

Ingvild Burkey

*Interview with  
the Homecoming Hero*

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LE MILIEU

## INGVILD BURKEY

Ingvild Burkey was born in Oslo in 1967. She studied political science at Yale University, and has worked as a human rights monitor in Bosnia and Herzegovina (1997-2000) and a number of African states, including Rwanda, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda and Zimbabwe.

In the 1990s, she was co-editor of the Norwegian literary journal *Vagant*.

She has published two collections of poetry (*Torden i søvne*, Aschehoug Forlag, 1994, and *Den mest tenkelige av alle verdener*, Forlaget Oktober, 2008), a novel (*Falsk pike*, Tiden Forlag, 1997; 2nd edition, Forlaget Oktober, 2008) and a collection of short prose (*Intervju med den hjemvendte helten*, Forlaget Oktober, 2002). Her latest book, *Den mest tenkelige av alle verdener* (The Most Imaginable of All Worlds) was nominated for the Brage Prize 2008, in the poetry category. In 2009 she received the Tanum stipend for women writers.

She lives in Oslo, Norway and Borje, Croatia.

When you enter the hangar, you will forget your father and mother. This will happen whether you loved them or not, and whether or not you are still in possession of your luggage. It will be lost, of course, eventually, along with your date of birth, your unique serial identification number, and any bodily marks (moles, dimples, acne scars, strangle marks, tattoos, badly healed love bites) which might fix a name to your imperishable memories. The Red Cross will be handing out prayer beads, while a nurse demonstrates how they are used. Debilitated by dream, you will submit to moving forward, like the others. The moment it takes to cross the open space is all you need to realize that since birth, you have been asking the wrong question. Where the field ends there will be a ditch, slowly filling with yellow water. It will be spring. Watching the women undress, the commanding officer will remember that he is an opera lover, a passion which shortly will lack the slightest substance.

We walked slowly toward the border holding on to each other's sleeve, whistling under our breath, trying to remember the magic animals we had once seen carved on our skin, in the dreams of our benefactors. We had not known, then, that we were designed for extinction. We took our shoes off at the checkpoint, it seemed the thing to do, for we could see the snow beyond the border post. The blindfolded guards were polite, but did not return our documents. A youth saluted as we handed over the banknotes. Someone we couldn't see whistled gaily. We had made everything ready, yet we were not ready. That's the way, the chief guard said gently, it's quite in order. No one is ever ready. Now if your excellencies will kindly permit, I must put out the lovers' eyes.

We are shown the way by a garrulous peasant: The Master is in his study, annotating the world. Holding our tongue in cheek and our fist behind our back, we approach the Master. We come as supplicants, but have paid at the door. Corruption everywhere: His servants indulge and deceive him like a child. The Master watches us approach with clear but fretful eyes, as if he feared our worldly power. 'Man knows himself like the back of his hand, a rough and webbed surface, disfigured by immutable forces whose action is too slow to be perceived. A thing alive yet mute, dumb, heavy with meaning. A silent animal attached to the end of his limb. A club that shakes in his sleep. Man fears his hand, fears what it may do to him.' The Master speaks as if his lips were wooden, as if his face were a mask bound to his head. His hands, we notice, are criss-crossed with waxed string. We look around for a suitable place to lay our offerings; there is a dried sheep carcass lying by the door. 'Take me away from here,' the Master whispers.

OK, here's the story. I'm thinking about the future. I'm always thinking about the future. The Government is thinking about me. It doesn't know yet exactly what the problem is, but has set down a task force. Meanwhile, premonition seeps into the solid waste disposal system. Up and down the corridor runs a slight but continuous tremor which can be felt through a rubber sole after weeks of insomnia. In a nearby state, a man has everything, but misses something. He doesn't know yet what that something is, but he knows it's missing. He knows because he has a gaping hole in his stomach and the Government isn't doing anything about it. Meanwhile, the rebels in the bombed-out hills are developing like mental illness. Modern medication proves counterproductive. Denuded forests provide fertile ground. The Government is at a loss, its lifeblood pouring out of the bodywork. Nice work, commends the auto industry, but unsustainable. Our metal is fatigued. Elections are coming up. Garbage in the streets is not being picked up, and is becoming unruly. No one is volunteering. What happened to our youth, cries the Government, a lone voice in the wilderness. It has flown, O it has flown. Who said that? All eyes turn to the head of intelligence. Soon birds of panic circle the white brick city. And now the Hero enters, wearing his eyes of yore. He reveals the truth. It is terrible. This creates the demand for the sequel, which will warm the heart like a changing climate.

Of course they don't teach you anything. The correct response is to pretend not to notice. Follow the instructions issued at the start if you want to reach the finish. They let you in, now it's up to you to get out. The easy way, there is no other. Some common mistakes: No clambering on walls or on the other sex. Feign rebellion if you must, but select a natural leader. Ask yourself the important questions; the right answer will be in the second or third box from the top. When life's great doors swing open, you will at first not recognize yourself. But the bright, educated look wears off, presently your eyes will be like brimming ashtrays or everyone else's. Accept the terms and you will soon speak the language. You'll get a job, usually. Enjoy the money. The economy will be healthier if you spend it, and you'll find you want the economy to be healthy. Exploit your youth; seek and find your partners in mass ceremonies, if necessary aided by modern chemistry. You are free to marry, but show moderation: Hate shrivels the flesh, love tinges it pink and destroys its firmness. Invest in your child. Choose the colors of your living room. Our democracy is hard at work to produce a future.

No one outside, no one inside. No one between. See? No one. Just slimy sticks in the water. Never mind the river rats, think of them as rodents, close relatives of the Oriental soul. Your mind will keep you floating through the monsoon tide. Remember: Whatever else crawls into your brain, don't play Russian roulette in a red headband. Just don't. It doesn't pay. Listen to what I tell you. And keep your chin up, or they'll tie it. Can't sleep? Straining for the whirl of the death choppers? Easy boy, easy. Steady your dream life. This is war, not a manhunt. Keep your eye glued to the gray horizon where their red sun will never rise. Keep your trigger finger ready and your cross hairs fixed on the tall white-tailed deer, in the order he appears, jumping lightly and nervously over your inner Pennsylvanian mountains.

At low points we imagine the future in the shape of an ingenious instrument of torture, the pinnacle of human scientific endeavour. Yet though we have combed the world with a fine-toothed comb, we have found no reason to despair. Our resplendent antisepsis is the fruit of Soviet engineering, the celebrated irrigation project of our state. Diverting the rivers of the imagination to feed the factories of thought, our planners left the land a desert, leached out, white, poisonous to growth. This, too, is part of the Five Year Plan. At the end of the plan we will plant new seeds here, improved, luminous, with none of the old dirt clinging to them.

A brief history of our affair or the Revolution. A certain incongruity will not escape notice: While she was born in the year a Russian dog went into orbit, he entered the world at a time when Our Chairman was having his intestines scooped out by trembling embalmers. The vital organs were carefully preserved, in the interest of Science as much as for the health of the realm. His liver, his private doctor reported, weighed eight point seven kilos and was the exact color and texture of Yangtze river mud. Accept no substitutes. His chest, as fondly remembered by the People, was wide enough to span the river from bank to bank; his eye, keen enough to pierce a spring lark's racing heart and send it plummeting to the earth to be pinioned by laughing revolutionary children safeguarding the rice harvest from foreign devils. His heart was never found; though five mortuary workers from Jiangxi were tried and executed for stealing state secrets, they never disclosed where they had hidden the colossal organ. To this day, in our distant mountain districts, fortune hunters disguised as hydroelectric engineers dig up dry riverbeds looking for the fabled ticker, rumored to be eight-valved and of purest gold.

Our collective fears are cartoons come true. Huge red gods tear our bodies apart, sink their fangs into squelchy hearts. Superman has outgrown his suit, he's stuck in the phone booth, there's no operator, the machine doesn't take coins. Too many Chicken McNuggets. Lex Luthor has slipped a Kryptonite crumb into Clark's wallet, Kansas suffers a wave of farm foreclosures, old farmer Kent's solid ox heart is broken, cruelly. A slave like us, Superman watches as we are led away in chains. There's no way he can make it.

Irrefutable as facts: The half-truth. The quarter-lie. The logic of rules, also known as the rules of logic. The photogenic scientist and his nondescript assistant. Swiss-made watches. Surveillance camera footage. The steel pen tapping the glass tabletop. The sharply rising profits. The ocean detergents. The blood wiped clean away. School experiments. The Nobel prize in physics. The boiled, peeled egg being sucked into a bottle by a lit safety match made in The New China. The weather report and its precise correlation with today's harvest of bugs split open on the windscreen. The obvious advantages of mass production. The human faces of wrinkled primates. The gene spiral. The dead failures. Modern medication. The dirty fatso sucking donuts near the subway exit. Public hygiene. State funerals. Television. The repetitiveness of dawn. The lost or forfeited dream of an unforeseeable future.

Buddha walks to the grocery store, carrying his jute shopping bag. Let's see now, it's all written down on the shopping list Mrs Buddha made up this morning in case he'd be absent-minded as usual. It's best to think ahead, says Mrs Buddha, then you won't be so sorry. So he buys six eggs, a pound of butter, onions, ketchup, mayonnaise in a tube, a can of yellow lentils. On reflection he adds deodorant, Brut aerosol spray for men. He pays for everything in cash and gets a free coupon for the Thanksgiving prize draw. They might win a small German car with turbo injection, the picture says, a food processor, a 22-inch Korean colour tv. They might win nothing but then that's ok too, Buddha thinks to himself, folding the coupon gently and sticking it in his wallet.

Beg your pardon, we're not from around here. Ask the next guy. Ask someone who knows. We wouldn't. We wouldn't know how the signs came to mean what they mean, to the people who use them. All day, every day, confidently. This accounts for much of our fear, our hesitation before the human stream. We seek consolation in heavy drink and the sound of sewage rushing deep beneath the manholes. Mass transportation is in our blood, our blood is in our arteries. This is perhaps our station? We study the bus routes, the train tracks, the metro lines, watch the people getting off, getting on, going about their business.

The hold is congested with stowaways. The cargo keep silent for fear of detection by border guards, but exploit the dark and the confinement and common dispossession of fellow travelers to touch each other shamelessly, fingering faces and bodies under folds of clothing. And so it happens that while not one sneeze or cough escapes from below, a peculiar buzz rises through the hull, a clandestine vibration, tickling the Malaysian rubber soles of Philippino deckhands with the certainty that the freight, which ostensibly contains Korean forklifts, is in fact made up of live explosives.

It never happens to us, always to somebody else, when we're not paying attention: Death grabs one, drags him off into the darkness. To reconstruct the horror, we are forced to rely on uncertain sources, stuttered eyewitness accounts handed down the jittery generations. The heart thudded on for seven days and seven nights, even as his legs turned blue and the eyeballs clouded. Those long woolen skirts, damnable fashion, waving goodbye at a trot the great wheels dragged her under. Or the death of a modern: The bang in the sky, 59, 270, 2843 or an estimated 140,000 unlucky numbers. Stories pass down the line, like a rumor of execution. Dropped like a stone, just as he was pulling out his fat leather wallet. Each eavesdropper gauges his separate chances: How thick is the dark, can it be cut with a hand, with a knife, with a cry for mercy. Our guards stoke the fire, huddling closer to nothing.

Still warm in our corpses we plotted tirelessly, hatching plans for moving to the country, if only we had known which country, or where it lay, or if it had even a constitution, or what kind of arrangements, a monarch, a junta, an actually existing god, or if there were jungles matching our dense expectations, and did we really love animals, even when they had scales not fur and spoke in hisses, and might we bring canned fruit, could we dispense with disposables, and would the natives be good-natured, for who would carry our bags if they didn't comprehend the value of money, and would there be wolves in the night and would their howling frighten us, and what would our in-laws say if they heard of it, and how would they hear of it if we were above leaving a goodbye note, and if they didn't hear of it who would come to rescue us from our terrible follies, for would we survive even the first week (we doubted it) among the wild, would our intentions be honorable in their language, if they had language, were we made of valuable foodstuffs, would their president have us executed on a whim or would his subjects beat him to it, rising up in an insect-like tide to torch our folding camp bed and flannel blankets, and if so would they appear human, or would their eyes roll back into great wooden heads, had we confused the continents, was there ever more than one, a solid landmass, oh we had seen the great ocean in caves, our drug-abusing ancestors swimming head down and hair streaming, degenerate, without shame, but could we trust them and their blood-based paints, were they truly possessed and if so by which spirits,

what visions had they seen, did we carry their deadly diseases, did we embody their apocalypse, and what if we actually found the place, as envisioned, the longed-for country, would there still be comfort on desolate days, would there be desolate days and walking wall-eyed in the circle of nowhere, would stick trees in the snow appear untranslatable as Chinese characters, would there be hanged men in the park so spring could bring smells of putrefaction, would there be comfort, cold or warm, would we find love there, and if we did, would we ever know it?

As for the children, well, children are trusting, God knows why; perhaps they are born too early. Human pregnancy is brief, maybe it should last longer, a couple of years, as in elephants, or even a decade, to give the young time to grow distrustful. For in general children are credulous, often up to the age of twelve, in some cases even longer. On this point, the official story is plausible, if not entirely convincing. But then there's the rats. The part about the rats is hard to accept. They would have us believe, then, that the vermin followed him blindly, as if hypnotized, out of the pantries, down from the garrets, out of the grain stores, the silos, the tubs of potatoes, forsaking the hams dangling like ripe fruit from the rafters, quitting the wine cellars, the mattress stuffing, the fur coats laid away in mothballs, relinquishing the mountains of garbage and the gutters rich in delicacies, yes, abandoning the city and all its delights, to follow this outlandish pipe-playing charlatan to their own destruction? Rats, who feel the vibration in the hull long before the most seasoned sea captain, who begin swimming while the ocean still lies smooth as oil, who peer knowingly at us from the treadmills and the narrow lab cages, rats who will eat their own young if they're hungry enough, who will survive us by thousands of years, who even in our own century have grown fat as cats and disturb our sleep with their loud rummaging in the household refuse? And we are to believe that these highly intelligent animals were lured to their deaths by a reed pipe? Believe it she who can. There are rumors. If the rats followed him,

they did so because they knew something. Something we still don't know. I would leave this place gladly. My wife is still young, we could have other children, start a new life, in a new town, but she says her dreams are all of a vast desert, that she wants only to go away. Far away from Hameln. I've studied the city maps, the subway charts, the grid of public transport, I've searched for the missing information, seen that beyond the commuter terminals, the suburbs end abruptly.

We had only gone a small part of the way when the way ended. A headless man sat by the roadside, cradling his beloved in his arms. The beloved was his only possession, as we easily deduced from the clutch and curl of his hard fingers. In their grip lay his dead head, grinning now with pleasure. Or grief, there is a fine line. Ah! Ah! Ah! wept the man's head, choking with coarse laughter. But night was falling, and so we took our leave of the happy couple. Yet try as we might, we could not find the road again, though we overturned every pebble.

All that is required is to remain uncharted. When the frontier advances, spread your confusion behind the lines. Beguile the binaries, unnerve the highways, romance the engineers. Study the little red book of the Master Mousecatcher: Dreaming butterflies disguised as techniques of mass suggestion. Study well, then burn. Watch the ashes flutter and ascend into the white, inscrutable sky. Remember to free the mice. Swim the River of Renunciation every morning before the tide, then swim back in time for breakfast. Towel well and eat your eggs. Note how egg yolk mocks the Emperor of the Sky. Practice patiently The Seven Virtues: Deep Breathing, Dyslexia, Loitering, Lousy Aim, Indiscretion, Circumlocution, and Tolerance of Country & Western. As for Friendship, there is a schism among our scholars. One school of thought holds good companions indispensable to passage, another scorns all company as a detour from the path. The sophists among us sidestep the muddle by arguing that as every friend is a distraction, so every distraction is a friend. This hardly clarifies matters. Good. Keep in mind, taking care it's not your own, that you are fleeting. Have you done? Now, wipe clean the slate. Put your faith in three things, and three things only: Doubt, Imperfection, and Love, the great scrambler.

Sand trickling out of His left ear startles us so much we hear nothing of the first part of the speech, though the trembling in the ground is familiar. Then we recognize the voice and this is a triumph of science, since His voice was quite different. They've changed it, the sound is much improved, His love of the people made audible at last to the naked ear by high fidelity technicians. Remove your headphones or other electronic devices and observe a moment's silence. Lying now on His back in the brown snow of Our Heroes' Square, His great head severed, an island of calm amid the frenzied public transport, He speaks into the mind's great hall: There are no revolutions, only sound recordings. As rigid as in His prime, He has no second thoughts, He is still preoccupied with the first one. Nor does He mind the calumny, bad press is instrumental to great music. History surrounds us like chicken wire. We who celebrated His fall, are felled by His moving shadow: Here there are no memories, only museums of war and childhood.

What it's about? It's not about. It's a growing hole, in the sky, in the ground. Things fall into it. Trees, houses, species. Time. What we used to call creation. Until we, too, became a species. Whose creation is this anyway? Not mine. A hole, I tell you, growing rapidly. In the sky. In the ground. To make room for the dead, who seem to be multiplying at an unprecedented rate. For now, they have no other exit. The dead are growing impatient, crowding around the lips of the hole, quarrelling about rank.

This is being in control: Friends and aging pets abandon you, but you are too in demand to wave goodbye, goodbye, sign the guest book. In any case your hands are tied, or off on more pressing and squeezing business, punching the air, twirling the big stick, not harming a hair on newborns' fuzzy, eggshell-thin heads, which the farmers keep producing. In line with company policy you are plated with lead and your great limbs are unimaginably heavy, which is why you rarely move anymore, but let the planet and the speakers rotate. Captains of industry come to call, wearing football cleats and padded shoulders, saluting the chiefs of staff and leaving great clods of soil on the hallway carpet, unlike the family dog, which the security men shot by accident, they said, twice, you made them repeat it. The fine print lawn is slowly ground to mud by unfielded questions. Beyond the fence you glimpse the tops of great dark-leaved agitated trees, like there's a storm out. Funny how you can't hear a thing in these earphones. What happened to free time and space exploration? Why, even the bedrooms have revolving doors, your intelligence travels at the speed of the air force, jet lag spoils the free state visits, your ears fill up with wax, and you no longer have a dream, or sleep, or even afterdinner naps, your fan-mail stuffed with germs, your effable name written all over the nation's gas-station toilet mirrors, your purpling cheek kissed by sick assassins, your advisors articulate as desert snakes, when you take a piss, a historic froth develops, when you speak, wise men switch off the tube, and there are unexplained lapses, a rub-

ber band is strapped to your ankle for no good reason, your black jumpsuit commands too much attention, your bull neck is exposed, around your golden crash-helmet there is a perpetual buzzing of aides or horseflies, but only death carries a sting, blunted by frequent use, administering a mild soporific.

Observe minutely all that happens to you. These are unexceptional times. Others will follow. Read your history: Great men come to naught, zeroes rule. Suck this licorice root. Even the teeth will rot, the eyes dim and go out like run-down battery torches. God will prevail. Try not to worry.

On exhortatory days we are taken to the Zoo, to feed candy to the inmates. I stick close to my friends, like the teacher told us. My friends are me, myself, and the cagey one with field glasses and bad pronunciation. The animals give off terrible stench, like stock yards or our nation's heavy industry. They deserve to be locked up, says the guard, you can't smell like that and expect to be treated equally in a democratic state. The great apes masturbate in public, in the middle of the littered yard. Jerking off on the fruit peel. No one laughs. No one stares at the guard's zippered boots. The great cats are nearly blind. They knock their big heads on the walls, their murky eyes clog with gray, nostalgic slime. The veterinarian explains that this is due to an infectious longing spread through the air vents, that we children must be brave and never succumb. Think instead, he says, of Brussels Airport. Think of the Great Conveyor Belt, our stockpiled butter. The polar bear lives near the exit. His world is upside down. His belly is flabby and gray with fish oil. He doesn't interact. He listens for the ice, its far-off, archaic crackling. It won't do, the vet says. The poles are melting. Sahara gets bigger all the time, all your life. Get used to it. That is the lesson.

From the bloodstains left on the sidewalk we infer that love has struck, again. Are there signs of resistance? Pieces of brain? The blind panhandler on the bench says there's an allowance given to each of us: You can run from it only so many times. As you make your last dash for cover, love catches up with you, bearing a huge grudge. Sometimes the chase takes a lifetime. The well-shod young hoodlums fall upon you in the dark, kicking you until your light goes out. Unfortunately, it comes back on, after a brief darkness. In the ensuing confusion, love slips away, stalking a fresh victim.

When he can't stand it anymore, he buys a dog, and the dog walks him home. It's the first time for both of them. His home is three flights up behind a crumbling doormat. The dog reproaches him for the lack of optimism everywhere in evidence: In the furnishings, the choice of paints, the kitchen sink, the Master's downtrodden slippers. I don't see how you can expect me to live in this filth, the dog says, genuinely hurt. He considers beating the dog, then feels ashamed, sensing the mutt's moral courage. I will not be made a tyrant of in my own home, he resolves, out of earshot. There must be a better way. I will have to study the dog closely to win his confidence. For I aim to win his love. I am already becoming quite fond of him, he shows promise, he is a fine dog. He will cooperate once he finds it in his interest to do so. How shall I name you, he asks the dog, who is sniffing the Afghan rug disconsolately. As you like, the dog replies, it is a matter of no consequence to me. But by birthright I should be called Spot, after my great grandfather. Then I shall name you Spot, declares his Master, and we shall become great friends.

Perhaps had we lived closer to the ground, we might have overheard any number of credible conversations. But then we would not have had this view of the city burning. Nor would we have felt the buildings sway, like the tops of tall trees in childhood. After all, our education was only one of many possible. Had we been taught more archeology, our present ugliness might have pained us less, though there is no knowing. Would we have been able, then, to perceive an act of God? Is it too late in the day to imagine a healthier sunset? It is true we may have lacked imagination. But had we only ourselves to blame? We kept no known pets. We made choices as if they were our choices. We believed at least a quarter of what we were told, but did we have an option? Under the circumstances clouds pass overhead, swift as regrets.

There are no signs of you, so I invent them: Angels in the snow, levitating by means of sentimental lapses. The voice of experience speaks: Those you love exist to the extent that you love them. They can't leave you, anymore than you can dump them. There are heavy fines for dumping. To pass the time until judgment, I sift through the garbage, looking for lost civilization. And time does pass, but I can't count anymore, there's no first number. The everlasting days are dense with signs in an unlisted language. No linguaphone tapes, no known recordings. To love someone here is a feat; learning the relative weight of words takes a lifetime, more than you or I have left.

They say in the paper that one of the last great humanists has died, at the ripe old age of ninety-six. So old he wasn't even interested in his own ailments. But they still printed his picture, taking up pricey advertisement space; some hoary Italian writer of polite pornography we'd never heard of. Not that that means anything. A humanist, he died unshaken in his faith in the dignity of man, in man's native capacity for truth and goodness. He believed we were important, somehow, and not just to our dog. He believed human beings matter. How often did he masturbate, on average? The obituary doesn't say, but judging by his wizened cheeks we'd say he did it pretty often. While he did, his room was peopled with tender childlike voices. He felt the universe to be alive, in love, he felt its hot breath on his collar. He no longer felt alone. Then he came, sticky warm over his fingers, and the voices faded. He summoned the nurse, just to hear her pretty footfall hurrying up the corridor. A handpicked plump brunette. No doubt we are doing him an injustice. We wish him only well, and his brand of literature will no doubt thrive on the back shelves of book antiquaries for decades still to come, in defiance of more technologically advanced generations. What do they know about humanism? What do they know about ripe old truth? What do they know about our dog?

In the coveted country, to which entry is gained only with expertly forged travel documents, the better class of women sit immobile on hired stone benches, stabbing visitors with their naked eyes. In each public square there are pools of dense shadow where troubled adulterers can come to be executed by stoning, to operatic music composed by sleeping husbands. But these entertainments are organized only in the capital city; beyond the fearsome city walls, black-clad peasants press themselves adoringly to the earth, which swallows them one after the other.

Unburdening our love of the needless objects it had been made to carry, we found it had no heart, and that our crumbling body for centuries had wanted only peace, of the kind that comes with drowning. We noticed, too, that our mind's eye had been reddened by the searchlights auguring our rescue, scouring the frenzied sea for fugitives from longing. Yet might we still be drowned? Shielding each other with our doubt, we held it to be self-evident that only other souls exist, while we ourselves are daydreams merely, refractions of a thought, a stone dropped in the water. To this we clung, knowing no other way to journey.

Over the dim years we had trained ourselves to see the circumstances in a certain light, finding in any case that we couldn't see them in the dark, ever, our eyes were not set that way, but fixed to the brain, which we for lack of imagination imagined enclosed in its casing, airless, fed with blood, lied to, flattered, forced to instruct, watchfully dozing, marshalling the visions, the revelations, such as they were. And indeed in this scheme it all fitted neatly, even the paranoia, the loss of consciousness and its return, hardly to be described as triumphant, hardly to be described as a return, to the graveyard of received ideas, to find the circumstances unchanged, or our relative positions within them, as revealed in the old certain light, steadily streaming out of us like grammar.

In the film there is always a small girl in a short dress singing sharply off-key and running through a field, shouting and startling the blackbirds. If they're not blackbirds, they're crows. The director's name is not important. The screen shimmers in the dark and always she has fair streaming hair, though sometimes of a different color, and though the sky is always white, she never grows up and often dies, in the film, which also abounds in shadowy trees, yellowed newspapers, brown Central European rivers. Where is not important. If she doesn't die, the film doesn't say what happens to her. You're named after her, says the father, following her with his closed eyes.

Leaving the city compulsively, at fixed intervals we attempt the impossible, safe in the knowledge that it will break our spine and that we will not walk again, over the threshold, into blazing sunlight. Made for giants, the gates are left as if open. The paralytics by the inner wall stretch their bowls out, cawing the first letter in the name of God. Each cripple spells it differently, according to his defect. Yet after these thousands of years there is still no graffiti; they have thrown away their soup spoons and are waiting to be readmitted. Dazzling nurses perambulate, feeding time to the aging, desire to the young. Empty lots fill the convulsive city.

Transport of troops. Mass movement in darkness. It's a maneuver. The exercise consists in moving blocks of men and material. Solid or solidifying matter. Stiff with hours of crouching. The objective: To control, then decontrol the mass. In a controlled manner. In the theatre of operations the logistician performs his vast work of art. Movement of helmets, flak jackets, gas masks, radiation counters. The objective is moving closer. Smoke rises in a slim column. Tick tick tick tick tick tick tick. Gravel crunches under heavy boots. March. Oh radiant head, white grin in the ground, in a quarry, at a dead end. Sand stuck between the molars, the last few which remain in the jawbone. Someone's beloved grins in the ground. Someone's beloved wakes us deep in our maneuver. Insistent, clinging, foul. Won't take no for a no. Grinning. Night after night we are woken by a grin, embraced, enlaced, till we jump up, enraged, exhausted, wild. To hell with you, you're mistaken, it was a different regiment, we were never there. Go haunt the corporals, the sergeants, the majors, the generals, not us regular conscripts, a few dozen honest men taking part in a mandatory maneuver, if we were there we were no longer us, they took from us who we were and issued us numbers, boots, blankets, automatic rifles, we were fifty men, crew-cut identical, we were no one and everyone, everyone fired, everyone missed, only nobody hit the target. The worst is not waking up before impact, soon after the flesh begins to rot.

Every interview with the homecoming hero ends with an affirmation of his gratitude to life. Thank you, Life, he says, mouth twitching. He's not ashamed to wear a medal. In fact, he's not aware they've jabbed one into him. The crowd noses in, as at an auction, waving blunt objects at his head. What will he do now? they want to know. Now that he's home. Is there anything he'd like to tell today's young, before we go live? He cocks a burnt ear: Schoolyard bird calls above the drone of Hercules airplanes. Tell them, he says, rubbing his wrists, to remember Our Father's eyes. And how, on gray days, the sky had a blue spot where His love was visible.

The bodies continue into the architecture. Spinal columns, arches, shiny domes. This is an arm. This is a wing. This is a house of worship. This is an arm bent behind the back in supplication. This is supplication. This mat of woven hair. The village women weave their hair in great mats, for the pilgrims to wipe their feet on. They enter the house of God on an empty stomach. This is a lung, the organ of groaning. This is the body. This is the architecture of the body. Groin vaults. Impediments. Trapped for centuries in the mortar, only an earthquake will bring us down.

Of course, this landscape is nothing you'd expect or even wish to see in your real mind. Nevertheless. You see it. You see it everywhere. It fills the known world from shore to skyline. It's an advertisement for life. You prefer death? Don't cry. Something bad may already have happened. Hospitals have been known to empty, the sick dragged out and cured. Stop crying, they might hear you. Well, obviously they're kicking him to death. You might have to cover him with your own body. Go on, it's just a body. Meanwhile, rescue crews continue to attempt the rescue. Does that disturb you? What a truly spectacular collapse. Here they are now, knocking on the rubble. It's no use, they've got that tracking device on you.

This, then, was the shape of our thought (and thus of things to come): Blunt, of some adulterated substance, and flattened at the top, like a slagheap. The solid waste of knowledge, which was the word we used for order. Wielding this great bludgeon, we reckoned we had come a mighty distance, yet we were further from departure than when we first set out. Indeed, we'd boarded the wrong train.

How disaster strikes: The early warning signs. The key people walk into your standard life by the front door, wearing a proprietary manner. You make to throw them out, but find yourself, as in the old death scene, exasperatingly passive. You let them move into the master bedroom, which, as it happens, is the only bedroom. You let them sleep in it, with you. You ask yourself, is this any way to behave toward your dead expectations? No one bothers to answer. But then there is more noise and smoke than before, the air thick with guttural tongues and rather expensive mementos being hurled in your direction. Not everything is disagreeable. You get used to it. You get used. It's a huge party. You fall behind on your bills, the grass grows wild, the delivery vans stop coming, there are no more clean glasses. Guests come to complain, having pitched their tents of wickedness on the neighbour's golf course. You are singled out as the ringleader; in the ensuing confusion, the chain of events is lost. Truth is unhelpful. In this way, the key people move from house to house, from town to town, and are never arrested.

The red Indians depart from the prairie. The prairie is chewed up by giant cornflakes boxes. The iron horse is not halted by magic language.

I killed my kids near the school, in the parking lot used by teachers. Their little classmates were locked inside the quiet building. After that I tried for a long time but couldn't remember the words to the Simon and Garfunkel song that was the real reason. Looking up for crouching men, I saw a V-sign in the sky, Canadian geese flying somewhere else, maybe to Mexico. Since then I saw it many times. Though they say I'm no good with birds. At night, in the dark, it's my own heart I hear beating. I'm often in the dark. Darkness, I've found, makes it possible to lose everything. I told the librarian she should collect all the school atlases and burn them, so there might be something left for the kids to discover besides our dirty industrial secrets.

Anywhere, it said. Though the paint was peeling. We looked around, distrustful, but found no one to contradict, except a tiny prune-faced man who tried unsuccessfully to sell us trinkets. For this was no time for charity, we were none of us who we might be, with a little bit of effort, so desperately hard these days to come by. In the gray light of doubt, we hunkered down for counsel. Someone suggested to drive the pack animals away, so there'd be no way of going on, or off, or drifting into the congealing darkness, others said to dump our stuff and pitch the tents right there, in the municipal sand sticky with condoms and old gum with teeth marks, and squat, in dignified protest, waiting for the dark ships, whether they came or not. But the sun showed no sign of setting, the horizon had sunk so low, and while we killed the time we spent our fossil fuels building towers to the sky, on foundations shaky as philosophy, constructing not a city but a mass dissatisfaction. Toward the end we began to dream of money, mountains of it, great plateaus, mined by an underground river of love which geologists still haven't abandoned hope of finding.

In the days that follow she thinks of nothing in particular except of you, as a welldefined notion or a fruit left out to dry in the air of abandonment, knowing from academic studies that the winter garden survives every insurrection, affliction, or blight, that glass doesn't shatter by the power of thought, that pain doesn't inhabit the body, and that indifference can be cultivated to degrees of extreme sophistication; moreover, that the crop is cut down, steel does not rust, the eye moves not, the birds are fixed points, the sky a sheet draped over the body. Only the ground is always there, dragging everything to it.

The dark is okay. Like being strangled with a pillow. Better keep the eyes open, that way the dark stays soft and moist. Note the signs of hesitation: Cuts rather than stabs, superficial and horizontal, mostly parallel though sometimes crossing, like railway lines.

On the slate-gray sea, a moving bar of white. The sun, *vielleicht*, or a white-hot angel. In his good dream, he is barefoot and small sharp pebbles embed themselves in his soles. His lower arm is lean and muscled and lightly dusted with sand. It is the one part of his body he can see. He doesn't know if there are others. An iron curtain is lowered, and he is lying on a slab, a glaring eye above him. The sun, perhaps, dispossessed of seagulls. Has his shadow gotten shorter? Deep in these red dunes there is a smell of French fries and a faraway ocean.

Squatter than anyone could have imagined, the new god lands on the freshly painted tarmac. Illiterates have drawn the sign of the full circle, to be visible from the burning air. His green steel machine whirls up dust like old-style cavalry. He has landed. First impressions are rapidly classified. Why are there no flags in the hands of waving children? Because they are busy scrambling for the yellow metal lunch boxes raining from the sky. Knee-deep in the fields of combat, badly shaven peasants turn their backs to the fresh-dug ditch. But why are they blindfolded? Pass on, pass on, there is to be a welcome reception in the new government headquarters. This was the wall of the city. And this? This was the city. In the palace reception room, smiles pass from hand to hand, leaving grease spots. Meat is cooked under open skies. Fires flare in the night. The cold is bitter, the land brown. Some impalpable thing is being withheld. The freed women are not forthcoming. To be blunt, God had expected a bit more, on this His first visit.

Having finally eliminated other species, we turn our fellow men into the animals we mourn.

Always his eyes behind the reflector sunglasses. Never anyone else's. Ray Ban. He practices nosedives from the hotel balcony. He has a crash helmet welded to his skull. He hasn't found love. He's bitter about the life he hasn't lived. It's become impossible to think. The longing for another view pursues him across the continents, over the seven seas, crisscrossing the all but rubbed-out border lines. He's seen the mirror image reflected in his shades. Asia: The monkey god. Latin America: Cocaine fields. Africa: Dead cows and nail clippings. His inner organs appear to him defunct. There's an unidentified ache. What would it mean to love? Where are the normal people with their tenderness for baby animals? Operate my heart. Back to base. From a height of sixty feet. Naught. Zero.

The correspondents stopped obsessing about legitimacy when they realized that not even we the survivors had any clue what had happened to us, and moreover, that it could happen all over again tomorrow except that for the time being we were weak from cold and hunger and there were North American and German peacekeepers on every corner, large and meaty. We'd feed off them, we thought. Here comes the corned beef, we'd whoop, in our language, as they came hunkering down the remains of the street in combat gear, weighed down by seventy pounds each of surgical equipment and protective hardware. But who were the meat, and who the carvers? The Ambassadors sat at high table, wearing linen napkins and faces stiff with moral outrage. Peace was a board game, played in heated rooms with new-minted paper money. If we knew nothing else, we knew we were losing it.

Long lost in the big picture, we resign ourselves to relinquishing even the little. Our mind poor, divided and anarchic, like the country the authorities attempt to rule. Printed ballot instructions: A few rules of thumb will do, if you have a thumb. If not, use the index or middle finger. If you have no fingers, use the stump of the arm. Yes, a leg will do, equally. *Your address, ma'am, for the government record.* My house is on the corner of the huge hole where there used to be a greengrocer. Oh but it's not really my house. My house is where I left it, when the armies were fighting, oh a long time ago now. Now there is someone else living in it. *Life, ma'am. The government would like to know what you make of it.* Life is the time at their disposal. Life is the time that elapses between the fine and timeless moments when you disbelieve every word. Life is very slow, when you sum it up towards the end it's interesting to note how little actually changes. Even in war time. *The idea is to improve, ma'am.* You lie, boy. The idea is to live forever.

Now she is taller than the cornfield. The cornfield is on fire. The plume rises a mile high, the land a visible ruin. The eye widens until there is no horizon. A black chimney pokes the fat belly of the sky. Unspeakable things are left in a circle of burnt grass. Why circle? By what law or order? Burn the land to the roots. Roots caused this. Now she has none. She is free to walk, if only she can guess the direction. No, you can't tell what she is thinking, nor will she ever tell. She begins to walk, filling her pockets with burnt potatoes. Walking, crouching, waiting for the sky to open.

The rain falls uniformly on streets devoid of reason. Miles away from the center of gravity, you plot out the events to follow. Birth, stunting, upholstery, mass production. The mass produces, then reproduces itself. The single brain collapses, like a doll freed of its strings. It's thinking that does it. I've tried to flee into sensuality. I've tried to better myself, to improve my finances. I've tried to weep, thinking it would blur the outlines. But I've discovered you can weep and yet continue to think at a mad speed, like a fleeing car careening along a Californian cliff face, hugging the curves and for each curve skidding closer to the precipice, the lack of gravity becoming plainer every minute.

She has flesh in mostly all the right places, but a shortage of it around the eyes. *Cavernous* seems apt. Difficult to see what goes on in there, especially near the embers at the cave's dead end. A gnashing of bones may be heard occasionally; this howe 'being spied on'. Very often the place is simply deserted. We who wish her well discuss how best to win her confidence. Sadly, even on this critical question, opinions diverge. Some suggest a portly baritone voiceover and a wooden decoy father pushed out from between the cattails will lure her far enough to snag her hind leg on the wire. Others say, not unkindly, that the only language the crazy bitch understands is violence. And even violence, they add, exasperated, she grasps only feebly. We try it all. *Go away go away go away go away*. This is the faint echo the cave returns when bait is cautiously inserted into it: A flash-light beam, a roast leg, a blood relative.

Hotels? I was in a hotel once. A medium priced hotel in a medium sized northern European city, six feet deep in November. The room was nothing much, it could have been anywhere. It could have been home. On the double bed next to me lay my best friend from school days. We hadn't seen each other for years, or was it decades, I didn't recognize him. We were so close I could have put out my hand and touched him, if I'd wanted to, but I didn't want to, I hadn't wanted to touch anyone for months, contact made my skin crawl. So my hand stayed where it was, alone in the dark, left to its own devices. Back on the bed, I waited for my friend's breathing to deepen, until I could hear the terminal smoker's rasp deep in his thorax. Then I began to talk. I talked about the pictures I was developing in my head, images I manufactured like an assembly line worker and dwelt on open-eyed, lying in the dark, which surrounded me like a second brain, and further how I thought of my picture-conjuring as an act of hatred, deliberate and slow, like a man in a muddy trench beating himself with the stump of his own blown-off leg until the blood is everywhere and so surreally purple and viscous that he knows for a fact he is an actor in a cheap horror movie. I imagine, I said to my now deeply sleeping friend, vast muddy ditches filled with chopped up and rotting body parts, and these pictures, I went on, make me feel clean again, clean and clear-minded, I feel my thought coming into greater focus, sharpened by revulsion, and when thought is fully focused I see that my isolation is absolute and quite without emo-

tion and that death and life are equally irrelevant since I am still here despite the desecration and always will be and nothing I say or do can make any of it stop, ever. My friend began to snore. The next day he played his solo violin concerto at the Gothenburg Hall of Culture, and the day after that I flew back to the Peace Agreement. At the airport I felt better at once, with the stateless security agents all mispronouncing my name and introducing me jocularly as an officer of the stabilization forces. It was winter, and it would stay winter, by order of the High Representative, since the snowdrifts kept the mines from surfacing. Deep blue, old-fashioned snow, the kind that melted decades ago in Europe, and on the Sarajevo Olympic slopes there was spectacular skiing. In between the ski-runs, I walked from tray to tray, picking off the maraschino cherries and mingling with high ranking refugees. From time to time, in meetings with the toy government, I toyed with the idea of blowing off its head.

We couldn't find our face, and turned to see who walked behind, thinking that if we had a disciple, our traits were bound to mirror his, or why would he have followed? But that way there lay nothing, or nothing beside itself, and on the jealous edge of nothing a twisted figure, as of a man, our species. He seemed to have been standing, twisting himself around, back to front or front to back, no one now alive could tell, as he had no features to speak of, other than the heavy grain of salt which shone through the dusk even at this great distance. Or was he only a stone's throw away? Our skin stung, and then we saw the second figure, some way behind the first, a shade whiter than he perhaps (it could have been the light), though neither more nor less rubbed out. Yes, a whole line of them there were, one block of salt after the other, twisted like the first, and faceless. They stretched away into the uncertain distance like a string of lights above the freeway, say, between Ithaca and Troy. It was then we felt our eyes were burning.

Fellow stoics: Is it not our belief, that the moral life must bring tranquillity, and that renunciation will set us free? This life being all and nothing, can we not sit through it, steadfastly, like red Indians tied to the pyre? Listen to the rustling flame. And not cry out, nor move the lips, nor wince, nor cry for mercy. Be the fire, not the fuel. Be the trembling hallucinated air, not the sick roiling smoke swallowing the sky like Empire.

Whatever the book says: There were too many disasters. We had spoken allegorically, by way of visions; the hail of fire and blood, the scorching with great heat, the city of sin cast down, the third part of the sea turned bitter. So at first we dismissed the reports as mass hallucinations, common in bad years. But that was before we saw the darkened air, the swollen, floating fish, the rivers catching fire and burning. We struggled hard to project calm, only to be reproached for our aloofness. Humbled, we banned the use of our name (in fact an old regulation, but enforcement had grown lax) and were rewarded by a thousand epithets: The Merciful, The Just, The Everlasting. While the waters rose, and the earth shook, and power crumbled. And we said, Let there be panic, and there was panic. Toward the end, we sought refuge in the empty churches, fleeing the floodlit temples of science, cold comprehension. But the keen-eyed priests pursued, swinging burning censers, as if to smoke us out, piercing our hard won darkness. And the living crowds poured in, and we were sore afraid. Their knees thick from kneeling, they will not rise up, not even now, though we have pleaded. The lame have blocked the exits. The blind fumble for our face. No, we will not come out. Not with all that dead and gilded wood, and our terrifying grimace.

Is this the street where history is being made? A red mess. A smashed wall. A howling siren. But will it make the news? Remains to be seen by passing citizens. Someone should clean up this mess. Citizens pass on, mindful of their duty. Non-citizens must carry passes. Walk single file. A man carries a child, two passes. A man carries a stone, he feels it turning and turning inside him. Keep walking. A woman carries her head as if it held a poisonous substance. Pass. A boy is carried on running feet, round a shattered corner. A boy is left where he was found, someone will come for him later. A boy will remain a boy always, the boy of a moment ago. Why do we keep photographs? Life goes on. Some days are for feasting and celebration, to remind us of what used to be our customs. The women carry veils and steaming, covered dishes. Life goes. Words carry no weight, take away nothing.

At last we are sick of describing the world, after an outbreak of words in syntax we are covered in boils, scabs, our hair comes out in handfuls, blood spurts from the sky, though perhaps this is normal in as much as we have never truly understood the significance of structured appearances, fixed ideas, pure or applied science, personal names, first causes, chains of events or whatever it is they are driving at, headlong, into the abyss, as we see it you cling to these childlike things for a while but when you feel your own godlike void stir within you, you become terrified and you let go.

Is it change you seek? The Revolution? Try not to be afraid. Try gathering together a few good people. Try following the random motions of the pedestrians swarming over the sidewalk twenty-five flights below, as if nothing is wrong, as if nothing is right. Try animal proteins. Try all of this and if none of it works, try murder.

In a dream you are walking on piles of rotting fish under the eyes of African dock workers. And so naturally you want to know, what does it mean? Who is that dreaming? The look in their eyes. The glistening lozenges. Meanwhile, in a faraway galaxy, a man stands in your living room, telling a joke out of all proportion to the pain. Life sized, you crouch in a corner of the kitchen with a half-eaten sandwich in your hand, failing to remember. Outside the house, the light has come on, as if it were dawn.

Whereas the Doukhobor spirit wrestlers of Southern  
Russia,  
Rejecting not only the authority of state and church but  
the incontrovertible truth of the Holy Book itself,  
Abhorring the worship of icons, patriarchs and tsars,  
Ignoring the sanctity of private property,  
Fleeing military conscription,  
Flouting the law,  
Assailing common sense, and just plain  
Rebelling,  
Running wild,  
Publicly torching their forcibly recruited firstborns' army  
greatcoats,  
Gathering in great and terrifying number around  
roughhewn peasant tables  
to share the holy feast of bread and salt, washed down  
with brackish river water,  
and what's worse,  
Sharing their black and fertile land like brothers,  
illiterate, rosy-cheeked,  
Chanting folkish riddles from the unwritten Book of  
Life, not even  
Pretending to make sense,  
Holding it to be patently obvious that the spirit of The  
Unnameable dwelleth in all created things, excepting  
states, churches, armies, governments, profitmaking  
corporations and their offshoots, admittedly myriad;



Finding, in the end, resistance silly,  
and so in a moment of mortal weakness,  
wrestled to the ground,  
pinned to the mat, and Canadian citizenship granted;

Affirming all of the above to be merely recorded history,  
still we find it interesting to note,  
Winding up this interminable preamble,  
that until the Year of Our Lord 1991, the U.S.S.R.  
was the unrivalled champion of international wrestling  
and that even after its  
Stumbling drunken fall into the gutter of the post-wall  
world, ethnic Russian athletes continue to dominate the  
sport, due, it is  
Universally suspected, to their unbridled use of anabolic  
steroids.

Long after the white fog, the caretaker will insist on keeping the plant tidy, raking the gravel, burning the dead grass, gathering up the dazed ghosts and ordering their initials into long, meticulous queues, to be committed to memory.

We must have felt, one feels, that we *needed* to carve these artifacts, to give the light more angles to bounce off of, hoping that the bounce would reverberate in organs of speech magically endowed with unreason and blood vessels. Poling down the delta we repeated the word endlessly, as much in synch as the motion of the dugouts would allow: Confluence. Confluence. Confluence. In time we lost scent of the days, our dim thoughts erasing the water colors. When one dawn, there it was: A curtain of mist, a dull roaring.