



MON DEG REEN

SONGS ABOUT DEATH AND LOVE

(AN EXCERPT)

VOLODYMYR
BY RAFEYENKO

TRANSLATED BY MARK ANDRYCZYK

Mondegreen: Songs about Death and Love, by Volodymyr Rafeyenko, translated with an introduction and notes by Mark Andryczyk, is forthcoming from the Harvard Library of Ukrainian Literature. Printed by permission of the Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute.



abinsky finally climbed to the top of Golden Gates. The twenty-ninth station of the Kyiv metro. Although it's raining, there are many people by the metro. It's always like that here. The Syretsko-Pecherska Line. Dark-blue clumps crawl in the sky. They formed over the Baltics and swam over here to this station, which has existed since December 31st of the eighty-ninth year of the previous century in order to ruin people's moods. This sense of

dampness kills one's self-confidence. And it is only the round columns, the Byzantine chapters, and the mosaic panels, only the eternal dark-grey granite, that somehow support the will to movement, if not to work. According to *The Daily Telegraph*, it is one of the twenty-two most beautiful stations in Europe. Kyi, Shchek, Khoryv, Lybid, Dyr, Askold, Ihor Son of Riurik, the esteemed Princess Olha, and so on, all the way up to Danylo Romanovych. In other words, all of our guys and gals are here, everyone is where they are supposed to be, there is no need for any concern. Your insanity will find you, nonetheless. And there's the St. Sophia Cathedral, and there's the Church of the Tithes; oh and there we have the Irynine Church, and, hey, look—it's St. Michael's Church. St. Cyril's Church, The Mother of God Church at Pyrohoshcha, The Church of the Saviour at Berestovo. Some say that Orthodoxy brought nothing but grief to the people of Kyiv. It doesn't look that way. The griffins, at least, came out really good. They are so frickin' awesome.

Just look at them. One is Halibey, the other Babliuk. Some people believe that they are named Begma and Bedzyk, but that's crazy. They respond only to Halibey and Babliuk. Although it is true that Babliuk sometimes thinks he's Halibey and that Halibey stubbornly associates himself with Babliuk. You say—Halibey, sweetheart, come to me. But nope, he doesn't. He squirms. Overindulged medieval bastard.

Haba loved those beasts because griffins, obviously, are completely mythical creatures: each of them is both an eagle and a lion. Like all the world's refugees, these beasts are completely irresponsible and, in evenings such as this one, helpless too. And what's the deal with a griffin? What's he all about? A tail that is long and fabulous. In this case, for some reason, triangular. A character that is playful, quirky. And there you have it—a griffin. Babliuk is convinced that his being personifies the Sun, strength, and the astuteness of wisdom. Halibey is responsible for the swiftness of punishment and retribution. In Haba's first months in Kyiv he would play with them for long periods of time, feed those poor dudes

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poppy-seed buns, which he would buy at Yaroslavna and, eventually, they began recognizing him.

The meeting was set up on Yaroslaviv Val, in that very same Yaroslavna café, where they sell poppy-seed buns and coffee, wine, cognac, and compote. The lampposts flickered. People hurried. Smiling faces swam about. The Baltic clouds created a peacefulness and a slow and dull light rain. The young, the old, the Ukrainian-speaking and the English-speaking; everyone was happy for some reason. There is no doubt that among them were readers of James Augustine Aloysius Joyce. And this was a bit strange. How are they able to read such wise books when, in the world—that is, in the Ukrainian world—there's a war going on or, as they say, an ATO¹ endures?

Haba never really understood what this ATO means. Perhaps it stands for “authentic types of observation.” But what does that have to do with the war in the East? What about that merciless death that reaps its harvest in these lands? What about the despair that smolders in one's heart and does not disappear, even in dreams? In conscious dreams Habinsky would ever more frequently end up in a strange place—the one with which he became familiar during his final months in Donetsk.

There, people and dolls had equal rights. It was a complete horror, but in no ways was it an ATO. And if it is about observation, then why is there this constant pain that eats at your insides and squeezes out not only dish and fish or hook and rook but also reality itself from your brain.

But really, it's all quite clear. The Ukrainian government is developing skills in the selection and schematization of observations of characteristics. Any Leonardo da Vinci worth his salt must master the skill of simplifying a characteristic in order to later squeeze it into his own talented individuality. These methods have existed for ages. Almost since prehistoric times. It was Schiller who noticed that aesthetic and creative aspirations would constitute a joyous kingdom of play and safety amidst a grave world. It's as if it frees people from everything that hounds them in both the physical and psychological sense. And that is where ATO comes from. Generalization and schematization—those are the two poles upon which we have been hung, my brother. And we dangle, tangle, and sway from there, kinda like two happy scarecrows among the corn. Painted faces, rags blackened by the rains and winds, and, instead of hearts, which were eaten out by the occupiers—there is a poplar stick. The birds jeer at the scarecrow, the roads beckon and lure, but where can he really go now, one-legged, damaged, and poor? And a frickin' Russian-speaking one at that. Sorry, gentlemen, if that last bit doesn't rhyme.

Looking around the room, Haba didn't see the person he was supposed to meet. On the one hand, the verbal portrait painted by Petro Petrenko may not really reflect reality. But that's not a problem. In real life, Haba

looked just like he did on his Facebook page—gloomy and lackluster.

“If she wants to find me, she'll find me,” he said to himself and got some compote, cognac, and a poppy-seed bun; hung up his leather jacket on the back of a chair; and once again looked around. The Yaroslavna quietly rocked on the waves of time. People swam past it. Flowing past the large windows were the street, the buildings across it, stars, cars, female smiles, and past life—and circling around all of this was the ATO zone, like Jupiter around the sun.

“Let our doll not forsake us,”² Haba said, lifted the cognac, smelled it, felt the sweet aroma of genuine Transcarpathia, and took a gulp. The liquid turned out to be so pleasant that he couldn't resist and drank up everything that he had purchased. He thought about it and got another glass of that thick, fragrant amber.

“I believe you're the one that I am looking for,” a joyful, young bell rang just above his right ear.

Haba breathed in the air, which still had the aroma of cognac, and carefully turned his head. A smallish young woman in light-grey overalls and a green coat. He wrapped his chosen one in the coat of his love,³ thought Haba, got up and bowed.

VOLODYMYR
RAFAYENKO

Photo by Natasha Kravchuk.

“Habinsky!”

“Ole-Luk-Oie.” The girl gave her name and sat down on the stool across from Haba.

“What can I get you?” Habinsky gallantly smiled. “Coffee, compote, green-black tea, a *pliatsok*, a bun, some chocolate?”⁴

“And get me some cognac too, please,” Ole acquiesced, “and a big mug of black tea.”

“Of course, as you wish,” Haba lowered his shoulders, “but would Uncle Petrusio⁵ approve?”

“Oh, don’t worry about that,” the girl chuckled. “I’m not twenty years old, I’m allowed to have sweets.”

Haba ordered cognac and poppy-seed buns for the girl and for himself, waited

for the server to pour boiled water into the mug, and thought about the fact that Ole had turned out to be quite

different than he had imagined.

It seems that Petrusio was mistaken.

After his conversation with his friend,

Haba had expected

a delicate and shy, yet very serious, eighteen-year-old girl. And here, my friends, we have a twenty-year-old, or even, gasp, a twenty-three- or a twenty-four-year-old! (*Twenty-five?*) And she is by no means shy. A young, attractive woman. Fairly happy eyes, a trim figure, cool overalls, a somewhat juvenile little coat, a pink umbrella. And on top of all that—she drinks cognac. “Well, for God’s sake, what is left for me to teach her?” Haba pondered.

“Let’s drink to our acquaintance,” the girl suggested. “Uncle has told me so much about you. He said that you’re a serious, honest, highly educated, Ukrainian-language-speaking person. You can tell the difference between *banosh* and *zupa* and, in general, you have some kind of degree.”⁶

“Really?” Haba made himself smaller, “To be honest, your uncle is exaggerating. Ok, I got *banosh* down, but I’m not all that well-versed in *zupa* as I would like to be. It’s difficult without practice.”

“But aren’t you a scholar?”

“The scholarliest scholar,” Haba smiled. “To be honest, I agreed to meet you only because in those couple of months (*days?* *years?*) that we’ve worked together, Petro Petrovych has become almost like family for me. At the same time, I really have no idea in what context our future relationship could develop, if it is to develop at all.”

“Understood,” Ole smiled. “How about a brief course in literary aesthetics? You specialize in that, don’t you?”

“And what use does a woman your age have for that?” Haba honestly inquired.

Ole once again laughed.

“Forgive me,” he became concerned. “I didn’t mean to say that



Yaroslavl Val during the evening rush hour (2020); via Shutterstock.

young women have no need for this; what I . . .”

“Don’t fret,” Luk-Oie suggested, lifting the glass of cognac. “Shall we drink to our acquaintance?”

“Yes indeed,” Habinsky agreed.

He drank up and inhaled the air that was filled with the din, and the smells, of the buffet, and looked through the windows of Yaroslavna. On the opposite side, above the chaotic and multicolored crowd, emerged the silhouette of the MR.⁷ Its eyes were sad and distressed. It smoked, as always, a slim cigarette, and one could see in its eyes that it was not feeling very well. It’s not used to having people around, Haba thought with pity. It’s always alone, doesn’t know anyone in the city besides me, and, on top of all that, there’s the traumatic experience of authentic observation. Something needs to finally be done with this.

“What are you looking at?” Ole became interested and began eating the poppy-seed bun.

“It’s nothing,” Haba lowered his shoulders and turned his eyes away from the window. “A familiar figure flashed by. So, you say you want to become a student? What subject are you interested in? I assume that technical studies are not really your thing, right? And that’s a good thing because technical studies and I are not a good match . . .”

“The things is,” Ole placed her unfinished bun on the plate, “that I’m already in my second year as a PhD student at Chernivtsi University. I’m hoping to defend my dissertation next year.”

Haba paused for a minute. He once again looked through the window. The Mare’s Head had disappeared. The wind was picking up but the Baltic clumps hadn’t gone anywhere. They blackened, blued, and circled above the city, and it became clear that the rain wouldn’t stop until morning.

“Honestly, at this point I don’t understand anything. Then why am I here? What’s the point?”

VOLODYMYR
RAFAYENKO

ON THE OPPOSITE
SIDE, ABOVE THE
CHAOTIC AND
MULTICOLORED
CROWD, EMERGED
THE SILHOUETTE
OF THE MR.

“The point is,” Luk-Oie cheerfully explained, “that Uncle Petro believes that his niece is now brainy enough and that the time has come for her to be happy.”

“In the matrimonial sense of the word?”

“Of course,” she nodded her head and laughed jovially. “But don’t worry. That’s what my uncle thinks, not me.”

“You don’t want to be happy?” Haba inquired seriously.

“I am happy and everything is fine.”

“So, what are we to do then?” Haba extended his arms. “Why did we meet, why are we drinking this wine? In times of war, humanities scholars need to have a clear understanding of their own motives, their consequences, and the reasons for them.”

“You know,” Ole giggled, “my uncle always tries to introduce me to people, but I don’t want to meet with most of them. And when he told me about you christening the dried fruit,

I truly became interested. Besides, I was free for the evening, and so I decided that that it was no big deal.”

Luk-Oie became quiet, checked out the elderly couple by the neighboring table for a few seconds, took a sip of tea and a bite of the *pliatok*.

“What do you say?”

At first, Haba said nothing, just ate a small piece of the bun and later noticed:

“The way I see it, he asked me to ‘instruct’ you, but you don’t need any instruction,

and he told you that I’m insane and that I need to talk to someone. Correct? That’s what bugs me about Petro, his constant tending to me. One cannot deprive a Kyivite of his absolute disrespect for the internal brittle world of a displaced person.”

“You misunderstood . . .”

“I already told him,” Habinsky could feel how in the depths of his multi-eyed “I” the Bee of Great Anger was lifting its head, “that I am not crazy; moreover, I regularly visit my psychiatrist, so everything is fine. Except that my head hurts sometimes. But that should be of no concern to anyone . . .”

Haba had become sweaty (*a worm is the larva of an insect*); the smile and silvery eyeglasses of Laurentius shone before him. Grabbing his head (*that lives in the ground*), he exerted great efforts in holding himself back. Accursed war. (*St. Nicholas has turned to dust because of the worms. And even the savior himself, the one on the gates, has split in half.*)⁸

“But I thought it was so funny!” Luk-Oie added, glancing straight into Habinsky’s eyes and touching

his damp palm, and, in doing so, instantly chasing away the intruding unpleasant reality. “It’s so great that you and Uncle Petro are friends. Oh my God, Mr. Habinsky, blessed onions and dill, that’s awesome!”

“Really?” Haba smiled at his cognac, took a big gulp (*no one will end up falling on the floor and yelling*) and, attempting to act as quietly as possible, took his hands off the table and began secretly rubbing his palms on his pant legs.

“This is so hilarious, oh my God,” Ole jovially laughed. “Molière and Beaumarchais have got nothing on you. Three grown men in a drunken state christening a store. That is just precious.”

“Yep,” Haba nodded, “The Eleusinian Mysteries.”

The Beautiful and the Beneficial is part of the KarmaTown shopping-entertainment center. That huge, silent, and lively space greeted Petro Petrakis and Haba with the smells of a mopped-up floor, of air still filled with the perfume that is sold in the daytime by its entrance, of tasty hot corn on the cob that was cooked right here by the cash registers of The Beautiful and the Beneficial an hour or two ago, and of the light and romantic, like one’s first love—smells of onion, cabbage, potatoes, bananas, kiwis, and fresh, but not quite ripe, mandarins. A realm of soft, subdued light.

During the day—it is true—in this giant space, which is as big as St. Peter’s Church in Rome, there are two hundred forty or, more likely, three thousand three hundred thirty-two, different enterprises. Thirty-four of them or, probably, fifty-eight, are restaurants, bars, cafés,



“ YOU SURE ARE A GOOD STORYTELLER, VASYL. MAYBE YOU SHOULD HAVE INDEED BECOME A PRIEST.”

or small, simple, fast-food stands. Five hundred forty are clothing and jewelry shops. Seventy-three are stores with souvenirs or household goods. Eighteen—bank offices. Ten—toy stores, adult ones too. Five are shops with European cheeses and wines. The second and third floors are set aside for leisure.

“This is your first time here, right, Vasyl? Just wait till you see it,” Petro smiled with glee. “Altogether, the center takes up X amount of thousands of square meters or, one hundred and five square kilometers. Which, by the way, is equal to the size of a city, such as Paris.”

“In other words, it’s big enough,” Vasyl respectfully nodded.

“Plenty. Besides The Beautiful and the Beneficial we’ve got bowling-shmowling, a pool with dolphins, tennis with rackets—Petro poured silent Haba and good Vasyl some vodka—an ice-skating ring to sense the coldness of existence, a small private zoo, three movie theaters with movies, a theater floating on water, a cabaret, fourteen slick business centers and beautifully-equipped halls for assemblies. In other words, assembly halls.”

“Truly convenient.” Vasyl drank a shot of vodka and ate a pickle.

“Yep,” Petro agreed. “In one try you can get a vacuum-cleaner, take a selfie with a monkey, drink some whiskey, go for a swim in a pool, drink some whiskey, insure your life, play a few rounds of tennis, drink some whiskey, and then after all that, like a true man, get on the skating rink and fucking kill yourself.”

“It’s really, really convenient,” Haba nodded. “All this place needs is a funeral parlor.”

“In general, I think,” Petro continued, “what we really need here is an open natal pavilion.”

“A ‘Quasimodo’ natal pavilion, a ‘*Nie ma sprawy*’ funeral parlor, a Prometheus crematorium, and a Nestor Makhno tele-radio station,” Haba amended.⁹

“Yes,” Petrunio agreed, “and we’re unwaveringly moving in that direction.”

The posse quieted down and, without agreeing to do so, all started going in the direction of huge glass doors almost five meters tall through which one could see cars racing along an avenue, stopping at red lights; they looked at the large buildings of new residential complexes, which had just lit up with the happy hearths of family joy and comfort, and they observed the endless life of a big strange city, the capital of a country at war.

The Beautiful and The Beneficial takes up less than twenty percent of the first floor. At night, you can just sit on the floor, like now, and listen to how all those things that fill up the Obolonian Paris live. You can hear how Turkish gold converses with Chinese jumble; how an indiscernible individual knocks a ping-pong ball on bare, tennis tables, whose green backs extend to the horizon where, exhausted by the monotony of life, the sad killer whale Femida, who has for two years already been presented by this attraction’s owners as the dolphin Tolia, swims in a large dark pool lit up by the fires of Obolon. And this Femida is in no way a Tolia and, moreover, not a dolphin. It is a killer whale, *Orcinus orca*, hailing from a population of the Norwegian Sea that specializes in herring and follows the migration of the latter to the shores of Norway every autumn. And it is because of its love for herring—and not for those loud, stupid creatures that come to KarmaTown every day—that it has not eaten any of them. It

swims and senses the whole city living and dancing, and dying, and crying, and laughing around it. And it doesn’t like it because it does not understand how one can live like that. How one can eat herring that was frozen a hundred years ago and is sold at The Beautiful and The Beneficial and, on top of that, is chased with shot of cheap Polish vodka.

And beneath this random junk, beneath Femida, beneath The Beautiful and The Beneficial, beneath these dudes, who are sitting on the floor by the stands and discussing life, the subway pulses along toward nighttime. This pulse is constantly felt. But soon the hour will come when the underground world will shut its doors. The metro-beast needs time to digest today’s impressions and the living shadows of slapdash people—their smiles and memory, and their pictures and movements, that will remain in distant and endless undergrounds for eternity.

Haba thought about all of this while Vasyl talked about how he once studied in a monastery; how he met his first wife, then left the priesthood, and then went to work at a factory. He became the talented head of a division, a great plumber, a big-time dreamer with a capital “D”; and then he completed an institute, became the constructor of constructors, a businessman, even had a few patents, whatever that means. But he stayed true to the hobbies of his youth. He loved to read the Bible

and ponder his future meeting with Christ. He traveled to Jerusalem several times, to the Garden Tomb, to see what is there and what had happened there with his own eyes. He cried like a child when he saw the Garden of Gethsemane (*And then Jesus came with them to the place known as Gethsemane and said to His disciples*). And in everyday life he always found time to instruct, and heal with enlightening lessons, the toiling hearts of the proletariat and managers of this world.

“Shall we begin, boys?” he finally said, and Peter, with Haba in tow, seemed to have awoken from a long sleep.

“You sure are a good storyteller, my dear Vasyl,” Petrunio rocked his head and glanced at the clock above the entrance, “maybe you should have indeed become a priest. Maybe we would have already had Heaven on earth for some time now.”

“Would have gotten God’s blessing for Ukraine,” Haba added, “and would’ve moved it a bit to the left.”

“Where to the left?” Vasyl couldn’t understand.

“Past Poland, at least. Let the Poles deal with the Russians on their own. And then we’d see who Lviv belongs to and what authentic national memory looks like. Or, even better—past Germany. Let us have a border with the Benelux countries. With all of them at once, at that.”

They became quiet.

“Now then,” Vasyl said at last.

All three of them got up. They

“LET THE POLES DEAL WITH THE RUSSIANS ON THEIR OWN. AND THEN WE’D SEE WHO LVIV BELONGS TO AND WHAT AUTHENTIC NATIONAL MEMORY LOOKS LIKE.”

mused for a bit. Petro rubbed his beard and motioned to Vasyl.

“Begin!”

That one pulled out of his bag that which he brought with him, laid out everything on the stools, and made the sign of the cross.

“In the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit!” he said with a regular voice and coughed. He then read a few Psalms, prayers to God the Father, to the Holy Spirit, and to the Mother of God. “We are blessing the dried fruits of The Beautiful and the Beneficial,” he proclaimed at last, sternly looking somewhere into the otherworld space, “and through it—the whole plant world of Ukraine, consumer goods for the soul and body, white sugar and strong onions, buckwheat, Thai rice, the citizen’s spirit, all of our salt and soda and oil. And together with them, chocolate, cocoa beans, nuts, various seeds, salted pork, and vodka. Let coffee be not bitter, but let tea, pepper, and all types of ginger (medicinal, *Zingiber officinale*) be so. Amen.”

“Why all that?” Habinsky commented unsatisfyingly. “We have no desire to bless vodka and meat. We desire only that dried fruits be blessed.”

“Drop it,” Piotrek grabbed Haba by the sleeve of his sweater, “he knows what he should and shouldn’t say. Let him say it. It’s working out alright, isn’t it? Keep in mind, Hitler was an abstinent and vegetarian specter.”

“Let these holy goods not be touched by the gluttonous hand

of an evil beast,” Vasyl continued, “that is—by its nails, claws, talons, or hooks. Let neither alien overseas wisdom nor our local metaphysical evil ruin the holy and beneficial God’s plan to make everything around us magnificent and wonderful. Let these dry and beneficial raisins, cherries, prunes, dates, pears, apples, ginger and pitted apricots . . .”

“Raisins and dried apricots with pits,” Haba suggested.

“Raisins and dried apricots with pits,” Vasyl picked up and ran with it, “dried mushrooms and condensed milk, preserves, jams, jellies, and powdered eggs all be blessed, grow, and multiply.”

Haba approached the stand where an unopened bottle of vodka stood, grabbed it, carefully looked around, sat on the floor, and took a few sips.

“And let this this war finally come to an end,” he said quietly.

“Vasyl, let this war come to an end!” Petro asked.

“Merciful God!” Vasyl yelled as tears involuntarily began to fill his eyes.

“Let this war, which denies us peace and rest, end. Forgive us, God, have mercy on us!”

Having said that, he pulled out candles, which he had brought with him from the Holy Land, from the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, lit them, and stuck one or two of them into a potato, a few into oranges and kiwis; seven were used for dried fruits, onions, grains, and bread. He poured holy water, which he had gotten this morning at St. Nicholas Church, into a glass; a despondent Haba handed him large, hairy paintbrushes, which Haba Habinsky and Piotrek Petravskiy had picked up at the Heroiv Dnipra metro station, dipped them in the holy water and sprinkled it around.

The droplets flew far, all the way to the distant stands, passed them, and partially landed on the cookery display cases, lay there for a few seconds, and then got up and moved along. They circled near the transparent doors and went through them. Having flown outside, they paused for a moment, as if they were checking out Kyiv and thinking what should be done next, and then shot upward. Then, momentarily, in the glow of the lampposts, cars, and advertisement lights, a heavy, clear rain fell in a solid green wave over Kyiv.

“And, Vasyl. Let our enemies fade,”¹⁰ Peter said, sat next to Haba, accepted the bottle from him, glanced at the rain beyond the grey walls of the building, and also took a sip.

“Grant us victory, O Lord!” the plumber implored quietly, almost pathetically. “Let it be a small one, but one that is ours. And grant us peace in our land, light, harmony, and hope.”

“And let my mother think of me, at least from time to time,” Haba whispered and lowered his head, “because not one of us knows where it is that he or she shall perish.”

“And Habinsky’s mom, Holy Lord,” Vasyl voiced sternly, “let her know that this dude loves her and thinks about here every day.”

“And father,” Habinsky quietly uttered and began to cry.

“And let Habinsky’s father have good health, bread on the table, and, at least occasionally, tranquility.”

“He has issues with his memory, with his stomach, and with his heart. They are cold and frightened in city Z, but they, holy father, will never leave it.”

“Grant our families a guardian angel, O Lord,” ardently pleaded Vasyl, quieted for a moment and then with prayer and holy water walked along the stands. ■

“

**GRANT US VICTORY,
O LORD! LET IT BE
A SMALL ONE, BUT
ONE THAT IS OURS.
AND GRANT US
PEACE IN OUR LAND.”**

¹The Ukrainian-Russian war in the Donbas region, which began in 2014, was officially referred to as an Anti-Terrorist Operation (ATO) by the Ukrainian government until 2018.

²A pun on a popular Ukrainian drinking song, “*Hey, nalyvaite povnii chary*” (Hey, Fill the Glasses), which has the line “let our fate not forsake us.”

³This phrase is a quote from part VI of Ivan Franko’s 1905 poem *Moisei* (Moses). The translation of the complete poem by Vera Rich can be found here: <http://sites.utoronto.ca/elul/English/Franko/Franko-Moses.pdf>.

⁴Among Haba’s offerings are *pliatok*—the name of a pastry-pie/cake that is baked in Western Ukraine and is rather exotic in most other regions in Ukraine—and *chokoliad*—a Western Ukrainian term for the literary-Ukrainian *shokolad*, both meaning “chocolate.”

⁵As part of the novel’s continual exploration of names and naming, the author plays with several of the characters’ names throughout. For example, in this excerpt Petro Petrenko is also referred to as Uncle Petrusio, Petsia Petrovych, Uncle Petro, Petro Petrakis, Petrunio, and Piotrek Petravskiy.

⁶*Banosh* is a cornmeal dish popular in the Carpathian region of Western Ukraine. *Zupa* is the Western-Ukrainian word for “soup” (other regions of Ukraine use the term *sup*).

⁷MR refers to the Mare’s Head—a character from Ukrainian folklore whom Haba continually sees, and occasionally converses with, on the pages of the novel.

⁸This is a quote from the 1859 Stepan Rudansky (1834–73) poem-anecdote *Pros’ba* (A Request).

⁹“*Nie ma sprawy*” means “no problem” in Polish. Nestor Makhno (1888–1934) was an infamous Ukrainian anarchist revolutionary, who was commander of an anarchist army in Ukraine from 1917 until 1921.

¹⁰This phrase is from the Ukrainian national anthem.

Translator’s Note

Hailing from Donetsk, Ukraine—the largest city in Ukraine’s easternmost Donbas region—Volodymyr Rafeyenko is a writer, poet, translator, literary critic, editor, and film critic. Moreover, he is also a scholar, who completed postgraduate studies in literary theory at Donetsk University. In July 2014, Rafeyenko fled Donetsk for Kyiv when Russia-backed rebels took control of his hometown. Having for years enjoyed great success as a Russophone writer living in Ukraine, the writer was appalled by Russia’s false claim that Russophone Ukrainians were in peril as a result of Ukraine’s recent Revolution of Dignity. He felt he was both a victim of the war and, in some ways, responsible for it. This roused him not only to flee Donetsk but also to make a concerted effort to learn the Ukrainian language. *Mondegreen: Songs about Death and Love*, his seventh novel, is the first he has written in the Ukrainian language.

Rafeyenko’s *Mondegreen* explores the ways that memory and language are engaged in the construction of one’s self. It tells the story of Haba Habinsky, a refugee from Ukraine’s Donbas region, who has escaped to Kyiv at the onset of the Ukrainian-Russian war. His physical dislocation, and his gradual learning of the Ukrainian language, throw the protagonist in a state of disorientation in which he revisits his past and reassesses his country’s identity, as well as his own. The novel treads a hazy path between illusion and reality that is full of allusions to world cultural figures and features extensive quotations from Ukrainian and Russian literary texts and pop culture.

In this excerpt, taken from the novel’s second chapter, Haba explores

his new home—Kyiv—and is often bewildered by the architectural wonders and everyday idiosyncrasies of the capital city. A recent refugee, Haba has few friends in the city beyond Petro, his boss at the well-stocked supermarket The Beautiful and the Beneficial, which is part of the massive, kitsch-laden KarmaTown shopping and entertainment complex. Haba agrees to meet with Petro’s niece Ole-Luk-Oie in Yaroslavna Café to help her with her studies. The rendezvous offers lonely Haba the opportunity to test out his growing knowledge of the Ukrainian language. The scene also features a visit by the Mare’s Head, a creature from Ukrainian folklore that occasionally appears to Haba throughout the novel as he navigates his new life in his country during a time of war.

—Mark Andryczyk

Mark Andryczyk is associate research scholar, Ukrainian Studies Program, Harriman Institute. He is the editor of The White Chalk of Days: The Contemporary Ukrainian Literature Series Anthology (2017) and is the author of the monograph The Intellectual as Hero in 1990s Ukrainian Fiction (2012).