

Biography: Margarita Pērveņeckā (1976) is a Latvian playwright and writer. In 2001, Pērveņeckā graduated from the Latvian Academy of Culture with a BA in film and theater, and since then has been publishing her writing, working for various creative platforms, and writing screenplays. Her first collection, *All the Trees Have Gone*, was published in 2006. Pērveņeckā has written several plays for theaters in Latvia. Her writing stands out with her unusual ways of perceiving the world, her use of scientific terms, internationalisms, neologisms, and other peculiar and poetic means of expression. Her novel *Getano's Krematos* received the 2011 Annual Latvian Literature Award.

Synopsis: *Gaetano's Krematos* is a novel about a tired and shadowed soul's journey in the footsteps of lost gods. The main protagonist, Gaetano, interacts with divinely beautiful beings - wise superhumans who can create not only works of art, but whole worlds. He idolizes them, but his interaction with them is fleeting, like sunlight briefly reflecting off water in cupped hands. Unsuccessful attempts to repeat this interaction cause Gaetano to lose trust in his own abilities, which mentally paralyzes him. The only thing keeping him alive burns out in the dark. His comatose existence is sustained by memories of light, which once again awaken his longing to become one with absolute beauty and magnificence. Gaetano's journey ends with the creation of a culminating work of art - he finally breaks into a different state of consciousness and a different reality; a self-transformation into a higher plane: divinity.

Excerpt

A thousand years

For them to settle,

The ashes

Of burned out passions

I

OVERLAND COMPANION

Lajs is eating a ball of goat cheese the size of a grapefruit and a boat carved from a saltine. There's a line of dried porridge caked onto the bottom of his chin. It looks like a large reddish-brown scab.

Leaning forward just a little bit he begins his climb up the mountain early on the third morning. One hand in his pocket, the other held against his chest like a rough-edged blue-grey stone and he clutches the flaps of his hemp coat tightly.

His left knee is bound with a rag tied over his pant leg.

The wind keeps pushing Lajs back with increasing force and frequency. Lajs takes the green canvas backpack with the cracked leather straps and turns it around so it's sitting over his stomach and fingers each stone carefully as he keeps climbing higher.

Tiny pieces of glass are hitting his face like sugar grains. Lajs stops. He jerks back his head, opens his mouth, fills it, and swallows. He pulls out a diver's mask from his coat pocket. It's had tinted lenses attached to it and he puts it on. His cap looks as if it's been sewn together from pieces of two other caps. He's covered his face with a thick layer of goat fat. The cryolite wasps sting into the fat and suffocate as they stab at the greedy hail of glass shards.

The figure with the white wasp's nest on his head gradually falls asleep, yet still keeps moving forward.

It gets dark.

Lajs taps the snow drifts from his body and settles into a narrow niche in the rocks. He takes off his billypack and unbuttons his coat. Under it he has a linen sack hanging around his neck. He takes out a bar of chocolate. Each of its pieces is numbered with a fraction. Three pieces for every day: one in the morning, one during the day, one at night. With his left lower canine, he shaves off little slivers from the piece numbered $3/3$.

Lajs never climbed at night. That's when the the mountains would move around.

The best way to make progress was to stay put until morning. If a traveler tried climbing at night, soon enough they'd come face to face with a massive mountainous torso that would shove them into a ravine. The ranges and gullies here would take a reckless traveler and seduce them like a cheating lover, leaving them on some especially narrow peak or summit the next morning. The surrounding mountains would watch with rapt attention to see how much frost, thirst, and hunger a human being could survive.

And the mountains expected that anyone dizzy from lack of sleep would discover all of a sudden that they had an irresistible urge to fly.

Fortune smiled on the travelers who woke up at the foot of the mountain in the same spot where they had started their climb. Those travelers would usually just return home then.

Lajs is sitting motionless in the niche, his eyes and ears wide open towards the darkness. The mountain is shaking from somewhere deep inside, it lifts and starts pushing to the right. Lajs lies flat with his pack down close to the rocks, he sticks his face between two

soft mossy stone breasts, which he grasps tightly but gently with his palms, and holds his breath for a long time.

The next morning Lajs pulls himself away from the stony flesh. There's a plug at the tip of each breast. Lajs hangs a small leather sack from one of the breasts, removes the plug, and lets the sack fill with fresh mountain spring water. He ties the water sack from his pack and turns to leave. In every direction out to the distant horizon his view fills with dark pink fields of heather blending with the sky. Lajs gets nervous and starts pacing back and forth, ten paces each way, torn between wanting to climb down and gather up all the heather and not waiting around and continuing climbing.

No waiting around. Lajs turns his back on the heather-filled expanse, takes out the chocolate piece numbered 4/1 and, startled by a sudden hawk shadow, quickly swallows the chocolate. Lajs throws a rock at the shadow as it slides away and manages to hit its wing. The hawk disappears from the sky.

In the early evening, Lajs climbs up to a small plateau carved out by the wind near the mountain's summit. A bit further on, near the edge of a ravine, an object glimmers in the distance. It resembles a cage made of sticks resting on supports along each of its sides. Approaching it, Lajs waivers. He stops. He falls onto his knees. He collapses, stares straight into the ground, bites at his lips. He gets up again and goes a few more steps.

He keeps standing long enough for darkness to sneak up on him, draws the laces from his shoes, and nibbles the crumbs off the half-empty charred earthen pan.

On the edge of the plateau, desiccated leather sacks hanging from hooks drilled into the cliff face rattle in the wind. The wind carries the smell of goat's milk fat to Lajs' nostrils from a few of the sacks, which are still a little soft and not completely dried out.

The last measure of the solar disc sinks behind the hills.

There's a different kind of light radiating from above the cliff tops. Lajs heads in that direction.

He shrinks into a fragile, tenacious flame...

"Tano!"

What had seemed from a distance like a cage fashioned from sticks, turns out to be a human skeleton sitting with its back completely straight, covered by patches of mummified skin. Here and there scuffed bones stick out through these patches. Its feet and worn palms are pressed together. String after string of beads made from goat excrement have been placed around its neck and cover its chest. A pale yellowish light shines faintly through the hollows of its eyes and nose. This light is radiated outward by a waxy mass and shards of mountain crystal inside of the skull. Bamboo bowls have been arranged in two straight rows in front of and behind the skeleton. A heavy stone has been placed as a weight in the middle of each bowl and in the windbreak it provides, there is an occasional scrap of uneaten food, a shriveled vegetable or piece of fruit, a bean, pea, or fruit pit nearly indistinguishable from a small stone.

Lajs peers into the skull's eye hollows.

He sees crystals slowly shimmering there in the waxy darkness.

The pulsing light stops.

The end is almost here.

Lajs freezes.

Quickly and all of a sudden he blows into the skull's nose hollow.

Darkness and silence. He blows into it again, this time with more force; the skull's spine crackles, he grabs the spine with both hands, holds on to it, and blows into the skeleton's nose...

Flickering. Sudden ignition. In one eye hollow.

Lajs takes out a small wooden barrel from his bellypack, positions it inside of the skeleton's chest, and ties it to its ribs with several small pieces of cord. The barrel contains goat fat with a ridged hemp thread pushed into its center. Lajs carefully runs the other end of the thread into the wax ball surrounded by the shards of crystal inside of the skull.

The flickering picks up in strength; the flame warms the fat and like petals through a flower stem draws nourishment through the hemp thread. The warmth is protected from the mountain winds by the layers of beads. Lajs and the skeleton sit one against the other until morning.

Lajs waits until the sun rises the length of his pinkie finger above the top of the lowest ridge. He puts the bowls and leather sacks into his bellypack. There are saddle girths laid out on the ground. Lajs covers the skeleton in a layer of fat, hangs the strings of beads over it again, covers it in a wool blanket, runs the saddle girths around it. He then crouches

down with his back straight against the skeleton. He ties the saddle girths around his waist and stands up; the skeleton with the glittering skull is safely secured to his back.

On his return, Lajs climbs down along a winding side path, which leads into the heather fields.

Both of them spend the night there next to a fire.

In the morning Lajs unties the skeleton, supports it against the bellypack, his strength is drained but he still manages to get a running start and with a feeble leap falls face first into the heather. Right there, lying on his stomach, he pulls together a bundle of heather. Lajs ties it to the skeleton's palm. And, after turning away in a slightly bewildered frame of mind, eats chocolate piece 6/1.

Three days later the smell of a grazing herd reaches them along with a droning "bahhhh" and the irregular clanging of heavy metal.

From the goats' perspective, it looks like a pregnant woman is coming down from the mountain with a huge bundle of sticks on her back.

The next night both travelers are squeezing between the trees in a spruce forest.

With his last strength, Lajs walks through the crudely finished doorway of a herder's shack with his traveling companion on his back. He collapses right there on the ground and with their backs pressed together sleeps for two whole days and nights without moving.

The door isn't completely closed and the shack has filled with moths flying in through the gap. A few of them are lying, their bodies singed, on the surface of the illuminated skull.

The spruce forest covers the shack's window; from the doorway it is bounded in a semi-circle by a cliff face. Exiting through the door, one has to walk around the shack and then a few steps away from the window a narrow path starts through the forest. A little way further on it forks: one path passes deeper into the forest, the other heads off towards the mountains.

The entire shack is just one room, 20 m² in size. It contains a wood-burning stove, an electric GÅ×NA-3 model two-ring hotplate, a shelf with oil lamps and various kitchen tools, two bunks covered in goat skins, snow shoes hanging from a nail driven into the wall, carabineers, ice axes, coils of rope and cable. A table in the middle with two tree stumps underneath. The small window is covered by a thick layer of spruce branches and so the inside of the shack is perpetually in a greenish grey twilight.

Lajs pours buckwheat into a wooden bowl, adds water boiled on the hot plate, and moves it around until all the buckwheat is covered with water. He skims off a few hulls that had floated to the top, covers the bowl with a lid, and leaves it on the windowsill.

He mends the heel of his sock.

He hangs a small cylindrical pot around his neck. Its handles have a lengthy cord attached to them. He ties a water sack and one empty leather sack to his waist and heads for the forest.

The skeleton is sitting with outstretched legs on one of the bunks covered in goat skins, its back supported against a filthy wall, its face turned towards the window, a bundle of heather placed between the fingers of its hand. The strings of beads and leather sacks are hanging above its head.

A second barrel of goat fat has already been secured in place inside its chest.

As evening approaches, the waxy lump of brain inside of the skull has drawn out all the fat from the little barrel through the hemp thread and the crystals have arranged themselves into its creases, fissures, lobes, and rises.

The light inside of the head begins to diminish. The wax from the brain begins to slowly flow out across the entire skeleton and gradually covers it in flesh with a moth pattern.

Lajs returns from the forest. He leans a long, fairly fat branch behind the door, puts the pot now filled with lingonberries and the leather sack filled with goat's milk onto the table. He hangs his coat up and turns on the larger of the two rings on the hot plate. In a small pan he melts butter that had likely been sitting here for several years already and lightly fries the now swollen buckwheat.

Sitting down on one of the stumps, Lajs eats the buckwheat out of one of the bamboo bowls, while drinking milk through the mouthpiece at the end of the sack. Every so often he grabs a handful of lingonberries from the pot and tosses them into his mouth.

It gets dark outside. The gleaming of the amber skeleton maintains a yellowish twilight inside of the hut. It's starting to look increasingly like a mummy.

Lajs unties the bindings securing the empty barrel to the mummy's ribs and removes it from its chest. He studies its body carefully. He pours milk into a bowl and dips a rag into it, which he has taken out of his pack. He pulls a pocket knife from his pants and places it in boiling water and then carefully starts cutting into the mummy's pelvis. He drills a small hole

and puts a piece of straw into it the length of a finger joint. Meanwhile, the coil in the bowl has softened and unrolled; it's a piece of goat intestine. He puts one end of the intestine over the end of the straw that he'd fit into the mummy's pelvis and secures it by tying it with a piece of string. He sits down on the bunk next to the mummy and makes a cut into his own navel, inserts a tube into the incision, pulls the other end of the intestine over it, and ties it with a piece of string. The mixture of chewed up buckwheat with milk and lingonberries flows through the intestine from Lajs' stomach into the mummy.

Several days pass with Lajs feeding him in this way.

For a long while, Lajs sits in the dark, afraid to move. But then he takes the tube, pulls it from his navel, and ties a knot into the end of the intestine, allowing the rest of the nourishment to slowly slide into the still motionless body.

Lajs lights the oil lamp for the first time.

Enough of the skeleton is now covered by a thin layer of flesh that all of its hollows are closed and its head is shining only very faintly, somewhat like through a bird leather apron hanging in a distant fog.

The mummy now looks like an incredibly gaunt person.

"Tano..."

Lajs keeps a constant watch over the body sitting opposite him, almost as if he'd like to jostle it with just his gaze alone. He covers it with a blanket, blows out the lamp, and

climbs up onto his bunk. He lies down, he pushes himself up next to the wall so tightly that his face is visible outside through the boards of the hut.

Lajs eats first and then feeds the mummy. He takes out a rectangular basket from underneath the bunk and opening its lid. It contains clothes – a tunic and pants made of rough hemp cloth and covered in a dusting of tiny stones, leaves, and dried grass. The pockets are filled with an assortment of moss, lichen, and pine cones. Lajs sits down on the bunk next to the mummy. He takes its arm, which looks like a long tree branch, puts its hand in his lap, and starts to slowly move each joint starting with the fingers and ending with the shoulder blade. He does the same with his other arm. Holding its head, he moves it back and forth, left and right several times, then bends and turns its feet, bends and straightens its knees. Its joints have become more elastic. Lajs carefully dresses the mummy in the clothes.

"Tano..."

"The mummy sinks into its oversized clothing, so much so that only someone who knew that Lajs had dressed him would realize that something was even inside of this stiff fabric spacesuit.

The amber-colored eyelids open at last.

The reflection of a spruce branch behind the window flashes across the dark grey eyes that had been hidden by the lids.

"Lahh..."

Gaetāno inspects the inside of the hut from his bunk. The center of the ceiling has been cleaned with a broom; the broom is covered with a thick layer of dusty cobwebs and the shriveled, dry remains of flies and other small insects. The corners from the floor up to the ceiling have been left as they were, packed with dusty, tattered webs. Bare branches have pushed their way through the boards around the door with a couple of ragged hemp coats and Lajs' backpack hanging from three of them. The floorboards are covered in a thin layer of moss and lichen. On a splinter sticking out from a board on the wall next to him, there is a fine, dark, blonde strand of hair about the length of his palm. Gaetāno takes it in his fingers. It's a strand of Lajs' hair. The door of the stove is hanging at an angle and looks not unlike a slightly torn eyelid, slowly dripping ashen tears. On the very edge of the other bunk, Lajs is sitting with his hands held together in his lap, almost as if in church. He is quietly waiting for their eyes to meet.

Moving slowly and under his own power, Gaetāno gets up from the bunk, takes three steps, and holding on to the table, sits down on one of the stumps. He stares at the palms of his hands for a long time. He arranges ten buckwheat seeds in a row on the log in front of him and ten lingonberries in a second row next to the buckwheat. He isn't able to lift the jar of melted butter on his own. Lajs unscrews the lid, digs in the spoon, and places the butter on the log, then pours milk from the sack into the bamboo bowl. Gaetāno studies the buckwheat grains for half an hour and then eats them one by one with the lingonberries. Then he gets up, goes back to his bunk, sits down, turns to his side so it's

easier for him to put his feet up on the bunk, and supporting himself against the wall, slowly sips the butter from the spoon for another half hour.

Lajs is whittling a walking stick from one of the branches with his pocketknife. He breaks and cuts off the smaller branches and peels off small strips of the tough bark. Twilight comes early. The last drop of oil burns out in the lamp he had only just lit and so peeling the branch has to wait.

Each one is looking at the other from their bunk. As it gets darker, the features of their faces fade and only their barely perceivable silhouettes remain. The last lingering light is the vanishing glow of the milk in the bowl on the table. Gaetāno walks up to the table and gets down on his knees. Clutching the bowl and pushing his chin up to the edge of the table, he drinks down every last drop of light.

A few days later, Lajs finishes peeling the branch; the wood underneath is bright white. He takes the second hemp coat from the branch next to the door. Insects have eaten holes through its fabric. Lajs gives his coat to Gaetāno and puts on the tattered one himself.

The land looks like an ornate cake with tall mountains of nuts, forests of cream, rivers and lakes of syrup, licorice figures, some sleeping some still awake, all covered by the dark grey dome of midnight. No moon, no stars.

They leave the hut. Lajs with his backpack and walking stick, sacks of water and milk, and Gaetāno with the bundle of heather. Gaetāno is already strong enough to keep himself upright. They stand still for a moment, just long enough for them to spot the narrow path through the trees. Lajs extends his walking stick and with his other hand clutches Gaetāno

tightly. Then with short, careful steps, following the walking stick as long as its tip still can be seen, both shuffle into the forest. In places where they can't see the end of the walking stick, they stop. Then Lajs swirls the stick in a circle until its end becomes visible again and then they keep walking.

After four hours, the travelers are carefully moving along the top of a high, narrow earthen wall, which resembles the top of a fish's back. The tinkling of stars shining iridescently can be heard across the flatness extending along both sides; shepherds with lanterns in their hands are swaying there in a sea of feather pillows.

Dawn reveals a smooth, flat expanse extending out to the horizon. The fog is rising from it slowly in a wide straight line like the edge of a tablecloth. Lajs and Gaetāno crawl underneath the white tablecloth and shrink into ever tinier crumbs as they walk off into the vastness stretching out below the table.

Gaetāno stops for a moment to lean down and stare at the ground. A small snake is lying there, it was trampled flat and had dried out long ago. Gaetāno lifts it up carefully with two fingers, blows off the sand, and with the index finger of his other hand gently cleans it off. Lajs takes out the foil that had held his chocolate and slowly opens it up. He flattens it with his palm across Gaetāno's back. Gaetāno uses it to carefully wrap the snake. Gaetāno pins the bundle of heather into the pocket of Lajs' backpack, because he has to use both of his hands now to carry the fragile package containing the snake, so that the wind won't break it in half.

Here and there the earth looks almost like flesh, stripped of its skin with the pale tree roots pressing out like veins. Gaetāno is walking stooped over, watching the roots around him. He crouches down, shoves the foil bundle underneath the toe of his boot and tries to pull up one of the roots. It turns out to be tougher than he'd thought and doesn't break off. He cleans off a small, round area where a ragged cluster of roots is pushing out. He claps his palm on top of it and drives his long, out-stretched fingers deep into the earth like a pitchfork and tries pull up the roots. Now with both of his hands. This tangle has knitted itself into the earth in a tight mesh. Lajs notices only now that Gaetāno has fallen far behind and is slowly, rhythmically pushing and pulling against the earth, as if someone were trying to pull him underground. Lajs runs up to Gaetāno and watches. Gaetāno doesn't stop. Lajs takes out his pocketknife, hoping to cut off the piece Gaetāno wants, but it doesn't come easily even with a knife; he has to slice through each fiber individually. Lajs cuts off a piece and hands it to Gaetāno. Gaetāno takes the knife from Lajs' hands and keeps feebly hacking away at the piece he unearthed. Lajs takes the knife from Gaetāno, stabs forcefully at the roots, and pulls out an entire handful of them. Gaetāno puts them in his pocket. Lajs picks up the pace until he's almost running. Gaetāno speeds up to follow him, holding the foil-wrapped snake in his hand.

His shoes start to smell of burned rubber: the road is a gravel sandpaper tongue. On the left there is a small plateau along the road and on the right an ivory wall with a ridged top, black enamel with a rough grey neck by a red ditch resembling inflamed gums; it contains a shimmering black layer with an eroding base.

The panorama across the plateau reveals a series of small wooded hills rising at its far end. Light-colored strips can be seen here and there between the hills – gravel roads. Narrow, wooden steps ~1 km long lead down from the plateau.

"Tano."

Lajs beckons to Gaetāno encouragingly, throws away his walking stick, and starts to climb down.

Gaetāno's attention is focused on the black layer of rock. While standing there, Gaetāno moves the foil and the shimmering of the black rocks becomes more radiant illuminating countless layers inside of the rock and several of Gaetāno's faces. Gaetāno wants to dip his entire arm into the cliff face and reach something deep inside, but bumps into the surface. He bends down and with all his strength pulls his knife along the rocks and peels off a strip. It's elastic...

Lajs' voice echoes below.

"Tano! Tano!"

Gaetāno wraps the strip together with the snake in the foil.

The steps are steep and have no railing. Each step is narrow. Lajs is hurrying. He climbs down with his face turned towards the steps, gripping the sides that are holding the

steps in place. He throws back his head; Gaetāno is walking down but is still so far above him, standing tall, with a focused gaze across the tree tops.

Sliding down the last of the steps on his stomach, Lajs runs through the forest to the nearest turn in the gravel road. A bus is approaching.

"Tano! Tano!"

Completely out of breath, Lajs jumps in front of the passing bus. It breaks and its doors open.

Gaetāno, walking carefully and thoughtfully, is still at least 300 meters up the steps. The bus honks. It slowly starts driving. Lajs is standing impatiently in its doorway. Its doors close. They open, Lajs jumps out. The bus drives away.

Gaetāno stops a few dozen meters above the base.

The next bus: 6:40 a week from now.

They climb back up to the kilometer-high plateau. The water and milk sacks are empty. Lajs turns them inside out with difficulty. They both drink off whatever moisture remains. Lajs climbs down the steep ravine to retrieve the walking stick he'd thrown away.

In the late afternoon they find the herders they'd seen in the early morning darkness, falling down on their knees, they gulp down as much water as they can. A shy little goat walks up to Gaetāno. He grabs it, wipes his mouth on it, sticks his entire face into its

side, and breathes deeply. Lajs buys cured meat, milk, cheese, a loaf of buckwheat bread, barley, and fuel oil from the herders.

Meanwhile, the herders nervously study the face of the emaciated person, which seems to have absorbed several moths.

During the night they follow Lajs' outstretched walking stick until its end – tap-tap – bumps into the wall of the hut.

It rains for three days without stopping. Lajs and Gaetāno sit in their coats in the doorway and watch the cliff face.

On the fourth day, both of them walk along the edge of the nearby cliff face for the first time. It has the appearance of giant, vertically arranged, layered panels, each approximately the width of a hand. Moving through this monumental, though also fragile, stone house of cards, they find the ancient remains of steps approximately 20 m in height. Each step is worn at an angle and the platform is a thin sheet of paper. Lajs doesn't dare walk up the steps and freezes upon seeing that Gaetāno is already on the first step. Hoping for the best due to his slight weight, Lajs watches as Gaetāno climbs up to the very top and disappears around the corner. Lajs rubs both hands across his face and sighs heavily.

"Lah! Lah!"

Gaetāno's face appears above.

"Lajs. Bring a bucket!"

Gaetāno has sunk into pieces of a glass-like material up to his ankles. Obsidian.

Gaetāno fills two bamboo bowls with glass, takes them down, pours them onto a pile, walks back up to fill two more, and keeps repeating this all day long. Meanwhile, Lajs ventures out to get a basket of supplies from the herders.

On a different afternoon, they're both sitting on the tree stumps by the table in the hut. There is obsidian arranged into a cone-shaped pile on the table. The pile is so high that the piece at the very top is pinned into the ceiling. Gaetāno studies and separates out the glass pieces, placing those that seem the most valuable in a basket. When the basket is full, the pile has only decreased in size by a quarter, Gaetāno starts putting the glass into Lajs' backpack, coat pockets, and also into one of his own coat pockets, but not the other one as it still contains the knotted bundle of roots.

The now dried bundle of heather is sitting on his bunk.

This time they hike out to meet the bus a day early, leaving in the afternoon with pockets full of glass. Lajs is dragging the basket along. Every time they stop, Gaetāno sorts through some of the pieces again and leaves a few on the ground, transferring others from his pocket to the basket. The foil-wrapped package is still in his hand.

Moonrise comes and soon after midnight they reach the plateau. The black rock reflects the scenery like a multi-layered mirror. Gaetāno stretches out his arm, wanting to dive into it again. He brings his face close to the surface of the enamel-like rock and stares into it it. Five moths have grown into his cheek. He takes Lajs pocketknife and cuts his

reflection out of the rock. Lajs also stares at the rock layer and Gaetāno carves his reflection out of it, too. He hangs the peeled off segments of strata across his lower palm like strands of kelp. He tries to tear one in half, but it's only possible to stretch it. The image stretches too; the segments have preserved their portraits.

Lajs is already waiting at the top of the steps. The basket of glass is at his feet. Gaetāno binds up the segment he had removed from the rock face, tucks the front part of his tunic into his pants, and puts the bundle into his tunic.

Lajs can't decide how to get down the narrow steps with his backpack and the basket of glass. It tips over and half of its silvery black contents spill out. Seeing this, Gaetāno screams. Lajs leaves his backpack up at the top, walks down a few of the steps and holding onto them with one hand, uses the other to reach for the basket. He places it between his legs and scoops the precious contents back into it. Examining them in the moonlight, Gaetāno goes through the glass one more time and leaves only the finest ones, which will fit into the pockets of his and Lajs' coat and pants.

There's a bench at the bus stop. Gaetāno lies down on it, while Lajs lies down on the ground. Still two and a half hours left for sleep.

They are the only passengers on the bus, which seems to have been built a century ago. The seats inside are arranged in rows along its sides around a dark space in the center. The driver gives them seat covers made from the same material as umbrellas. The seats are made from compressed waste and dried mud. Lajs puts the covers across a couple of seats by the back windows, which seem cleaner. Gaetāno collapses onto the vertical pole in the

center. A moment later he grabs it with both hands. The ride feels as if the bus were moving across the ribs of a skeleton. It keeps knocking Gaetāno in every direction, like a raw egg around spoon in a jar. Bare roots growing across the gravel road are stretching one over the other, trying to join up, pull together, and sew the road shut like a seam that's unraveled in the forest fabric.

Spun around halfway to unconsciousness, Gaetāno collapses in Lajs' lap.

The bus comes to a stop for the first time only as the first stars begin to twinkle in the sky. The inside of the bus is suddenly full, as sheep, tripping over one another, push onto the bus. So many of them crowd in that those on the sides jump up onto all of the seats and tightly embrace everyone already seated with warm lanolin-scented pillows. The last to get on is the shepherd. He sits on the bus steps with a ram between his legs.

A few hours later Gaetāno wakes up cradled by Lajs, as the sheep that he had been supporting himself on are now gone. His hemp coat and shirt sleeves are also gone. Chewed off.

Outside of the windows he sees nothing but an endless expanse of fields providing no reference point, which could help establish whether the bus is standing still or actually moving.

Far ahead an object on the side of the road illuminated by searchlights is beginning to increase in size. An overhang. The bus arrives at its destination. Two-thirds of the space under the overhang is open with room for two buses and a long bench. A locked shed with a door that has a 20 x 20 cm window. The driver turns off and locks the bus. He takes his bag

and walks into to the shed. It contains a foldable cot covered with sheepskin. The driver drinks and eats what he'd brought with him and lies down to sleep.

Lajs and Gaetāno also lie down head to head on the bench under the overhang.

This bus might be only fifty years old. Its clock says 4:20. The sleepers are woken up by a shrill tone.

The bus pulls off the road regularly at designated stops to pick up passengers. They sit one next to another in the front of the bus, but every so often they look back and a few even stare at the bundles supported against the window. There's a stringy, pale yellowish blue forearm hanging from one bundle. The other bundle is partially covering it.

The bus arrives at a station in a small town. Lajs and Gaetāno have to transfer there to a long distance express. Lajs buys the tickets at the window.

The driver is standing by the bus and waiting as the passengers pile their suitcases and bags into the open luggage compartment underneath the passenger seating area. The passengers put their bags in and climb into the bus after showing their tickets. Gaetāno's bare hand, still holding the foil-wrapped packet, betrays that he is not a woven cylinder-shaped bundle. The driver shuts the luggage compartment, sits down in his seat at the front of the bus, and closes the door in Lajs' face leaving only a small gap open. Lajs shows the two tickets through the thin opening between the doors. The driver talks with someone over his walkie-talkie. A woman comes out of the station building in a white smock and hands Lajs two packets containing white coveralls. They put on their laminated polyester

coverings with Velcro closures along the back, head, by the face, and along the feet. They are now permitted to take their seats.

The coveralls don't let in any moisture or air. Lajs and Gaetāno are overheated, swelling up, and sweating inside of the suits. The only thing that helps them make it to the first stop is a movie about polar explorers in a hot air balloon being shown on four flat screens. Exiting the bus, Lajs quickly undoes the Velcro closures on both of their suits, buys two plastic packages with a picture of a sausage stamped on them at the gas station. They both strip naked in the restroom, place their clothes carefully into the bags so none of the glass spills out, and put the coveralls back on.

They still have four days and nights to spend on the bus.