

Five Stories by Varlam Shalamov

Translator's Preface

Walter Benjamin compared the relationship between the content and the language of a work of literature to an apple and its skin - fit to form, perfectly even, natural. A translation, on the other hand, is a loose robe, with many folds. This makes the translator's task a matter of arranging said folds — allowing different connotations of language and strands of meaning to be highlighted, as capturing the entire range of the original's complexity is an impossible task.

Not only in my translation of Varlam Shalamov's short stories, but in my selection of which to translate, I have followed the broad guiding concept of food. In doing so, I hope, in essence, to make my bias as a reader and translator overt and acknowledged. No translation is aesthetically neutral, nor can it encapsulate the entirety of the original, so I wish to follow a principle of laying my cards on the table, in order to guide the reader through *my* reading of Shalamov.

Food is no random choice, either. As a symbol it is rich with literary connotations: survival, sustenance, social ties, personal comfort, sensory excess, familiarity and familiarity. And in GULag literature, it also becomes a sharp reminder of the fact that all of these feelings and experiences are controlled, administered, and often withheld by the state. Food enters and leaves each of the following stories like a beacon, drawing all attention absolutely, and acting as a barometer for each character: Shalamov tells us everything about a person's current state by showing us how they interact with food.

The theme also helps to dispel a common falsehood about Shalamov's writing. Descriptions of the *Kolyma Tales* — the broad title for the hundreds of short stories he wrote over multiple decades about his seventeen years in the GULag system — often paint his stories as 'barren', 'bleak' or 'cold'. And while it would be hard to disagree with that as an assessment of the world Shalamov builds, I think there is something far more beautiful at play. The eternal struggle for food and a more spiritual sense of sustenance, helped by Shalamov's striking ability for characterisation, puts him in line with a great tradition of writers from Dostoevsky to Kafka, where it is not the harshness of an environment that calls to the reader, but the vibrancy and power with which humanity survives in such a place.

Reuben Woolley
April 2019

At Night

Dinner was finishing. In no hurry, Glebov licked his bowl clean, carefully scraped the bread crumbs from the table into his left palm, and, raising it to his mouth, he warily licked the crumbs from his hand. He didn't swallow, just felt, as the spittle thickly, thirstily submerged the ragged ball of bread. Glebov couldn't really say whether it was tasty or not. Taste was something different, too poor in comparison to this passionate, self-forgetting sensation he got from food. He didn't rush himself to swallow: the bread was already melting away in his mouth, and melting quickly.

Bagretsov's roaming, gleaming eyes were trained on Glebov's mouth — there wasn't a soul in here strong enough to pull his eyes away from food dissolving in another man's mouth. As soon as Glebov swallowed the spit, Bagretsov's eyes moved to the horizon, where a large orange moon had crawled its way into the sky.

"It's time," said Bagretsov.

They silently made their way along the path to the crag, and lifted themselves onto a small ledge surrounding the mound; although the sun had only set recently, the rocks, which by day would burn your bare feet through rubber galosh soles, were already cold. Glebov fastened his jacket. The walk didn't warm him.

"Far to go?" He asked in a whisper.

"Yep." Bagretsov replied quietly.

They sat down to rest. There was nothing to talk or really think about, everything was clear and simple. In the clearing past the ledge were piles of ragged rocks, and torn up, shrivelled moss.

"I probably could have done it alone," Bagretsov smirked, "but two's company. Plus, for an old guy like me..."

They'd been brought in on the same steamer last year. Bagretsov stopped.

"Gotta lie down, they'll see us."

They lay down and started to throw stones off to the side. There were no rocks big enough that two men couldn't lift or move them, as the people who'd piled them here this morning were no stronger than Glebov.

Quietly, Bagretsov swore. He'd scratched a finger, there was blood flowing. He sprinkled the wound with sand, ripped a rag of cloth from his jacket and held it tight, but the blood didn't stop.

"Poor coagulation," Glebov said dryly.

"What are you, a doctor?" asked Bagretsov, sucking the blood out.

Glebov didn't answer. His time as a doctor now seemed very far away. Had such a time even happened? That world, beyond the mountains and seas, too often felt like some kind of dream or invention. The minutes, the hours, the day from wake-up call to finishing time were real; he couldn't work out, he did not have the strength to work out anything further than that. That's all there was to it.

He neither knew, nor cared about, the past of those who surrounded him. Tomorrow morning, should Bagretsov pronounce himself a doctor of philosophy or an air marshal, Glebov would believe him, no further questioning. Was he *really* a doctor once? Not only had he lost his

instinctive judgement, but his observational skills too. Glebov watched as Bagretsov sucked blood from his dirty finger, but said nothing. The experience just crawled into his consciousness, and even if he tried he couldn't have found the will to respond to it within himself. But he didn't try. The consciousness that was still with him, which by now was not even genuine human consciousness, lacked its former capacity, and was now trained on one and only one thing: the quick removal of rocks.

"Reckon it's deep?" asked Glebov, as they lay down to rest for a moment.

"How could it be deep?" Asked Bagretsov. Glebov understood that he was asking a foolish question, that a pit couldn't really *be* deep.

"It just is what it is," said Bagretsov.

He brushed against a human toe. A big toe was peering out from amongst the rocks, dazzlingly visible in the moonlight. It was a toe different to Glebov's or Bagretsov's toes, but not for the fact that it was lifeless and numb — there wasn't a great deal of difference in that respect. The nails on the dead toe were trimmed, the toe itself fuller and softer than Glebov's. They quickly pulled away the rocks that were covering the body.

"Real young," said Bagretsov. With difficulty, the two of them dragged the corpse out by the legs.

"What a... healthy guy," Glebov said, sighing.

"If he hadn't been so 'healthy'," said Bagretsov, "they'd have buried him like they bury us, and we wouldn't have had to come here today."

They straightened out the deceased's arms and slipped off his shirt.

"And his underwear's completely new," said a satisfied Bagretsov. The underwear was slipped off too. Glebov hid the bundle of material under his jacket.

"It's better to wear it," said Bagretsov.

"No, I don't want to," Glebov muttered.

They lay the deceased back in his grave and showered him with stones.

The blue of the fully-risen moon lay on the rocks, on the occasional forests of the taiga, highlighting every crag and tree in a peculiar not-day-light. Everything seemed real in its own way, just not the same way as it does by day. It was as if there were a second, nocturnal landscape.

The dead man's linens started to warm against Glebov's body, and no longer felt so alien.

"Wouldn't mind a smoke," Glebov said mindlessly.

"We'll smoke tomorrow."

Bagretsov smiled. Tomorrow they'd sell the linens, trade them for some bread, maybe even get a little tobacco...

The Package

Packages were given out at the watch-post. Taskmasters confirmed the identity of the receiver. The plywood cracked and splintered in its own way, plywood-ly. The trees round here wouldn't break like that, they wouldn't crack with that high-pitched voice. Sitting on benches behind a barrier, people with clean hands in unnecessarily neat military uniform uncovered, checked, shook, and handed over. The package boxes, having barely survived the several-month journey, were deftly tossed to the floor, where they fell and burst open. Heaps of sugar, dried fruits, pickled onions and crumpled packets of mahorka¹ spread across the floor. Nobody picked up the scattered items. Nor were there complaints from the receivers of the package - to get a package in the first place was a miracle to end all miracles.

Next to the watch-post stood escorts with rifles in their hands — there were figures of some unknown sort moving in the crisp, white fog.

I stood against the wall and waited my turn. Just look at those bluish heaps — that's not ice! It's sugar! Sugar! Sugar! Just one more hour, and I'd be holding my very own heaps in my hands, and they wouldn't even melt. They'd melt only in the mouth. A heap that big would sort me two times over, three even.

And mahorka! My very own mahorka! *Motherland, Belka* from Yaroslavl, maybe even *Kremenchug No. 2*.² I could smoke, I could host everyone, everyone, everyone, first of all everyone I'd been taking tobacco from for smokes this entire year, up to now. *Motherland* mahorka! See, we only get rationed old tobacco normally, taken from military warehouses at the use-by date (a venture of colossal scale, every product that passed its use-by date ended up being written off to the camps). But now I'd smoke *real* mahorka. After all, even if my wife hadn't known that I was in need of something a little stronger, I'm sure they'd have told her.

"Surname?"

The package cracked and prunes, leathery berries, spilled out of the box. Where's the damn sugar? Still more prunes, two or three handfuls at least.

"They've given ya boots! Pilot boots! Hahaha! With rubber soles! Hahaha! Like some kinda mine-officer! Here, take 'em and have a look!"

I stood still, confused. Why'd I get boots? You're only allowed to walk around in boots on holidays - and there weren't any holidays. Maybe some deerskin, some fur-covered felt boots or something. Hard boots were way too chic, they're not right here. Besides...

"Hey, you..." there was a hand on my shoulder.

I turned, just enough so that I could keep a simultaneous eye on the boots, the box (at the bottom of which still lay a few prunes), the guards, and the face of the person holding my shoulder. It was Andrei Boiko, our mountain ranger.

Boiko whispered hurriedly,

"Sell me the boots. I'll give you money. A hundred rubles. You can't carry 'em to the barracks anyway - they'll be nicked off you, run away with." With this Boiko poked a finger into the white fog. "They'll steal 'em from the barracks too. On the first night."

"You'll be sneaking over yourself," I thought.

¹ A stronger strain of regular tobacco, preferred amongst inmates.

² All various brands of mahorka.

“Fine, give me the money.”

“See this, you see the kind of person I am?” Boiko counted out the money. “I don’t trick ya, not like them others. I said a hundred - I’m giving you a hundred.” Boiko was worried that he had overbid.

I folded the dirty notes in four, then eight, then stuffed them in my trouser pocket. The prunes were poured from the box into my jacket, whose open pockets had long since been repurposed as closeable pouches.

I’ll buy butter! A kilo of butter! Then I’ll eat it with bread, soup, porridge. And sugar! I’ll get a bag off someone, a rucksack with some twine to fasten it. This was an indispensable accessory for any good, law-abiding inmate — thugs didn’t walk around with rucksacks.

I returned to my barrack. Everyone was lying on their bunks, leaving just Efremov sat up, hands laid on the dying furnace, stretching his face toward the waning warmth, scared to sit back or tear himself away from the heat.

“What, have you not melted yet?”

The guard came over.

“Efremov, it’s still your shift! The taskmaster said ‘let him take it where he wants, they need the firewood anyway,’ but I didn’t say you could sleep! Off with you, it’s early yet.”

Efremov crawled his way to the barrack door.

“Where’s your package?”

“They made a mistake...”

I ran to the ration-shop. Shaparenko, the shopkeeper, was still serving. The place was otherwise empty.

“Shaparenko, get me some bread and butter.”

“You’re killing me.”

“Fine, what’ll it take then, how much?”

“Do you see how much money I have?” Said Shaparenko. “What can a cheap matchstick like you *possibly* offer me? Take your bread and butter and get out of here.”

I forgot to ask for sugar. Butter — a kilo. Bread — another. I headed to Semyon Sheinin. Sheinin was Kirov’s former assistant, and very nearly got shot for it.³ We worked in the same brigade at one point, but fate drove us apart.

Sheinin was in his barrack.

“Let’s eat. I’ve got butter, bread.” Sheinin’s hungry eyes were shining.

“Lemme grab the kettle...”

“We don’t need the kettle!”

“No no, I’ll just be a sec.” He disappeared.

At that point someone hit me over the head with something hard, and when I got up and returned to my senses, the bag was gone. Everyone stayed where they were, and stared at me with an evil glee. This was the best kind of entertainment. In circumstances like these your happiness was twofold: firstly, someone else had it bad; secondly, you didn’t. It’s not spite, really...

³ Sergei Kirov (1884-1934) was a revolutionary, then Soviet official, whose murder (possibly ordered by Stalin) became the impetus for the beginning of the Great Terror of the late 1930s, which put many people in the Gulags.

I didn't cry. I was barely still alive. Thirty years have gone by, and I still distinctly remember that half-black barrack, the evil, gleeful faces of my comrades, the dry timber on the floor, and Sheinin's pale cheeks.

I went back to the ration shop. I didn't ask for any more butter, nor sugar. I begged for some bread, went back to the barrack, melted some snow and started to boil some prunes.

The barrack was now asleep: moaning, sniffing and coughing. Three of us were keeping to ourselves at the furnace: Sintsov was stewing a crust of bread that he'd stowed away at lunch, so that he could eat it now, hot and thick, and so he could thirstily guzzle the hot snowy water afterwards, which smelled of rain and bread. Gubarev pressed some frozen cabbage leaves into his pot, the lucky fox. The cabbage smelled like the most amazing Ukrainian borscht! I was boiling my package-prunes. None of us could look at the others' plates.

Someone suddenly burst open the barrack door. Two soldiers emerged from a cloud of frosty steam. The slightly-younger one was camp-guard Kovalenko, the elder — Ryabov, the mine-officer. Ryabov was in pilot's boots — in *my* boots! I tried my best to imagine that I'd got it wrong, that they were his own.

Kovalenko jumped to the furnace, waving the pick axe he'd brought with him.

"Again, with the pots! Here, I'll show you some pots! Let's show you how to get the dirt off them!"

Kovalenko tipped over a pot of soup, then the bread pot, the cabbage leaves, and prunes, and drove his pickaxe through the metal bottom of each.

Ryabov warmed his hands by the furnace.

"If there's pots, that means there's something to cook!" The mine-guard murmured, thoughtfully. "You know, that means they must be living pretty nicely."

"Yeah? You should see what they're cooking," said Kovalenko, stamping all over the pans.

The officers left, and we started to collect the crushed pans, along with our food: I grabbed the fruit, Sintsov the sodden, formless bread, and Gubarev the tatters of cabbage leaves. We all ate what we had immediately — that was the least we could hope for.

I got a couple of prunes down me and went to sleep. I'd learned how to fall asleep before my feet had warmed up years ago; once upon a time I'd never have been able to, but with time, and experience... sleep was like being able to forget.

The world suddenly came back, like a dream. The doors opened again: clouds of white fog, hugging the floor, sprawling across to the furthest wall of the barrack; people in white coats, stinking of outside-ness and unfriendliness; something collapsing on the floor, not moving, but alive, groaning.

The day-guard, in a pose of both disbelief and submission, bending himself over in front of the white coats of the ringleaders.

"Your guy?" They indicated the heap of dirty rags on the floor.

"It's Efremov," said the day-guard.

"Well now he'll know what happens when he steals other people's firewood."

Efremov spent a lot of weeks lying in the bunk next to me, until they took him away, and he died in a settlement for invalids. They beat him up "on the insides" — there were more than a

few masters of this particular art in the mines. Nobody took pity on him — he lay there, and quietly moaned.

1960

Cherry Brandy

The poet was dying.⁴ Starvation had swollen his hands, with their bloodless white fingers and dirty, overgrown, curly nails lying on his chest, open to the cold. He used to stick them under his shirt onto his bare body, but now there was too little warmth in it. They'd stolen his mittens a while back — all you needed for stealing was the guts, they'd comfortably do it in broad daylight. A dull electric sun, drowning in flies and clamped with a circular lattice, was fixed in place up on the ceiling. Its light fell on the poet's legs — he was lying, as if boxed-up, in the dark depths of the lower bunk of a sturdy prison-bed. Now and then his fingers would twitch, click like castanets, fumble over a button, a buttonhole, a tear in his jacket, wipe away some dirt or fluff, then lie still again. The poet took so long in dying that he stopped understanding the fact that he was dying. Sometimes some simple, distinct fact got to him, painfully and almost tangibly forcing its way through his skull: they'd stolen the bread that he'd been resting his head on. And this gives him such a burning anger that he's ready to argue, to curse, to fight, to hunt out, find some evidence. But he doesn't have the strength for that, and bread starts to ebb from his thoughts... And now he's thinking about something else, about how they should take everyone to the sea, and for some reason the steamboat's running late, and how good it is that he's here. And now again, just as easily and hazily, he starts thinking about the big birthmark on the barrack-guard's face. For a large part of the day he would just think about the events that filled his life in here. The visions that swam before his eyes were not the usual visions of childhood, youth, or success. He'd been rushing somewhere his whole life. It was nice that he didn't have to rush anymore, that he could think slowly now. And taking his time, he thought about the great similarity of the motions we all go through before death, about the fact that doctors had realised it and written about it long before the artists and poets. Every medical student is familiar with the Hippocratic face, man's death-mask. This mysterious similarity of deathbed motions served as the basis for some of Freud's most contentious hypotheses. Similarity and repetition are the fundamental soils in which science grows. It is the task of the poet, not the scientist, to find that which is unrepeatable in death. It was nice to be aware of the fact that he was still able to think. Nauseous starvation had long since become a regularity. And everything was completely equal; Hippocrates, the guard with his birthmark, his own dirty nails.

Life entered, then suddenly left his body, and he was dying. But life appeared once more: eyes opened, thoughts arrived. Only desires stayed dormant. He had now lived at length in a world where life reentered people regularly — via artistic inspiration, via glucose, via smelling salts, via caffeine. The dead often returned to life. And why shouldn't they? He believed in immortality, in real, human immortality. He often thought that there were no truly biological reasons that prevented a person living forever... old age was just a curable illness, and if it weren't for the fact that this tragic misunderstanding had not been cleared up by this point, he'd be able to live forever. Or at least, until he got tired of it. But he hadn't gotten tired of it yet. Not even now, in this transitional barrack — the *tranzitka*, as its inhabitants so lovingly dubbed it. It

⁴ This story is named after an untitled Osip Mandelstam poem from 1931, which equates the whole world to "*Bredni, Sherri-Brendi*" ("ravings, cherry-brandy"). A popular poet and proud anti-Stalinist, Mandelstam was exiled to Voronezh in 1934 and died in transit to the gulag in 1938. Stories about exactly where and how he died were a common feature of GULag mythology and varied widely, but Shalamov's imagined version is now one of those most commonly accepted as part of the mythos.

was the harbinger of horror, but it wasn't horror itself. On the contrary, the spirit of freedom lived here, and everyone could feel it. In front of us was the camp, behind us jail. It was "the peace of the road", and the poet could understand that.

There was yet one more path to immortality — Tyutchev's:

*Blessed is he, who visited this world
In its dying moments.*⁵

But even if, as seemed apparent, his human form had not been granted with immortality as any sort of physical continuation, then at least he'd earned a sort of immortality of the artistic kind. They called him the first Russian poet of the twentieth century, and he often thought he really was. He believed in the immortality of his verse. He had no disciples, but can poets ever really put up with them? He'd written poor prose, he'd written articles too, but only in verse did he ever truly find something *new* to give to art, something important, or at least that's how it had always seemed to him. His entire past life was a story, a book, a fairytale, a dream, only the present day was his actual life.

All of these thoughts came to him not as heated argument, but secretly, somewhere deep within himself. He didn't have the passion necessary for these meditations. Apathy had long since consumed him. What complete rubbish it all was, a "mouse's errands" in comparison to the horrible burden of life. He was surprised at himself — how could he think like this about poetry, when it was all already finished, which he knew all too well, better than anyone here? Who here needed him, and who here was he worthy of, at that? Why does all of this have to be understood, and he waited... and he understood.

In these moments, when life re-entered his body and his half-open eyes suddenly started to see, his eyelids flickering and his fingers twitching, so too returned ideas which he hadn't thought about being his last.

Life came in like an overbearing landlady: he hadn't called for her, but all the same she came into his body, into his brain, came in as poetry, as inspiration. Now the meaning of this word, inspiration, first came to him in complete clarity. Poetry was the life-creating force by which he was living. Without a doubt. He did not live *for the sake* of poetry, he lived *as* poetry.

It was now so evident, so tangibly clear, that inspiration, the intake of breath, was in fact life itself; in face of death, he had been granted the understanding that life *was* inspiration, just inspiration alone.

And he rejoiced, that he had been allowed to realise this final fact.

Everything, the entire world, was equivalent to poetry: Work, the trample of horses, home, birds, cliffs, love; all of life came so easily into his verse, and there comfortably found itself a place. And so it always should have been, for poetry was the Word.

Stanzas now started coming to him breezily, one after the other, and despite the fact that he had not written down his poetry in a long time, nor was he able to record anything, still they came, in some pre-ordained and ever-unique rhythm. Rhyme was a divining rod, an instrument searching magnetically through words and concepts. Every word was a part of the world, it

⁵ Fyodor Tyutchev, 'Cicero'.

echoed a rhyme and the whole world carried it forward with the speed of some electronic machine. Everything cried: choose me. No, me. There was no need to search. Just to reject. It was as if there were two people there: one who set the record playing as fast as possible, and the other, who considered, then from time to time lifted the needle from the running machine. And, having acknowledged that he was in fact two people, the poet knew that he was still composing real poetry. So what if it wasn't recorded? To write down or publish is a vanity beyond all vanity. Nothing made from self-interest can be of superior quality. The best things are those that are never recorded, that are created and disappear, that vanish without a trace, and only the creative bliss he feels — which nothing can interfere with — remains, as evidence that poetry was made, that beauty was made. Was he not right? Was his creative bliss not unmistakable?

He remembered how awful, how poetically useless Blok's last poems were, and how Blok himself didn't seem to understand this fact...

The poet forced himself to stop. This was easier to do here than it had been anywhere in Leningrad or Moscow.

Now he caught hold of the fact that he had not thought about anything for a long while... Life began to leave him once more.

For several hours he lay still then suddenly, not too far away, he spotted something like a rifle target or a geological map. The map was unlabelled, and he tried in vain to make out what was depicted. A little time passed before he realised that it was his own fingers. On the fingertips remained the faint brown traces of a burned-up, sucked-dry mahorka cigarette — his fingerprints were still distinctly shaded, like a relief of mountainous terrain. The shading was the same on all ten fingers: concentric circles, like a cut tree. He remembered how once, when he was a child, a Chinese man coming out of the laundry room (which was in the basement of the home he had grown up in) stopped him on the boulevard. The man managed to grab him by the arm, by both arms, then turned his palms upwards and excitedly shouted something in his native language. It seemed like he had declared the young boy a lucky soul, a possessor of good omens. The poet would recall this lucky omen many times, particularly around the time he had his first collection published. Now, he remembered that same man without any malice or irony — it was all the same to him.

The most important thing was that he had still not died. By the way, what does a 'poet's death' mean? There should be something childishly naive in that kind of death. Or maybe something ostentatious and theatrical, like Esenin's, or Mayakovsky's.

An actor's death is easy. But a poet's death?

Well, he was figuring something out about what lay ahead of him. He'd managed to figure out or understand lots of things on the way here. And he was joyful, quietly joyful at his own weakness, and he hoped that he was about to die. He remembered an argument in prison from ages ago: which was worse, or more frightening: the camp or the prison? As nobody knew any actual right answer, all the points were entirely speculative. But oh, how violently the man who'd been moved from camp to prison grinned. He remembered that man's grin forever, so much so that he was now scared to recall it.

Imagine how easily he'd have managed to deceive them — the people who put him here — if he died now. For ten whole years. A few years ago he was in exile, and he was well aware

that he'd been put on special lists forever. Forever?! The scales had shifted, these words had stopped meaning the same things.

Once more he felt the beginnings of a tide of strength washing over him, as if at sea. The tide rode high for a few hours. Then it ebbed away. But hey, the tide never leaves us forever. He'd get better yet.

All of a sudden he wanted to eat, but he didn't have the strength to move. He slowly, laboriously remembered that he'd given today's soup to a neighbour, that a cup of hot water was the only sustenance he'd had in the last day. Apart from the bread, of course. But they'd given out the bread a long, long while back. And yesterday's had been stolen. Guess someone still had the strength to steal.

So he lay there, lightly and empty-headed, until morning came. The electric light became a little yellower, and they brought in bread on big plywood trays, just like they did every other day.

But he no longer stirred, no longer watched out for a crust, no longer cried if a crust was given to someone else, no longer rushed a morsel into his mouth with trembling fingers, so that it would melt slowly, his nostrils would flare, and with every ounce of his strength he would feel the taste, the smell of a freshly torn piece of bread. And there would no longer be a morsel in his mouth, despite the fact he could not make himself swallow or disturb his still jaw. The piece of bread would melt away, disappear, and it would be a miracle — one of the many that happened here. No, he didn't stir anymore. But when they laid in his hands his daily ration, he grabbed it with his bloodless fingers and pressed the bread to his mouth. He bit the bread with his scurried teeth, his gums seeped with blood, his teeth rattled, but he felt no pain. He pressed it to his mouth with all his strength, stuffing the bread in, sucking it, ripping and gnawing...

His neighbours stopped him.

"Don't have any more, why not later, best eat it later..."

And the poet understood. He opened his eyes wide, making sure not to let the bloodied bread leave his dirty, bluish fingers.

"Later when?" He said, clearly and distinctly. And he closed his eyes.

By evening he was dead.

But he was reported so two days later — his imaginative neighbours managed to receive two days of bread rations for the corpse at feeding times; the dead man would raise his hand, like a marionette. This means that he passed away earlier than the date of his death — an important thing for his future biographers to note.

Condensed Milk

Hunger made our envy stupid and powerless, like all the rest of our feelings. We didn't have the strength for feelings, or for the things that would make finding a better job easier, for walking, asking, begging... We only envied people we knew, the people together with us in this little world, the people who managed to land themselves a job in an office, in the hospital, in the stables — the places which didn't require the long days of heavy physical labour, the labour that gets glorified on the frontispiece of every archway as a deed of valour and heroism. In short, we only envied Shestakov.

Only something external had the power to drag us out of indifference, to divert our attention from our slowly approaching death. Only external power, not internal. Inside everything was burned out and derelict, nothing mattered to us and nobody made plans for further than tomorrow.

Take this one time, for example — I wanted to leave and go to my barrack, lie on my bunk for a while, but instead I was stuck stood at the doors of the grocery shop. The only people allowed to shop in this place were domestic convicts and a few old jailbird thieves who'd been made out as "friends of the people".⁶ There wasn't much for us to do there, but we couldn't tear our eyes away from the chocolate-coloured bread rolls; the thick, sweet smell of fresh bread tickled our nostrils — the smell made our heads spin. So I stood there, not knowing whether I'd find the strength to leave for my barrack, and watched the bread. And that's when Shestakov shouted at me.

I knew Shestakov from the outside world, from Butyrskaya prison: we shared a cell together. There was no friendship between us, just acquaintance. Shestakov didn't work at the pit-face in the mine. He was a geological engineer, so they took him to work in the geology department, in an office, that is. The lucky beggar barely greeted his Muscovite acquaintances any more. We weren't offended — you never know what he might be able to get himself ordered from there. His own shirt, et cetera.

"Have a fag," said Shestakov, handing me a strip of newspaper, a pinch of mahorka, lighting a match, a real match...

I had a fag.

"I need to talk to you," said Shestakov.

"With me?"

"Yeah."

We set off for the barracks and sat on the edge of an old mine-face. My legs immediately grew heavy, while Shestakov happily chatted away in his new prisoner's boots, from which came a faint smell of fish oil. His trousers were cuffed to reveal a pair of chequered socks. I surveyed Shestakov's feet with a real admiration, even a little pride — at least one of the lads from our old cell wasn't wearing foot cloths. The ground under us shook from silent explosions

⁶ Also known as *kulaki* ('fists'), Stalin ramped up imprisonment and conviction of people who were supposedly collecting private wealth against the national cause (usually they were accused of stockpiling grain). This soon became a blanket conviction usable against people the state found to be unfavourable. The term "friends of the people" stems from an 1894 book by Vladimir Lenin which called for people to reject the populist worldview — despite its apparent connotations, "friends of the people" are those considered antithetical to the USSR.

— it was the earth being prepared for the night shift. Small pebbles fell at our feet, grey and unnoticeable, rustling, like birds.

“Let’s go a little bit further,” said Shestakov.

“It won’t kill ya, don’t worry. Your socks’ll be fine.”

“It’s not about the socks,” said Shestakov, pointing a finger out across the horizon. “How do you reckon we’ll get to see all that?”

“Die, probably,” I said. I wanted to think about nothing less.

“Actually, no. I don’t submit to dying in here.”

“Well what then?”

“I have a map,” Shestakov said, languidly. I’m taking you and some coworkers and going down to the Black Keys — it’s fifteen kilometres from here. I’ll have the documentation. Then we can head to the sea. You in?”

He laid everything out quickly and dispassionately.

“And then at the sea... what? We swim?”

“Who cares? Starting is the important bit. I can’t live like this. ‘It is better to die standing than to live on your knees’”, Shestakov said with a solemn tone. “Who said that?”

Indeed. It’s a well-known phrase. But I didn’t have the strength to remember who said those words or when. I’d forgotten anything vaguely literary. I didn’t believe in the literary any more. I rolled up my trousers, revealing some scurried ulcers.

“We could treat that in the forest here,” said Shestakov, “with berries, or supplements. I’ll take you, I know the way. I have a map...”

I closed my eyes and thought. There’s three paths to the sea from here - all of them five hundred kilometres, at least. Shestakov wouldn’t even make it, let alone me. What, is he gonna carry me on his back like food? Of course not. But why is he lying? He knows that as well as I do; and all of a sudden I was frightened of Shestakov — the only one of us who got a specialist job. Who put him there, and for what price? All of this has to be paid for, be it with someone else’s blood, someone else’s life...

“I’m in,” I said, opening my eyes. “It’s just that I’ll need feeding first.”

“But of course, of course. We’ve got to feed you. I’ll bring you some... conserves. After all, we can get that stuff...”

There’s a lot of conserves out there — meat, fish, fruit, vegetable... but best of all: milk, condensed milk. Everyone knows you don’t eat it like usual, with boiling water mixed in. You get a spoon, spread it on bread or just swallow a little from the tin, eat slowly, watching as the fatty mass starts to yellow, as sugar crystals start to stick to the tin...

“Tomorrow,” I said, sighing with happiness, “condensed milk...”

“Sure, sure. Condensed milk.” And Shestakov left.

I returned to my barrack, lay down and closed my eyes. Thinking was hard. It was some kind of physical process, for the first time the materiality of our psyches was laid out to me in all its nudity, all its tangibility. It hurt to think. But I needed to think. He was gathering us to escape then he’d hand us over — that much was obvious. He was paying for his office job with our blood, with *my* blood. They’d either kill us there, at these ‘Black Keys’, or bring us back alive and sentence us — add another fifteen years. There was just no way he couldn’t know that we can’t make it out of there. But milk, condensed milk...

I fell asleep, and in my broken hungry sleep I saw Shestakov's tin of condensed milk: a glorious tin with a cloudy blue label. Huge, and purple like the night sky, the tin was pierced in thousands of places and milk seeped out and poured the vast streams of the Milky Way. And I could just reach my hands up to the sky and eat that thick, sweet, celestial milk.

I don't remember what I did that day, or how I managed to work. I waited and waited, until the sun leaned to the west and the horses started complaining — they know how to estimate the end of the working day better than any human can.

Humming a broken tune, I made my way to Shestakov's barrack. He was waiting for me in the courtyard. His jacket pockets were bulging.

We sat at a big, clean table in the barrack, and Shestakov pulled two tins of condensed milk out of his pocket.

I pierced one with the point of my hatchet. A thick, white stream seeped out onto the lid, onto my hand.

"Best punch out a second hole. For the air." Said Shestakov.

"Don't worry about it," I replied, licking my sweet, dirty fingers clean.

"Hand us a spoon," said Shestakov, turning to the workers surrounding us. Ten shining, licked-clean spoons were extended over the table. Everybody stood and watched as I ate. This carried no indelicacy or secret wish to partake, none of them were hoping that I would share my milk with them. It was plain to see — interest in another's food was entirely selfless. Even I knew that you couldn't *not* look at food as it disappeared in someone else's mouth. I sat myself back a little more comfortably, and ate my milk without any bread, occasionally sipping some cold water. I ate both tins. The crowd dispersed — the show was over. Shestakov looked at me sympathetically.

"You know what," I said, licking the spoon in vain, "I've changed my mind. Go on without me."

Shestakov understood. He left, without saying a single word to me.

It was, of course, an inconsequential vengeance — weak, like all the rest of my feelings. But what else could I have done? Warn the others? I didn't know them. They should've been warned though, Shestakov managed to convince five of them. They were on the run for a week, two were killed not far from the Black Keys, the other three were sentenced a month later. Shestakov's own case was singled out thanks to his profession, he was quickly taken away to somewhere else, and six months later I met him in another mine. He hadn't been given an extended sentence for the escape — the authorities were openly using him for a game, how could we ever have thought otherwise?

He was working in the geological office, well-fed and smooth-faced, and still his chequered socks were just fine. He didn't greet me, the petty git; two tins of condensed milk isn't *that* big a deal, when all's said and done...

1956 (assumed)

Vaska Denisov, Pig Swindler

He had to get a comrade to lend him their jacket for his evening excursion. Vaska's was too dirty and torn, he wouldn't get two steps into the village wearing it — any resident would catch him out immediately.

People like Vaska were only allowed through the town in convoys, strictly ranked. Neither soldiers nor local citizens would be happy if people like Vaska were allowed to walk through their streets alone. The only times they avoided confrontation was when they brought firewood: carrying a little piece of log — or, as it's called here, a "firetwig" — on their shoulder.

Just such a twig was buried in the snow not too far from the garage — the sixth telegraph pole after the turn, sitting in a ditch. It had been put there yesterday after work, in preparation.

Right now, a friendly driver was stopping the truck, while Denisov crouched his way to the back of the cargo bed and slid out onto the earth. He immediately found the log's burial place, the bluish snow was a little darker here, a little crumpled, you could make it out in the approaching dusk. hopping into the ditch, Vaska kicked away some of the snow. The log emerged, grey and sharp-edged, like a frozen fish. Vaska dragged it out into the road, left it standing on the ground, hit it, so as to knock off the snow, then bent forwards, placing his shoulder underneath and lifting the wood with his hands. The log swung over his shoulder and landed on it. Vaska started for the village, switching shoulder from time to time. He was emaciated and weak, so he warmed up quickly, but the heat didn't stay for long; no matter how laboriously he felt the weight of the log, Vaska stayed cold. Dusk congealed into a white darkness, and all electric lights were lit in the village. Vaska chuckled, proud of his calculations: in the white fog, he'd easily managed to reach his target unnoticed. Et voila! The gigantic fallen larch, the frost-silvered stump: the next house is the one.

Having dropped the log off in the garden, Vaska used his sleeve to wipe the snow off his felt boots, then knocked at the porch. The door opened inwards to let him through. He was looked at, inquisitively and a little fearfully, by an elderly woman with an uncovered head and an unbuttoned short coat, who was wearing little else.

"I've brought you a bit of firewood," said Vaska, having difficulty moving the frozen skin of his face into the necessary folds for a smile. "I'm here for Ivan Petrovich."

From behind a curtain came Ivan Petrovich himself.

"S'good of ya," he said, "where is it?"

"Outside," said Vaska

"Well wait there, we'll chop it now. Lemme get dressed."

Ivan Petrovich searched for his mittens at length. They went out into the garden and, without so much as a log horse, lifting the wood up and, holding it steady with their feet, they got to chopping. The ax was blunt, and cut poorly.

"Bring it in after," said Ivan Petrovich, "you can sharpen it. Here's the hatchet for now... lay them inside when you're done would ya, not in the hall, take it straight into the living area."

Vaska's head was spinning from hunger, but he chopped all the firewood and dragged it into the house.

"That's everything," said the woman, coming out from under the curtain. "You're done."

But Vaska shifted uneasily at the door, not leaving. Out again came Ivan Petrovich.

“Listen,” he said, “I don’t have any bread right now, and we’ve given all the soup to the piglets, I’ve nothing to give ya. Maybe if you come back next week...”

Vaska, silent, wasn’t leaving.

Ivan Petrovich dug around in his wallet.

“Here, three roubles. Just to pay you back for that firewood mind, and some tobacco, I’m sure yer aware, tobacco’s not cheap at the moment.”

Vaska stuffed the crumpled notes in his chest pocket, and left. Three roubles wouldn’t even get him a pinch of mahorka.

He was still standing in the garden. He was nauseous from hunger. The piglets had eaten Vaska’s bread and soup. Vaska took the green notes out and ripped them to pieces. Shreds of paper, caught in the wind, skated for a while across the polished and shining trampled-down snow. And once the final scraps had hidden themselves in the white fog, Vaska left the garden. Staggering a little from his feeble state, he walked, not towards home, but into the heart of the village, he walked and walked — towards the one, two, three-floored wooden palaces...

He entered the first available garden and wrenched at the door-handle. The door screeched and painstakingly opened. He walked down a dark corridor, lit only by a dull electric lamp. He went past the doors to living areas. At the end of the corridor was a stockroom, and Vaska, having leaned against the door, pushed it open and crept over the threshold. In the stockroom were sacks of onions, perhaps a couple of salt. Vaska tore one sack open — grain. Suddenly angered again, he dug his shoulder in and threw the sack aside in vexation — only to find out that beneath the sacks lay frozen pig carcasses. Vaska screamed pure malice, he didn’t have the strength to rip the tiniest morsel from the body. But further under the sacks were a few frosty piglets, and Vaska couldn’t see anything else in the world. He ripped a piglet out and ran for the exit, clutching it in his hands like a kid with a doll. But people were already coming out of their rooms, a white steam filled the corridor. Someone shouted “stop!” and threw themselves under Vaska’s feet. Vaska hopped over them, still holding the piglet tightly, and ran into the street. The residents of the house rushed after him. Someone shot at him from behind, another roared ferally, but Vaska kept running, seeing nothing. Eventually he realised that his legs were carrying him to the only government property he knew of in the village — the Office for the Collection of Remedies, for which Vaska had once worked as a bush-picker.

The hunting pack was close. Vaska ran into the grounds, knocked the shift-guard to the side and ran down the corridor. The crowd of pursuers rumbled behind him. Vaska dived into the office of the manager for cultural work and jumped directly through the next door — into the red corner.⁷ There was nowhere else to run. Only now did Vaska realise that he’d managed to lose his cap. But the frozen piglet was still in his arms. Vaska lay it on the floor, turned round the massive benches and used them to blockade the door. He dragged the lectern over there too. Someone shook the door, then quiet set in.

⁷ A concept unique to Soviet Industrialisation, the ‘red corner’ was a section of every workplace devoted to political agitation and education — it usually functioned a little like a library-cum-classroom.

Then, Vaska sat on the floor, took the piglet — the raw, frozen piglet — in both hands, and he gnawed, and kept gnawing...

By the time the firing squad had been called, the doors opened, and the barricade broken down, Vaska had managed to eat half a piglet...

1958