

After the apocalypse we lived in Pfarrkirchen  
with its double-onion domed church  
where I first saw the stations of the cross,  
Jesus on his knees amid a throng of deformed faces,  
the incensed walls bearing up ancient icons,  
and in our cabin on the windward hill, Aunt Julia,  
wizened in her sixtieth year, played cards with me  
in her black woolen dress and patient heart,  
the gooseberry bushes thickening in noonshine,  
bursting crisp clusters in my mouth after the Alps  
had traced their distant shadows in pink quilts of mint.

The camp loomed at the town's edge  
like a medieval crenellated beast  
hoarding its bewildered store of displaced lives  
that the Americans threatened to repatriate,  
wracks, animate and gaping, after glimpsing  
the angel with the skull's chalice that had  
galloped over them on blood-veined roads.

Somewhere they had heard of my father,  
his single-mindedness, his wits that saved us  
from the slaughter mills along the Vistula,  
living apart in his aerie above the specks  
of kinsmen massed below. Ostap, they said,  
help us, or they'll throw us on Ford trucks  
and then the cattle wagons at Brest where  
the train tracks widen all the way to Yakutia.

Even then they were inept, bringing their bottles  
of home-made hooch and jaw-loose grins.  
Slavic mush, swore my father, but took the job  
anyway out of that softness he concealed  
to the left of his breastbone. So we came down

from the hillside, riding the vernal foam  
of Alpine lowlands into the teeming citadel

with wide hallways and mullioned window sills.  
My father brooked no preferential treatment  
but moved into one of the cavernous high-ceilinged  
rooms partitioned for a dozen families  
where I could hear the mattress springs moan at night  
and saw strange glances pass between my parents in the day.

I chewed my first mouthfuls of white bread  
and peanut butter spooned from titanic cans,  
the dark-green trucks in constant motion,  
hauling their canvassed wonders while I played  
in the cemented courtyard and the doorways  
near the curtained cubicles, chaotic basins  
of attraction where transverse flows of bodies mixed  
with the aromas of latrines and whiskey stills,

the days fretted by honey-languaged shouts  
and arguments from cheekboned faces  
and bearded mouths, shrill curses  
around corners, and the women's guttural songs  
behind the curtain walls, my father's fists  
continuously tight, his eyes intense and vigilant  
as he paced like a monastic commandant  
through that archipelago of human wrecks.

Soon he had whipped them into shape,  
a nonesuch commune, first-class haven  
for politicals, in three months passing muster  
with the allied commission's muck-a-mucks.  
I never saw the hillside cabin again  
but wandered through the vast complected corridors  
of that immense fugitive palace,  
one afternoon accidentally walking into  
some kind of atelier, high-beamed and bright,  
full of men around a heavy-breasted nude  
on a pedestal of cardboard and old planks.

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