INSIDE THE COPPER MOUNTAIN

A thunder of resurrection on the mountain
is being announced for me.
Smash your fists against despair,
hiding within the copper mountain.
—Vasyl Stus

Because I keep files about dissidents, especially those who were martyred in Soviet Ukraine, I cut his picture out. It was printed in a glossy English-language magazine, *Ukraine*, from Kiev, mailed faithfully to me for months though I had no subscription. It shows a close-cropped, dark-haired man of about forty, with big ears, a strong jaw, and a dark, bright and mettlesome gaze straight into the camera. He's wearing a black turtleneck sweater and looks to me like a Ukrainian Marlon Brando from *On the Waterfront*.

I pin this up on the bulletin board above my desk. It's one of those portraits in which the eyes follow you as you move around the room. He stares at me, I stare at him.

His name is Vasyl Stus. I know that he was a poet and a member of that band of young writers in Ukraine called the "Sixties people" whose first novels, first collections of poems, first screenplays blew their hot breath briefly in the 1960s in the thaw after the Terror and the War. I have never read his poetry, and am guilty, I suppose, of hallowing the singer not the song. I do not know what exactly he did that got him arrested. I do not know when this photograph was taken. Has he been to the camps yet? Or is he waiting for the van to pull up in the street below his flat in Kyiv?

I do know he died in the Zone in September 1985, somewhere inside that vast complex of penal colonies, prisons, and psychiatric hospitals where, until the late 1980s, the USSR held its political prisoners. "Why couldn't you have held on six more months?" I cry. "You would have been freed."

He's big-boned, broad-shouldered and robust, I guess years away from his death, with his fight still ahead of him.

I kiss my two fingers and lay them on his cheek.

Thousands of miles away from your grave I will find you in my books, and I will drag you into my language, my purposes, and my memory. There in my memory is a Pantheon of lost loves, men who were heroes I wooed and lost. And you are going to be there with them.
You come from the green kingdom. I see you upright in the greenery, leaning on a thick stave stripped crudely of its branches, your round, dark head crowned with wild roses I have plucked from roadside ditches. I sit squinting in the noon hour sun. You haunt the shade.

In the mid 1960s, I was a student of Russian literature, reading Russian dissident poets and collecting their books. I was not then aware of dissident Ukrainian poets who were not in any case at the centre of my concern.

My reading persisted and the books became a library. Then other books joined them, the excruciating stories of the men and women of the Gulag. Those who had the means to do so smuggled out their

stories while still in the camps. Those who survived wrote their memoirs and smuggled them out of the USSR to the West where émigré foreign-language presses received them. Some were eventually translated. I would come across them gathering dust in piles of remaindered books or yellowing in second-hand bookshops, as though their content had proved too arcane for readers used to more ordinary worlds. And still the habit persisted, until the library became a harrowing archive of that archipelago of punishment called the Zone.

By this time I had become aware of the particularly relentless persecution of the Ukrainian intellectuals and in time set myself to learning the language of my grandparents so I could understand better who these dissidents had been and what had happened to them. I began subscribing to Ukrainian journals and magazines. I noticed the repetition of certain names, made connections among events, stared at photographs,

A Photo

A patch of hummocky land, sprouting weeds and three small wooden posts. The caption: "Cemetery of unmarked graves along the Potma railway (Moscow-Kuibyshev line)." This line was laid by political prisoners and the graves belong to those who died building it. They have numbers but no names. The photograph was taken in 1976. There is no other information.

Short Course in the History of the Zone

In 1921, near Arkhangelsk on the Barents Sea astride the Arctic Circle, the Soviet government set up the extermination camp, Kholmoger, for the purpose of physically destroying the political enemies of the Bolshevik Party.

In 1973, the Ukrainian, Baltic, Russian and Jewish inmates of Camp VS 389–35 in Perm region, where Vasyl Stus would serve his second term, marked the anniversary of the establishment of concentration camps in the USSR with a hunger strike and demanded that henceforth September 5 be known as the Day of Protest Against Persecution. They called themselves "*zeks*," from "z.k.," Russian slang for "zakliuchennyi" (prisoner).

Prisoners worked on construction sites without proper work clothes and in unheated workshops with their bare hands unprotected from the frozen metal. They ate where they worked, with no washing facilities and no tables, and worked forty-eight hours a week.
One long-term political prisoner, Anatoly Marchenko, could remember exactly when he ate cucumbers: one in 1964 and a second in 1966.

Kyiv, September 4, 1965: The KGB Opens a File on the Poet

There were several hundred packed into the *Ukraina* cinema in downtown Kyiv the day that the new Sergei Paradzhanov film, *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors*, premiered. The word had gone around that "something was going to happen." After the screening, the journalist Viacheslav Chornovil and the critic Ivan Dziuba strode to the stage, grabbed the microphone and denounced the recent arrests of artists and intellectuals, their colleagues and friends, who had been protesting publicly the Russification of Ukrainian culture.
The plainclothes police in the audience did not let Dziuba finish speaking but switched on sirens to

drown out his words and then chased him off the stage. Vasyl Stus, the writer of a handful of published poems, stood up from the floor and shouted out a challenge to the crowd: “All those against tyranny, rise up!” Only a few responded, here and there standing up and sticking their necks out.

I shake out the Gulag memoirs, the weird volumes of memorabilia published by Ukrainian exiles and émigrés in Munich and Baltimore, the collections of underground *samizdat*, and note how Stus’s name, his dates, his first notoriety spill out from the footnotes.
And then, like a gift, in the magazine *Ukraina*, I find four dense pages of the memoirs of the critic Mykhailyna Kotsiubynska about her friend, Vasyl Stus: “In the Mirror of Memory,” written June 1990.

“From time to time in recollections and dreams,” she begins, “a blinding projected apparition appears before me like a magic eye in the hopeless nights.”

I am enchanted. I haul out my Ukrainian-English dictionary. I look for words, following with my finger the elaborate syntax as the tender remembrance of this woman rises from the paper, a photographic image emerging from its developing bath. I do pages of this work before I realize, fascinated, that Mykhailyna’s initials are the same as mine: MK. The temptation is huge: to enter her words here and join her voice contrapuntally as the woman who did not know Stus. But *she* did, and there I am, she is, beside Vasyl Stus in the *Ukraina* cinema in Kyiv. They are sitting together and fate, Vasyl’s fate, is about to throw them into a friendship to the death.

MK
. . . we stood up together. He shouted out something despairing—“Whoever is against tyranny, stand up now!”—while trembling in every cell of his body. I could feel it through the arm I held around his shoulder as we left the hall.
“Poet,” she wondered, “how are you going to manage to live in this world?”

Poet, how are you going to manage to live in this world? You are large and strong. Your voice fills whole rooms. I remember the morning you came to me in the garden, smiling with the pleasure of the lilacs and held out to me one thick, radiant stem that shook in your trembling hand.
You come from the green kingdom. I see you upright in the greenery, leaning on a thick stave stripped crudely of its branches, your round, dark head crowned with wild roses I have plucked from roadside ditches.
In the winter you come with your handful of seed, sowing in our households the new life latent in the wild grass. You bear the cranberry branch of your good wishes. “Good fortune to you,” you whisper. “Sister.” I light a candle, a solitary fire in the snowdrifts. If I look after you, if I watch you go, you will melt like beeswax.

A couple of weeks after his outburst at the cinema, Stus was expelled from his doctoral studies for “systematic violations of the norms of behaviour of graduate students and staff members of research institutions.” A year later he was dismissed from his assistantship at the State Historic Archives: he had become unemployable in his profession.

Soviet Writer Publishing House returned his manuscripts without explanation and a collection of poems already slated for publication was purged from the schedule. He found employment as a labourer on the construction of Kyiv’s subway line but was fired after a few months, in a Soviet Catch-22, for working outside his specialization. How did he survive? Under a pseudonym he published translations of Rilke

and Goethe.

Roll Call of the Arrested: 1965

Accused of anti-Soviet propaganda and agitation and defended by Stus in his protest in the cinema: Ivan Rusyn, Valentyn Moroz, Mykhailo Osadchy, Mykhailo Horyn, Ivan Hel, Panas Zalyvakha, Myroslava Zvarychevska, Anatoly Shevchuk, Ivan Svitlychny. They were respectively: a member of an amateur choir, a history teacher, a journalist, a philologist, a locksmith, a painter, a proofreader, a linotypist, a critic. These names are just a sample.

Here is Vasyl Stus's poem to his arrested friend, Ivan Svitlychny, who was under intense pressure to confess:

> Like a star he beams in from the gloom
> But he says nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing.

Stus's friends were charged under Article 62, Section 1, of the Criminal Code of the USSR with "anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda designed to undermine or weaken Soviet power," were found guilty and sentenced to four, five, six years in forced labour camps in the Mordovian Autonomous Republic southwest of Moscow.

Only the KGB and the criminal justice system paid them official attention. Even the Ukrainian Soviet press made no mention. Friends of the accused, among them Stus, wrote a flurry of open letters and appeals on behalf of their associates, and stood outside the courtrooms demanding to be let in.

It does not seem like much, a signature on an appeal against "lawlessness," say. I suppose they never did stop being afraid, but they tried to act as though they were not and swallowed back the salt secreted by their own faint hearts.

Stus stood at courtroom doors of their trials demanding to be let in. Dissident Nadia Svitlychna was there with him. Interviewed twenty years later, she remembered how they had stood together in the square opposite the court house where one of the trials was going on. "Vasyl lit a cigarette. His hands were shaking." He was already suffering from the gastric ulcer that would torture him in the camps.

They milled about outside the bolted courtroom doors and threw flowers. At the trials of 1966 there were flowers everywhere. They fluttered down from the sky as the prisoners filed past the cordons of police on Pekarska Street in Lviv, carpeting the *via dolorosa* between the Black Marias and the drunken judges like a Carpathian meadow. "Hurrah! Hurrah! Hurrah!" the friends shouted, pelting the police with carnations. When the poet Lina Kostenko threw roses to her friends at the yawning courtroom doors, the police dropped to the ground as though she had lobbed a bomb. Red tulips stuck into the railings of the prisoner's dock were snatched away by shrieking prosecutors before their damage could be done.

Q: Did you know [Stus] personally? What was he like as a person?
A: Certain "snapshots" from my meetings with him are fixed in my memory.
Winter 1966: Nadia Svitlychna and the artist Alla Horska go to Vasyl's wedding. In the bureaucratized, conveyor-belt atmosphere of the state Palace of Happiness, they have come to add a little human warmth to the proceedings of the "registration of marriage." Vasyl comes up to Nadia and asks forgiveness. "For what? I don't know. He was taking my brother's arrest very badly," she tells the

interviewer on Radio Liberty in 1985.
I imagine the bridegroom proud in a stiff black suit a little short in the leg, the bride grasping red carnations, her knees knocking under her skirt. Are they holding hands? Does he encourage her with his hand pressed against the small of her back? Nothing. There is no bride here at all. She has a name—Valentyna Popeliukh—but no figure, no face.

Your house is orderly. The icon of the Theotokos*, the Godbirthgiver, hangs discreetly in her alcove. A branch of pussywillow blesses our entry to the kitchen. Your furniture is pale, creased. This is very far away from the sweatshops of the Revolution. You are wearing suspenders. You smoke furiously while beating out the rhythm to the male duet from "The Pearl Fishers." Your wife sits curled up on the sofa and glares coldly at you. She has been looking at you like this for some time, while you and I have been talking. She is thin and beautiful. Her neck is fluted with grooves. She does not wear the look of a woman in love. Perhaps I do.*

He loved her. He chose her. He bedded her. Where is she? When I find the poems, I look for her as though I were rifling through her husband's pockets for his secrets.

> And there will be parting enough for two,
> and there as well will be a silent joy—
> to feel with the whole heart the long debt
> owed to a past with a white headboard [. . .]
> and a pair of long arms, drunk upon the dark
> —Vasyl Stus

It was sometime that same year, 1966, that Mykhailyna met Vasyl on Volodymyr Hill on her way to the district office of the Communist Party where, after a seven month long ordeal of extricating herself from Party membership, she was finally going to turn in her card.

MK
And here was Vasyl, waving his arms about, shouting cheerfully at me. He had just finished his translations of Lorca, and I can still hear how his voice broke when he came to the line "Cordoba, distant and alone."

You are driving me back to the city, through a black tunnel of night crackling with the green ice of the cold. Suddenly, you slam on the brakes, pull over to the side of the road and scramble out of the car, crying "Look! Look!" It is the Aurora Borealis leaping all over the sky. You have unhunched your shoulders and are laughing. I move towards you and put my hands in your pockets and nuzzle my face in your thick coat; you hold me, rocking back and forth. I can hear the snow sqeak under your heels.

Later you will say that we sought each other out. But you are wrong. In the rooms where we gathered, you were telling us that the comrades' position on Afghanistan had driven you to despair. I was listening. But I was also lusting after you, admiring the trim set of your hips bound in a narrow, leather belt, the heft of your shoulders under the cotton shirt that gaped open at your throat (you fiddled with the top button and I imagined you opening your shirt for me, button by button, a little strip-tease unwrapping your soft-furred chest contoured perfectly for my fingertips, my cheek, my lips closing in on your left nipple.

In 1970 a collection of Stus's poems, *Zymovi Dereva* (*Winter Trees*), was published by an émigré press in Brussels. Vasyl wrote to Vira Vovk, a Ukrainian-Brazilian poet who had visited Ukraine in the 1960s, that he was developing a "kind of obliviousness." He was content, he said. He strung up a hammock under the pines, poured himself a glass of whiskey, looked up at the sky. "My wife's at work, my son's in daycare, I write, I relax." It's an image I will come across again, in a poem from the cycle "Through Oblivion." "The wife is at her job/The son is in day-care/Silence/Enjoy yourself/Until the hour peaks/Sit. Rejoice." I do not begrudge the poet his domestication. All hell is about to break loose.

In November 1970, Alla Horska, a good friend who had been at Stus's wedding, is found dead, her friends assume murdered, in the cellar of her father-in-law's house outside Kyiv. It is Nadia Svitlychna, dragging the local militia with her to the cellar door, who finds her. No relative or friend is allowed to examine the body; the coffin remains sealed.

The friends stand at the open grave in a vacant lot outside the city, holding each other against the December wind. On the anniversary of her death in the years to come the circle will be smaller—the friends sense this already. Vasyl reads his poem in Alla's memory: "For we are very few. We are a pinch of earthly salt . . ."

A year later Stus is arrested in a storm of arrests known as the General Pogrom, the harshest single assault by the KGB on dissidents in Ukraine since the death of Stalin. The KGB did not limit its sweep to political dissidents or "conspirators" or "gutterpress profiteers." Virtually an entire generation of writers and artists was repressed.

Sympathizers found themselves threatened with dismissal from work, watched helpless as investigators removed their books from their incriminating libraries and the police ransacked their houses. Their family members were hauled along with them for interrogation, and, as witnesses at their friends' trials, they were remorselessly bullied and humiliated in cross-examinations of breath-taking vulgarity.

Radio Peking, 1969: "The Soviet revisionist renegade clique has transformed the first socialist state into a great fascist prison."

The pogrom peaked in January, 1972. Hundreds would be imprisoned, among them many who had already done terms in prison and camp after the crackdown of 1965–66.
Here they went again. Valentyn Moroz, the history teacher. Ivan Hel, the locksmith. Mykhailo Osadchy, the journalist. Mykhailo Horyn, the philologist. And some debutants: Viacheslav Chornovil, Ivan Dziuba, Iryna Kalynets, Yevhen Sverstiuk, Leonid Pliushch, Ivan Svitlychny. And Vasyl Stus.

> It would be naive to believe
> that among the five thousand who perished
> while building Cheops' pyramid
> there was no poet.
>
> —Mykola Horbal, "Parts of an Hourglass"

On January 12, 1972, while Stus was in western Ukraine being treated for his gastric ulcer, the KGB

ransacked his apartment and, next day, issued a warrant for his arrest on charges of involvement in an espionage ring. When they returned to his apartment a month later it was to confiscate his library (Pasternak, Gorky, Solzhenitsyn, Marx, Jung, Lorca) and virtually everything he had written in the last fifteen years: poems, essays, translations, and his one and only published collection of poetry, *Winter Trees*, published abroad.

Meanwhile he was arrested, held in prison, and interrogated. According to notes that were smuggled out of the Zone during his first imprisonment, he accused his interrogators of acting like "Stalinist dogs." He was taken forcibly to a psychiatric hospital, dragged down through the hallway of the interrogation isolator in Kyiv, kicking, and screaming to the prisoners in their cells that "They are taking Vasyl Stus to the Pavlov Insane Asylum!" When Mykhailyna and her friends accidentally learned of this, their alarm and anxiety increased a hundred-fold.

Stus was finally put on trial August 31, 1972, in Kyiv Regional Court under revised charges of slandering the state. He was found guilty, and on September 7 sentenced to five years in special regime labour camp in Mordovian ASSR and three years internal exile. Oddly, in spite of his own sustained activity since 1966 on behalf of colleagues in jail and on trial, I come across no material describing efforts mounted in his defence by others nor any eye-witness account of his trial. Only a plaintive bewildered little note struck by Mykhailyvna: that although she was to be summoned and questioned as a witness in other friends' trials, she was never summoned to Vasyl's—and all these years later it is as if she regrets that she had not been put to the test.

MK
His [Stus's] arrest would not be totally unexpected, of course. In fact, there was a certain logic in this barbaric act, a natural continuation of those ideological "witches' sabbaths" that had been gathering momentum. Judicial persecution for heresy became our reality.

They were forced to live in it and for all of 1972 they lived for news from There.

You called last night—I surprised as always to hear your voice, never quite expecting you to act the lover. But, then, may not friends call? You did not sound yourself; you were lonely, you said.
Listen to you: you miss me. You say you are surprised by the images intense nostalgia conjures up—lying together on the sofa, curled around each other, listening to music and chatting domestically, stroking each other (pulling items of clothing loose from belts to get at the unveiled flesh), leaving kisses sticky with Greek brandy.
You have no homesickness for love-making. You slide from my bed to wash, for it is time for you to go home. Ah, the marriage bed. And do you find your ardour there at three o'clock in the morning?
You said, if you had another life to live, you'd live it in one of the monasteries on Mount Athos. And where does that leave your lovers—standing on the Aegean shore waving good-bye at your little boat setting sail for the village of men?
I dream instead of the heat of the Peloponnese and stretching you naked on the rocks of Sparta. You swoon in the buzz of the honey bees and the speeches you would make dissolve in the back of your throat as my breast falls in your mouth. You cannot move. You are arched over the slope of the rock and I stroke your flanks with my hair. You make a sound like a little pup and spill into the cup of my hand. You sleep. I am awake. If you try to leave, I will know.

The Political Economy of the Zone

The caption reads: “A rare photograph of a concentration camp watchtower deep in the forests of the Mordovian ASSR .” I don’t know how they can be so sure. I see an indistinct patch of a forest and a wooden tower trellised like the fire watchtowers in national parks. There’s a man up there, lounging on the railing. I suppose he’s in uniform but I see no gun.

Mordovian ASSR, southeast of Moscow, west of the Volga, had been a dumping ground for political prisoners since 1917 when camp labour was used to build a highway and railway, the so-called Dubrovlag route. In 1980 there were eight camps on the route (including Stus’s Number 19), holding between five hundred and twenty-five hundred prisoners each, and seven of them were special regime. On limited rations prisoners were pressed into labour in logging, lumbering, furniture-making, production of steering wheels and automobile chassis, glass-grinding, and the manufacture of souvenir cuckoo clocks for export.

I do not know what Stus laboured at. What I learn is that, even in camp, he kept up a barrage of verbal attacks on the KGB, compiling documents that he eventually was able to smuggle out of the camp and which, by 1975, were circulating in the west. The most famous was his own “J’accuse,” published in a Ukrainian-language journal in New York in January 1976:

“I deem the KGB a parasitic, exploitative, and pernicious organization, on whose conscience lie millions upon millions of souls, shot, tortured, and starved to death. . . . I accuse the KGB of being openly chauvinistic and anti-Ukrainian because it deprived my people of word and voice. . . . I am sure that sooner or later the KGB will be judged as a criminal organization, openly hostile to the nation. I am not sure that I will live to see this judgement passed on it. Therefore, I beseech those who will judge this criminal organization to include my testimony and my accusations into the many volumes of its dossier. . . .”

He was writing to friends too. Mykhailyna heard from him, messages included in letters to his wife and coming under the “severe constraints” of the camp rules, when they arrived at all. “It was 1972,” she recalls. “We lived for news from There.”

She made a point of posting her letters from different cities, to “compensate” him for the sudden forcible withdrawal from “normal, live impressions.” At other times she wrote him a kind of journal, exposing to him her interior, poetic landscape as though they were meeting (as they had done?) late at night after a concert, a play, and reviewing their particular pleasures. She goes to a Bach concert, she sits down to write Vasyl, “about music and spirituality, about the eternal and unchanging, about beauty and tragedy,” wanting to recreate for him her “soaring of the spirit.” It is as if the ache of his absence can be assuaged by confession (“the lofty tremulousness of my soul”) but she says this letter was never received at his end.

The silence is absolute. The clock sounds like a bomb winding up. I am lonely for you. Outside I know the tiny white honey-sweet blossoms of the saskatoon are changing slowly into berry fruit. If you were here, I would lay some on the pillow by your head so you would fall asleep with honey in your mouth.
Just so, as I lie in the cabin’s bed, I have a slant view out the south window through to the burnished poplar trees and the piercingly blue sky that they are splayed across. I thought of your son the other day. He is taller than you now, he has the shadow of a moustache on his upper lip, and his voice is

deepening.
Does he remember his childish sleep on this very bed, tucked in for a nap while you and I lay in the long yellow grasses by the overturned earth of the field? Did he wake up and look for you through the open window? Do you *remember the blanket laid imperfectly over the dry stubble, the grasshoppers nibbling at the shoots of oats, the breeze bearing away our heat?*

Martyrology

In July 1975 Stus was severely beaten by a non-political prisoner and sent to the camp infirmary to recover. As a matter of course, he was refused the medication for his perforated ulcer that, a month later, provoked an internal haemorrhage. He came very close to dying but not, as he had feared, alone. Boris Penson, fellow *zek*, was there. Here is what he wrote:

"I remember the date so well because the camp's loudspeaker system was transmitting the broadcast of the signing ceremonies of the Helsinki Accords. Just imagine: the solemn voice of [the newscaster] intoning about maintaining the respect for human rights to the fullest, and in the middle of the barrack lies Stus, all covered with blood. He had fainted and fell down; blood was everywhere and Vasyl was dying. Some three hours later two camp trustees come accompanied by four guards armed with automatics and leading two attack dogs. The trustees . . . carried him . . . some three hundred yards to the infirmary. . . . The hamorrhage was stopped and later the chief surgeon would brag to me that he pulled Stus out of the morgue."

Stus could not know that, at the other end of the Dubrovlag route, five women political prisoners, including Nadia Svitlychna, having heard Stus was bleeding to death, announced a hunger strike to protest the official maltreatment and offered to donate their own blood. They were shut up in the camp hospital and ignored.

In December 1976 Stus was taken to a prison hospital in Leningrad where three-quarters of his stomach was removed. Two months later he was back in the camp and promptly joined a fellow prisoner's protest against confiscation of mail. He was punished with cancellation of his special post-surgical diet.

Naked body searches. Enforced isolation. Solitary confinement in the freezing cold. Confiscated letters. The burning of several hundred poems found in a camp search. Reduced rations. Stus went on hunger strike in defence of political prisoner Stefania Shabatura and her right to keep her drawings. Fellow *zeks* went on strike for Stus and his right to his poems.

Sergei Soldatov, who arrived a prisoner in 1976, called him Hetman (Cossack chieftain) "because I pictured him on a frisky, raven-black horse, in a gold helmet with a glittering sword in hand, at the head of a brave regiment of Cossacks going into battle." The Hetman would wait until everyone in the barrack was asleep (except for the insomniac, Soldatov) to creep out into the corridor and expel the groans he suppressed all day in his degenerating body.

And he still loved his bride.

Mikhail Heifetz Remembers 1976

"I had to convince my wife that, when she got to Moscow, she should make an appearance in the dissident circles and tell them about the confiscation of [Stus's] poetry. . . . My wife wasn't exactly a political person. But I could tell that she had practically drunk Stus's poems. Then she asked me a question, one which I'll never forget, so originally did it resonate in this politicized business:

'Are the poems dedicated to his wife?'

'Yes.'

'Then for him I'll do everything. Wherever it is necessary for me to go, I'll go.'"

Your women, Vasya! We are all possessed.

In The Poet's Own Voice

Suddenly a whole new set of materials arrives across my desk: all the surviving writings of Vasyl Stus from the Zone. They have been published here and there in Ukrainian-language journals in the West since 1983, the year when his camp notebook "miraculously" made its way abroad (there are no details, only references to "indirect routes"), and now a researcher has brought them to me. There are also a few letters.

Abashed it has taken me so long to get to him, I open my dictionary and try to let the poet through. Finally, he is speaking for himself and he sounds vigorous in his outrage, even proud, as his manifestos and outcries fly from my ballpoint pen. But then suddenly he disappears into words I can't find in the dictionary or behind his inflexible righteousness. He is a man who will be broken before he will bend.

At the beginning of 1977 Stus began his three-year term of exile in a compound near Kolyma in eastern Siberia where he was assigned to forced labour in a gold mine, whose infrastructure had been laid down by slave labour in the 1930s. After a cursory examination by doctors he was pronounced "fit" and sent off to the Matrosov pit.

From his camp notebook:

"My work began. It was a Communist shock brigade. Half the workers were Party members. A model brigade. They were to educate me. There was a horrible dust at the mine-face because there was no ventilation: they were drilling blind vertical shafts. The hammer weighed close to fifty kilograms, the drilling rod, eighty-six kilos. We had to shovel out by hand after the drilling. The respirator (a cloth face mask we tied around our heads) was useless after half an hour—damp and covered with a layer of dust. So you throw it away and work without protection. They say that young men, right out of army service, become sick with silicosis after six months of this hellish work.

"Once I refused to work because there were no respirators. They promised to get me one. I said loudly that that wasn't the point: a respirator is a necessary protection for *every* miner. I asserted this general principle and protested against the violation of technical norms. So they found the respirators . . . and punished me for 'striking.'"

In some respects, life in exile was worse than in camp. According to Mykhailyna, "he felt completely solitary yet was never given the chance to be alone." It was against the regulations to live anywhere but in an assigned dormitory and for room-mates he had a group of rowdy, vodka-soaked drunks at least one of whom was a KGB informant. He feared ceaselessly for his papers and books and was forever at war with the KGB for his mail: "Dozens and dozens of letters simply disappeared. To my

accusations they replied in a novel way: the mail bag at the Magadan airport terminal was full of holes! I sent telegrams to KGB chief Yuri] Andropov: 'Your Service is stealing my mail.' There was no point."

He shattered his heels in a fall and hobbled for weeks on plaster casts, wobbling on crutches over ice and snow to the outdoor privy and, deprived of medicine, tried to heal himself with home-made solutions in which he soaked his gnarled feet. To top it off, a local newspaper, *Leninist Flag*, ran an article, "Friends and Enemies of Vasyl Stus," lavishly spread out over two issues, in which a local nurse testified that "Stus is prepared to rape and murder. He's similar to a fascist." Predictably, dozens of honest Soviet citizens wrote to the paper to register their outrage that such a pervert lived among them.

"He had nowhere to stretch out his soul," Mykhailyna writes. "'And you couldn't bear it. And you could never get warm.' So begins one of his Kolyma poems."

In the summer of 1978 Stus received word that his father was dying in Donbas. Refused permission to travel, he posted a notice on his dormitory door: "Do not disturb. On hunger strike for permission to bury my father." They let him go, accompanied the whole way to Ukraine by a "detachment of spies from the KGB."

"We buried father," he writes, "and I returned to Kolyma as if to prison." A cryptic statement, to say the least. He leaves out the fact that friends, whom he had not seen for six years, had come to the funeral to be with him, among them Mykhailyna, who in turn fails to mention Vasyl's wife who had come with their son. Had they all become already a little insubstantial, blurred by the unreality of everyday life beyond the Zone, so that the only real adventure was back at the Matrosov pit? But these are Mykhailyna's memories, and if she and her beloved friend sit alone under the fruit trees in a swoon of communion, I do not protest. They met the day after the funeral in his childhood home.

MK
It was a squat white house with a narrow porch and a table had been set up in the small garden under a tree. We sat at the table. "And it is you, you, my dearest friends. . . ." An aching feeling of happiness from the visit. Vasyl was very stoic and didn't say much, certainly no complaints or grievances. Reserved. There was pain and anxiety in him but not for himself.

Perhaps for his mother, withered by grief, stunned as much by the return of her son "from There" as by the death of her husband. Or for Mykhailyna with whom he walked among the mine tailings—so exotic for her!—away from all the watchful eyes at every doorway in the village, alone, not saying much, carrying their silence together.

When you stood up to embrace me, I could see over your shoulder the thick, soft, grey sky. Everything was soft on the coast. I stood within two scenarios: in one, your arms were pressing me to your breast, your mouth was on my neck, your heart thudding; in the other, trees were suspended in a grey cloud and whales shuddered within the cold bowl of the grey sea. Your hair tickled my cheek. Outside, red cedars bled decadent into the soil. Inside, an empty bottle of brandy, the TV guide, snapshots of your son. So, the Wife was fecund and child-bearing. I would bear books.

I put the two of you in scenes I imagine—let us say from a Gulag memoir, the scene of your last day

among us. You are a provincial apparatchik getting ready for work. You brush the breadcrumbs off your lapel, check the contents of your briefcase for the fountain pen, explain that you will be detained this evening at a committee meeting. Your wife is distracted, thinking of the day ahead for herself—the grocery shopping, the Party wives' gossip, the half-completed translation of the Russian novel piled by her typewriter.
You are about to walk out of the house and into the void. Neither of you sees the dark car waiting outside the apartment courtyard. You peck your wife on the cheek and shut the door behind you. You are erased.

Later your wife will drive herself mad remembering that, on your last night together, she was too tired for love-making.

This scene has nothing to do with me.

A Photo
The last known photograph of Stus was taken in 1979 towards the end of his exile in Kolyma, though he would live another six years. You cannot see his eyes; they have sunk into the black shadows of his eye sockets. He holds his right arm bent awkwardly at the elbow as though it had been broken and never straightened out. He is wearing a heavy jacket. His head is tilted down ever so slightly but just enough to suggest, for the first time in any of his pictures, that he has been cast down and discouraged. For the first time I find it believable that he is a man who will die.

Completing his term in exile, Vasyl Stus returned to Kyiv in October 1979. Loath to ask anything of anybody, he made his own arrangements at the Paris Commune factory where he worked pouring molten metal into cast iron moulds, but he could barely walk, his feet hurt so. He next found work on the assembly line of a shoe factory, spreading glue on the soles of men's shoes.

MK
Those seven months before his second arrest that Vasyl lived in so-called freedom Mykhailyna remembers as "sombre, monotonous, and melancholy. It was hard for him to breathe in that suffocating atmosphere of the half-truth and the false, it was hard to meet former colleagues and acquaintances who would shake hands with him seemingly sincerely, all the while looking nervously about".

She, along with all the other, needed to keep a job, the money coming in, felt the distraction of family illnesses, food shortages, hart-to-get train tickets. They were all, she said, victims of the false and unfree.

Once upon a time we did not like to leave each other. Now we dance chastely under the gaze of our friends, who separate us and we do not touch again until the party is finished and I, leaning against the wall, seated with my left leg crossed over my right knee, feel your fingers on my ankle. "Good night," you salute a little wearily, and you sweep out the door into the snow while I lean back against the wall, feeling the branding-iron of your fingers still hot on the bone of my ankle, and will myself to be still. I have no business to transact with you in the middle of the night. Such business is illicit, and you and I live in the light of day.

The End Begins

While still in exile, Stus wrote to the Ukrainian Helsinki Monitoring Group, an illegal watchdog organization that monitored the USSR's compliance with the Helsinki Accords on human and civil rights signed in 1973. Stus stated he wished to become a member.
For its monumental task, the Group had thirty-seven declared members. (The number of undeclared members was never disclosed.)

Stus must have understood that for a newly released political prisoner to engage politically in such a public manner was to invite immediate harassment and even repression. A particularly odious form of intimidation was being employed at that time: the fabrication of nasty criminal charges against former political prisoners who had just been released or were about to finish their term. By accusing them of rape, dope-dealing, and hooliganism, the authorities were able to throw them straight back into prison.

"Vasyl wanted to render his friends some real assistance, but what?" Mykhailyna wondered, having visited Stus with the news about the fabricated case against Chornovil. He heard her out, then withdrew from a drawer the pitiable savings from his labour in the pits and handed them over as a gift to Chornovil's wife who was getting ready, continues Mykhailyna, "to make the purgatorial trip to Yakutsk [ten thousand miles east of Moscow] where this shameful farce was being played out."

Yet there begins to coalesce around his "persona" a mystique if not a romance of the inevitability of his doom. Mykhailyna, so impressed by the inner person "unriddled by fear," understands that his refusal to erect the normal protective barriers necessary for the citizen in a police state will be his undoing. "He couldn't have lasted in our world. It was as though he had bared his chest to the gun."

In his notebooks, Stus mulls this over. And accepts that, even as he goes about the melancholy business of the free man at the factory and at home, out in the Zone the camp gates are already opening for his re-entry: "You don't choose fate. You accept it, as it presents itself."

October 1983, Amnesty International in London received a first-hand description from within the camps of life in the Special Regime Camp VS-389-36/1 near Perm, twelve hundred kilometres east of Moscow near the Ural Mountains, where Stus was being held. The report was written in Russian. Its author is not known:

"The regime in the camp is like that in a KGB investigation and isolation cell. . . . There is no ventilation and so it stinks. . . . The work cells are dark: electric light is necessary by day. . . . The light burns at night too. . . . In autumn and winter the electric light is very weak and flickers. . . . The privileges provided for by the Labour Code for the sick and disabled are not applied here. [Prisoners] must work to the death. [In 1980 their daily task was to fit cables to seven hundred electric irons. Most could manage only four hundred.] . . . The food is bad . . . groats, meat (a piece of gristle, bone) which is often rotten. We hardly ever get vegetables. . . . The water is very bad. Sometimes they bring drinking water into the kitchen, but most frequently there is none—and then they boil stagnant water, which is very dirty . . . it stinks but you have to drink it."
On May 14, 1980, seven months after his return to Kyiv, the KGB visited Stus at his workplace. That night he was served with a warrant for his arrest as a repeat offender against Article 62 of the Soviet penal code: "anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda designed to undermine or weaken Soviet power."

He was interrogated, tortured, and sent to trial—his fate fulfilled.

At his trial in Kyiv he tried to speak in his own defence, was expelled from the courtroom and sentenced as an "especially dangerous recidivist" to ten years' forced labour and five years' internal exile.

The trial took place at the end of September 1980, in the hall of the regional court packed with a specially verified and prepared public brought in to give the appearance of an open trial. No acquaintance, friend, or family member was admitted. But Mykhailyna had been summoned to testify.

Vasyl was very thin and pale and rose to greet her but, as this was not allowed, was made to sit down again. When it was her turn to testify, she stood at the dock, her back to Vasyl so that she kept trying to turn around to face him, for which she was reprimanded by the Court. Asked to "describe Vasyl's personality," she rose to the occasion, her first public statement about Vasyl, and went on to speak of him as she would years later, at memorial meetings.

MK
I spoke of him as a person of elevated conscience, a person of honour and idea such as one meets very rarely in life. One should applaud such a person, not put him on trial! I thanked Fate for granting me the chance to know such a person; I said I tried to be like him. Protest against lies and injustice was the only means of existence for him.

As I left the courtroom, I glanced at Vasyl. He sat white-faced and strained, clenching his fists. I never saw him again.

Half a moon hangs in the sky tonight. I stand inside its wan light and await your return. You belong on my white pillows, your limbs smeared with candle glow. I am humming at the base of my tongue the love song that I have swallowed. It is like a fruit whose yellow flesh I suck to slake the anguish of your absence.

Camp Correspondence: An Archive of Letters

In his novel *Cataract*, former *zek* Mykhailo Osadchy usefully reminds us that "*zeks* are not doomed creatures. They may write letters," one every fortnight. As with all Soviet literature, of course, the letters are censored. "A *zek* is supposed to write: 'Dear Mother (Sister, Wife): I have received your letter. I am living well. The administration is pleased with my work. I am involved in socially useful labor at the camp. . . . Yours with love.'"

"I wrote you a week ago but they confiscated the letter," writes Stus to his wife and son on March 22, 1982. "I shall try a second one. I got your package. For the third time they've cancelled one of your visits. So I don't know if we'll be seeing each other soon. I get no letters except yours. This is almost a rule. . . . How is the Kyivan Spring?"

A month later he asks for ballpoint pens even though every scrap of poetry he writes down, in hasty and diminutive script, is confiscated and he wonders whether he has already written all the poetry he is going to write.

August 8, 1982: “I got your letter of the 12th. You would have heard from me at the beginning of the month but they confiscated the letter. It had translations of Rilke in it (I guess they stuck in somebody’s craw).”

In place of his rhymes he shouts obscenities at the “fascists and Gestapo agents” of the KGB. His stirring manifestos fall on deaf ears: the *zeks* are exhausted and the one who wrote a protest letter “to the authorities” has been thrown into solitary for a year.

“We have lost every right to belong to ourselves.” He belongs to no one else either. The lines to his darlings are broken, his friends are cleaning toilets, his country is standing in a queue, hoping for bread. He holds the debris of his life’s portion in his cold, grubby fingers and knows “you must create yourself from your own burning heart.”

Stus writes to his son October 10, 1982: “If you have a clean, innocent heart, then you will live easily in the world, and you will know no evil. For you will be like a bright little fire, a pure beam, to whom all will be drawn with the purest of impulses. For you will be the finest person—like your mother and Baba Ilynka. Do not sin, my son. This is the first rule. Maybe the only one.”

Death Watch: Anonymous Testimony published in *Suchasnist*

“The last time I saw Stus was in 1981, in the Urals. He was going to the bathhouse and he stopped for a few minutes to look out at the taiga. He looked with the eyes of a poet, of a profound spirit as though he had absorbed into himself that which not everyone is given to see. His eyes, face, figure expressed withdrawal from the real order of things. He lived in another world entirely, inaccessible and incomprehensible not only to his jailors but to retribution too.”

It has been said of prisoners in the Gulag that the experience of living in extreme deprivation is transformative: the sufferer becomes aware of the demands of an “internal voice” which calls the individual to sacrifice the body in order to save the soul. This is called a “mystical experience” and is perhaps the message of all Gulag literature, all reports from the “other side”: the metamorphosis of the terror of imminent death into a feast for the spirit.

And now something rather extraordinary begins to happen: at the same point where the mortal Stus is brought low in physical anguish and humiliation (those body searches upon his squatting nakedness), those who were around him begin describing him as “spiritually refined,” “tender,” even “delicate,” as though he were being transfigured before their eyes. He recited Rilke. He cited Plato and Seneca.

All around him are the weaker ones, who stammer and have bad dreams, who long to be drawn up into his field of energy and be electrified there. But they are in awe of him too, for he contains within the cellular structures of his passion a dense and nuclear loneliness.

In the final years, very few documents arrive from Camp 36-1 and no poems at all. His creativity, which may be divided into three periods, Pre-Camp, Camp, and Farewell, now lodges in his last three hundred poems which, collected as *Bird of Spirit*, never emerged from the camp. He is said to have

written a good-bye to his mother, wife, sister, son, and friends in the Fall of 1984, but I have not found it.

In 1985, some time after Stus's death, exiled members of the Ukrainian Helsinki Group based in Washington, DC will send a notice to the Commission on Human Rights at the United Nations, to Amnesty International, and to International PEN noting that "all information about Stus, especially in 1984, [had been] extremely troubling." For five years his family had received no permission to see him, even when his wife, Valentyna Popeliukh, and his sister, Maria Stus, managed the two thousand kilometre journey to the camp. Meanwhile, the executive of the Ukrainian Writers' Union had cynically broadcast that "actually, V. Stus is well" and unpardonably went on to call him a "traitor, terrorist and murderer."

"You aren't really here, not really here."

For the entire last year, Stus was held in an isolation cell on reduced rations in spite of exhibiting dangerous symptoms of kidney malfunction.

He died on September 4, 1985 (precisely twenty years, to the day, after his heady protest in the Kyiv cinema), while working the night shift of a forced labour detail. This is one version. In another, he was on hunger strike.

All his writings remained the property of the KGB.

His family asked to bring home his body. The camp authorities refused. Because he had died before his term was up, they explained, he could not be removed from camp until he had "served" his entire sentence.

They dug the hole and laid him in it, buried under marker number nine in the camp cemetery. The marker was a wooden stake, and, according to the photograph in the newspaper I clipped out, someone has tied an embroidered cloth around it.

> All the same there is nothing sweeter
> than this lost and indolent
> than this carefree, repellent, than
> this earth.
>
> —Vasyl Stus

The Film

In 1989 Stanislav Chernilevsky decides to make a film: "In August 1989, I went to Chusiv [near the Perm camps] to organize the filming of the reburial of Stus's remains but the authorities told us he could only be reburied in winter—danger of epidemic, they said. We figured that sooner or later there was going to be a reburial and we'd better be prepared so we got a Konbas camera and three hundred metres of film stock and set off.

"From the 29th of August to September 1, we filmed the former establishment . . . where . . . Vasyl Stus had died. Our guide was Vasyl Ovsienko—he had been twice imprisoned with Stus.

"I got my first shock at the sight of the Zone when Ovsienko led us through the entry gates and I saw the tracks, now overgown with weeds, down which thousands of people had shuffled, hands behind their back, day after day, year after year, without rest.
"He took us from room to room, told us who had been kept where, who died where. Stus died in cell number three. . . ."

I'm looking at their film, a tenth-generation video lent me by a colleague in Toronto, in the company of a friend whose grasp of the Ukrainian language is strong enough to catch the drift of this washed-out, wobbly version. The crew's inside one of the barracks, filming the plank beds and the inscriptions of the prisoners on the boards—"Murderers! Blood-suckers! Torturers!"—while Ovsienko tells them about Vasyl's last day of life, how he had been sent to the isolator cell and, going in, had said to a fellow prisoner, "I'm declaring a hunger strike to the end," and kept his word.

The film crew tramps around the deserted barracks, tripping over junk in the long grass. Ovsienko hoists himself up on the sill of a barred window to look inside "where Vasyl died." He gestures at the shutters that hang akimbo, the rusted bars, the eternal gloom of the cell. The camera follows him inside (there is a great deal of clattering sound including the roar of a second camera) and he demonstrates that the barracks rooms were as wide as a man with his arms outstretched.

Now we are at Room 12, where Stus sat before being hauled to the isolator. It faced north and never had the sun. On the night of September 4th, 1985, Ovsienko heard the sinister voice of one of the wardens hissing orders and then the noise of a body being dragged away "by thieves in the night."

The camp graveyard, surrounded tentatively by ramshackle fencing, is woolly and thorny like a prairie boneyard. Stus lies under a bed of wildflowers long gone to seed. The crew pokes around in the weeds and comes up with a shredded cloth and the remains of a small blue-and-yellow flag. They clear the grave, tie a new embroidered cloth around the grave stump, and light thin white candles.

In November 1989, Vasyl's son, Dmytro, a Kyiv University student, is finally given permission to unearth his father's remains. Standing in underground water, he digs with a pickaxe in the Ural earth. Carefully removing the rotting planks, he lifts up the blackened body in its shreds of camp uniform and lays it in its new coffin. There is a short prayer service at the open grave, the mourners masking their faces from the sulphurous air.

Later, Stus's mother will complain to a journalist: "An impressive delegation—two busloads—visited me. They bore portraits of Stus, flowers, wreaths trailing ribbons inscribed with phoney declarations: 'O Mother of the Martyr!' 'Hail Mother of the Famous Poet!' But I didn't want any of this. What I wanted was my own living son. I had lost three children: a daughter to famine, an older son to the mines and now this younger one to the Zone. I told them that I spoke now only with myself and the Scriptures."

And so, in 1989, the poet comes home.

At Boryspil Airport in Kyiv, in a cold winter's wind, some hundreds of ordinary people stood in a concentrated silence, holding Ukrainian flags and church banners, staring at the doors of the

Baggage Department building. The Perm-Novosibirsk-Kyiv flight had landed an hour earlier.

Presently, a baggage car drove up and deposited three long packs made from crude boards. These contained the bodies of Stus and fellow Ukrainian *zeks*, Yuri Lytvyn and Oleksa Tykhy. A short liturgy for the dead was sung and then a vehicle bearing the packs set off for the city.

The next day, November 19, the funeral cortege moved through the city, past St. Sophia Cathedral and down St. Volodomyr Street, past the gloomy structures of the old KGB headquarters. Mourners led with a cross bearing a crown of thorns while the rest followed, singing one of the great hymns of the Ukrainian Orthodox liturgy: “Holy God, Holy Almighty, Holy Eternal, Forgive Us.”

At the cemetery a group of former political prisoners took the coffins into their arms and bore them to the graves. And then, because no one but convoy guards had been present at the first burial in the camp cemetery in Perm, thousands now filed past the open graves, each with a handful of earth to cover the dead.

I think that’s the widow among them, the woman in the smart black hat. She has a large, well-shaped nose and a sad, down-turned mouth. With a shapely hand she brushes her tears away. She is wan and middle-aged.

Mykhailyna is there. She stands at the grave and says farewell. I can’t make out her words. I watch her on the videotape, the solemn and inconsolable friend, and soundlessly make her prayer for her.

Last Will and Testament

> Leap over the precipice
> before you grow old,
> and you’ll fall into your childhood:
> face up—into the scented grass.
>
> —Vasyl Stus

On April 25, 1979, Stus wrote a letter to his son. In it he remembers his childhood in a village south of Kyiv. He remembers hanging in his cradle from a hook in the beam of the cottage ceiling. He remembers the brown cape he wore to school and the dead bunnies whose tiny corpses in the dirt made him weep.

He remembers the childhood with the wheelbarrow, trundling potatoes from the field, grass for the goat, coal from the slagheap. He remembers the dish of food he tried to share with his hungry mother. He remembers her one torn blouse, her patched skirt. He remembers he was hungry, and gleaning handfuls of grain from a stubblefield in his baba’s village when a mounted guard snatched his bag and ran him off.

He remembers the first maps he saw—of ancient Egypt and Greece. And the first time he read Jack London’s *Martin Eden* and Nikolai Ostrovsky’s *How the Steel Was Forged*, and that he promised to study very hard and be like their heroes so that people would live better. He remembers a song: Throw off my chains, set me free,/I will teach you to love liberty.”

“Remember, my son, that people must live like the angels, with love for one another, with feeling;

that all people are equal and honourable, all-powerful, whole, crystalline, made in the image of God. . . . For everything is alive and wants to live."

Photos from the Republic of Happiness

Photograph of a street in Kyiv. Three men, two now dead. Summer (they are in shirtsleeves). The man in the middle, Stus, is talking, pointing a finger. He has a sweater thrown over his left shoulder. He is broad-shouldered, slim-hipped. His right hand holds a briefcase. It must be heavy: I can see the corded muscles of his arm running up under the sleeve. He is thirty years old and belongs to that legendary generation, the Sixties People, for whom the heady atmosphere of the early 1960s has already thickened and clogged with worry and fear as friends are plucked out one by one and vanish. They were made prisoners at the first peak of their creative lives. They had been writing poems, painting pictures, developing theories. Then, they were working in stone quarries and weaving shopping bags.

But in 1968, 1969, Vasyl is still with us. He goes to the studios of his friends to see their paintings, he goes to football games, he lifts up his face to the September sun, crushing the withering leaves of the chestnut trees underfoot.

A photograph of Vasyl and some of his poet friends from student days. They are lined up on a couch, grinning, except for Vasyl whose head is bent down in contemplation of something on his lap. Thick dark hair tumbling onto his forehead. The sculptured cheeks and proud nose. The mouth slightly open. The shutter has just clicked. I have slid onto the couch beside him. I push my hand into his hair, groping along his skull, and pull his head back. He shuts his eyes. His mouth falls open and he utters a little cry. I do not let go.

He is surrounded by women. These are his friends, the ones who also write poems, who bustle about the one-room flat bearing platters of bread, sausage, radishes, torte, while everyone gets drunk and kisses each other in sheer admiration, who kick off their shoes and dance on the Crimean rugs, curling their arms around Vasya's hips and dragging him into the waltz, who shuffle off to the camps, too, and, thin and cold, their hair falling out and their breasts flattened and sapless, offer their blood for Vasyl.

Mykhailyna is here. She has written herself back into the festivities, the golden summers of their "small, temporary Republic of Happiness" where they found in each other's company relief from the everyday world of affliction and separateness. In their Republic they were neighbours again, confidants, audience, lovers, acolytes, at the core of which was their poet, Vasyl. He lived as the "poetic heart" of their little sovereign republic, "like the good heart of a good king."

Where is the wife? No one mentions her. She is not there when, later, the surviving friends conjure up those celebratory feasts of their youth. Vasyl writes to her from the Zone, but the letters are so crabbed by the sour censorship that I cannot read anything there of his love, and I have found none of her letters to him.
And when I do come upon his love poems, none later than 1965, I am not relieved but excited by jealousy.

tell me that you love me.
Just tell me about our love.
(Like the pulp near the cherry pit)
A single, solitary, round, damp
succulent . . . red word

—Vasyl Stus

Jealous that, while I and all the other women dance attendance on him, offering our sighs and loyalty, he has cleaved to his wife and taken her to bed,

so that gathered into yourself like a tiny fist,
you'll become whole and unharmed,
restored for my hoarse
gutteral whisper of joy.

—Vasyl Stus

MK

A quiet summer evening on the Prypiat. The broad, gentle river rolling by. Motorboats puttering busily back and forth, carrying hay and some kind of fishing tackle. On the river bank, our small camp of noble savages on vacation. A few tents, a large wooden table, a firepit. Frying fish, a pot of dumplings, a bottle glinting in the pail of water. All of us were in splendid form, the men with paper bowties pasted to their naked chests. We raised the flag—lifejackets on a rope—and held our musical instruments—pots, spoons, plates—in readiness.

At exactly the designated time, the flag leaped to the top of the pole to the accompaniment of a great clanging and clattering. From around the river bend came sailing a boat festooned in greenery. Two "nymphs" held aloft blossoming branches of plum while at the prow stood the tall, strong figure of a man whimsically draped in water lily plants, his head wreathed in wild grasses, and his hands gripping a stave. Poseidon! Magnificent, truly beautiful, this Neptune. Our friend, our poet, Vasyl.

And then he rounds a bend in the river and is gone. For awhile I hear the plash of the water disturbed by the oars and then that too is gone. The next view I have of him he is in the Zone, a hero among the damned.

He is thin, his hair is cropped, his camp uniform hangs on him like a potato sack. It's cold, the fire has gone out, the plank bed is hard and slicked with frost.
And then, in the final years, he becomes the dying man, his flesh melting away from him as he drifts off into a rapture of the spirit.

His place was where he found it—in his case, as it turned out, in a camp. Agreed, you say: all poets are citizens but it does not follow that all citizens are poets, and who will write the poems of the men and women weaving shopping bags in the Urals and digging gold in Siberia, flapping their arms and stomping their feet within the icy walls of the isolator cell? The task of the writer is to write, you say, not to sit (tongue-tied) in prison. The corollary is this: anyone can go to prison but only Stus can write Stus. Yet he didn't agree. Unperturbed by the epithets—spy, traitor, bourgeois nationalist—he got up from his writing desk and went to the Zone.
t
He did not hold on. I hold on. I insist on that broad back, the elegant line of the narrow hip in black trousers, the sinews under the hairy skin of his arm. I imagine the clenched musculature of his

buttocks, the long shaft of his thighs, the dark, soft curl of his sex laid against his belly. He is lying on the grass. His bony fingers hold a plum, its blue skin split open, the flesh's golden liquor smearing his thumb. He shades his eyes against the sun. A small, pale butterfly lifts off from the cabbage plant and lights on his lip and he keeps her there, while she drags her soft powdery limbs into the corner of his mouth.

Remember how later, after the food and the drink, we went walking along the riverbank and talked and the air smelled of hay and mint?