounded by the dark circle of shade. Father has already climbed on the thresher's platform, Mother is waiting on the wagon with the long pitchfork in her hands, Nana, who has recovered, attaches the linen sacks under metal pipes from which the grain is going to pour, and I'll remove the straw; Nana spreads out a white sheet under the thresher, this is where chaff will fall; after the threshing, we'll take the chaff to the chickens: let them pick grains from it. Joja now hurriedly waves his hand greasy with engine oil, he has just oiled something with his finger, and motions us to get started: he's huge, his hands and arms are like oars. Mother hurls the first sheaf, and Father, using a small knife similar to a thin crescent moon, cuts the straw holding the sheaf together, then spreads it, strews it into the hungry womb of the thresher. It gives out a deep rumble, tightens the noise, and the steam engine called *Aran*, connected to it with a long, black, heaving belt, clatters, letting out a pungent stench of oil. Father repeats the same motions: we all repeat the same motions as if we're part of the thresher, of all those gears and levers of the mechanism inside that keeps inventing new sounds; I wait until the thresher heaves a larger pile of straw from its jaws, then I take it to the place where, once we're done, we'll load it back onto the wagon. After a while, the sacks are full, so I run up to help Nana tie them up, lay them down on the ground, replace them with fresh sacks. Joja says, alarm in his voice, "Run back to the straw, it'll get jammed." I jump up, grab the pitchfork and, bending under the load, pick all the straw up and carry it away in one go: Joja laughs and shouts to my father, "By god, this time next year the kid's gonna kick your ass!"

Father pretends he hasn't heard him: one second he's bent down, the next he's standing up: he feeds new sheaves to the thresher, keeping his eye on me, so I try to pick as much straw as I can with my pitchfork; his gaze makes me go faster; my sister has come to the thresher, Mother tells her she has to go home right away because the fox could come and take our chickens. Sister comes closer, all the way to the

thresher, and Father shouts from above, spitting the dust that got stuck on his tongue, “Go home, get going, the belt’s gonna catch you!” She first shakes our angry looks off, and when Nana threatens to use a birch twig on her, she goes home; she waddles like a duck, one foot in front of another, as if she could change her mind at any moment. Mother hurls the last sheaf to Father, climbs down from the empty wagon and says, “I’ll go get the lunch.” Father says, “Bring a couple of beers too.” He climbs down and then the two of us – he steers the shaft, I push from behind – push the empty wagon to the mound of straw. Joja has already waved at the next wagon to be brought to the thresher: Nana has pulled out the sheet with the chaff and raked the floor under the thrasher once again. Then I help Father take the sacks to the scale, I haul them on my back like they are filled with down. Joja takes out his weights; the iron beak of the scale keeps moving up and down; I and Father say nothing, we pick each sack each on his end and carry them to our wagon.

Later we sit next to the oxen, waiting for my mother, and then we’ll slowly load the straw. Father picks the chaff out of his ear, I look up over our heads into the treetop where the birds are chirping, but I can’t hear them well from all the noise; maybe I should clamber up to the very top, to see if Mother is coming; the thresher booms: different sounds roll out of it always anew. Nana came over to us, she’s tired, she has removed her scarf, patted the chaff off of her sleeves, and then put the scarf back on her head. At that moment, Mother suddenly comes from behind the thresher. When she pulls two misty bottles of beer, three glasses and a bottle opener out of her basket, Father tells her in a hoarse voice, “And where’s his beer?” Mother glances at him and says, “One for you, and the three of us will share this one.” In the same calm, hoarse voice, he tells her, “Now go back and bring a whole bottle for him.” Mother’s eyes are smiling; she puts the basket down on the ground next to our feet and gets lost in the curtain of chaff.