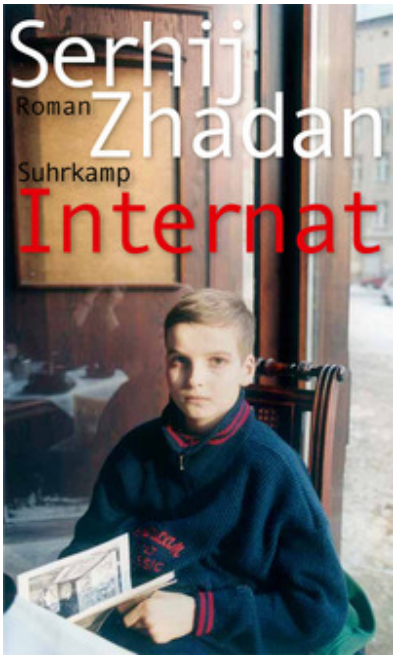

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The Orphanage
Novel
(Original Ukrainian title: Інтернат)
Publication date: 12 March 2018
300 pages, Hardcover

Sample translation by Reilly Costigan-Humes
and Isaac Stackhouse Wheeler
pp. 7-25

"Go pick him up!" Pasha's old man yelled.

"He's her son. She oughta pick him up," Pasha retorted.

"He's your nephew," the old-timer reminded him.

"So what?"

"And he's my grandson."

And he kept the television on the whole time. The television was always on, even at night. It was like their very own eternal flame, burning to commemorate the dead, rather than please the living. The old-timer watches the weather report like he's expecting the meteorologist to mention him by name. After it ends, he just sits there, like he can't believe what he's heard.

Pasha doesn't really watch TV, especially this past year when the news is downright scary. He sits at his desk with its stacks of textbooks until he can't stand it anymore and jerks to his feet. The old man hears him and turns around. Springs protrude from the couch like twigs from a Boy Scout's campfire. The furniture in the house is old, yet full of life—it'll probably outlive its owners. Pasha's sister suggested they get some new chairs, but he simply brushed her off: "what's the point of hauling stuff around? Sprucing this place up is like trying to put on muscle when you're seventy. Sure, do some pull-ups if ya want, but make sure ya take some ibuprofen first." His sister hardly came by anymore, so nobody was talking about hauling furniture around anymore either.

Pasha liked their house; he'd lived here his whole life and planned to keep on living here. It was built by German POWs shortly after the war—a rather spacious duplex on the second street back from the train station. Their densely-populated settlement, which was mostly home to railroad workers, was built around that station—it gave them work; it gave them hope like a heart blackened by locomotive smoke, pumping the blood of the ties and windbreaks. Life still revolved around the station, even now, when the depot was as empty as a drained swimming pool and the shops were unused, if you don't count the bums and swallows sleeping there. There just weren't any jobs now. Sure, maybe they lived in a so-called worker settlement, but they were the first to find themselves out of work. The shops were shut down, and the people scurried off in all directions, hiding in crowded apartment blocks with wells dried up by the summer sun and cellars where the supplies had already run out by Christmas.

Pasha didn't have anything to complain about, though—he was on the government payroll, it's not like he had it rough. "Yep, yep," Pasha thought as he went outside and shut the

front door insulated with hospital blankets. “I’m on the government payroll, even if I’m not actually getting paid all that much.” The snow reflected the pinkish sunset and the blue evening sky, but its deep pores remained dark. The icy surface snow is sharp to the touch, it conceals the black sludge of the earth and the smell of March water, and it renders weather reports unnecessary—the winter will last for a long time, long enough to get accustomed to it, suck it up, and learn to cope. Then when they’ve learned to cope something else will get underway. For the time being, the world resembles a chunk of snow in someone’s warm hands—it melts, it releases its water, but the longer this goes on, the colder their hands get, the less warm motion they retain, the more icy stillness seeps into them. The water stays lethal, even as it melts; the sun drowns in an intricate system of watery mirrors and reflections. Nobody can really get warm—twilight comes early, in the afternoon, the instant after the wet blaring of horns announcing shift changes at the station subsides...well, those horns aren’t blowing anymore. The instant it comes, that illusory sensation of warmth, of a thaw, disappears again.

Pasha skirts the building and takes the soggy path through the trees. They had always shared the duplex with a railroad worker. Half the building belonged to him, half to Pasha’s tight-knit family—mom, dad, Pasha, and his older sister. The railroad worker’s half burned down about fifteen years back, when Pasha’s family all still lived together. They managed to put the fire out before it got to their half. The railroad worker didn’t feel like rebuilding, so he went to the station, caught a train heading east, and disappeared from their lives forever. So, they just knocked down his half of the building, painted the burnt wall, and went on with their lives. From the outside, the structure looked like half a loaf of bread on a store shelf. Pasha’s old man always bought those half loaves, so he wouldn’t have to pay too much or have too much left over. Living by the railroad taught him that.

Black trees in the snow, sharp branches against the red backdrop of the sky, their street on the other side of the fence, the neighbors' white houses, yellow globes of electric light like citrus fruits scattered here and there, gardens, and fireplaces emitting smoke like the warm January respiration of weary men standing out in the cold. Empty streets, no one in sight, and train cars being coupled together, metal on metal, like someone rearranging iron furniture. There have been sporadic blasts all day, since morning—it's coming in from the south, from the city, sometimes intense, sometimes diffuse. An echo ripples high up in the air. The acoustics are distorted in the winter; you can never really tell where the shells are coming down. Fresh air, the smell of damp trees, and tense silence. It only gets that quiet when everyone pipes down and starts listening. Pasha counts to one hundred and heads back. Ten. There were six last night. In the same interval. "I wonder what they'll say on the news," Pasha thinks.

His old man's in the kitchen, bent over the table and packing an old duffel bag.

"Long trip ahead of ya?" Pasha asks.

What's the point of asking, though? Obviously, he's going to pick up the kid. He makes a big show of tossing things into his bag: a newspaper (how can he reread old newspapers like that? It's like looking at a completed crossword), glasses (Pasha's always getting into it with his old man over those thick glasses that warp every image—"you may as well wear sunglasses; you can't see a damn thing anyway"), pension card (he'll get a free senior citizen bus ticket if he's lucky), his cell phone, worn smooth like a rock in the sea, and a clean handkerchief. The old man washes and irons his handkerchiefs himself, he doesn't pass it off on his daughter. He takes out the ironing board once a month and smooths out his handkerchiefs, greyed by the passage of time, like he's drying out devalued hryvnias that have been through the washing machine.

Pasha's always getting his old man tissues, but he continues to rely on his handkerchiefs. They didn't make tissues back in the Soviet days, when he worked at the station, so carrying handkerchiefs became a habit for him. The old man can hardly even use his cell phone, plus the frame is beat up and the green button is faded, but he still takes it just about everywhere. And Pasha puts minutes on his phone for him; he never learned how to do it. Now he's folding everything meticulously, rooting around in his bag, and silently taking umbrage at something or other. It's getter harder and harder to deal with him; you can't even talk to him without hurting his feelings. He's just like a little kid. Pasha walks over to the stove, picks up the teapot, and drinks straight from the spout. All the wells dried up in the summer and they're too scared to drink from the tap—who knows what kind of gunk is floating around in the pipes now. So they boil their water and steer clear of lakes and rivers. The old-timer is rooting around in his pockets, refusing to respond to Pasha.

"Fine, I'll go and get him," Pasha says.

The old-timer isn't going to just roll over, though. He takes out the newspaper, unfolds it, then folds it in four, and sticks it back in his bag. He's all hunched over the table, dry, yellow fingers tearing nervously at the paper, not even looking at Pasha, like he wants to prove something, take on the whole world.

"Did you hear what I said? I'll go pick him up."

"You don't have to."

"I said I'd pick him up," Pasha repeats, a bit anxiously.

The old man makes a show of picking up his newspaper and leaves, flinging open the door leading to the living room. A strip of soft light from the television reaches the dark hallway. Then he shuts the door abruptly, as though he's locking himself inside an empty fridge.

Day One

It was a January morning, long and motionless, like a line at the hospital. Morning briskness in the kitchen and slate twilight outside. Pasha walks over to the stove and his nose instantly catches the sweetish smell of gas. For Pasha, that smell is always associated with vigorous mornings—getting up for work, tossing textbooks and graded assignments into his briefcase, ducking into the kitchen, breathing in sweet gas, drinking strong tea, following it with black bread, assuring himself he's living the good life, and running off to work once he's fully convinced. That smell has been with him his whole life; whenever he wakes up somewhere outside his own home, without the morning stove, its aged burners crusted with ash, he has no appetite. Pasha peers out the window, considers the black snow and black sky, sits down at the table, and shakes his head, trying to get his brain going. 6 a.m., January, Monday, one more day with no job to go to.

He grabs some assignments off the windowsill, leafs through them, puts them back immediately, gets up, goes over to the main room and peeks in. The old-timer's sleeping in his chair; a blood-drenched man is crying out to him from the screen, to no avail—the sound's been off since last night. Now you can't get to him, no matter how loud you yell. Pasha stops for a

second and looks at the blood. The yelling man shifts his eyes towards Pasha and starts yelling at him, “don’t turn it off. Listen up, this is important. This involves you, too.” But Pasha quickly finds the remote, squeezes the large, red button like he’s trying to get toothpaste out of the tube, tosses the remote on the table, slips outside, and shuts the door carefully, so as not to wake his old man. But the door still creaks alarmingly in the morning twilight; the old man wakes up immediately, finds the remote, and turns on the TV. It’s showing something horrific, something that involves all of us. Pasha’s already running up to the station.

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“Something’s off,” he thinks. “Something’s definitely off about this place.” Not a living soul, not a single voice. No locomotive noise. No peddlers. It’s just above freezing; water is leaking from the dark blue snowbanks—clouds in the sky, moisture hanging in the air, sometimes turning to barely perceptible drizzle, fog settling on the far-off tracks, no voices or footsteps coming out of that fog. “It’s still early,” Pasha thinks. “It’s still early, that’s all.” A suspicious silence—no blasts, no shredded air—has settled in the south, over there, by the city limits. A bus comes around the corner. Pasha exhales in relief—the buses are running; everything's fine. Yeah, it’s just early, that’s all.

He nods to the driver, who draws his head deeper into the collar of his leather coat, then walks through the empty bus and takes a seat on the left side. He sits for an instant, fidgets, then gets up and moves over to the right. The driver observes all of this closely, as though he's afraid

of missing something important. Pasha locks eyes with him in the rearview mirror, which pushes him to look away, fire up the engine, and ease out the clutch. There is a bad-tempered metallic crunch and they get moving. The driver takes a victory lap in the empty fog, and the station disappears behind them. “They drive the departed to their funerals in buses like these,” Pasha thinks for some reason. “These same buses, just with a black ribbon running along the windows. I wonder if there’s any room for passengers? Or does the widow have to sit on top of the coffin? Where’s this hearse gonna take me, anyway?”

The bus passes one empty street and then another. The bazaar should be up ahead—old ladies are always selling some kind of frostbitten food there. They turn a corner, but there are still no old ladies and no pedestrians in sight. Pasha’s starting to realize that something definitely is off, that something’s gone down, but he tries to pretend everything’s just fine. Come on, don’t freak out. The driver takes great pains to avoid eye contact, goading the hearse through the fog and water. “Guess I should have checked the news.” Pasha is getting anxious. The damn thing of it is the silence—after all those days when the sky in the south, over the city, looked like rods of scorched metal. It’s quiet and empty, like everyone hopped on the night train. Only the driver and Pasha are left; they pass two high-rises built on sand, then an auto repair shop, then they drive on out of the worker settlement. A long row of poplars leads out to the highway—the poplars peek out of the fog like children from behind their parents. The sun’s moving somewhere up high, it’s already appeared somewhere up there, even though you can’t quite see it yet. You can feel it, though. You can’t feel anything else. Pasha’s watchful eyes consider the dampness all around him, trying to figure out what he’s missed and what that character drenched in blood was

trying to communicate to him. The driver carefully dodges some cold potholes, reaches the highway, and turns right. The bus pulls up to the next stop, like usual; generally, at least one person gets on here, but not today. The driver stays put, probably out of habit, without closing the doors, and then looks back at Pasha, as asking for his permission to continue. The doors close, they get going, pick up speed—then there's a checkpoint right in front of them.

"Motherfucker!" the driver mutters indistinctly.

The place is packed with servicemen; they're standing behind some cinder blocks, underneath some frayed national flags, looking towards the city. Just how many times had he driven through this area over the past six months, since the government had returned after brief, intense fighting? When he was heading into the city or coming back home, to the station, he had to wait for them to check his papers. In other words, wait for trouble. But they'd always let Pasha through, without saying a word—he was a local, with the papers to prove it. The government didn't have a bone to pick with him. Pasha got used to the agents' apathetic eyes, smooth, mechanical movements, and black fingernails, and to the fact that you had to hand over your papers and wait for your own country to verify your standing as a law-abiding citizen. The soldiers would give Pasha his papers back, and he'd shove them in his pocket, trying not to make eye contact with anyone. Rain had washed the color out of the national flags. It dissolved in the gray air of last autumn, like snow in warm water.

Pasha looks out the window and sees a jeep wrapped in dark metal armor streaking past them. Three men with assault rifles hop out of the jeep and run towards the pack of people clumped together up ahead, paying no mind to the express hearse. The soldiers are standing there, yelling back and forth, grabbing binoculars out of each other's hands, scanning the

highway, straining their eyes, red from smoke and sleepless nights, framed by deep wrinkles. But the highway's empty, so empty it's unsettling. There's generally always somebody driving through, even though the city's been completely surrounded for an extended period of time, and the ring is tightening, someone or other is always making a run for the city or coming back along the only road. Mostly servicemen transporting ammunition or volunteers constantly gathering up all sorts of useless crap—like winter clothes or cold medicine—from here, from the north, where there wasn't any fighting, for the besieged city. Who needs cold medicine in a city getting pounded by heavy artillery, where the troops are going to surrender any day now? But that wasn't stopping anyone—every once in a while, a whole convoy would leave the mainland and make a run for the besieged area. Sometimes they'd come under heavy fire, which was to be expected. It was obvious that the city would fall, the government troops would be forced to retreat and take the flags of Pasha's country with them, and the front lines would shift to the north, so death would come a few miles closer. But no one really gave a damn. Even civilians mustered up the courage to make a run for the city over the crumbling asphalt of the highway. The servicemen tried to talk them out of it, but nobody around here really trusted the servicemen. You just couldn't tell people anything, they all thought they knew best; you'd see some old-timer come trekking into town in the middle of a mortar attack to file some paperwork for his pension. Well, if it comes down to death or bureaucracy, sometimes death is the right call. Sometimes the servicemen would get irritated enough to block off the crossings, but long lines would form at the checkpoints as soon as the gunfire abated. Then they'd have to let people through.

Now the highway's completely empty. Seems like something's happening over in the city, something scary enough it's even deterring the taxi drivers and speculators. There's a pack of unshaven men, pissed off from sleepless nights of fighting with neither side gaining ground,

standing by cinder blocks and barbed wire, and everyone's yelling to vent their hatred. One tall, slender soldier emerges from the group and heads towards their bus. His frenzied eyes are wide with fear beneath his oversized helmet, and he extends his arm as if signaling them to stop, even though they already have. Pasha and the driver are planted where they are, holding their breath. Suddenly, there's so much space inside the bus, and the air is so thin. Gulp down as much as you can—it still won't be enough. The soldier walks over to the doors and smacks the metal with his hand. The bus echoes like a sunken submarine; the driver pops the door a bit too abruptly.

"Where the fuck ya goin'?" The soldier barks as he ducks into the bus. He's forced to hunch over a bit, so his helmet slips down over his eyes, and Pasha senses something familiar about him. Where does he remember him from? "Where have I seen him before?" Pasha asks himself. The soldier gives him a dirty look, comes over, adjusts his helmet, rubs his eyes, and yells right in Pasha's face.

"Papers! Papers, for fuck's sake!"

Pasha rummages in his pockets and suddenly, there are pockets everywhere. He gets lost in them, he can't find anything except various pieces of junk—the wet wipes he uses to clean the mud off his shoes when he gets to school, printed lesson plans, and a card informing him that his package is ready for pickup at the post office. "Yep, yep," Pasha thinks, looking into the soldier's eyes in terror. "Gotta pick up that package, package, package. I completely forgot." His skin turns cold and damp, like it's him, all of him, getting scrubbed with a wet wipe.

"Well?" the soldier yells, hovering over him.

The damn thing of it is Pasha can't seem to figure out what language he's speaking; the words are bursting out of him, choppy and broken—no intonation, no detectable accent—he's just hollering, like he's trying to cough up some mucus. "He must be talking the official language." Some unit from Zhytomyr was stationed here a month back. They were Ukrainian-speakers, so they laughed at him for sliding back and forth between languages. "Are they those same guys? They've gotta be," goes Pasha's frenzied line of reasoning as he looks into the soldier's enraged eyes that reflect his fear back at him.

"Don't have them...completely forgot," Pasha says.

"What?" The soldier doesn't believe him.

The driver leaps to his feet, still unsure what to do with himself. Should he run for it or stay put? Pasha doesn't know what to do with himself either. He's thinking, "how could this be? Just how could this be?"

Somebody's shouting outside, a sharp, prolonged shout that makes the soldier shudder. He turns around and bolts off the bus, shoving the driver, who falls down into his seat and then springs to his feet again and darts after the soldier. Pasha darts off the bus too, and all of them run over to the pack, which suddenly falls silent and makes way for them. Then men—one at a time, two abreast, and large groups—start emerging into their viewshed from the south, the direction of the besieged city, like they're bursting out of an invisible patch of turbulence. They're coming this way, plodding away from the horizon and moving towards the pack that stands and waits in silence. Barely visible at first, over there, on the horizon, they grow gradually, like shadows in the afternoon. Nobody's looking through their binoculars anymore,

and nobody's yelling—it's like they're afraid of disturbing this procession as it slowly stretches out to fill up three hundred yards of highway. The men are moving at a measured pace; at first, they seem as though they're in no rush, but it soon becomes apparent that they simply cannot go any faster—they're too exhausted and these last few hundred yards are taking too much out of them. But they have to keep going, so they do, forging on doggedly, moving towards their flag, out of the valley, towards the checkpoint, like people walking along the highway because they got kicked off the bus for trying to get a free ride. It's as if time has sped up, and everything's happening so quickly that nobody even has a chance to feel scared or happy. The first group is approaching the paint-stained cinder blocks, while more of them continue appearing on the horizon, descending the slope and then moving upward again, heading north to join their buddies. The closer they come, the more distinct their features become and the quieter it gets, because you can see their eyes now; there's nothing good in those eyes—just exhaustion and frost. Their breath is so cold that you can't even see it rising from their mouths. The whites of their eyes, the black dirt on their faces. Helmets, torn black hats. Handkerchiefs, gray from brick dust, wrapped around their necks. Weapons, belts, empty pockets, bags hoisted over their shoulders, hands black with motor oil, and shoes smeared with pulverized brick and soggy, black earth. As they're approaching, the men in the first group glare at those standing here and waiting for them, judgement and mistrust in their eyes, like they're the ones at fault. It's as though everything should have played out differently—those who'd just come should've been standing here, under the low-hanging, January sky, looking towards the south, at the horizon, where there's nothing except dirt and death. The first guy to arrive walks over to the pack, thrusts his fist into the air, and starts yelling, like he's berating the gods for their bad behavior, the fury of his curses and threats mounting. Tears trickle down his face, washing his skin. The pack makes

room for the newcomers that blend into it, like dirty river water blending with the clear ocean. The pack can no longer fit between the cold cinder blocks; the first guy keeps standing in the middle of the crew, clamoring about injustice and revenge, about surrendering the city, about abandoning it and everyone who lives there, just handing it to them, backing down, buckling under the pressure, retreating, and escaping from the trap. The ones who got out are doing fine. But what about the guys stuck back there, on those shot-up streets? What should we do about them? What about them? Who's going to get them out of there? "So, we just left them out to dry? We just ran and gave up the city? How can you do a thing like that? Who's going to take responsibility for it?" he yelled, without lowering his fist. "Olezha, my pal Olezha… I didn't even have time to throw some dirt on his body or drag him into the snow. He's still lying there, all burnt up, by the gas station. I just left him. Who's gonna drag him out of there? Who's gonna take care of him?" he yells, threatening a raincloud with his fist. He keeps carrying on until a newcomer squeezes past and knocks him upside the head, as if to say, "shut your goddamn trap. We're already hurting here without your bullshit." Then everyone starts talking at the same time—asking questions, answering, getting carried over to the bus to warm up, getting wrapped in old, burnt blankets. Suddenly, yet another group pops out by the checkpoint, carrying a stretcher on their shoulders, and a guy is lying on the stretcher, so ripped up and bloody that Pasha looks away. Some officer type starts yelling that they need an ambulance. An ambulance—around here? The fresher soldiers from the checkpoint intercept the stretcher and take it over to the bus. "Take him to the station. Come on, get a move on," they yell at the driver. Pasha thinks that heading back home might be his best bet, so he steps towards the bus, but a serviceman is already standing by the doors. Without a glance, he shoves Pasha, who sees the stretcher being carefully carried into the bus; Pasha glimpses gummed-up hair, a sugary white

bone—like someone sliced open a melon and dumped out its sweet insides—he glimpses a contorted hand latching onto the stretcher, clinging to it like only one clinging to life can.

The driver tries to turn around, but the pack is swaying back and forth; everyone's yelling and getting in the way, getting in the way and yelling, and mostly yelling at others for getting in the way. Finally, somebody issues a command; the pack shifts and creeps off to the side. The bus turns around and disappears. Pasha's jostled to the side of the road; he's trying, limply, to break out of the pack when somebody standing behind him says, "gimme a light." It's a soldier with no helmet and dirty, silvery hair.

"Don't have one," Pasha replies.

"What do ya got?" The soldier's not letting him go. Pasha automatically reaches into his pocket and produces his papers.

Pasha stands there, on the shoulder, the dirt torn up by tires and treads—and tries to recall where he's seen those fingers before. Contorted, lifeless fingers, clinging to life. He remembers immediately—a week ago, on the last day of classes. It was just a week ago. Everything was the same as it is now—brisk wind, pale January sun. Somebody is calling him into the hallway. He steps out. Teachers are herding their students back into their classrooms. Pasha's kids bolt towards the windows to see what's going on. He glances back at them.

"Alright now, keep it down. I'll be right back," he yells. But nobody's listening to him; the principal, her sickly body swaying laboriously, rushes past Pasha. He runs after her; they go out onto the front steps and stop. A jeep full of servicemen is parked by the school. No license plate. Just a military motto, painted white on black. Pasha's no expert on military mottoes, so he

doesn't really know who these guys are. They could be with one of the volunteer battalions, or maybe the national guard. The flag on the jeep is the same as the one on their school, that's to say the town hasn't changed hands.

The feverish servicemen are bustling around and making some calls; the man in charge walks over to the principal, takes her firmly by the arm, leads her away from the entrance, and starts talking, his voice cold. Pasha catches fragments of their conversation; the serviceman's laying out his terms, not asking for permission.

"No..." he says, "Can't go anywhere else... has to be here... where you are... it's you we're here to protect, after all.... call whoever you want... get Kyiv on the line for all I care." The principal slumps in her black suit, and her face goes grey, which makes her look even older. She'd like to object, but she just can't do it. She turns towards Pasha, seemingly expecting him to back her up. The serviceman pats Pasha as he passes by and chalk dust rises from his shoulder.

Then an old, Soviet transport van, brown like a soggy meatloaf, rolls up to the school. Servicemen start unloading the wounded, heave them over their shoulders like merchants handling bags of goods—apparently, there aren't any stretchers—trudge up the steps and down the empty, echoing hallway. They turn left, and their clay-smeared combat boots kick open the very first classroom. The Ukrainian language classroom. Pasha's classroom. The classroom where Pasha teaches kids. The wounded are placed right on the floor, in between the desks. Shortly thereafter, Pasha sprints in after them and dismisses the class; the scared kids step over fresh blood and then jostle in the hallway. Pasha steps out, too, and disperses his class, yelling, "go home. Get a move on!" He's speaking Russian, like he always does in the hallway, outside of class, and then opens the door apprehensively. The classroom smells of filth and blood, snow

and earth. Soldiers bring in blankets and warm things, shove the desks into the middle of the room and the wounded towards the walls.

Another soldier walks into the classroom, a machine gun on his shoulder, lips clamped around a cigarette. Black hair, eyes dark, hence untrustworthy, dust chewing into the wrinkles on his face; the only other guys Pasha has seen that looked like that were coal miners coming up to the surface. He casually surveys the wounded, notices Pasha, nods, and says hello. He speaks with a thick Caucasian accent and mixes up Ukrainian and Russian, but tries to be friendly, as if his tone will determine whether Pasha believes him or not. He translates some words from Russian to Ukrainian as soon as he gets them out, trying his best, like he's taking a language exam.

"Hey, teach, don't be scared. We won't let 'em take your school. We'll protect you, so you can keep teaching your kids. Who are those guys?" The machine gunner nods at the portraits on the classroom wall.

"Poets," Pasha answers tentatively.

"Poets, huh? Well there ya go. Are they any good?" The machine gunner asks in a doubtful tone.

"They're dead," Pasha answers.

"Perfect," the machine gunner chuckles. "The only good poet's a dead poet."

He carefully opens the window as though he wants to air out the room and deploys his weapon on the sill. Pasha gathers his students' assignments and tosses them in his briefcase; as he's about to leave, his eye is drawn to one of the wounded men, who's been placed by the radiator—two fuzzy blankets with crusty bloodstains, an old, tattered sleeping bag, head facing the wall, only his greasy hair and unshaven face visible, the torn sleeve of his army jacket lying right there, patches of dirty skin marked with little cuts between bandages, bare palm poking out of the sleeping bag; just like a passenger in a sleeper car stretching his hand out from under the blanket that encases his motionless body. That blanket recreates the protrusion of his knees and the indentation of his stomach like the Epitaphios recreates Christ's body. The nakedness of this battered male body stands out among the bundles and warm clothing tossed on the desks nearby.

"Here and now," Pasha thinks. His skinny, pale hand, dotted with sparse hairs, looks so out of place against the classroom floor, with its new coat of paint from the summer, against the desks and the blackboard, clinging to the sleeping bag, too afraid to release it, as though that sleeping bag is the last thing linking him to life. Pasha can't look away from his long, black fingers—all cut up and roughed up and tinted a gasoline blue; then a brisk, wintry breeze rushes inside, shaking the window frame, but the machine gunner holds it open. Pasha remembers where he is and quickly steps out into the hallway, straight into the principal's embrace.

"Mr. Ivanovich, Mr. Ivanovich," she cries, grabbing him by the arm. "How could this be? Tell them to go."

It hits Pasha that even her tears are fake. "She doesn't know how to cry," he thinks. "She just doesn't know how it's done. Well, she doesn't know how to laugh either."

“Tell them, tell them to leave.” She talks to Pasha in a stilted tone, as though she’s addressing a streetcar conductor.

“Yes, yes,” Pasha assures her. “I’ll tell them. I’ll definitely tell them.”

He walks the principal back to her office, helps her get settled, leaves, shuts the door, stands there for a bit, and hears her sniffle, then instantly regain her composure, take out her cell phone, dial, and start making a stink.

“Take care of this one without me,” Pasha says in a whisper and heads for the door.

There are servicemen standing on the front steps, smoking. They fastidiously wipe their dirty shoes with a clean rag whenever they come inside. Blood doesn’t come off all that easily, but it does come off.