

Biography: Inga Žolude (born 1984) is a Latvian prose writer. She studied English literature at the University of Latvia, and upon receiving the Fulbright scholarship attended Southern Illinois University in the USA (2008 - 2009). In 2015, she obtained her PhD. Žolude is a member of the Latvian Writers' Union since 2010. Her works have been translated into numerous languages.

Synopsis: This story collection is compiled of seven independent and meditative stories, each with a clearly laid out plot and individual characters. In "The Hike," three life-long friends go for a hike in the Swiss mountains and review their lives and relationships, revealing life-long, dark secrets; in "Energy," a wealthy husband and his biologist wife go on vacation with two friends to a rural resort in Norway, to reassess their marriage, and almost establish a love triangle in the process. In yet another story, a couple lives in a house near which a new motorway has been built, changing their household and disrupting their lives, which they suddenly decide to reconstruct. "The Hair" follows a man whose wife is dying of cancer and has freed him from their marriage – but when the man engages in a new relationship, everything becomes complicated. These stories are masterpieces of human psychology, viewing many different possible situations experienced by as many and different characters.

Excerpt

The Road

The next day he headed out on his own. Yesterday he had gone for a walk with Astija and her family. It was a slow walk with disjointed conversation. But it suited him as well. The girl wasn't even yet a year and a half, and she no longer wanted to sit in the pram, nor walk on her own. Astija and her husband Germán carried the child from one arm to the other or let

her walk along the pavement and street when there weren't any cars. Carver watched these unhappy parents and thought that he would have done it differently. Little Yvonne was too restless and shrill a child who threw her stomach in the air and kicked out if Astija and Germán couldn't calm her down or guess what she wanted. Carver walked in slow steps along with them and pushed the pram while both parents kicked an inflatable ball with their child along the street that meandered past the nursing home for dementia patients and empty sports grounds, which appeared to have been uncared for and deserted for some time. The pram was easily steerable, too sensitive — each tiny movement of the hand made it change direction. Their pram wasn't like that, it was far sturdier, but maybe also not as easily turned, and Carver thought that it surely still stood in the pantry cupboard, only now in Joyce's house. It was green — obtained with the idea that in it they could put both their son and the daughter who would be born after Munch. But who knew if that would ever happen. At least not with Joyce. Definitely not with Joyce.

Carver laughed.

— I'd already forgotten what it's like to push a pram!

Astija and Germán nodded and continued to play football and run after the ball that had been kicked far away. Then Astija ran up to the pram and took a camera out of a lower compartment. She was a photographer. Carver had thought that she could make an elegant portrait of him that he could use on the jacket of his next book. Carver didn't like any photographs of himself. He felt like they ceased to characterise him the moment after they were taken, when he had already become a completely different person. Astija began to photograph Yvonne. Carver saw these happy scenes; they were worth photographing. Just

like all other children's moments on earth. But unfortunately these images couldn't keep these moments alive forever. Before he came here, while packing his suitcase and rummaging through his things, Carver had by chance come across the photographs Joyce had placed in a little box along with other mementoes — movie theater tickets, receipts from restaurants where they had had romantic dates, dried flowers, cocktail napkins, pages inscribed with the logos of hotels where they had slept in one bed, and other things whose use could no longer be understood. He thought, what to do with them. Everything that was unforgettable now had to be forgotten. He had started to look through the photographs. They were the pictures neither of them could do anything with, since they were both in them, sometimes along with other people, and still no one made a move to throw them out. He had been able to look at only a small portion of them. Joyce seemed so unfamiliar. He had the sensation that they lived a different life in the photographs. Carver, just like Joyce, was smiling in a lot of the pictures, therefore they had been happy. But the feeling intruded that it was the happiness of another, completely different person, not him. And after finding this memory Carver felt like he was rolled back into the old feelings. It had seemed to him that everything had already calmed, the waters stood still, but now it was stirred, and he was sinking, and there was no one who could pull him out. He was alone, and there would never be another.

As they played ball, they wanted to branch off on a different road, but it was a blocked-off restricted area — private road.

Germán wondered how a road could be private.

— That means that a person can't go where he wants, and there are roads that remain hidden, impenetrable to a person? — he exclaimed.

— Yes, some roads are private. Would you want anyone to be able to amble down your road? — Carver asked laughing. He felt even. He had abandoned suspicions of anything that had haunted him in the early days, when he had first arrived here. He had thought that, perhaps, he could go insane. That's why he had gone to look for other artists in the residence and got to know Astija, Germán, and Yvonne. Carver had wanted a drink, but they offered tea. Astija placed organic nuts and sugar-free bran biscuits on the table.

Yvonne impeded her parents' conversation with their guest. Carver withstood it, he knew how it is, Munch was six already, during the first three years he had also impeded every conversation, every cup of tea, coffee, and wine. Carver sat in a chair near the open window, through which insects flew in on the air, and let themselves encircle this room, around which Yvonne's playthings were strewn, crumbs of food, and prints of Astija's photographs. Having finished his tea, Carver wanted to leave. It seemed like Astija and Germán had picked up on the face that Yvonne was disruptive, and Astija took her daughter in her lap and put her to her breast. Carver looked at Germán, and they conversed about something. It was the first time in a long time Carver could simply have a conversation, he didn't try to say anything, but gladly listened, he had realised that there are people around him who have stories they want to tell, and maybe, he thought, they could be used in one of his works, when he started to write again. He was experiencing writer's block, which in the past he'd said he didn't believe in. On applying to the residence, he had composed a believable application about the piece he was working on. He couldn't remember which of

the books he'd read he had described in his fictitious project. For several silent minutes while Yvonne nursed, Germán brightened. As it turned out, he is a musician. As it turned out, Germán is. At least he was for these several minutes. But Astija added on to almost everything Germán said. Astija nursed the child while the exhausted, irritable Germán — with whom Astija wasn't always of the same opinion when it came to child-rearing — spoke. Carver understood her well, Astija, who also wanted to take part in the conversation — Joyce would have done the same. Carver observed this tired pair and knew that they aren't happy, that Germán thought about breaking away from this child and all the postnatal accessories scattered about their nest. Their apartment was smaller than Carver's, though Astija also rented a studio on the basement level. Writers don't need studios, a large workroom would do. Germán wanted to compose — and bury himself in notions of listeners, fans, and the history of music in which his name would be written. Astija sat with Yvonne in her lap on the sofa behind Germán; Carver's view of the woman was partially hidden by a laptop screen sitting right there on the table. She asked him to close the computer. Carver imagined that she didn't want him to see the emails on the screen, and he lowered it down. She had only wanted to see Carver more clearly. Carver saw the round shape of her breast and intentionally turned his view to Germán.

Joyce's breasts were like that in the beginning, too. Later she worried that they'd lost their shape after nursing the child, that they had suddenly disappeared. She said they don't make lingerie in such a small size, that you could only find it in the children's clothing section. Wanting to do something nice, Carver gave her a lingerie set a few days later with a "push-up" effect. Joyce, of course, misunderstood. So Carver still thought her breasts were

too small, she shouted, and didn't speak to him for several hours. Carver too then made the final decision to divorce her. When Joyce had calmed down, she apologised, but asked him to not bring that kind of gift any more. Something different — yes, but not such sensitive things. They would live on.

Yvonne had finished eating, threw her stomach in the air, and wriggled out of Astija's lap. She stood in the middle of the room and peed on the floor. Germán hurried to the kitchen after paper towels to wipe up the wetness. Carver began to say his goodbyes. Germán and Astija apologised. They became neurotic, they thought Carver was leaving because it was impossible to have normal grown-up time with them because of Yvonne.

— She probably has to go to bed, I'll go, my son Munch is six, I know how it is.

Carver left. They had been friends since that evening.

They had come upon an empty playground. The slides were too high, meant for bigger kids, those like Munch. Astija and Germán went through the small gates so that Yvonne could play. Carver pushed the pram up to a bench and went out of the playground to smoke. He headed straight along the path to a big tree — what was it, a walnut? — and saw that you could return along the path on the other side of the lawn. An athlete was headed towards him, pressing a pedometer to his wrist. He had surely finished his training and wanted to know its dynamics. Carver turned away and exhaled smoked, so that it wouldn't flow into the runner's well-ventilated lungs. Yes, it was a walnut tree. Its discarded nuts were small and blacked and the leaves were browned. He carried his cigarette butt to

the playground's trashcan. Yvonne was playing with a food container, from which she threw lumps of couscous into the sand.

— Just a bit more, — Germán said to Carver as if apologizing.

— Sure, no problem! We're not in a hurry. It's a walk!

Carver didn't want them to feel guilty or as if they were a burden to him. He had been a burden to himself and others just the same since Munch's birth and only now understood that it was neither a burden to anyone nor an offense. But nothing was reparable any more. Yvonne turned the plastic container upside down, almost all the couscous spilled out. Astija smiled.

— For the birdies! — she said so Yvonne wouldn't be upset. But Yvonne wasn't upset, she wasn't one of those children who are aware of their actions, maybe she was still too young for that...

Joyce always made couscous salad with seafood when they had company. Carver didn't like couscous. He'd never eaten it in his life before Joyce had made it one time. Carver hid biscuits and bars of chocolate in his studio which he ate in the moments when we was to have gone there to write. At the time he could no longer write. But the empty candy wrappers filled an entire drawer. He had gained weight. Carver asked Joyce if he seemed less desirable because of it. She had answered that family isn't about desire. Carver thought that she was a bit gratified in the fact that he had lost his figure since she had lost hers.

— Don't let her pour food out on the ground! — Germán reddened.

— She's too little to understand that! — Astija looked maternally at the child. Carver saw the stress between them. He was familiar with it. The stress of child-rearing that wiped

away partners' mutual understanding. Carver knew that if Astija and Germán don't notice this drop of poison, it will spread.

A few days after meeting them, feeling that a friendship had developed between them, Carver regained his calm and sat down to write. He didn't believe he would be successful. But there he was, letting the words roll out awkwardly as if from a long hardened chrysalis. Suddenly someone knocked at the door. There stood Germán, a bottle of red wine in hand. Carver invited Germán inside, found two wine glasses and placed the corkscrew in front of Germán. Germán tried to open the bottle, while Carver tidied his writing desk.

— I don't really drink, —Germán said toward the room, peeling open the protective wrapping around the cork with nervous fingers. — I drink very little... Were you busy?

— I was writing a bit, — Carver said lightly, returning from the room. — Give it to me. — Carver took the bottle to open it, poured some wine into the glasses and wiped the droplets that had spilled onto the table with his hand. After the first sip Germán looked around and said that Carver's studio is nice, a lot bigger than his.

— I haven't unpacked yet. — With his hand, Carver gestured to the suitcase that stood there on the floor.

— Astija unpacked everything the first night! It was hell! You have a family, you get it. Carver was quiet for a moment. — We don't live together.

Germán quickly drank another sip. Carver put the glass to his mouth too. Carver saw that Germán felt uncomfortable and so clarified:

— For two years now.

Germán exhaled and loosened from the wine.

— Sometimes I think, too, about... I've never been so exhausted as I have been in the past year and a half. — Germán felt that what he'd said wasn't right. — But it's a great joy! For example, on New Year's our neighbors had invited us over, but Yvonne had to go to bed, and we chose to stay with her. We slept next to her, I watched her fall asleep, the fireworks started outside... — Carver smiled.

— An indescribable feeling. — Germán's voice cracked.

Germán took Yvonne in his arms. She stretched out her little arms and whimpered, she didn't want to leave the playground.

— Sorry it's so slow-going, — Germán apologised to Carver. — It's impossible to take her some places.

— It's fine. I understand. You don't have to apologise.

Astija kicked the spilled food into the sand and placed the almost empty container in a pocket in the pram. She started to push the pram through the sand. Yvonne became even more defiant, Germán began to run and make animal noises, Yvonne started to smile. Astija asked Carver to push the pram and, taking her camera, she hurried after her husband and child.

Carver slowly pushed after them. It was as if he was there, he knew that Germán and Astija had been too hermetic for too long and now they could finally talk with someone else, not just between them, not just about mealtimes, diapers, bedtime, shopping, money... Yet they didn't have time to pay Carver too much attention. Carver watched Astija, who took

pictures squatted down. She had wide, faded trousers. Her black hair was grey in places, and

looked thick like wire. They were several years older than Carver, yet so inexperienced! Carver is experienced now. And he still has time to put into it, to start a new life. He knew that he wouldn't allow the same mistakes to be made. But he had doubts about whether another life isn't a mistake in itself. He was alone, lonely. He worried that this could already be that other life. Sometimes he became melancholic, like in the first days, when he had arrived here. That's precisely why he had sought out company and got to know Astija and Germán, and Yvonne. There was a moment when he was afraid of himself, when nothing led him anywhere — he couldn't write or do anything else either, he was occupied with emptiness and a desperate longing for the feeling of being needed by someone. Not by Joyce. He didn't remember Joyce at all any more. He longed for someone whose presence he could feel, whose waist he could hold tightly while they slept, and sense the smell of her shampoo on smooth skin. He imagined a wordless coexistence filled not with words but with proximity. He imagined slow sex, he imagined how, seeing submissive eyes in the dark, he looks right into them and slowly moves in, and out, and she slowly lifts her chin, straightening her head, and her longish blonde hair is spread out over the pillow's soft satin fabric, and she presses her hands back against his chest, she has long, thin fingers, and they hear someone walking outside, and they suppress their outbursts of pleasure. Afterwards he lies on top of her for a long time, ears pressed to her chest, and looks along the line of her body to the sheets, where the light falls in muted streaks from the lamps outside, her fingertips play in his hair.

When Carver had come up alongside Astija with the pram, she stood up and began to walk with him, carrying the camera in her hands. She told him about organic food for

Yvonne, about how here the air is really bad, cars all around, she wakes up in the morning with the taste of petrol in her mouth, and her lungs hurt, it can't be good for Yvonne either, but Germán is so heartless, he says that it's Astija's psychological problem, well, how is it psychological if she can taste it and it hurts in her chest! She told him about organic cotton clothes for children, about wooden toys painted with natural colors, about soft shoes and the fact that her entire career as a photographer is dependent on the child, since Germán can't look after her for more than 40 minutes. Carver looked around, he was walking along this road for the first time. On one side was a big rose garden, teenagers sat on the lawn and kissed. Carver smiled and turned back again to Astija. He didn't say that, in his opinion, Yvonne is too quarrelsome because she's half-starving. As far as he'd seen and heard, she mostly ate breast milk. Today's couscous incident soothed Carver a bit. At least he knew that at a year and a half they were no longer able to get by on milk alone. Yvonne began to whimper every time she saw food. One time Carver had given her a biscuit. Astija pursed her lips. Yvonne chewed on the treat and for a least a moment wasn't stressed. Astija said that biscuits aren't healthy, they have preservatives in them just like yogurt, whose shelf life is unimaginably long. Carver hadn't known that one biscuit for Yvonne could contain so many threats to her life.

— What kind of child is raised without biscuits? — Carver laughed.

— Exactly! — Germán echoed gladly. Astija told them again about harmful substances and their effects. Germán had no say in the matter, Carver saw that and knew how it is. Astija was exaggeratedly serious about her role as a mother, Germán would be fine with giving the little one biscuits, candy, and even meat, which Astija, a vegetarian, had

cut out of their entire menu. Germán would do everything so that the child wouldn't scream and it would be easier.

In the distance Germán waved at them with Yvonne on his shoulders. Carver waved back. Astija kept taking photographs. She snapped something for a long time, but Carver couldn't figure out what. He stood next to Astija and looked as if from her perspective. There was nothing. Just the road. A narrow cobblestone footpath, that threw a hump upright, as if behind it were a drop.

— Go and stand up there with your back to me, — Astija told Carver, looking through the viewfinder of the camera. — I have a new project — I'm photographing people from behind as they look ahead. This a good place. That little hill.

Carver climbed the footpath and stood on the highest point. Astija instructed him to stand still. He heard the click of the camera.

— Do you see where the road leads? — Astija asked, continuing to fix the frame.

— No.

— How? Does it end?

— No.

Carver heard Astija climbing up the pavement. She stood next to Carver. The road behind the big hump turned almost at a 90 degree angle, insinuating itself among the trees and couldn't be seen any further beyond that.

— That road leads God only knows where, — Astija determined. — Let's not go any further.

Astija pushed the empty pram and caught up with Germán and Yvonne on the small observation deck over the city that they had wanted to show Carver.

— I didn't know that there was such a place here, — Carver said.

— We found it recently too! And we wanted to show you. — Astija was happy that they had managed to surprise Carver.

Really they came here so that Astija could photograph people from behind as they looked out on the city and the setting sun.

— I don't like you photographing me from behind, — Carver said, viewing the city. He had thought about this road, the one that led *God only knows where*. What could be there? Who walks along it and where does it go? Recently he thought a lot about life as a journey on the road.

— Nobody will know it's you, don't worry! Only your back will be visible. There are millions with a back like that. — And Astija continued to snap pictures.

— When I stand with my back... people see what I have behind me. But that's already done, I've already been through it. It's like the tail of a comet. But I'm a person from the front, who has a travelled road of experience up to this point. I'm already different. Get it?

— So complex! — Astija said. — No, I think that the person looking at the photographs, it's as if he's behind them, and he doesn't really see the view either. Everything that he sees is from behind. And from behind he can't say what it is, what you see and what you feel. Because every back is the same. There aren't any traits. If it were

photographed from the front, there would be traits and emotions — there would be a narrative. But I don't want a story. I just want a back.

Germán sensed Carver's frustration with Astija's photography and tried to change the conversation to a different topic.

— So you're a writer. What do you write?

— I write for children, — Carver answered shortly, on the lookout for whether Astija would train her lens on him again.

— Something like *Neverending Story*, the Moomins, Harry Potter?

— No. — For a moment Carver imagined that his stories didn't come close to resembling those mentioned. — I began to write for my son...

And to some extent that was the truth. He hadn't written anything for a long time. He couldn't. He didn't understand what was happening around him and what was happening in his head. The only thing he could manage was a story written as a joke for Munch, not very good, come to think of it.

Fortunately, Yvonne, who had been put in the pram and strapped in, was trying to crawl out, and Germán couldn't restrain the little girl any longer, and the conversation dried up by itself. After the sunset it had become noticeably cooler. Germán said that he couldn't stand it any more, that Yvonne had to be put to bed, he was nervous. They all headed back to the residence. Along the way there was no conversation, strength and patience had dried up. They all wanted to be liberated from each other. Sleep offered this chance, but until then they still had to be quiet. Until everything had to be quiet. Until anything had to. Carver thought about the hidden road that sharply turned.

They parted in the vestibule. Astija carried Yvonne upstairs. Germán was still unpacking the pram. Carver thanked him for being together and, entering his apartment, exhaled. Shoes thrown off and hands washed, he poured into a glass what was left of the wine Germán had brought. He was awake for a few hours more, at first trying to unpack the suitcase. He hated the suitcase because it reminded him of moving out of the house, Munch's face, running after him and everything that followed after, mostly a lot of tears, and everything that came before that. He left the suitcase alone and stood at the window; outside it was dark, and he had the feeling that he stood on the little cobblestoned knoll. He stood and stood, and then began to walk down, to turn sharply. And the hidden road led him *God only knows where*. Where is that?

The next day he headed out on his own. The walk seemed a lot shorter since it wasn't impeded by a child's whims. He walked through a neighborhood of silent mansions; at that early hour everyone was still asleep, he walked past the nursing home for dementia patients, the abandoned stadium, the big rose garden, the playground, and sought out the cobblestoned path. The cobbles were covered in dew. All around was quiet and heavy with the dampness that pattered in the leaves and grass. Carver climbed a bit, and stood on the hill just like yesterday. He imagined Astija's photograph of his back — he stood, having arrived on his own life's path up to this point, as if he'd come out of a tunnel. A tunnel thirty-six years long, in which he had evolved from a babbling lump into a person who himself created a new person who after fifteen or twenty-five years would create more of the same. Endless tunnels. He has lived from his parents, friends and acquaintances,

ultimately — critics and Joyce's insights on life. And now he's finally come out of the tunnel and into the light. In his thoughts, in Astija's photograph he turns his face to the lens and looks at his observer — yes, I am just as you see. There's been a lot. And I don't know what there is yet to be, maybe nothing. But I'm going. And he headed straight down along the slope of the road. On the bend where the road sharply turned, Carver stopped and looked back. The street beyond the hill wasn't visible. He went along the middle of the road, the stones were dark and covered with dirt, they were drenched and slick, here and there the foliage shook almost unnoticeably, drops of dew merging into one large drop and falling. Carver wiped the drop of water from his hair. There began a dense hedge of spruce trees, whose tops were cut straight as if in a wall. Carver stopped to listen, breaking his view from the surroundings. For a moment he became completely uncomfortable. Here in this early morning he was completely alone. Anything could happen, and there was no one with him who could save him from it or accompany him therein. Nothing could be heard. He started to walk again, breathing deeply, and immediately stopped again — he seemed to make out the sound of some sort of motion behind the hedge. Carver stepped into the patch of grass between the road and the hedge and felt the chill of the dew that drenched his shoes. The spruce trees had grown into each other, and nothing was visible. He walked along the fence, looking for a hole to peek through. The fence was long, the ends of his pants were wet and clung coldly to his ankles. Carver returned to the road and, walking further, he noticed some dried up spruce trees, seemingly destroyed by the snow and heat. There was all kinds of rubbish hanging in them — beads, faded and stretched neckties, postcards in plastic sleeves, Tibetan prayer flags, fairy lights and carnival masks with peeling faces. For a moment he

stared at these decorations and couldn't understand who thought of hanging something like that here. He touched one of the neckties and turned it over, the tag was the only thing that wasn't faded — on it was written 100% silk. He let it go and took the beads in his hand.

— Please, don't take anything, — a voice said.

Carver jumped and turned toward the speaker. She held her long skirt gathered in her hands. She wore open-toed sandals, short blades of grass and lumps of mud were stuck to her toes.

— No... — Carver forced out, — I wasn't about to take...

— Something didn't agree with the trees, so Father decorated them, — she faltered.

— He lives in the nursing home now. — She gestured with her hand in an uncertain direction.

— Dementia? — Carver felt awkward about the word slipping out and absently turned again to the knickknacks in the span of dried out hedge.

— I'm sorry...

They stood motionless.

— Where are you going? — she asked.

— I'm taking a walk.

— You won't walk any further along this road. It doesn't lead anywhere.

— Every road leads somewhere, — Carver said confidently. — It has already led.... —

She smiled and, letting go of her skirt, smoothed it.

— That only happens in fairy tales, — she said.

— What do you know about fairy tales? — Carver laughed, touching the knickknacks hung in the hedge once more.

— Not a lot. When I write them, I don't know a lot, but I like that you can enter a world of wonder through them. — She took a few steps and touched the faded knickknacks hanging in the hedge too, — Like being on some road that leads *God only knows where*.

Carver observed how she spoke, how a desperate pinch of her pinned-up blonde hair was smoothed behind her ear, how she licked her lips, how her breath moved under her blouse. He tried to imagine her back in Astija's photograph. Carver had yet to see her back and didn't know what it looked like. He didn't have any idea what had been on the road behind her. He imagined how she would turn in Astija's photograph with her face toward her observer and would look at him, standing with Carver. They would stand side-by-side, turning toward their viewers, who would think that they are a couple, and he would take her hand.

— Like in *Neverending Story*, *Moomins*, and *Harry Potter*? — Carver laughed ironically. He was mocking the coincidence, which he clung to at the same time and began to believe in.

— No. — She smiled. — More like... — She grew quiet, likely failing to find an acceptable example. — Have you already had coffee this morning?

— Yes, — Carver answered. And he instantly realised that that was a silly answer. — I mostly write fairy tales for children, too. — Carver tried to salvage the conversation, which threatened to dry up. — I'm from the residence. — He gestured in an uncertain direction.

She laughed.

— You're a writer, too?

Carver nodded hesitantly.

— How interesting! — she brightened. — You see, what an encounter! Here, on the road...

Carver raised his eyes. Yes, he saw this encounter too, he saw that the road would continue somewhere farther along the hedge. But this time he chose not to go farther, to stay here, he had arrived.

— Where do we stand with that coffee? — he asked. — Since I've already come this far. She looked Carver in the eyes.

— You have arrived...

Carver followed her to the house. The dew hadn't yet dried up, and Carver untied the wet laces of his damp shoes at the terrace door.

— You can leave them on! — she started to say, taking her sandals off her feet and stepping over the threshold. Carver placed his shoes next to her sandals and awkwardly entered the room, drawing alongside her.

— We haven't introduced ourselves. — She put out her hand. — My name is Klīve.

— Klīve... — Carver took her hand, it was dry and cold. — Carver.

— This is where I live, Carver, let's go inside. — She dragged a white tulle curtain in front of the open terrace door, and it vibrated gently, swaying in the morning breeze. She

moved from the spot, leaving damp footprints on the floor, Carver placed his steps right in hers, imperceptible.

— What kind of coffee do you drink? — she asked, grabbing coffee beans from the bag in a scoop. Carver finally saw her back, her blouse made it possible to sense her shoulders and for a moment, when she lifted her arms, her scapulas, too.

— Just as you make it normally. — Carver answered. Klīve turned on the coffee grinder, and, blanketed by the noise, Carver cast his glance around the room. It was cozily appointed, the windows reached the floor, letting in the sunless light. Silence setting in again, Carver turned back to Klīve who looked for a moment to have been observing him. Carver awkwardly shifted in the tall chair and Klīve smiled favourably. She poured milk into a stainless steel pitcher and began to froth it. Once more, covered by the noise, Carver cast his glance around.

— Do you live here alone?

— Yes, alone. That's how it is now. Father won't come back any more.

— I'm very sorry.

— I don't do well with him. He didn't do well with himself. — Klīve stirred the milk's foam into the cup. Carver never knew what to say at moments like these. — I'm very sorry.

— No sorry necessary. We each have our own road to walk. — Klīve put down the chalice and licked her fingers.

— All too often we understand that too late.

— That's the way it is. A person can't understand that which in that moment he can't understand.

Carver's thoughts drifted. Carver's thoughts drifted to Astija and Germán, as he looked at them, knowing that they don't understand what was happening with them. He knew that through Munch and Joyce, now he even knew that you can't just turn time back again, and that he didn't even want to. — That's probably just the way it is.

— In my opinion, understanding and awareness are like fruit that ripens each in its own time. — She turned with two cups in her hands and placed one in front of Carver.

— Thanks. — Carver took the teaspoon to stir the coffee, but froze when he saw she had drawn a design in the milk's foam.

Klīve picked up on Carver's surprise and invited him into the room to break up his sudden stiffness. Sliding down off the chair, Carver stood holding onto the saucer, staring at how the foam's cells bursting in the coffee slowly subsided. Led by Klīve into the room, Carver stood there awkwardly while Klīve straightened the light camelskin. Sitting down, she raised her eyes to Carver and then he too fell to his knees. Touching the long fur with his palm he placed the saucer in front of him, the design hadn't yet completely disintegrated.

— Tell me, what do you... — Klīve drank a sip, and a bit of foam remained on her upper lip.

— You have... — Carver drew a gesture around his mouth.

— What? — Klīve didn't understand.

— A bit of... — Carver waved his hand toward Klīve's mouth, she looked at him with big eyes, wide open. Carver reached and brushed the dot of milk from her lips, licking his finger after. — Milk.

— Thanks. — Klīve lowered her eyes and twisted her fingers in the long fur of the rug. — Tell me about that road.

Carver caught a glimpse of an image — he was standing on the knoll, Astija was taking pictures and saying that the road leads *God knows where*. Suddenly he remembered the road where he went with his suitcase and a bag hiked up on his shoulders — away from home, from Joyce, from Munch, who was crying, whom Joyce comforted inside, while Carver slowly distanced himself from the porch. He remembered how he gathered himself and walked along the path whose slabs he had counted thousands of times and he knew them better than the lines of his hands, than the lines on Joyce's face. When something is so very much yours, so present you don't look at it, looking more and more for something on the outside, looking past everything near you as if it were self-evident, without value. He walked from the path onto the pavement. It had disappeared from his memory how he got a few blocks away, where he had stopped and put his suitcase on the ground, who knows why he had gone in that exact direction. He lifted the bag of things off his shoulders. As if those things inside it had any value. How important it was to divide up their things, distinguish your own from the collective in a moment when neither of them could yet comprehend that something was now ending. Tear out objects from the room, from the cupboards and shelves. Carver didn't open the bag for a long time. After a few weeks it seemed that the deafening feeling had abated, but opening the zipper, the ghosts tumbled out onto the floor. Clothes that he had worn when Joyce had come home from work angry, the jacket he dressed himself in when he went with Munch to the park, and whose front was still soiled with dried ice cream, the underwear Joyce gave him one Valentine's Day,

when he gave her perfume which she never seemed to wear after that, a pair of rolled up socks that smelled like the laundry detergent from that big bottle behind the washing machine, a box of cufflinks given to him by Joyce's parents on his birthday... He couldn't go on.

Carver was awoken by Klīve's question.

— Couldn't you write at home? You said that you're at a residence here.

— Yes, — Carver extracted himself and began to take tally. — I arrived... two weeks ago.

Unbelievable that he'd lived here for such a long time doing nothing. Two weeks already, really? — Two weeks still left.

— But... — Klīve forced out. Carver saw Klīve's eyes cloud over. — Can I see you again?

— You're seeing me now! — Carver laughed. Then he said more seriously: — Yes, I'd like that. Of course, if you...

— Yes, yes! — Klīve said and fingered the fur of the camelskin.

The foam image absorbed, Carver finally sipped down the lukewarm coffee.

— I don't know if I can find the road back in the dark, — Carver said, when it was considerably late.

— The road itself will lead you back.

— It was nice to meet you. I'm sorry that I burst in on you like that in the morning... I hadn't thought...

— It's good that...

— Klīve... — Carver whispered, suddenly the awkward parting faded and Carver pressed Klīve's cheek to his, blowing a soft kiss into the hollow of her ear. They embraced each other tighter for a moment and held one another for a minute longer. — Good night.

Klīve drew back the curtain, Carver shoved his feet into his shoes and bent down to tie the laces. Klīve's sandals remained by themselves on the terrace.

— Good night, — Klīve said, not crossing the threshold. Carver walked along an unfamiliar lawn on which the lit windows cast their light in squares. He didn't look back, but everything was before his eyes, as if he was walking backwards, — Klīve's face, her thin forearms, her blouse in which her rhythmic breath hid, her fingers that curled between the prickly fur, the coffee design in the cup... He stepped carefully in the grass milky with evening dew, until he came out from behind the hedge and headed back along the same road.

Several of the residence's windows too threw squares of light onto the pebbles in front of the building. Astija and Germán's apartment window was open, and it threw down the sharp fragments of Yvonne's evening screams as well. Astija's and Germán's voices, too, now and then rose, climbed, flew out, and disappeared. The pebbles crunching under his footsteps, Carver quietly unlocked the street door and turned on the light in the old wooden winding staircase, at the foot of which stood Yvonne's empty pram, its seat strewn with dirt. Carver placed his hand on the bannister and headed upstairs, from where the trio's evening

hullabaloo was audible, only more muted than on the outside. Arriving at his door, Carver was about to turn out the light, when he noticed a piece of paper shoved in the crack of the door. He took it, quickly unlocked the door, turned out the light in the staircase and went inside. Not taking his shoes off, he hurried to darken the windows with curtains, throw open the terrace door and turn on his computer, then he returned to the hall and took off his shoes, entered the room, fell into a chair and unfolded the paper.

Hi Carver!

Where were you? We were looking for you. We wanted to invite you for a walk with us, but we went on our own since you didn't seem to be free. We'd climbed up to the vineyards. The winery was shut, but we bought wine in the store. Could I come up tonight?

Germán (Astija and Yvonne are going to bed...)

Carver read the note again, then let it fall to the table. He got up to look for some music on his computer. Something wordless — Tchaikovsky's 5th Symphony. For a moment he listened to the sound, it was pleasant, and he headed into the kitchen. He turned on the light over the stove, he opened the refrigerator and took out some cheese. Checking several drawers, he found the cheese knife and set it with the cheese on a large greyish-white stone dish. There were still two-thirds of a loaf of bread in a paper bag, he tore off a strip and, chewing it, continued to work in the kitchen. Everything prepared, he arranged the dishes in a line on the table and went to turn up the music. For a moment he stood next to the speakers, feeling the resonance and looking at the writing desk, then he took a stack of

pages from the table and felt around the table for a bit looking for a pencil. He sat down at the dining table, sliced the cheese and then looked through the papers, making minor corrections. He'd thrown the text onto the paper some time ago, it wasn't bad, but only a few pages. Suddenly rising up from his inner depths came a growing desire to write. Something. Nothing concrete. To continue this story he started, maybe a novel — if there were enough strength.

A quiet rapping fell on the door. Carver read until the end of the sentence placed the pencil with the page on the table. He was rocked out of this evening, yet he didn't feel intolerance, since the span of time since he'd arrived home was sufficient to revive him in solitude; what's more, his overall disposition was indestructably good.

— Hi! — Carver called to Germán as he opened the door.

— May I, are you working?

— Come in.

Carver turned his back and walked to the table to gather the text.

— Here's that wine, — Germán showed the bottle. — Did you see the note?

— I just did.

— What have you been up to then? — Germán cried.

Carver didn't answer, pretending not to hear, went into the room to put on more suitable music.

— What is that playing?

— I don't know, — Carver said. — You're the musician!

He fetched some glasses. Germán still hadn't learned how to uncork a bottle, yet, contrary to his previous utterance about rarely drinking, he ravenously clung to the goblet, not even letting the red wine breathe a little. — And how was your walk?

— Don't ask! — Germán sighed. — The best part was the hook that I got at the edge of the plantation from some seasonal hippies harvesting grapes.

Carver approvingly widened his eyes and contorted his lips.

— Astija, of course, gave me shit about it all night. — Germán's language had become looser. — And as punishment I had to watch Yvonne all night.

Carver pursed his lips and rocked his head sympathetically.

— That's how these people are — they become spiteful if the other person has it better... — Germán continued. — But it'll pass. Yvonne's asleep, then Astija will soon come back to her senses.

— Did she photograph anything else for her reverse project?

— Reverse? You mean the backs?

Carver nodded, swilling the wine in his mouth.

— What do you think about that project anyway? — Germán asked uncertainly.

Carver swallowed the wine. — The idea is... — He stopped suddenly. — It's a welcome thing for people generally to work with art, because art is still...

Germán interrupted him. — So it's not much to you either! — he breathed a sigh of heavy relief.

— I was trying to say, — Carver continued, — that art is a means of insight and understanding. I don't mean that it's a way of thinking, but a way of grasping the world, trying to grasp it. Through art, a person can get to know a lot about himself.

— I didn't think that Astija's project had such a complex philosophy behind it, — Germán said a bit scornfully and giggled. Carver didn't understand whether in such a way Germán was drawing attention to Carver's snobbery or if he was undervaluing Astija.

— Maybe she doesn't know yet.

— But if she doesn't know, then it isn't there! — Germán turned to the cheese. — Maybe it's only you that sees it, everyone sees something different!

Carver nodded hypocritically and went quiet while Germán, chewing on cheese, continued. — Yes, and then after the grapes we came home. Yvonne's evening tantrum today reached tornado level. At least in my nervous system. — Germán stared at Carver, but he was turned away pensively. — Hey, did you see that yoga in the yard Tuesdays and Thursdays? It happens to be tomorrow, Astija is going, but we could...

— It's not yoga; it's pilates. With the colorful balls?

— What's the difference. But I'll be free, with Yvonne of course.

There was a great certainty within Carver of the meaning he had begun to approach tonight as rapidly as a comet. — I can't, I have to work. Inspiration came. Now for a while there's no point in me — socially I mean. — Without remorse, he glanced at Germán; genuine disappointment had crept into his features. — That's how life is for us writers! — Carver added encouragingly.

Germán nodded, with his chin lower and lower on his chest, then swiftly jumping to his feet, and rushing resiliently into the room, mumbling: — What are you playing there?

For some time Carver looked sympathetically at Germán's distant figure, stooped over the computer screen. Then images and sentences began to flicker in Carver's head, which he needed to write down, but he sat calmly with his hands on his thighs, and repeated the flashes in his mind several times, so they wouldn't disappear from his memory. But if they disappeared, it wouldn't be a huge deal, it wouldn't be the first time. Yet this time it would be bitter to remember that a great idea had been forgotten.

When Germán returned to the table, Carver said: — You need to get to work too.

— Yes, I have a commission for a theater — the soundtrack for a performance. But in what time? — Germán didn't take his lips from the edge of the glass until it was empty.

— You're drinking wine these days.

— It happens. I disconnected.

— Maybe you need to stop and connect. — Germán became pensive. — I'll head upstairs then. — Carver nodded.

— Then you won't join me tomorrow?

— I'm sorry, I'll be working, I have to finish this text.

They said their goodbyes. Carver shoved the cork in the bottle, in which a bit of wine still swilled around, cleaned up the table and changed the music to the previous classical.

He stood in the shower for a long time, arranging his mind for tomorrow's writing. His body warmed up throughout, Carver was reinvigorated and lifted as if along with the current of

steam, unchained from the earth, unfettered by any limits. A scene swam into his thoughts, of him and Joyce getting into a shower, normally that happened after sex, as if stretching out the intimacy that had just been between them, he got out of the shower first and handed Joyce a towel, she went to check on the sleeping Munch, and then they settled in bed on their backs and joined hands, hair still damp. The next day it was as if none of it had ever been and they fought again while Munch patiently sat in his room and played war with miniature people, surely listening to mother and father's spat.

Carver turned off the water.

Going to bed, he opened the window and, turning off the light, watched the curtain rise and fall like bands of the Milky Way.

In the morning Carver sat with his cup of coffee at the table. The most important thing is the first sentence; it's like stepping over a threshold, from the first blossoms the next, and from that one more, and then onward. Did he know which direction the story should continue? Yes, he knew. Then he had to be able to write this frontier sentence, following which the text itself would let him in. And he wrote. At one point he heard Yvonne running around on the pebbles, and Germán's footsteps, pushing the pram, the outdoor fitness trainer's directions from the other side of the courtyard, the patter of fallen walnuts on the ground, the flapping of a bird in the juniper, the tinkle of dishes and implements in the bistro below, the radio from the kitchen and the unloading of the delivery van, management conversing in the staircase and a rapping at Carver's door, but he didn't get up to open it, he had headed deeper along a road he hadn't gone down in a while. Gone. He

pushed forward along it like a weightless being, deliciously paddling through the words, filling lines on page after page.

Carver hadn't left the residence, he moved noiselessly around the room and smoked on the terrace in the blind spot where no one would see him. With the growing dusk, he would smoke staring at the scenes in the windows of the house opposite, which the juniper hadn't obscured completely. A man and a woman making dinner together. There wasn't anything interesting to see but still this view hypnotised Carver, he smoked another cigarette deliberately slowly, then kicked a fallen pinecone on the terrace and, heading inside, sought out the bottle with the remnants of wine and fell back into the down blanket that was spread out on the bed. It slowly subsided, forcing out fresh air around the contours of his body, he lifted himself up on his elbow, drank all the wine, turned off the nightlight and withered off to sleep.

Printing what he'd written, Carver read over it, making corrections with a pencil. Now it was clear that it wouldn't be a novel, it would be a story. It already is a story. Carver sat down at the computer to continue. There were footsteps audible approaching outside the door, Astija's and Yvonne's voices, and surely Germán was right there too. One of them tapped on the door, Carver didn't move, waited, someone banged again, louder, then went away.

Carver wrote the whole day, cooking pasta during a pause, downed it quickly, not noticing the taste, and carried on. At night he smoked on the terrace, staring over at the lit window of the house opposite, they were shelling pistachios and talking. Carver closed the window, turned out the light, went to sleep. He woke up, sat at the table with his coffee

cup, knew how the story had to continue, wrote, ate stale cheese, thought. He had regained a sense of meaning that lived in the satisfaction over the ability to write. That was him. No more and no less. That's who he was. He didn't need anything else — not to turn back time or to act differently, if he'd understood sooner — not preaching his religion of literature, but more time dedicated to Joyce and Munch, not drinking so long at readings which smoothly turned into other readings, not trying to live up to conventional ideals of work, money, family, friends, leisure, manliness, one's outlook, image, hygiene, attitudes, the thickness of the book, writing... It all meant nothing to him, even though for a long time, these considerations had covered Carver like a heavy box lid, sucking from his intuition — or instincts? — a draft that would just sit on the page and wrench around itself important stories, subjects, images, which often enough had no transcendental dimension, at least it didn't come out of Carver like that. Simply do what he had to do, since that was his road.

When he had finished the story, read through it and revised it several times, he had five days left until his departure. He printed out a copy of the text and left the apartment to ask the administrator for a folder.

— I haven't seen you in a while.

— I was working.

— Yes, we notice writers around the least. Artists and musicians come out of their workrooms the most. Sometimes we only see writers the day they arrive and the day they leave.

— I'm leaving soon, too.

— Did you have any success? Did you write something?

— I was lucky with inspiration.

— Or with a muse, — the administrator remarked mysteriously.

An image of Klīve emerged before Carver, just as mysterious as an enigma blown out of a white mist. He looked at the wall clock. He thanked her for the folder and went to his room. Carver couldn't wait for the moment he'd meet Klīve, so he promptly pulled off his clothes to change. Smelling his armpits, he ran into the shower, vigorously lathering the sweaty areas with a piece of soap, he dried off haphazardly and pulled one shirt out of the closet, then another, none of them seemed okay. Carver hurried, his heart rhythm beat more rapidly. Finally he locked the door and ran down the steps. The heavy outer door was open, the day had blossomed sunny, nimble steps sunk into the pebbles, he started when Germán called him from his end of the courtyard, Astija too stared at Carver while Yvonne wrapped herself around Astija's legs. Carver waved busily and not slowing rushed onward. He knew that Germán was staring sadly at his back, envying that he could so easily turn and run away.

People ate lunch on the lawn in the park, youth paddled in the fountain, the gravel on the path stirred up dust onto Carver's shoes, only once he'd come out from the crowds of the main street and climbed higher over the city did he slow his steps and look down. Walking past the nursing home for dementia patients, he saw several nurses supporting patients on the lawn, helping them hobble forward in tiny, awkward steps; maybe Klīve's father was there. The park's rose bushes had expanded their shadows on the lawn; there were people on the observation deck; on the opposite hill in the distance one could make out the grape-vines in straight rows that poured down along the slope of the hill, surely

Germán and Astija had walked there. Carver stealthily plucked a giant pink rose that was half-open, but still held itself closed, and in its center were several drops of dew that had yet to evaporate. His breath slowly calming, he stopped his fast pace until the cobbly hill appeared. He knew where this road led, and that's exactly why he came to a stop this time. He didn't think about turning back, he didn't think about his actions, he simply stood for a moment — the story in one hand, in the other, a rose.

— Is everything alright? — A hand came down on his shoulder, and Carver jumped. Turning, he saw a young woman, very similar to her. Klīve had been imprinted in Carver's mind like a photograph, but at the moment he wasn't sure if that was her.

— You already know, where this road leads, — she started to say. — Nowhere far. — Now Carver was certain that it was her.

— Proximity isn't so bad either, — he said and handed her the rose.

— It's for you.

— The "Tchaikovsky" variety...

— You know it? — It's from the gardens down there, my father planted them, he was a gardener... Is. — She inhaled the huge blossom's scent; eyes closed, she stood that way for a moment.

— Thank you, — she said on waking and began to go. Carver stood there; she disappeared on the other side of the hill. Carver stood there; his sweaty fingers were stuck to the folder.

— Where'd you go? — she said. Carver headed toward her.

— I thought that I'd never see you again, — she said.

— You wanted to see me?

She smiled and waved the flower.

— But you knew where to find me, — Carver said, stopping and waving towards the city.

— I had to write. A lot of productive days, it hasn't been like that for a long time.

Carver smiled in assent. — Me too. — He lifted the folder. — I don't usually show anyone, but this time...

— For children?

— No, this time... a story. For you.

They walked silently. Then she started to speak again.

— One must be careful with dedications. So much is ephemeral, but text doesn't suit the ephemeral.

Carver knew that. For writers, dedications were just like getting a tattoo of a lover's name and then breaking up. It wasn't the first time Carver had given in to an overflowing desire, which was real, more real than real, in that moment. Only now he knew that this desire, this authenticity could be ephemeral; he knew, and yet.

They arrived at the garden on the inside of the hedge. The place looked different.

Now that it was midday, the trees' shadows etched dark streaks.

— I was at the store. — She took a woven bag off her shoulder, the kind you normally take to the beach. — Allow me. — Carver took hold of the bag.

Klīve unlocked the front door. Carver wanted to take his shoes off outside, but Klīve invited him in, and on the carpet stood a few pairs of her shoes. She put on a pair of house slippers and went over to open the terrace door, letting a few flies drift inside. In the silence while they didn't speak the buzzing of the flies seemed thunderously loud. Carver followed Klīve uncertainly, bag in hand, until she took it and put it in the kitchen. She looked at him inquiringly.

— Coffee would probably...

— Yes please.

She set about making the coffee and unloading the bag.

— Will you stay for a meal? What is it now — still lunch, or should we already be thinking about dinner? — Carver impatiently slid his hand over the folder.

— Surely we'll have to eat, but I'm not able to think about that right now.

— What are you thinking about then?

Carver almost let out: — About you! All the time!

But he suppressed this confession and suffering in silence simply raised his eyes at Klīve and smiled.

— Fine, — Klīve said. — We'll drink coffee and then everything else. — She put the same cup and saucer in front of Carver as previously, a design in its layer of foam — a heart. Carver took the cup. Klīve was still busying herself at the stove, and he, knowing the way, headed into the room, the folder under his arm, staring carefully at the cup so it wouldn't

fall and spill, and sat on the camelhair carpet. — So, — he whispered, encouraging himself and straightening the pages that had been removed from the folder.

After a moment Klīve joined Carver on the rug.

Carver tried to clarify something, prepare Klīve; he was worried, but he tried to give some sort of preface, until Klīve, seeing how hard it was for Carver, reminded him that she's a writer too and likely understood, likely would understand. Carver began to read.

The thought had come to him that it would be great to read the story to Klīve on the road that led *God only knows where*, and where that took them — to her place; but this story hadn't yet been written. Carver read the story that had been begun in agony long ago, but with his depression, inability, disinterest, worthlessness, and suicidal thoughts had been cast aside in neglect... but in the last few days had been reworked and finished. It was a story about happenings long ago, so long ago that they lent themselves to literary interpretation without resistance since they had lost their dimension of reality, and were consequently also liberated from the sanctity of biographical precision.

He read for a long time, his legs had fallen asleep, and the coffee had gone cold. When Carver finished reading, his mouth was dry. He watched as Klīve looked down at the lifeless forest of white fur. Carver guessed that she had liked it. He himself thought the story was good, he was critical of his work, unforgivingly so, and his premonitions were usually right. Although — what is right in art...

Klīve lifted her head. And Carver watched her lips, waiting for them to open and say something.

— It's a serious story, — Klīve said. Carver thought that he recognised something familiar in Klīve's voice. — Very serious. — She looked Carver in the eyes. Deeply and longly they stared each other in the face; they seemed disarmed and genuine to the deepest nerve, discovering themselves and the other like the purest source of a stream. The paper slid from Carver's fingers, and he lightly touched Klīve, she closed her eyes, Carver closed his eyes too. Carver sensed Klīve's breath getting closer, it became stronger and louder, until their lips met. After that they began to kiss passionately.

Klīve's head was placed on Carver's chest, and he embraced Klīve's shoulder. The prickly fur of the rug itched the sweaty smalls of their backs. The room had been warmed by the sun and smelled like quartz. Carver smoothed Klīve's hair.

— You're leaving soon?

— On the 29th.

— What's today?

— Five more days.

Klīve exhaled. — Five more days, still. That's a lot.

— Five days is a lot?

Klīve unwound herself from Carver's arms and grabbed a piece of clothing that was spread out right there beside them, and headed daintily on her toes across the room. Carver lifted his head and watched as her back receded. He never wanted to see this view — it's a departure, he thought. Klīve disappeared. Carver threw a shirt on, Klīve came back dressed

and stared at him from above. He blinked, over Klīve appeared a brilliant halo of light from the window.

— The shower is on the second floor, I put a grey towel there for you.

— Thanks. — Carver tried to touch Klīve's feet, but she turned, stepped back and started to speak energetically about dinner.

Once he'd showered, Carver helped in the kitchen; they ate outside at the sun-and-rain-worn boards of the table. When it grew dark, Klīve lit several outdoor candles to repel the mosquitoes, and they remained sitting there. Carver didn't ask if he could stay at Klīve's place, because he wasn't about to leave.

Klīve led him into her bedroom on the upper floor. Carver looked around this sanctuary and lay down undressed. They both had an awkward shyness which had stood out of the way the first time on the carpet of the lower floor.

They ate breakfast leisurely but ponderously, sensing that time had shrunk by one more day. Carver started to say that he had to head back to the residence.

— I knew it, — Klīve pushed out painfully. Carver pressed her tightly, staring over her shoulders at the garden beyond the window, where at the outdoor table a little bird pecked at the crumbs from their dinner.

— It's fine, — Klīve said with more understanding. — I knew from the start that you were only here for some time.

Carver backed away and looked her in the face. — We'll meet again. Soon.

— Well, yeah, only four days! On that scale everything is soon.

Carver headed off. Looking back, he saw how Klīve, hidden behind the curtain, looked out. What did she see? Carver's back, a bit stooped forward like an arrow headed on its course of trajectory.

Returning to his apartment, Carver threw open the windows; the air seemed stuffy. He turned on the computer and, while it woke from its sleep, he walked around the room, changing clothes, drinking water, staring out the window, noticing his billfold and passport on the sideboard. He went over to it and looked at his airplane ticket. The 29th of July. He shoved it back and haphazardly threw the leather wallet back on the sideboard. He sat down at the computer to write — a story, about the road that leads *God only knows where*, — he stared numbly at the white page on the screen, unable to force open the hidden entrance of that first sentence. It doesn't matter, just something, he assured himself, you can change it later. In through the open window slipped Yvonne's whimpering, feet sharpening the pebbles, Germán's muttering and the rumbling of the loose trashcan lid. On the street, cars caught in a traffic jam rumbled, the clock ticked in the room, Carver looked — the second hand moved mechanically. Crazy — only three and a half days, yet I'm sitting here! Suddenly it seemed to him that he didn't have to be here, but he did have to be at Klīve's. Otherwise it would turn out that all his previous thoughts about a writer's existence — which isn't just writing — were nothing more than aphorisms. Even though writing is a writer's general essence, at the same time it's still only a part of his existence. Yes, the large part, so large that it allows itself to become swollen, and allowing it to grow of its own

accord, it slowly squeezes out everything else, for in one person can fit only as much as fits. Ideas and the obsession with words and phonetic effects and syntactical structure squeezes out family, empathy for other people, it pushes out recreational freedom, a glass of wine, films, friends, birthdays, going to shows and concerts, ultimately it squeezes out readings too, and turns on the egotistical pleasures of language and construction of thought in a vacuum. Carver came back to reality, hearing Germán call his name, having noticed that Carver's window is open. Carver, stunned, went onto the terrace and smoked leaning over the railing. Germán stood below and smiled upwards. — Are you writing? — he asked.

Yvonne was crouched looking at stones right there beside him.

Carver nodded. — Where's Astija?

— She went off to take pictures. — Germán waited, but Carver didn't say anything.

— Lots of sun. — Carver blinked looking at the sky and nodded.

— We need to meet up again before you head off... — Carver nodded.

— We're leaving sometime after you. Later.

— We'll arrange it. — Carver exhaled smoke. — We'll arrange something.

And waving at Germán, he went inside. For a moment he stood in the empty room, in which there was an uncomfortable silence. He realised that he had gone out to the terrace in just his socks and they were pricked by the fallen juniper needles that had settled over the terrace; he brushed them off with his hand. Going over to his computer, for a moment he stared at the white square, totally ambivalent, then closed the screen. He got dressed, then went out into the staircase. As he locked the door, the same administrator addressed him from behind from whom Carver had got the folder the previous day.

— You're leaving on the 29th?

— Yes.

— I'll take you to the station and help you buy your ticket. I already checked the schedule — the train's at 9:40.

— So early?

Carver realised that there wouldn't be a fourth day.

— There'll be just enough time to make your flight with that one.

— Yes, fine, — Carver mumbled, already running down the stairs. Carver probably went along the same road — he didn't notice anything, didn't focus on anyone, his thoughts ran in several directions. He came to when he had already passed the rose park, and he took a few steps back to look it over, now with different eyes. In the rose garden were several small fountains, a life-sized bronze casting of a horse and two small houses with tiny window panes. He stared back, where the nursing home for dementia patients loomed.

Carver continued along the road. He went up to the front door; it wasn't locked. Without excessive noise he went inside and took off his shoes. Tip-toeing, he listened attentively — where could Klīve be. Only periodic clicks were audible, and Carver tried to detect what direction they came from. Taking a few more steps, he caught sight of Klīve, who sat at a writing desk and, wearing glasses, clicked the computer keys. For a second she stopped writing and read over her screen, then pressed the keys again, stopped again, shoving a finger under her glasses, rubbed her eye, straightened her glasses and wrote again, reaching out for her mug, drank a sip and wrote again. Carver didn't know how long

he had been observing Klīve before she noticed him. She stiffened in astonishment and, taking off her glasses, placed them on the table. Carver came closer to her.

— I want this time that still remains to be seen off with you. I knew that from the very beginning.

Carver threw himself on his knees at the writing desk and, kissing Klīve's hand, placed his head in her lap.

— I was writing, — Klīve replied.

— I saw.

— I wanted to finish before you went away.

Carver looked Klīve in the face. Just as bare a look as had brought them together last night bound them now as well. Their eyes brightened.

— To read it to you, — Klīve clarified.

— Did I disturb you? — Carver asked. Klīve smiled. — Let me stay with you, I promise to let you write.

Klīve smiled wider.

Three days and nights had coalesced into one line of time which was divided not by light and night, but by intervals when they relaxed: both together — sleeping in the bed, on the carpet, on the assortment of pillows near the writing desk; one from the other — Klīve didn't wake Carver, to her it wasn't necessary to go to the trouble just because she had opened her eyes, she still continued the story, confidently feeling out words from the dark

material of language and pulling them out into the light of the white page in front of her; from loneliness — speaking, but sometimes remaining silent for a long time, sensing each other's presence, exploring the most concealed strata.

The line of time dwindled. They had curled up in each other, the crumpled white blanket in the chair looked grey and torn; it didn't seem completely dark yet outside.

— I'm getting up early tomorrow, — Carver said. They both stared in deep thought through the curtains and glass at the black hedge wall.

— But I won't, — Klīve retorted. — I won't go to sleep at all! — Carver squeezed her shoulder playfully.

— Stop! You don't have to torture yourself because of me!

— I'll be able to not torture myself when you're gone.

— Or the torture will only begin then, who knows!

— No promises.

— Yes. No promises.

Carver put on Klīve's robe, one she had allocated for him, and they walked around the house, not turning on the lights; they lit candles in the kitchen and ate broken bread, walked out into the garden in bare feet. Carver let go of Klīve's hand and leaned his back against the hedge, even more imposing in the dark. Klīve reached out her arm. — Come, I want to show you something. — Carver grabbed her hand and followed. They came to a stop right where they had first met. Klīve touched one knickknack, then another, as if lingering, until she fumbled from the branches a string of prayer flags and tore one off. She handed it to Carver.

— It's a prayer flag, — Carver said. — What are you praying for?

— I can't say, you know... — Klīve looked away.

— Say it anyway.

— ... that you wouldn't have to leave.

Carver pursed his lips and exhaled sharply. He covered the flag with his palm, locking the prayer cloth in as if in a closed box, and kissed Klīve.

Even though they hadn't gone to sleep, departure arrived too quickly and unstopably. Klīve pressed a sheaf of folded pages to his chest.

— I couldn't finish, — she whispered, unhappy. — But at least I'm satisfied with the beginning.

On the way back to the residence, Carver thought about the last moment with Klīve, about all the moments with Klīve, about the last words, which didn't express what Carver had wanted to say and hear — two wordsmiths unable to express their feelings, their sentiments. And then he couldn't stand it, unfolded the pages given to him by Klīve, which all this time he'd carried carefully in his hand, and read out the title — *Lux*. Meaning — light.

Dew carried Carver's footsteps, he turned up at the residence around seven, the cleaner was washing the floor, pushing around the chairs; at the stairs stood Yvonne's pram, Carver climbed with soft steps to his apartment, the stairs creaked treacherously. Entering the room, Carver didn't know from which end to begin. Fortunately the suitcase wasn't completely unpacked; into it he haphazardly folded the clothes that had been laid here and there in the room. He gathered his shaving foam and razor, notebook, pencils and pens, post-its, books, printouts, packed up his computer... He stuffed the billfold with his

documents and airplane ticket into the inside pocket of his jacket. It wasn't yet nine, and he opened the refrigerator and took out what was inside, snacking at pieces of the remnants. Then he remembered Germán, Astija, and Yvonne. He pulled out a page of printer paper and wrote a letter to them in which he apologised that he hadn't managed to meet them, wished Germán and Astija perseverance in raising their wonderful child, and wrote down his email address and telephone number. At nine the administrator knocked at the door and asked if Carver was ready to go. He handed her all of the things he'd been loaned and the keys, looking around the room for the last time, he had left nothing behind. He ran up to Germán and Astija's door and stuck the note in it.

Through the noise of the suitcase being pulled through the pebbles Carver thought he heard Yvonne's chatter, and he raised his eyes, the window was open, and, even though no one saw him, he waved just to be sure.

On the road that led to the station, the administrator asked if the time had been productive for Carver. Very, Carver answered. Considering that he hadn't written for a long time, now he felt that he had regained his voice, like learning how to walk, like learning how to see. They stood on the platform and were silent, they had already said their goodbyes. There were still ten more minutes until the train, and Carver assured the administrator that she could peacefully head back to the office, he could manage the rest of the way by himself. She reluctantly agreed. And Carver looked back at her petite figure, her back, which at this distance looked the size of a fist.

Carver smoked a cigarette. The train arrived, people started to get on, Carver didn't rush, stepping to the side and letting others ahead of him. The train door shut, and it moved

away. Left on the platform almost on his own, Carver saw the train off with a glance, right up until the bend behind which it disappeared. And then Carver, taking his suitcase, headed *God only knows where*.