

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: "The protagonists of Santa Biblia are Tūrs, Levs and Nīma, who is also the narrator. The prototype for Nīma is clearly Mary, and the prototype for Levs is Joseph. They are on a mission to save the world: to find and destroy a microchip plant which produces microcircuits for controlling people and installing a certain kind of personality programme in them. In the course of the novel, the protagonists visit twelve stations, which may represent an analogy with the Catholic Stations of the Cross (albeit there are fourteen of those, each dedicated to a meditation on the passion of Jesus Christ). With the help of a talking, inexhaustible rucksack, the young people fulfil their mission encountering various illustrations to the decadence, animal nature and sins of mankind at a certain time and place. The location where the novel unfolds is abstract and unspecified, it resembles time tunnels and encompasses various regions. References to the Bible and Christianity dominate in the novel and they are intertwined with history: there is a Casper Hauser prototype from the 19th century, the hedonism of the ancient Romans, skyscrapers, and neutralization of the brain among other things." (Literary critic Kristine Karklina)

Excerpt

Station: Soledad

A thousand and one nights without rain. The only thing increasing is our thirst. Think about the world as we travel through the night—they always forget to do that. Newbies. By the

time we arrive at the station, our flatcar is practically in pieces, with each meter the rust eats away at it faster and faster, iron dust falls and settles onto the railway ties.

I stand next to the station building, a dilapidated wooden structure without a door or windows, a sunken tower-like roof, boards are hanging off the facade. A big doghouse with a Hounds of Baskerville feel to it, its side stained with the paint bleeding from the station sign. *Soledad* Station. It's total solitude, I say. No one responds. I said total solitude! I look from side to side, no one's there. I tense up. Where'd they go? Lev!? Tor! Tor!

A flatcar clangs against the rails as it rolls into sight, Lev is lying on it like a rag, like he's dead, his arms hanging off the edges, dragging on the ground, knocking against the ties like xylophone keys, and the flatcar carries him away from the station like Charon's boat. Lev! I run to catch up to the flatcar, Lev doesn't move, the rust flakes away, the flatcar is thinning out like porcelain, the rust stains on his clothes are already unraveling the fibers, which the wind blows away in small, almost moth-eaten tufts. Lev, get up, the rust will eat away at you! I trip as I run along the track, jumping over the ties. Still within arm's reach. The flatcar falls apart, four wheels roll off each in its own direction and, after the first three come to a stop, the fourth continues on toward the horizon. Lev lies between the tracks, clothes in tatters. Lev! I fall to my knees and touch him, Lev, get up, what's wrong? I lift his head. He's almost unrecognizable: his face is filthy, covered in brownish-black water. Dead. Not dead. He's sniffing. Lev, what's wrong, don't cry, it'll be okay, why are you crying, don't cry! Finally he speaks. My . . . I . . . I . . . I feel so alone, totally alone, like even God has abandoned me! What are you talking about, Lev! Lev keeps crying. I sit him up like a doll, we sit on the tracks, him clutching onto me like a child, me looking out for Tor. Yet again!

Where should we look? Lev, stop crying, get up, Tor is missing, we need to find him. We each take a drink of water from the canteen, I pour a few drops into my hands and scrub Lev's rusty cheeks. Singing, reflecting the sunlight, the last wheel keeps rolling down the infinite track, closing in on the horizon.

Where could Tor be, he's always up to something and never, never thinks about anyone else! Lev grumbles impatiently, back to normal and forgetting his breakdown. At that we hear more sniffing, a clear sound like the ringing of a bell. Tor, Tohhh, Tohhh! I almost trip over the source of the voice. It's Tor's backpack. It's crying! Even the bag is crying! I pick it up, the canvas material is soaked through, dripping. But no Tor. Where's Tor? I ask the sniffing bag. I don't knowww! it wails and sobs. Where is he, I want to be with Tor . . . Lev takes the bag into his lap and comforts it, singing something like a hymn to it. The bag closes its eyes and contains its dripping. Save your tears, we'll find your owner soon.

Wow, ha ha ha! someone shouts from behind us so suddenly that Lev and I jump. What, did I scare you? It's Tor. Where were you guys? he asks with bravado. I looked for you everywhere! Where were you, I hiss back, you're always going off somewhere, we always have to look for you or wait for you! Tor isn't listening, he lifts his arm and points. We have to go that way! he says and starts off in that direction. Wait, Tor, I say, your bag was crying, why did you just leave it? I can't stand whiny bags, he answers scornfully. It's a stupid invention! The bag takes offense, opens its pocket-mouth and starts to cry again. Tor laughs. What's your deal, you canvas chump, do you think we're short on tears? Look at Lev—all blotchy from his sniveling! Man, I didn't you were that black and dirty on the inside, your tears are like crude oil! It's from the rust! I say in Lev's defense. And what about you? Lev

snaps at Tor, offended. Nothing, Tor says, I have a handkerchief in my pocket like any civilized person, I keep my tears tucked away in it, and when I need them I take it out. Mhmm, look down, I don't believe a handkerchief could've cried your entire pocket full, it's more like you pis . . . Lev stops short. What did you say? Tor growls, why you little . . . Enough! I yell, Tor, where do we need to go? There. But how do you know? Lev is skeptical. Believe me, I know. But how? Lev asks again. Just do. Okay, but still—how do you know? Lev repeats. Tor turns to me, Nima, you tell him! I shrug. Well? I don't know; tell him yourself why we have to go that way. Don't you start, too, Tor says, and by the way, why weren't you crying? You didn't cry, Nima? Lev asks in surprise, you really didn't cry? But why? You're not human! And see, that's my point, the word "human" only has the word "man" in it! So either I'm a man or I'm inhuman? Jesus, clearly a sensitive subject! Fine, but why weren't you crying? I don't know why not, I tell them, I mean, maybe with everything we've already been through, the things that've happened to us . . . *Soledad*, solitude, nothing comes with it. Little flowers. Lev and Tor drop their gazes.

I let my eyes wander over our surroundings. Look. I've never seen anything like it. Colorful earth. Puddles of color that the saturated ground can no longer absorb, it's swollen like dough. Babbling streams of liquid pigment flow together to create an ever-changing rainbow. It's coming from the flowers. All the flowers are crying, they're starting to wilt, their open blossoms hang down like little bells and cry tears of pollen, their insides have been sobbed out, purged to paleness. So-le-dad, they cry and cry. The syllables are like sharp, splintery harpoons. At least there are three of us, not just me all alone. A shiver runs through my bones. So-le-dad, the sound repeats. You hear that? Where is it coming from . . .

The words indicate a presence. No words—no presence. Maybe I'm just hearing them in my head: solitude, solitude, *soledad*, *soledad* . . . like a reminder that I'm all alone, alone, alone. Tor and Lev are godsend; otherwise I would've lost my mind. Of course, I'm fully aware that They sent them to me, but still. If it weren't for the two of them, I'd be sitting here like everyone else at this station—completely alone, forsaken, like a hollowed-out fruit that seems intact on the outside, I'd sit in front of my crumbling shack like a ghost, like all the Soledadians—on the drink, on the needle, on child support, on my wife's case, if I were one of the rare men still around, etc. Until all your bodily fluids trickle down your leg, and you can't get up anymore and sit alone, die alone, and waste away where you lie—totally alone. And you can escape those Soledadians still alive, if you just look, if you look into their still-destroyed faces. Then look out, whether you scream or don't, you'll take a punch to the kidneys and come-to right there, all alone, with no one going to get help or stopping to see if you're still alive. Times like these you need a drinking buddy on payday, a shop or a street corner, some chick's snatch to stick your dick into and get off if you're bored, a place to lie down, well, and afterward a hot meal prepared by your wife, if you have a wife, who has for the past fifteen years believed that this time, this time, you'll stop drinking and fucking Ljuba from Hedonia. And your wife waits patiently. A pony, all saddled-up.

Station: Cirkumcido

We have to go do Hedonia, Tor says. Away from this station, there's nothing here but lonely, dying souls that don't have anything worth taking. At least something will finally happen! A party, celebration, life! Do we really have to go there? Lev asks. But Tor is already on the

move, he grabs the now-quiet backpack, ushers us, let's go, it'll be fun! Is that what you really want? Lev asks doubtfully. And you don't? Tor responds, surprised. Don't you want to see some girls?! When's the last time you saw a normal girl? Lev glances at me. I haven't in ages! Tor continues pestering Lev, then suddenly remembers that I'm here, too, and gets embarrassed. Nima, I'm sorry, I didn't mean it like that. But our legs are moving us along anyway, and we follow Tor along the narrow path, which is still raw and dewy from the salty flood of tears. Strange how loneliness is a kind of epidemic. I don't have anyone to go home to, no one to lose. The only thing I'm risking is my life, and mine alone.

Tor is leading us to Hedonia. He's dying to get there, he's heard so much about it, he's obsessed. I know, I just know with some kind of sixth sense that I should gather the courage to tell him we're not going there, but instead I follow him. Dusk has settled around us, all the posts lining the road are crooked or knocked over. In the mornings they're sturdily back in place. A few moments later I finally notice the figures sitting on them. Huge vultures with saxophone-like necks eye us in greeting—look, fresh meat. The salt-covered grass on the path has been exchanged for rivulets of blood that flow across the bare and trodden ground. Many people have walked this path in the direction of Hedonia, but have any of them returned? I glance over my shoulder, the way back to Soledad is still gloomy, a fine mist of tears still covers the ground. Weird, Lev murmurs. What's up? Tor elbows him in the ribs. It'll be great! Relax! And you're able to relax? Lev snaps. Calm down, Tor says, they won't come at you unless you're rotting and stink, I'm telling you, it'll be fine, trust me, we're almost there! Overhead is the sudden flapping of giant wings; Tor takes a swing with the walking stick he's been using, and a piece of red meat the bird was carrying falls to the

ground right in front of us. The meat marinates in the bloody mud we've been trudging through. Lev and I step over it; Lev crosses himself. Tor pokes at the meat with his walking stick. Hey, look, what is this? Huh. Tor falls behind, studying the thing, and Lev and I make it another ten or so meters ahead before we stop suddenly and freeze, as if we've seen a ghost ship. Hundreds of vultures are circling above, nimbly avoiding one another, in such a great mass that you can't see through it, the cacophony, the cawing and screeching, now and then they swoop down and then fly back up again. They're scrabbling and digging around in wheel-less train cars that have been lifted off and set right next to the tracks. What's in those train cars? Lev asks, what are they looking for in there? From where we stand we can make out oddly shaped chunks of red. But I know—once we go closer we'll find greenish fiber, brown and crusty edges, tiny white maggots crawling in slimy flesh.

That's some sight, Tor breathes heavily as he catches up to us. It's exactly like I'd imagined it. Maybe not as graphic, but basically like this. Well, wasn't it worth seeing? Lev and I stand, mouths gaping. The vultures squawk and settle on the posts. We join hands and walk toward the train cars. Tor's excitement dwindles, he finally grows uneasy as well. We pick our way alongside the train cars, the entire ground is covered with bits of flesh and chunks of meat, human parts. Is that what I think it is? Tor asks in disbelief. Human flesh, that's what we're walking on, there's no other way through. No, it can't be! Lev turns away, retching. I don't think this is Hedonia, I say. Mhmm, Tor agrees. So what is it? Let's go, c'mon, Tor says. The station has to be somewhere nearby. We continue along the chain of train cars, it seems infinite. A light shines in the distance—the closer we get, the brighter it glows, and then we can read the lettering: Station Cirkumcido. Cirkumcido? What's that

mean? Tor asks glumly. Circumcision, I answer in frightened disbelief. But it can't be, not in these volumes, it's not possible, I add. What d'you mean, circumcision? Tor doesn't seem to get it. You've heard of male circumcision, right? I ask him. Yeah, and not just heard of it—want a look? Wait, you're circumcised? Lev interrupts. You're not? Tor says, surprised. What it can also mean, I continue, is female circumcision. Bullshit! Tor shouts, women don't have . . . well, you know . . . what's there to cut off? Tor's curiosity has piqued, but Lev nudges him to keep him from asking more questions, but then Tor figures it out on his own. And afterward, is it as awesome for women as it is for us? The exact opposite, I say. Are you? . . . Tor waits for me to respond. No, I'm not, I say.

The infinite line of train cars looks like it's been off the tracks for years, they're overgrown with grasses, rusted. Trains haven't been running for years, anyway, Tor says. The open wooden containers are heaped with remains. Tongues, clitorises, breasts, hands, locks of hair. I think about how they might suture the veins after an amputation, sew them up with a cross-stitch using a sterile needle and silk thread, closing the wound like a stuffed pastry. The blood clots, turns black and dry, grating against the gauze bandage, pressing into the fibers like tiny, black, gelatinous drops of leukocyte, thrombocyte, and erythrocyte. A marmalade of human blood.

It's already dark once we near the station building, which I think looks like a hospital. The neon lettering in the station sign is so big that they light up everything within at least a ten-meter radius. Everything around us shines, glitters, advertisements flash. "Sterile and rusted nails!", "Scalpels and compact chainsaws—everything you need for at-home circumcision!", "Dr. Klyrotis's professional clinic!", "The most-professional female trainer!"

People walk under the advertisements and stare at them. Why are they walking so strange?

Tor asks. Don't know, it's probably from the circumcision, I say, and it looks like they

circumcise not only that, but other things too. I don't think I'll go any farther, I don't think

it's a good idea for me to go there, I say with concern. Mm, Lev nods. Of course, Nima, of

course! Tor agrees. Y'know, I feel a little uneasy here, too, he sighs, maybe Lev should go

ahead by himself, I'll stay here to protect you. They only circumcise women here, right,

Nima? Lev asks. Maybe Tor has a bit of woman in him, I say. I'm part woman?! I'm no pussy!

Let's go! Tor shoves Lev. I'll wait for you behind those train cars, I say, don't be long. We

won't, Tor says, we'll just take a look around, see if we can find anything or not. And y'know,

I'm getting tired of these riddles, it wasn't like this in training, where everything had a

structure, you'd get a command and some coordinates, but this here is all labyrinths,

rebuses, plays on words, and we're searching far and wide for we don't even know what.

Alright, alright, enough, let's go, Lev says. Here, take this! Tor says and shoves the backpack

into my arms. At least you'll have some company, otherwise it's worthless, all it does is cry!

And they go.

I take the backpack. I'm not sure you should've let them go by themselves,

sometimes they're like children, the bag tells me. I can't go with and babysit them this time,

I tell it and hoist it onto my shoulder as we step into the darkness. A few seconds later

they're out of view. The space behind the train cars is all undergrowth; the vultures have

overeaten, and are perched in the treetops, asleep, though some wake as we skulk past. We

go deeper, winding our way in, I gather kindling and build a little campfire. The backpack

takes inventory of the food we have left, I take out a few cans and packets, try to read the

labels, but they're faded and peeling, so I open one at random—whatever's in it is what we're going to eat. I close my eyes and pick out a can, set it aside. I unwrap the bread and cut off three small chunks, take a drink of water from the canteen. Find my Swiss-Army knife so I can open the can, and set them next to one another. A can, the knife, three pieces of bread. Our banquet spread. I roll our blankets out around the fire and make up three beds, then take off my shoes. And wait. Wait for my men to come home. Home. Men. Hilarious! More like missionaries—we're on Mission, after all. Or rather, missionists—which sounds strange, but more accurate. We're not missionaries. The backpack has fallen asleep. I take the canteen and have another little drink. Then open the can. Goddammit! It looks like canned peaches. I bring the can into the light of the fire, and sure enough, halved peaches, but they smell off and the syrup is milky, yes, they reek. A wonderful, fortifying meal that goes great with moldy rye bread. Now I've lost my appetite completely, just looking at it was enough. What an unlucky hand, picking out that can of all things. Hopefully the rest of the cans aren't all the same! I poke the fire, push the first coals into the center. I can't wait for them to get back.

I look into the fire. Fire. It destroys everything it touches. Devours it. No wonder animals are afraid of fire. Trees are probably afraid, too, they just can't say anything, look at the reddish, look at the bronze-colored leaves. I poke the fire. It doesn't attack me. At least not for now. I can't wait for Tor and Lev to get back. Why did they even go there? They shouldn't have gone. No, no, I can't lose hope, they'll be just fine. I take out my roll of papers. Good thing I still have this pencil stub, at least I could number Gerald's chaotic notes, but I'm still not sure I've put the pages in order. I'm not even sure that Gerald knew

exactly what he was writing about—so many things crossed out, words inserted here and there, Centrale, Centrale, Centrale, arrows, diagrams, sketches of maps, calculations . . . they all need to be checked . . . But what I like best is to place the papers all across my face, my chest, hold some in my hands, and feel how they barely move as I breathe, paper that Gerald once held in his hands. I write my own observations on the opposite sides of the pages—it's been twenty-three days since they assigned me Lev and Tor, but it feels like I know both of them down to the depths of my soul. Maybe I haven't counted right, the days changing to nights, the regular ones, the ones I haven't slept, the ones I have slept, the polar ones, the white ones . . . it's hard to be accurate these days. How long have we been here? Who knows. Maybe it's better not knowing, not being freaked out. I don't remember how people would've counted days in ancient times. Dates, yes, but not days. And how many days have Gerald and I been together? Everything's muddled. Five hundred? Eight hundred? . . . Is that a lot, or a little? A lot, if you consider that this could be my last day. Maybe today has already become Tor and Lev's last day. The hell, quit it! Stop it, shut up!

Finally I hear Tor and Lev's voices. They burst into our house, panting, shouting over one another, gesticulating. What the hell! I put on my shoes and set up the dinner table. You hungry? Give it here! What is this? Peaches in syrup and bread. Gross! Fine, I'll eat your share, too. I'll eat my own share, Tor says, picking up a reddish slime-wedge and sprinkling it with some breadcrumbs before putting the whole thing in his mouth. Good idea! With bread filling! We stuff peach halves into our mouths, and for some reason, in this moment, I think of the chunks of flesh stuffed in those train cars. I spit out my peach. What are you doing? Tor yells. The flesh in the train cars, I say. Fruit is flesh, too. No, fruit is not flesh.

Human flesh, unlike other flesh, has a soul, Lev adds. Some fruits do, too. There are all kinds of fruits. Thanks for dinner.

How did it go? I ask once they've settled in. Horrible! Tor shudders, it was too much for me. And we didn't find anything, there's nothing there and there never will be, Lev adds. That's what I thought, I answer. But, Tor says, I feel like there should've been. Our plan was to go do Hedonia. We headed for Hedonia, but wound up here. So we were supposed to end up here. There's a reason. What reason? Lev asks. I don't know, that's the thing, maybe we should go back and look around some more? Tor says. No, I'm not going back there again, Lev shouts. Was it that bad? I ask. No, well . . . only if you pretended not everyone, even the men, were all kinds of amputated, Tor says. And every last woman seemed to be circumcised . . . There was something like a clinic, a ticket seller was standing by the door, a big black woman, calling: "Tickets! Tickets!" So we bought two tickets and went into this small arena that had a huge screen hanging in it, at first it was running an add about the evening show with the tag line: "Circumcise the young, drive out Satan!" Then the spotlights came on to reveal another African woman standing in the center of the arena, holding a baby. There was a cameraman filming them, the close-up played back on the big screen. It was a beautiful baby, with soft, dark skin and pink lips like little orange slices. Then yet another black woman came out, holding a small torch in one hand and a razor held in a pair of tweezers in the other. She sterilized the razor in the torch flame, then the first woman, who was holding the baby, unwrapped its diaper—it was a girl, and her pubic . . . it looked so big on the screen. The assistant spread the baby girl's legs and held them tight, the cameraman stuck his camera in really close . . . It was insane! Lev interrupts Tor's retelling, it

was horrifying! Thank god you weren't there to see it, Nima! Then they cut, Tor continues, the baby screamed so loudly and kept crying, blood, applause, the camera lens splattered with drops of red . . . Then they brought out the next one—a young woman tied down in a gynecological chair, she was screaming and pleading, the first black woman spoke to her, and the woman was quiet for a bit, then started to plead again, then they slapped her and did the procedure, her entire body writhed. The black woman lifted the tiny, bloody bit of flesh that was the cause of it all, the camera zoomed in on it like a two-meter-long chunk of shame. Who knows, Tor continues after a moment, if I cried like that, too, when I was little and they circumcised me . . . The difference, I say, is that women aren't supposed to feel anything there afterward. But why do they do it to women? Well, first of all they see the clitoris as a product of satan. And second, so they purposely wouldn't feel anything, so they'd remain faithful and obedient to their husbands. And if there's no propensity for it down there, then they believe there won't be one up here, either—in the heart or the mind—there won't be any improper thoughts or desires. For some women, better safe than sorry, and they sew the whole thing shut.

The crowd was cheering, Lev says, after the show they poured out of the arena door like intestines from a gutted stomach, like the slimy, mucousy contents of the intestine itself, we waited and were almost the last to leave the arena, I can still hear all of it, I feel like I can still hear the agony of those mutilated people, I hope they at least gave them something to calm them afterward. I don't think they give them anything, I say, not before or after, it's done with them fully conscious, they probably don't even sterilize the tools . . . But wait, what tools, they did it all with the same razor, one after the other! It hurts for days, you

can't sit or fall asleep for the first few nights. A lot of them die after the procedure. I'm amazed at the women who perform the procedures, usually they're women—relatives—who have had the same done to them and are now doing it to the next generations, so the girls meet the standard. That's not the only thing they did at that clinic, Tor says, they've gone whole-hog and will disfigure anything on a woman's body: they cut off the nipples, yank out their teeth, stretch their necks, bind their feet, and a lot more, you saw yourself what was in those train cars. I've seen a lot of things, but this time I feel like I'm losing my mind, and I tell them both this, and they fall silent. I stay silent for a moment, too. All of these women, stained, used, ridiculed, hit, whipped, prodded, cut, choked, raw, scarred, healed, scabbed, disfigured beyond repair, experimented on, operated on—every last one of them was once valuable, chaste, beautiful, fragile. Now that's been taken away from them. And I can't do anything about it. Tor can't do anything. Lev, either.

Let's go, I urge them, let's keep moving! Now? At night? Tor asks. Maybe let's just sleep here? My eyes go wide. What?! Tor immediately realizes what he's said, and agrees we should move on. We gather our things, roll up our tattered blankets, finish the last of the disgusting peaches, stamp out the fire, and head back into the undergrowth. The world seems narrow in the pitch-black of night, the entire world is this one, single path we can never stray from. So, to Hedonia? Tor asks. Why do you want to go there so badly, what do you hope to find there? Lev sneers. What d'you mean, what! Acting like you were born yesterday! Tor snaps.

We keep some distance between us and the station as we move past it, leaving the train cars filled with human parts behind us as well. And all the vultures. There's a path that

runs parallel to ours; it starts at the lit doorway at the back of the station. From it, the African women lead small, light-skinned girls in clean dresses and with curly hair; the girls carry small suitcases or musical instrument cases. They line up one behind the other in a long chain. Here and there along the chain stand large, matronly women holding torches and talking with the girls, who sing. I hear their crystalline voices through the wall of leaves separating the paths. Where are they taking those angelic children in the middle of the night?

I remember: I stood in a similar line in training, before the Mission. Stark naked—real-life dolls on a conveyor belt. And what if we really were dolls? They shaved our hair off, ushered us into a large shower room, into a wall of steam, I thought I'd never get out of there, my heart was in my throat, afterward we didn't get towels, nothing, our goose-bumped skin dried on its own. Before being packed up they'd insert a soul and program your information. The computer split us into groups, then they'd inject the chip. And then Gerald . . . And me. After many, many days he scared the shit out of me one night, with a knife, I thought—he's sick, insane, but he covered my mouth with one hand and cut out the chip with the other. In the morning, once we were already a ways off, I looked at the blood-crusting microchip, but Gerald took it and destroyed it. They came looking for us, of course. My head was a total void, all the information they'd programmed was gone, my hair grew back, Gerald even grew a beard, we trekked until the border of the Old World, were able to make it across, and came here. We continued the Mission, we set out to save the world, but now we were different, we weren't your standard missionists. They only followed orders, but we were out

to save the world. Because we loved, we loved each other. Because if the world were to end, our love would end with it. But we had only just met.

Nima! Nima! What are you thinking about? I snap out of it. What? Nothing! Just thinking.

Tired, I'm tired. Me too, Tor yawns. Lev is silent and slow-moving, but he walks on.

Station: Virgin

We've been walking all night. From the moment we could no longer see the row of little girls and their singing had faded into the distance, I had been talking to Gerald in my thoughts. With you, Gerald, it was completely different, the Mission meant something else to me, something more—going with you until the end of the world.

Lev is at the end of his rope, he's dragging behind us, but he's made it this far. We reach a city just as the sun begins to rise. A small, western city with dirt roads lined on both sides with graying wood houses, buildings with embroidered linen half-curtains, the windowsills lined with aspidistras and aloe plants in brown clay pots surrounded by dead flies. It seems like a ghost town; there isn't a single person on the streets. But maybe they're all still asleep, or were wiped out by a plague. We don't see anyone, and stop at a water pump. Lev pumps water while I bathe, I rinse my hair, that's where all the buildup is, all my life experiences, I wash away the stories of flesh and blood clots, I feel dirty, like my head is filled with lead. A woman's beauty is in her hair, it's her strength and her weakness. We don't have soap; my wet, dripping hair is in tangles like the diseased knots on the branches of a sick tree. I comb through it with my fingers. Tor can pump while so you can wash yourself, I tell Lev. But Tor isn't here, he's disappeared again. Fine, I'll pump, I say. Go ahead, get clean, don't be shy, scrub your feet with sand. Jesus, are those blisters? Why didn't you say anything? And what would you have done! Lev cries. Carried me? Or just left me

behind? They're just blisters! Fine, wash yourself, I won't look! I pump water. Tor has wandered off. We have to worry about him again! Calm down, Lev says, he's always fine.

Meanwhile, the townspeople have started coming out. The row of golden-haired girls from the parallel path walks past us. I see their chaperones, the matronly African women, hand them off to some elderly nuns, who are quick to chastise the girls for every giggle, bunched stocking, crooked barrette, dusty shoes. The girls scatter around the water pump like pearls from a broken necklace, and Lev stops bathing, he just pumps and pumps the water, and the girls drink and drink from their small, rosy, frozen hands and giggle and giggle when the cold water splashes their bare legs and dot their dusty shoes with black spots, which they rub off on their knee-high stockings, which gets them a scolding from the nuns once they line up again. The nuns come to drink, too, each of them have a long chain on their belts attached to a small metal cup, which they fill with icy water and drink in tiny sips, freezing their mouths, nothing can shake their serenity, nothing but the filthy, stained socks on little girls. The line of girls is instructed to walk, and the row of angels draws away, barely visible in the distance, so far off and little. The gate to a cloister opens at the end of the road, and the girls pour into its belly, its womb, where they'll be locked away for a very long, cleansing, and evolutionary time. The street is empty again, we stand in a large puddle, Lev keeps pumping out of momentum, looking thoughtfully in the direction of the cloister, I stop him and motion for us to go. As he puts his shoes on his face screws up, I know he's in pain, each step is agony.

Gerald had blisters on his feet once, too. We walked all the time, rarely stopped to rest, were always on the road. When we finally stopped, I took his feet in my lap and looked at the blisters, lance them, his feet were wrecked, so were mine, but I felt the pain of his feet, not mine. I hurt because he hurt. I'm still hurting. We'd been traveling so futilely for so long, futilely because Gerald didn't make it to the end, all those days, those kilometers, the ravaged feet—everything in vain. When They took Gerald from me, I thought the Mission would fall apart, I thought, I prayed for it to be done with, for the whole world to end, the Old and the New—I don't need it, I don't need anything anymore. Only Gerald, just a jump back in time, before the moment they captured him and took him and I heard his startled voice from where I hid, saw how he fought back, but I did nothing, and what could I have done, it wouldn't have made a difference, because later it turned out that They knew I was there, and They wanted me to see, so that . . .

I'm ready, Lev says, we can go look for Tor, wherever the hell he's disappeared to again!

The almost graveyard-like silence of the city is broken by strange sounds. We listen. Someone's crying, I say. Someone's playing the violin, Lev says. And we both can clearly make out an occasional and strange clapping sound, after which the wails grow louder. We head in their direction until we're extremely close to them—I can hear it and feel it. Though we've stopped we don't see anything, but soon we can hear talking between the wails and violin. Then we turn the corner and see the speaker. A man in a habit, who looks like a priest, and he's talking to . . . to Tor! Tor, tied to a post! The man in the habit is holding a lash and whipping Tor on the back! And then Tor wails. A very young girl stands nearby

playing the violin, she's only a little older than the Goldilockses we saw earlier. I've been teaching these girls for forty years, forty years I've been protecting them! the man growls. Ha, none of them look that old! Tor manages to joke. And that just makes the man more angry. Not the ones brought today! Over the course of forty years, thousands of girls have passed through my care, all of them I've instructed to live according to the laws set forth by God, how to make music, all to bring forth their virtues, which we here are responsible for safekeeping. But that didn't keep you from sneaking up to this angel and . . . Did you truly not lay a finger on this pure, unprotected creation? Did you honestly not touch her? Here the violin song stops, the girl sobs, but the man makes her keep playing, and the girl swallows her tears, tucks the violin under her chin, and picks up where she left off. The priest continues questioning Tor. I'll ask you again, are you certain you didn't touch her? The violin stops again. See how you make her cry? Have you ever in your life seen angels cry? He whips Tor on the back. Have you, I ask?! No, sir, I haven't, Tor replies soberly. It's over, he's broken, I say to Lev. Do something! You're a man! But while Lev is thinking, the man continues to speak. Soon you'll see the tears of satan once I beat him out of your flesh! he threatens and raises the lash. I just . . . I just . . . touched her hair a little, Tor admits. Well finally, the man sighs with relief. Sister Lucia! Sister Lucia! A nun runs out at the summons. Wash this girl's hair, thoroughly, then rinse it in holy water, do something, he's touched it! Yes, Father!

The nun leads away the girl with the violin, the priest sits down on a stool next to the post. Is he going to let Tor go? I whisper into Lev's ear. The important thing is not to get involved, so they don't take us, too, Lev answers. But the priest resumes his speech. Let's

wait until the ladies have left, so their innocent eyes don't see the devil I'm about to bring forth once I purge him from your insides! There is no devil in me! Tor protests. There's a devil in each of us, the priest says, lifting the hand holding the lash and bringing it down hard. Tor's body contracts and slumps. Finally, Lev can't take any more. He runs over to the priest and grabs his arm. Stop hitting him! He hasn't done anything! The priest shoves Lev. Who are you? Another sinner? No, I'm not, Lev answers, but let him go! We are all sinners, you as well! Yes, yes, Lev says with a wave of his hand, I, of course, have sinned, and if it makes you happy I'll sin again, but . . . Then stand next to him! the priest points to Tor. No, not to that extent! Lev says. You have to show compassion! The priest is shocked. A stranger is going to teach me about compassion? Right, I'll deal with you later, once I've finished with this satan. He turns once more to Tor. You ruined that poor girl's entire future! How dare you—how?! And without waiting for an answer, he lashes Tor on the back. Tor's body again contracts and slumps. I didn't do anything to her! Tor cries. You're lying! You touched her! No one has ever touched her until now! She had been kept pure! Do you have any idea how much a virgin costs in this desecrated century? You can't begin to imagine the amount of money you've cost us, or this virgin and her parents! He hits Tor again, again Tor 's body contracts and slumps. Lev jumps the priest, fights him off as best he can, keeps him from reaching Tor, tries to grab the lash. Meanwhile I rush to Tor and try to untie the ropes. Nima! What took you so long? Tor asks. The knots are tight, I can't and can't untie them, and Tor, the idiot, pulls at the rope, trying to get loose faster, but only makes it harder for me. Don't move! I yell at him, and he faints. I finally get them undone, the ropes fall to the ground, and Tor falls onto me, has he lost feeling in his legs? Lev runs over just in time, helps

hold Tor upright. The priest lies on the ground, the sun baking him like a black beetle that's rolled onto its back and can't flip itself over. We prop up Tor and leave as fast as we can. A few blocks later we turn down a street that's just as dead quiet as the rest. We hurry through the labyrinthine city for a while longer, then stop in front of one of the curtained windows once we're sure we're not being followed.

What took you guys so long? Tor yells at us. Lev is furious, he has a cut on one cheek. And where the hell were you, huh? he shouts at Tor. Sticking your fingers in girls' hair, but we have to come save you! Where was I? I almost became the victim of an exorcist! But you don't even care! Tor shouts back. They're a second away from going at each other. Shh, I say, putting my finger to my lips. Shh! Look! I point to the scene playing out in the room on the other side of the window. Lev steps up to the window. What is it? Tor asks. I think it's virgins, Lev replies. Thanks be to God, Tor cries, then finally we're in Hedonia! I wouldn't be so sure, Lev says. What d'you mean, look at those girls, Tor says happily, pressing his face to the window next to Lev, but the excitement fades. Boring, Tor sighs, and goes to the other side of the empty street to sit against the building, but Lev and I stand and watch. The golden-haired girls are cross stitching on fabric secured in their embroidery hoops. Still-life scenes with pears, grapes, pheasants. And while they sew, another set of girls stands behind them combing their hair with ivory combs and pinning their braided hair into twists and piles. Then they trade places, the sewers put down their hoops and braid the hair of the girls whose tresses still fall around their shoulders; then they all go back to embroidering scentless flowers, tasteless fruits, lifeless animals. Farther in the room is a large, wooden crucifix, to which the girls are bowing their heads as they count stitches in their work. We

have to go, there's nothing here, I say. But Lev isn't ready. It's so beautiful, he says, it's as calm as it was back when everything was right in the world. Do you honestly believe everything was once right in the world? I ask. Lev turns to me. I just think that if everything had been right, then we wouldn't be where we are now, I say. Y'know? Then the world wouldn't be going to hell. I think it all adds up and that's why things are the way they are now. But whatever, I don't think it was ever alright. Lev looks away, thinking about what I've just said, then looks back into the window. I look back, too—and my eyes meet with another pair of eyes on the other side of the glass. I immediately duck down under the window, but Lev waves, I hear the squeal of a little girl, we've been caught, and I'm positive that we're all going to get lashed. Then the window opens. I thought they were sealed shut for eternity, seeing as even the wind could impregnate these girls, these girls ripe as flower buds being held closed by force.

An elderly nun leans out of the window and I stand up; she's spotted me anyway. We stand face to face for a few moments, while behind her the girls start lining up, peering over each other's shoulders to see who we are. No peace, no quiet . . . the old nun tut-tuts and sends the girls flying back to their seats with a sharp wave of her hand. A heavenly scent flows out of the window and into the street. Lev is able to say a polite hello just as the nun crosses herself and reaches out to shut the window. She lowers her hand and greets him just as politely, and I greet her as well. No quiet? Lev asks her, what do you mean by that? She looks ready to tell him off, but realizes we aren't the peace-disrupting type, and sighs. You're travelers, she says, where are you headed? We're headed for someplace peaceful! Lev says jovially. The nun glances over to me, I nod my head in agreement. If that's the case,

then this is the place to find it, the nun says. This is a place of peace. Yes, Lev says and looks at both ends of the empty street, this really is a peaceful place. So much peace, in fact, that maybe the world doesn't need saving after all. The nun's interest piques. You are one of those . . . missionaries? No! Lev says. Yes, I correct him, yes we are. She looks questioningly at Lev, and he nods. She leans out the window and tilts her head at Tor. Yes, he's with us, he's just tired, I add. Then it is my duty to serve you, the nun says, this is the only world we have. Wait there, she tells us and shuts the window, pulling the curtain over it. A few moments later she comes out of the low, creaky wooden door next to the window. Let's go to the cloister, she says, you will be able to rest there and regain your strengths. Tor moans as he gets up. Lev rushes to help him and takes the backpack. The calm is interrupted by voices, singing and chattering, as the girls come out of the door and into the street. The nun quiets them, asks us to follow her, and we walk on next to the line of girls. Lev is in conversation with the nun; I try to listen in, but their words seem to lift into the air and evaporate, and I can't pick anything out. Tor is wearing Lev's jacket, which hides his shredded shirt and injured back, but he's holding out. He's watching the girls, who pretend not to see him, their heads turned in the opposite direction, giggling playfully. I also observe these children. I've never seen anything like it—they're all bathed in gold, golden light, golden hair, golden skin. I look down at my hands: sunburned, dust-covered skin, scars, scabs, bruises, blue veins like pine roots. I'm not a real woman. Women don't look like this. That's stupid, stupid. In these times . . . how's a woman supposed to look? Like an anemic, pale-skinned goldilocks, a healthy, rosy piglet, a mannequin all dolled-up?

We've reached the cloister gates, and when they open we're met with a vibrant landscape. Everything is green, the shrubbery is trimmed according to the best French gardening traditions, there are cascades of roses, and a fountain to each side of the main portal, where sheep are craning their necks in effort to reach the water. The line of girls disperses and they run to pet the simple-minded animals. What a sight! Tor whispers blissfully. I'd love to herd that flock! Lev and the nun stand in the shade of the cloister tower, continuing their conversation until the gates are closed. Then Lev follows her, motioning for us to follow; I manage to pull Tor away from the idyllic courtyard and we catch up to Lev and the nun before they disappear into the maze of the cloister. I'll show you to your rooms so you can rest, the nun says. Follow me! She leads us along a hallway lined on both sides with cells, up a spiral staircase in the tower, down another long hallway, and then through a door. This will be your room, but the woman will stay downstairs with one of the nuns, I'll show her where. That won't be necessary, Lev stops her, Nima is also on the Mission, please don't consider her a normal woman. The nun's eyes widen, she wants to protest, but she holds her tongue. As you wish, she says, I'll have some refreshments brought up to you. She closes the door behind her.

Tor falls face-down onto a large canopy bed. My back stings like hell! he whines and takes off Lev's jacket. I carefully roll up his shirt and freeze when I see the angry red of his wounds. How's it look? Tor asks, his face pressed into the coverlet. Does it hurt? Lev asks, coming over to look. No, but it stings, Tor answers. There's a quick knock on the door and it opens. Lev and I freeze as we stare at the figure standing silently in the doorway; a nun skirts around him carrying food. Who's there? Tor asks, still lying face-down on the bed. I

reach for the fallen jacket and place it over him. The nun puts down the food, Lev and I bow our heads in front of the priest, he leaves without saying a word. Lev bolts the door. Get up! he calls to Tor, agitated. Tor gets up and heads straight for the food. Did a nun bring it? Tor asks, his mouth full. Yes. And the priest was here, too, Lev says, watching Tor, the same one who beat you. Well . . . Tor says slowly. I mean . . . I guess . . . He hesitates. Yeah, you mean, you guess! Lev snaps. Nima and I would appreciate not getting dragged by you into any more trouble! Trouble? What do you mean trouble? What trouble? I barely even touched her! I spot a pitcher of water on the table, and dig out the canteen to refill it. Once they've said enough, I give each of them a cup of the remaining water, and there's a moment of silence while they drink. They mellow out once rehydrated.

There's another knock on the door; it's the nun who brought us here. The Father would like to see you. Tor pales. I do, too. What's going to happen? There's nothing we can do; we follow the nun. We stop in front of a large double door. The nun clears her throat, then opens the doors and lets us in. Thank you, sister, you may go, the priest says to her from where he sits in a tall chair. The nun closes the door silently behind us. The three of us stand like scolded children in front of the priest, he studies us with a severe glare for some time, then takes a deep breath and opens his mouth to speak, but Lev rushes forward. I humbly beg you to please forgive him his sin! Lev says, pointing to Tor, who's hung his head as low as his spine will allow. He's new, and incredibly hard-working. Tor seems to lower his head even more, bending his body at such an unnatural angle that I'm barely able to keep myself from bursting out laughing. The priest cocks his head and gives a wave of his hand, as if to forgive Tor all his sins. The world has sinned, Lev continues, but there is still hope. Hope

for something pure and untainted. I'm not able to disclose everything, being on Mission, we're under oath, but I'm forced now to explain what happened. We're searching for a young girl, a pure virgin, as an antidote for a dying world. And he, Lev says and points once more at Tor, he thought he found the one, and that's why he . . . I know the rest, the priest interrupts. Perhaps that explains a few things, and I can also accept this. But tell me, this virgin, what is to be her task? Lev shakes his head. I'm not allowed to disclose that information, he says. I can only promise that nothing bad will happen to her. All the girls here are virgins, the priest says, take your pick! I have only one question—you are not the first missionaries to come to us. How come no one until now has asked us for a virgin? But Lev doesn't miss a beat. We each have our own assignments, he explains. Fine, fine, I don't want to get involved in the Mission's internal affairs, the priest says and rings a bell, upon which the door opens to reveal the nun, who has been waiting. Please give them everything they ask for, sister, the priest commands.

We go out. Lev starts speaking with the nun. Tor sits in the stone passageway, I look through the arrow loop onto the courtyard, where the sheep graze by the fountains under the watchful eyes of the golden-haired girls and the nuns. Where's all that water from? Tor asks me. I shrug my shoulders in disinterest; I'm trying to hear what Lev and the nun are discussing. I knew it, Tor shouts, as soon as the church gets involved you start to see miracles! Nima, do you believe in miracles? Miracles? I ask. Yes, Tor says, for example, coming back from the dead, babies born of the Holy Spirit, and so on! Do you believe? I shrug again and start to think about whether I do or not, I guess I don't, but before I can say anything we're called over by Lev and the nun, who've finished their discussion.

The nun shows us around the cloister. We tour along the long hallways, spiral staircases, towers, up and down, and through the kitchen, where we see giant stoves manned by flushed nuns stirring pots, small buckets filled with lamb entrails, trays piled with hearts and livers, vegetables in baskets, clay pots, flour and eggs, bundles of herbs and tea leaves hanging from the ceiling, bunches of onions, collanders, and a kneading trough. We walk for some time along the stone tiles, which a novice is sweeping in one hall with a straw broom. Then the nun takes us to the basement, where we see something incredibly strange: tracks. Iron train tracks. They run through the cloister, the basement is as wide as the catacombs of a metro station, but where the tracks might lead to outside, to the light, there is a tall iron gate engraved with the words: Station *Virgin*. Did there used to be a station here, sister? Lev asks. Yes, of course, but long long ago, but now, thankfully, the railroad isn't functional anymore, you must already know that, as soon as they've finished with one region, they cut off the railroad leading to it, but what am I going on about, you already know that! I tilt my head in confusion. They're incredibly shiny, Lev says. Yes, we like things clean and orderly, the nun answers, and work is the best form of meditation, don't you agree? The virtue of labor is one we hold in high regard here, while they work the girls' minds keep clear of silly thoughts, of which there can be a lot at this young age. Yes, yes, of course, sister, Lev murmurs, his eyes still on the tracks.

We're led back upstairs, into the courtyard. The nun has us wait while she goes to gather the girls, so we can choose one—the one who will serve the Mission. Once she's out of sight I fly at Lev. Do you have any idea what you're doing? Lev says nothing and sits down on the edge of one of the fountains. No, tell me, do you have any idea? How do you plan on

testing whether she is or isn't a virgin? And what are we going to do with the girl afterward?! It just came to me, Lev says defensively, I had to say something, and once I'd said it there was no going back. No shit! I hiss at him, there is absolutely no way back! Can't wait to see your next move, virgin hunter! Lev looks ill; Tor sits down next to him. Well, if Lev can't, then maybe I can help! he offers. And how! You already tried once! How's your back feeling? Nima, calm down, Tor says, I mean, it's not all that bad! We at least know there are train tracks here, and that may be important right now. Yes! I say, maybe the tracks are important, but right now I'm more concerned about all those girls who'll be here in a minute to demonstrate their virtues and purity! Lev is about to say something, but he's interrupted by the laughter of golden-haired girls as they filter into the courtyard.

The nuns line the girls up by height. The head nun asks Lev how we intend to find the right girl. Don't worry, I'm just going to ask them a few questions, Lev says and goes to the beginning of the line. I don't hear what he asks the first girl, but she begins to cry and runs off. She's not a virgin! Lev announces to the nun who accompanied the girl. The nun turns scarlet with anger and goes briskly after her unhappy ward. Then Lev goes to the next girl, who admits to having a lover, who comes to her on nights of a full moon when the roads are clearly lit, who comes to promise to marry her, give her his heart and everything else . . . Another shocked nun turns on her heel and leaves. Even the third girl, it turns out, has been impure for some time, because she has made love in the cool grass with the friend of the second girl's lover . . . The fourth and the fifth also fail the test. The sixth explains how her greatest resolution had been to stay pure forever, because the idea alone of being with a man disgusts her, but he . . . and here the girl points to the priest, who has come out into

the courtyard accompanied by the flustered nuns, and who now fidgets nervously . . . Yes, he forced me to! the girl shouts, sobbing. Enough, enough! the priest ends the questioning. This is too much! Everyone go!

He has the nuns shepherd the girls inside and lock them in their rooms with their rosaries. Even the ones who haven't spoken yet hang their heads and blush; all the gold has crumbled from them. Only one of the girls stands her ground and stares Lev right in the face with her clear eyes. You too, Virginia! the priest calls, especially you! No! the girl cries and throws herself into Lev's arms, burying her face in his chest, don't leave me with him, he's a monster! The priest takes a step toward her, and the girl tightens her grip on Lev's sleeves. Tor, defender of women, forgets his injured back and steps in front of the priest. No! Over my dead body! Tor shouts. I stand like I'm fenced in, I don't know what to do or how, everything is happening at once, but as I'm trying to think I suddenly find myself in a painful vice-grip and dragged away. The nuns surround me like a fortress wall. Give us Virginia, and we'll give you your compatriot! the priest says. You'll never get her! Tor yells and leads the sobbing girl away. Lev is also confused, standing stock-still, then he moves toward me, but the nuns wrench my arms up and stretch them out like I'm nailed to a cross and carry me away. Nima! I hear Lev yelling, I see him run after me, but the nuns meet him like harpies and block his path.

Let me go! Let me go! There's someone still there, someone I need! Gerald maybe screamed that over the deafening sound of the helicopter as it shredded the treetops into a green, crumbling mist. No, he didn't scream, he would've never turned me in. If it weren't so far, I'd

be able to hear if he said anything or not. But I kept at a safe distance from Gerald's final cries, from the last thing he saw.

Now they have me in a secure, damp, and cold cell in some basement, where I'll crust over with mold like this wall, which trembles in rhythm with me when I press against it. After a moment the trembling comes again, then releases me when I move away from the wall, but it just pulls me right back again, this wall has some kind of strange magnetic power, and I can't do anything about it. Does the church have some kind of new, unheard-of torture device, or is it weakness that makes me collapse each time I try to gather enough strength to stand? The wall is covered in slimy gunk, and I leave an imprint of my spine in it each time I lean against, and then a new, even stronger shockwave trembles through me, so strong that even my jaw shakes. I pull away from it with all my strength, try to scrape the goose-bumps off my upper arms, until the wall itself slams into my back, the force throwing me into the farthest corner of the cell. There's a huge cloud of dust, and a light shining through it. And through the light I see a hand reaching out to me, it must be Gerald coming to greet me, I must be dead. Nima! Nima! That's Tor 's voice. Tor, is that you? Nima, where are you? I start to cry because I can't speak. Shh! Tor hisses and hurries to my side. I wrap my arms around his neck so he can lift me. Tor breathes heavily, his injuries still hurt, but he lifts me like a broken doll and carries me out. The smoke clears, the dust settles, and Tor places me gently on my feet.

I see Lev and that girl, Virginia, they're standing next to a trolley. Black, shiny like it just came from the factory, polished, not a fingerprint on it—an iron trolley! Wow! I exhale,

that's impossible! Those don't exist anymore! Mhmm, Lev gestures to it. You think we could get out of here with it? How far do the tracks go? The nun said they were cut off. Yes, they probably brought everything they needed out to this place, did what they had to do, and then tore up the tracks. So we'll see, Tor says, grimacing. His back probably hurts again. How did you find me? I ask and kiss him gratefully on the cheek. Tor! Thank you! Tor gets a little flustered, maybe even blushes, but it's too dark down here to tell. Nah, it was nothing, how could we not find you! he says with bravado and goes to the giant gate blocking the tracks. Based on the size of the gate, Lev says, I'd say entire trains used to come through here. Where's it all now? Tor tries to push open the gate. Go on, go help him! I say to Lev. I want to get out of here as fast as possible! Lev goes to help Tor; I go to help, too, but suddenly my knees buckle and I crumple, but Virginia catches me at the last second, her tiny, fragile body vibrating like a dragonfly's, how is she so strong? I can stand by myself now, I say once I've gathered my senses. But she doesn't let go, she helps me until we get to the trolley. By this time the gate is open, and Lev and Tor run to join us. Hurry, hurry! Let's go! But what about the girl? She's coming with us! Tor says firmly. Nima, what about the girl? Lev asks. Take me with you, I can't stay here, I won't! Virginia begs desperately. I can't say yes or no before Tor has already started up the trolley and we're rolling through the gate.

A full moon shines down on us. There's a clearing, and the silvery tracks in the light. We breathe. That was something else! Tor says. We barely made it out, huh! And we even saved Nima! And me, too, Virginia says softly. I sit leaning against the backpack, watching Lev and Tor work to keep the trolley moving forward. This here's no comparison to that first one! Tor says, you guys remember that rusted pile of junk? Suddenly the track drops steeply

down the hill, we're going at top speed, in front of us is a big golden clearing bathed in moonlight. Jump, do it now, jump! Lev screams. And we jump. It takes me a moment, but then I crawl forward, Tor helps me to my feet, the backpack cries that it's been hurt, Tor shushes it. Lev is looking at the golden clearing, which is rippling from the impact of the trolley. Goddammit, he says. The trolley is sinking where it drove into the bog, the track disappears into the water. And Virginia too, Virginia too! Without any struggle whatsoever, Virginia's body disappears into the depths, until her head is covered by a golden blackness; the swamp locks her into itself and is still. Tor runs up and down the bank, takes a few steps back, then a running start, what is he going to do, jump in after her? Leave it! Lev stops him. It was meant to be, she couldn't carry that with her. There's nothing more to do—let's go.

I wipe the tears from my eyes. We gather our things and walk on along the edge of the swamp. I hear a cry, then another one. After each wail I see Tor 's entire body convulse into a painful knot in front of me. Lev stops and looks back. I catch up to Tor and put my hand on his shoulder. What's wrong? He starts away from my hand like it's fire. Tor!?! He's not crying out anymore, but instead grits his teeth and lets out an occasional, quiet groan. Wait, I stop him, and lift his shirt—your wounds! They've opened back up, like stigmas! It's fine, everything's fine, Tor says, we need to keep going. We don't want to give in to his impatience, but Tor is stubborn, and we go, but we move slower with each step because Tor is clearly losing strength. Lev and I support his weight as we walk and I can feel the large, round drops of blood as they fall into the sand; a few minutes later Tor blacks out. We lay him out on the damp grass. I take out my knife and we cut open the back of Tor 's shirt. We need water! I wash his wounds and cover them with nearby grass and leaves, which are cool

from the night and dew. We have to wait for him to wake up; he's breathing, it'll be alright. His body is hot, but is cooling slowly. It looks like we're spending the night here. Lev gathers sticks for a fire. Is there water? The canteen is empty. I'll go to the swamp, Lev offers. But that's all just mud, there's no water! So I'll go and look for some. He takes the canteen and disappears into the trees, at first I can still hear his footsteps, then they grow more distant, and then there's silence, the air is calm, cool, and moonlit. After a while I take the wilted and dry grass off Tor's back and put on a new layer, like soft, cold compresses. I check the rest of his body, carefully inspect the spots that aren't injured, his skin is warm, his hand doesn't flinch, he doesn't feel my touch.

When Gerald touched me like that, it was the first time. In training they purged us of all physical contact, wiped clean all memories of physical contact, it was like they even removed any semblance of skin that could be touched. But when we cut out our microchips and escaped, we grew a new skin, new contact. With my fingertips I could feel, feel the entire world—Gerald's skin, his shivers, the rough bark of the tree, the smooth pine needles, dried-out, fragile, and crumbling moss, the warmth of the fire, Gerald's warmth . . . And then they took away my fingertips and skin a second time—I was alone in the woods. And I regretted my cowardice, that I didn't come out of my hiding place and turn myself in. Then I was alone, lonely, with the woods and nature all around me—a temple for loneliness, eternal draught, until it was like everything burst into flames, including me. My only hope was that my end would come before that of the world itself. Then, a few days of mourning later, that moment came, and I was certain that hope would be fulfilled—the treetops bent

down toward the ground, pieces of bark were stripped from the trunks and tossed around like boomerangs—I was pushed to the ground by the wave of air from a helicopter propeller. Any second. They're going to shoot me any second. There's only enough time for one memory, yet your entire life flashes by. The helicopter lifted off, two people had me pinned down, forced me to open my eyes—look here and listen. A photo of Gerald, some graphs with curves, examination charts—Gerald had phenomenal results in all the tests—psychological endurance, physical training, mechanics, reaction times, orienteering, risk- and initiative-taking, IQ, unique charisma, etc. He missed out on a bright career, they tell me, he was trained to be the next Mission Leader. But he rebelled against the system. The idiot! they tell me. They won't let the same mistake happen twice—Gerald's life depends on me. If I do what they say, he'll live—and they show me the video where they've tied up Gerald. I touch the screen, my fingers feel the smooth, inanimate substance. I agree. And ask only: Why me? You were created in his likeness, there's only one couple like that, they answer, and it was done with the future in mind.

Lev has been gone for some time, the moon is fading, the sky growing lighter, and I'm starting to panic— Tor hasn't woken up yet, either. He may sleep for a while yet; I carefully cover him with clothes I've pulled from the backpack. The backpack is worried, it asks me every few minutes how Tor is doing, but the only thing I know and that I can answer are the same lies I'm telling myself in my head: everything is going to be fine, he hasn't lost that much blood, the wounds will heal quickly. If the stigmas don't open back up again.

Wake up, wake up! Lev says. What happened? The sun is up, time to go. How's Tor? Did you find water? Of course not. We have to wake Tor. Can he walk? Wait, let me check his wounds. They're looking better, much better, the swelling has gone down. G'morning . . . Tor drawls, rolling onto his back, then back onto his stomach as if he'd been burned, finally coming to rest on his side. How are you? Lev asks. Feels like my skin's been peeled off. Can you walk? I'll try, what other choice do I have? We get up and are just about to leave when we hear voices. Were we followed? Did they find us? We freeze and hold our breaths, hoping we won't be spotted. I slowly, soundlessly move my hand to the pocket where I keep my knife. We see figures move through the bushes, coming closer and closer, I through caution to the wind and pull out my knife, where it rests ready in my palm.

My eyes open into little slits. I see a blue sky. I can move my arms and legs. But my head hurts, it kills. Where am I? Where're the other two? This is a village of some kind. I see Tor's backpack tucked under the bench by my feet, I nudge it and ask what happened, it opens its eyes and shuts them immediately, without a word. What's that mean? What's going on? Where's Tor? But the backpack plays dead. I get up, stand still for a few seconds to see whether I can walk or not. My head pounds and aches, but everything else seems to be in working order. There's an inn-like building right next to us; men pass by me on their way into it and look at me with disdain, I follow them inside. If Tor and Lev are anywhere, they're in there.

And of course I find them. Lev and Tor are standing at the bar, talking to men in hats. I notice Tor is wearing a new shirt. Where did he get it? I look around—it's a classy place, but I only see men, no women. It's a welcome change, and after the squealing girls this

place feels peaceful. Tall men in suits, hats, guns on their belts, heavy boots. Nima! Tor calls out when he spots me, and nudges Lev. Everyone else notices me now, too, but they all react strangely, start to gesticulate excitedly, shouting, pointing at me, and a few of them even seem to be advancing menacingly toward me. Lev says something to the men in suits, but they continue to gesticulate wildly, Lev walks briskly over to me and steers me toward the door. What's going on, Lev? But he doesn't answer me until we're out in the street.

Where are we? I ask him. Who are they? Why did they get so worked up about me when I went in there? See, he said, you're a woman, and you're also wearing pants. Well, so? I ask, so what that I'm a woman? You can't go in the inn, only men are allowed in there. Excuse me? I can't be in there? Why? Because that's how they do things here, Lev says. Then let's leave, if they've got a problem with something! Wait, they promised to help us. Since when do you make the decisions? I snap. I'm the one in charge! Yes, but when I told them you were in charge they started laughing and said they wouldn't speak with a woman, women can't be in charge. Even more reason to leave! I say. But they're going to help us, see, they even gave Tor a new shirt, Lev explains. How else are they going to help us? They said they'd give us horses! Well I'll be! They're just going to up and give us horses! To a woman! To a woman, no . . . but to me and Tor, yes. Well of course, I say, the two of you just ride along, I can walk, I'm all set, except that my head hurts, my legs are great! But tell me, why *does* my head hurt? When they found us in the woods, Lev says, you went at them with your knife before we could stop you, and they hit you over the head, and . . . and what's more, you're a woman, and they can't stand it when a woman . . . I've heard enough

about women, I interrupt. You wait for your horses—I'm leaving, I've had enough of you two taking things into your own hands!

Lev catches me by the elbow. See . . . the thing is . . . Well, those men . . . They're not bad, just . . . I know all I need to know about men, you can save your breath! I cut him off.

No, you don't get it, some of those men are . . . are women. I look at Lev, confused.

Transvestites? I ask. No . . . but, you could say they're that, something similar. They—these women, that is—dress like men and smoke and drink because they're a kind of . . . un-

woman . . . man, it's complicated. They're sworn virgins who have sworn off everything,

their femininity, so they could live carefree among men, with the promise that they'll soon

be like them. Very interesting, I say, so that's why you left me passed-out on the bench all

by myself. It wasn't like that! Lev protests, Tor was sitting with you the whole time, he just

came into the inn for a quick drink. Sure, and I may have gone in there to get a drink myself,

I'm completely parched, I say. Nima, forgive me, I'll bring you something! Lev turns to go.

Tor comes out of the inn at that moment, carrying a glass for me. Nima, Nima! Tor calls,

here, drink! How do you feel? I take a gulp, but it's liquor, and it feels like a suckerpunch,

like the sun or the drink, or both, will lay me out on the ground, so I spit it out, all over Tor's

new shirt. I'm so sorry, I wheeze, because even though I've spit it out my mouth is still on

fire. Tor, wiping his chest, takes the glass and disappears back into the inn.

What are we waiting for? Haven't you guys chosen one of those virgins in there to

serve the Mission? I ask Lev icily. Or are the ones at the cloister the only ones any good? Oh

stop it, Nima, everything is so screwy, Lev says, maybe there are two types of virginity—the

kind they keep sacred within the cloister until a certain point in time, and the other kind

women carry with them their entire lives, on purpose, to buy their freedom. You should know how hard it is to be a woman! But in the end, it doesn't change anything, they can't help us anyway because they're men, and these women—or men, rather—have a code, and it's written in stone, and nothing in the world can change it, not even that! Fine, let's go, I say. We have to go! We've wasted so much time! Go, get Tor, and we don't need any horses. My eyes burn into Lev's. Understood, he says curtly and goes into the inn. In a few moments he comes back out with Tor. A big crowd spills out behind them, men or women, it's all the same, they all have the same face, they've all been pieced together by the same tailor. Nima! Nima! Tor shouts. Are we really not taking the horses? No! Why do you need a horse? Well, to ride it! Well look who's suddenly macho! Do you even know how to ride? Well . . . Tor says slowly.

We head out again, the locals stand and glare after us, they're convinced that a woman will drive you to your grave.

Station: Fuego

I'm convinced that death is on its way. I shouldn't fear death anymore, because I don't have anything to lose, and no one would miss me. Before—when I still had Gerald, even far away, when they had him locked up, I still had him—then I was afraid, but I had an inner strength, I thought I could save the world by myself . . . but screw the world—I could've saved Gerald, only me. Every single video They sent me made me aware I was still alive, aware of Gerald being alive, and the Mission, until one day the videos stopped coming. I thought I was doing something wrong, that I wasn't fulfilling my duty, that I had to try harder, had to walk farther each day, take more risks, be more observant, but the videos didn't come anymore. I was stripped of my skin a third time. I'd thought—better to just die. But I was afraid, and I still feel that fear of death. Maybe I'm afraid of pain. Pain seems even worse than death. The only consolation is that, when you die, any pain you feel is not eternal, and in fact is the last pain you'll know. When I lost Gerald, I felt pain. Sometimes I even feel that I'm actually withering away. And everyone destined for death probably feels that same way.

Hey, Nima, hey! You in there? Wake up! Tor is waving his hand in front of my face. Yeah, yes, what's wrong? We should rest for a bit, Tor says, I'm tired of going and going and not knowing where, how far, how long, why, and for what. Don't you feel that way? he asks me. Nima, I think you should rest! Are you sleeping while standing, and with your eyes open? Sleepwalking? Look there! Lev points to a blue-gray eddy up ahead. There are several

columns of smoke in the distance, flowing together to form a large, stagnant cloud.

Something's burning, I say. Yep, where there's smoke, there's fire, Tor adds. Lev and I smirk at him. What?! Tor bristles, everyone knows that, it's obvious! The closer we get, the more smoke there is, at first it pulses over the tree tops, but then it moves lower, stinging our eyes, making it hard to breath. Can't you suffocate like this? Tor asks. And I see that you could, it's possible to suffocate. We lean down, there's oxygen lower, then we crouch, and later, once the smoke is so thick it reaches from the sky to the ground, we crawl. Ash rains down in all directions like snow. If it rained the ground would be fertilized. I'm getting a headache, I say, there's too much smoke. Hang in there, Lev says. It might be even worse up ahead, I protest, maybe we shouldn't go there. Aren't you at all curious to see what's burning? Tor asks. If we've made it this far, we're going all the way! We'll just look, and then leave. So we keep moving forward. Even the backpack is coughing, Tor wraps it in a blanket. The ground is covered by a grayish-black layer of ash at least half a meter thick, it's light and fluffy, now and then as we dig our way through it we run into a hidden tree stump, there are no more trees, no more woods, this is a clearing. Now we hear the crackling of burning wood as the flames consume it. We hear hysterical screaming, insane wailing, pleading, cries and moans.

We're here. We see people in robes, women dressed in burlap sacks with their hands tied together and hair disheveled, free women walking by calmly dressed in ornate saris, donkeys stubbornly refusing to pull their loads of kindling, men with metal gas cans in hand, men sawing down the last trees, farther off there's a clearing. The men are wearing gasmasks, they look terrifying. No one pays attention to us, everyone is engrossed in his

own tasks. We see one man selling matches. Tor goes up to him and asks where he can get a gas mask. Executioners, inquisitioners, and other officials are issued their masks over there, the match seller points into the smokey fog. And we, almost blind, head in that direction.

We come to a building with a huge, singed sign: Station *Fuego*. Tor goes in and after a while comes back out with two gas masks in hand; a third is already on his face. How did you get these? Lev asks, did you claim you were an executioner? Hah! You just have to know how!

Tor says, his voice sounding hollow from inside the mask. I asked them what they were burning, and it turns out there are fires all over and they burn everything, it's how they do things here. For example, the section where there's the most screaming is where the inquisitioners are burning witches. They need a lot of firewood for their stakes, which is why they keep chopping down more and more trees, meanwhile other people have to transport the firewood, almost everyone here has to help with that. A bell rings. What's the bell for? Lev asks. Right, that's their bell, they're signaling a new stake. We head over to watch.

There's an endless line of stakes. At the farthest end, where we're standing, there are just piles of coals, a little farther up the piles are a little larger, still smoldering, and in which we can make out blackened skulls; still farther up we walk past more recent stake, the witch is already dead, but her body is still burning, there are still strips of skin on the bones, and at the opposite end is a stake that was just lit, the woman tied to it screams, struggles, writhes, tries to pull her feet up, to move away from the growing flames, but the little hairs on her legs are already singed, from her ankles to her knees, and the flames are already moving higher, the woman's body stretches up and tries to buckle forward, the flames lick the tips of her hair like sparklers, she's screaming. I think she'll die before she

burns up completely, Tor says, let's bet on it! Lev shoots him an icy glare. But really, look! Tor continues, the fear, the ordeal, and the heat will stop her heart. Or else she'll die of shock.

I don't want to watch. But I do. This is what we've become—the world is nearing its end—do what you want, nothing matters anymore. There's no point anymore in being good, in knowing when someone's lying, in being able to see the truth. Nothing has meaning anymore, no meaning whatsoever. Let it all run its course, maybe we're already on the other side, the underbelly.

The woman's burlap sack has already burned away and her skin is already covered in fiery petals; it's no longer her awareness that's making her body convulse—the fire is in control. We leave this stake, as do other observers, and a new stake is set up at the end of the line, the scent of pine tree bark, dry, light, brownish-gray, a layered vessel of flames. C'mon, let's go, Tor hurries us along, there has to be someone on the other side, too! I follow with the gas mask on my face and wonder what they'll do once they've burned up all the witches, what will they burn then? Tor leads us on, who knows if he has any idea where to, but we finally come to a place where the smoke is less thick. There are a lot of people here, men and women, they're dancing and singing, waving large palm fronds, there are Indian women wearing all kinds of jewelry, their bodies decorated with paints, there's incense, the smoke is fragrant. We take off our gas masks and work our way into the crowd; nothing is burning yet, but everyone is singing with their arms raised up, singing, I don't understand a single word, just the sound, the sound—you can understand when a sound is bittersweet no matter the language. If we were to lose language, all the languages of the

world, we could at least sing. And here there it is. A funeral pyre. A clay base padded with straw laid out carefully side by side, covered by an ornate cloth, on top of which he has been placed. He's deceased, this dark-skinned, middle-aged man, dressed like a king. And she's lying next to him, she's still calling to the people surrounding the pyre, I see her raise her arms in the air, she's still speaking, her hands are speaking, her bracelets and animated, lithe hands jingle and ring, the same bittersweet sound. She's wearing a wedding dress. That's how she looked as a young bride, and she's that young bride again now. Then she lifts her arm, makes three circles in the air with her hand, and says her farewell. Her brother puts a flame to the pyre. The singing continues. There is no screaming. She closes her eyes. The small puff of smoke starts to billow, billow, billow. Her eyes are closed tight, now the smoke closes them even tighter. What are you doing, what are you doing! I want to scream, you're still young! You still have half a lifetime ahead of you! But I say nothing nothing nothing. I stand back.

Always standing back, keeping out of other people's fates. It's because of me standing by that we're where we are right now. And am I better for it? And what if that were me? If that were Gerald, I'd lie next to him and make them light the pyre just like that. Maybe a person has only one better half in his or her lifetime. Maybe, when one half dies like that, nothing can ever fill that void. I often think about the greater purpose. In my opinion, it's changed. The more superficial and carefree you are, the less of a point there is. Don't you guys think? I ask Tor and Lev. There's no response, I look around, they're not here, even the Indian mourners are slowly wandering off. I look for Lev and Tor, and spot them smoking and talking with some men loading cans of gasoline.

The wind flutters a hanging display of tablecloths, napkins, towels, sheets, and clothes that used to be white and brightly colored, but are now blackened and ash-gray. Also on display are icons and prayer flags, bells, dishes and jugs, incense, porridge and bread, a single chicken. I survey all the wares set out in this market, which stretches along the perimeter of this area, and head toward my boys. They're happy, they glance in my direction happily, I see them smiling, their smiles are so foreign, I'd forgotten that people smile, I myself have forgotten to smile in this time before the end of the world. And I smile back at them. Where is this smile coming from, where is its strength coming from? What am I smiling about? I see the men loading the gasoline canisters eye me from head to toe, I feel their eyes on me, I smile, move forward like I'm in a drawn-out, slow-motion scene that stops everything for a moment, the wind blows through my hair, mixed with smoke from the burning bodies of women, a few strands caress against my face, I am beautiful. I reach the guys, we're all smiling. Who knows about what. They offer me a cigarette, I gratefully accept and take a drag, it's like a celebration, if nothing else at least there are cigarettes. It's awful. I hide the fact that it's awful, stifle my cough, hand the cigarette back. Nima, this is Nima, Tor tells the men with the canisters and points to me. Hi, Nima! a choir of voices greets me. You want anything? they gesture to the tablecloths, the clothes and the bells. I don't have any money, and where would I put it, we're travelers, I answer, but I can't stop eyeing the embroidered, fluttering material, like seaweed, hanging on the line. No matter, pick something! A gift! A woman should be surrounded by nice things, they say. My body jerks forward, my hand reaches out of its own accord, I think about how I'll wash it some day, once this is all over, I'll starch it, iron it, lay it out. I take a napkin. Find something? Yes,

this, if that's alright, I say timidly, my eyes on the ground. Of course, of course! one of them says, my wife won't be needing it anymore! I look at him in confusion, noticing his bravado for the first time. And me like a magpie, one look at these rags and my eyes glazed over. I want to put the napkin back, but he doesn't let me, he presses it into my hands. I don't need it! My wife's family thought they could win me over with these cheap rags, some dowry! Nothing good came from her, or her rags! Couldn't even make decent porridge. Take it, and go, be good to your husband, otherwise you'll end up like her, he waves his hand. I look and see a charred mass; is it a body, is it human, is it his wife?

Tor comes over to me and slides his arm around my waist. C'mon, wifey! he says. It's like I'm rooted to the spot. He pulls me away, the napkin falls out of my hands, Tor picks it up. Be a good wife, accept this gift, he stuffs it into my fist, the price of death that I don't want to carry. I'm only piecing it together now, only now do I understand what all that gasoline is for. We go around to the back of the market stands, I see a girl writhing on the ground, three men are on top of her, hitting her, yelling, degrading her, raping her. What forces, what barbarians haven't plowed their way through us women, we've seen it all. I bury my face in Tor's chest and cry and cry, wringing the goddamned napkin. Do something, do anything! I whisper into his shirt. We can't do anything, Tor says. Then you go! I sob at Lev, you do something! Don't let them do that! It's already happening, Lev says, we can't do anything. I pull away from Tor and run, my steps are so slow, this half-meter layer of ash on the ground, but I push through it, reach them, hit them with my fists, their backs are so broad, my hands are so small, let her go, let her go! Let her live! They throw me back with a single blow, I fall into the ash, it buries me, my eyes and mouth fill with that tasteless, airy

substance that used to be flesh. I get up, I see one of them pull his dick out of her, still wet, shiny, slick with fluid. Next to them is a canister of gasoline. Matches. Tor grabs me, I don't listen, I won't listen, Lev and Tor take me by the elbows and drag me away, I see the next guy get on top of her, the first one ejaculates on her face. She's not moving anymore. I hope she's already dead.

Only letting in *the one*. Shyly and timidly giving myself to my first, to Gerald. In the woods, with the scratchy moss and twigs, where shivers ran down my skin like ants. The moment when feelings are born. Gerald's body, which I will forever hold onto with my memory. Replaying the scene again and again like a movie on the inside of my eyelids. The mind isn't the only thing with a memory—the body remembers, too. When I think about Gerald, my entire body trembles, like his hands, and sometimes I think I can feel his touch, how real it all is, and it's all in me, he is in me.