Oles Honchar
(1918-1992)

THE BLACK RAVINE

It was still night when the telephone roused him from sleep. The telephone always stood at his bedside, and here it was calling him insistently at such an early hour. Petro Demianovych picked up the receiver and, turning on the standard lamp, heard out the speaker at the other end of the line, dropping terse remarks as he listened. His wife had also been wakened by the ringing of the phone; she had long ceased to be surprised by these night calls. There was nothing she could do about them, since her husband held such office. If the sky were to burst somewhere, Comrade Haidamaka would probably be called for help to take measures to patch it up. Once he had even been obliged to leave New Year's party when the rest of the guests were standing with champagne glasses raised in their hands, listening to the Kremlin chimes ringing out the old year: a water main had burst in some district of the city, and he had to drop everything and rush there to save the situation. So he left the party—and remained away from home for three days.

Zoia Dmytrivna was pleased to see her Petro Demianovych as a man of mark enjoying the respect of his subordinates. Once in a while she liked to hear some of them say, "Our Demianovych—he's a tower of strength. Today he's the mayor's right hand, and tomorrow he'll be. .." and point a finger upward. At such moments her spirits soared.

From snatches of the telephone conversation she gathered that something was wrong again at the Black Ravine which was Petro Demianovych's principal project. She was seized with alarm.

"Just don't get panicky," he spoke reassuringly into the phone. "Go to the site! I'll be there soon."

What he called "the site" was actually the Black Ravine, that cursed ravine Petro Demianovych's men had assaulted with hydraulic dredges in their day. For Zoia Dmytrivna it was his most monumental project, while for others it was no more than a crude armchair idea and a piece of window dressing, for which the future would call him to account.

What effort it had entailed to have the project pushed through, approved, and finally launched. Zosia Dmitrivna, too, had contributed her share, occasionally cajoling the appropriate people with her bewitching smiles. In short, the dam was built, its massive bulk stretching across the ravine, while in the upper part of it brickworks incessantly spilled pulp to. fill in the dammed part of the ravine, and deposit hard ground in the steep gulches with their perennially gloomy thickets where, in the hoary past, princes had hunted wolves and wild boar.

After the hydraulic filling operations, the ravine would actually cease to exist, and on the newly formed cushion of earth a park would be laid out, with an artificial pond, sideshows and a huge Ferris wheel, thus translating Petro Demianovych's long-cherished dream into reality.

What a nerve-racking business that ravine had been! Some miscalculations must have been made in the project, or perhaps it had been started at an inconvenient time, or else under a baneful sign of the zodiac.

Petro Demianovych, a man in his prime, with a dark Chaplinesque moustache and a fine fur cap, stopped on the threshold before leaving.

“Well, I’ll be going.”

Once had he waved his hand in parting, he immediately became sterner, and his smart figure, in a light overcoat topped by a vividly colored muffler, disappeared behind the door. A chauffeured sedan was already waiting for Haidamaka at the front door. Before climbing in, he threw a glance beyond the river and the islets: the horizon was getting noticeably brighter, and the morning star glittered in the sky like a large diamond. It was so big, with such sharp facets, that it looked more like a fragment of some celestial body.

“You and me are early birds today,” Petro Demianovych said in an affectedly cheerful voice, as he took his seat beside the chauffeur, and ordered: “To the Black.”

“Which way?”

“Make it along the bottom. . . I mean the lower road.” The long-necked chauffeur with red whiskers made an attempt to draw him into a chat about the previous night’s hockey game, but Petro Demianovych, enthusiastic fan though he was, waved the idea off: hockey was the last thing on his mind, for the Black Ravine was his pain in the neck today.

From the lower road “the site” was in full view. Against the background of the hills, ribbed by washouts from top to bottom, stood out a mighty earth-filled dam running across the largest gulch. This was the materialization of Haidamaka’s idea. It had taken more than a year to build the dam, and in the upper reaches of the ravine, work was still in progress, although it was going in fits and starts. In the place where the sideshows and the Ferris wheel were to be, so far there was only a huge pit containing hundreds of thousands of tons of muddy water, or rather pulp which the neighboring brickworks kept churning out. Powerful pumps had to draw off the excess water and empty it into drainage ditches, but because of the perpetual lack of equipment the whole operation sometimes made Petro Demianovych slump into despair. Had the time for matching wits with the Black Ravine really been ill-chosen, or was the place as cursed as old people believed it to be?

Petro Demianovych had grown up near the ravine. In ancient times people must have had no doubts that it was inhabited by witches, devils, all sorts of wood goblins and local demons that held their Sabbaths on the darkest nights before St. John’s Eve. Getting the better of his fear, little Petro used to join gangs of suburban boys who were simply dying to see what went on in the darkest depths of the ravine at the scariest and weirdest hour of midnight. In the darkness there were flying glow-worms the boys could catch in their palms; in some places the rotten wood of wind-fallen trees flashed a dull gleam; and the more imaginative could even discern wraiths with green eyes and creatures resembling Martians hanging about in the entangled branches. What if they were really devils and their eternal shaggy helpmates?

That’s how it had been yesterday. But today, when he had done everything in his power to change that ravine, chase away all those wood goblins, and build a haven of leisure and re-creation on a man-made elevation of hard ground, it pained him to see that even the people who were closest to him responded to his initiative coolly and with a lack of understanding. His dear father had not accepted the project—that was a fact. After retiring, the old man whiled away his time in loneliness at home, and then asked for employment as a watchman at the neighboring tram depot. He lived in his old house that clung to a hillside rising over the ravine, and did some

carpentry in his spare time. Petro Demianovych, as befits a son, called on the old man once in a while, but to their mutual chagrin they always got into an argument over the dam, which had become a wall of alienation in their relationship.

Once, during a family dinner, his father told relatives that Petro’s mother, who had suffered from an incurable disease and stayed in bed on the verandah all day long, used to complain with bitterness that the dam covered a patch of sky at the end of the ravine, so that the sun set a little bit earlier for the people living in the lowlands, and the solar day had thus become shorter both for them and for her! It was unlikely that she had meant this complaint as a reproach against her son, but Petro’s father presented it as just that, and a deadly, unpardonable sin on his son’s part. Stung to the quick, and his heart heavy with the burden of guilt, Petro Demianovych personally investigated his late mother’s complaint, and it proved that she was right: after the dam had been built it shielded the gap in the ravine, thereby making the sun disappear earlier than usual, and although the loss was trifling, amounting to a fraction of a minute, it was nonetheless a patent fact. But this was hardly reason enough for his father, in the presence of others and with reference to mother at that, to attack what might perhaps be the best thing his son would ever achieve in his lifetime. All right, so father could not reconcile himself to the loss of his antediluvian landscape, but there was also his sister Polina Demianivna, a schoolteacher, who was of like mind with father; the truth was that it was in her nature, because every time antiquity became the subject of an argument, she was always at variance with her brother.

“I appreciate your energy, Petro,” she had told him recently. “But how could you disregard the opinion of the people who live near and around the ravine? Do you realize that your venture has resulted in thousands of tons of mud hanging over people’s heads? And your future Ferris wheel—who is it intended for?”

“For the people!”

“What people?”

“Why, for people that really exist.”

“As if you didn’t have other problems on your hands! At times, brother, I have a feeling you’re concerned with some abstract people. And behind those abstractions you don’t see us, the living.”

That’s what he had to listen to. And just think of it, from whom? From his nearest and dearest!

Try and swallow that! Nobody could reproach him with being forgetful, callous, or smugly bureaucratic. Of course, there were other things on his mind now, but could that really mean that his memories of long ago did not echo in. his heart? After all, there had been those nights before St. John’s Eve with their merry lights, there had been those exciting scrambles in the dark thickets of the Black Ravine when he was a boy, and the first kiss that had burned his lips then on the very bottom of the ravine near the spring. That spring had disappeared a long time ago. Back in the days of the former city fathers the throat of the spring had been stopped with wool lest it swamp the lower street and waterlog the tram depot. There were no longer any springs, but they remained in his memory, didn’t they? This was not the time to live with fond memories of springs and things long past. Over there on the hill rose a cathedral, a veritable embodiment of harmony and grace, that seemed to have been woven of air and morning light, and to tell the truth, it compared unfavorably with his structure, although there was something mighty and progressively modern about it, especially if you looked at it without prejudice.

What a lot of contention went into everything! Demagogues were still aplenty, and you couldn’t shut up everybody’s mouth. His father’s friend, a depot foreman by the name of

Skakun, raised what he called “the problem of the Black Ravine” at every session of the Executive Committee. Well, the people had become accustomed to that depot Cicero. No sooner did Skakun raise his hand to ask for the floor than the session burst into animation. Some pulled their heads in, while others savored the imminent argument.

“Oh well, this one’s going to lay it on really thick.” And you had to admit that at times he could really be caustically biting. He hunted up old-fashioned expressions, and once, addressing Haidamaka, dragged in a word from the Bible – perdition – which caused a cheerful stir. If Petro Demianovych were to have his way, he would have put the windbag in his place immediately. The speaker’s time would already be up, but he was firmly astride his hobby horse and kept talking away about the Black Ravine: why hadn’t the project been put forward for discussion by the citizens and was the venture necessary at all, but since it had been started, what was the technical inspectorate about? You see, Skakun believed that the quality of the piles driven into the body of the dam was not too good. He was a typical faultfinder, but you had to put up with it and listen to him churning out his verbal pulp.

Such stresses, however, did not allow Haidamaka to rest on his oars. Time demanded that he keep the wheels turning at triple speed, and life urged him on and dictated its pace. It was a good thing his wife understood. The time he had stayed away for three days following the New Year party and returned home dirty, with mud up to his ears, she had met him with an excited cry of rapture:

“Oh, my hero! You’ve got haggard and even somehow younger.”

On recalling her emotional reaction, Petro Demianovych involuntarily suppressed a smile lest the chauffeur see it.

Before the traffic lights they had to wait while a tram crawled by. In the door of the tram, Haidamaka saw his strenuous opponent, the self same Skakun, wearing a cap with earflaps and holding a string bag in his hands. Skakun’s eyes were watering, but he recognized Haidamaka from the distance. This time, too, the old man could not hold his tongue in check, and let out a taunt that carried above the rattle of the tram:

“Off to your dam, are you, Petro? Going to carry water in a sieve?”

Such a morning greeting touched a raw nerve in Petro Demianovych, especially that absurd joke about carrying water in a sieve. As if he were putting himself out not for them, but for somebody else, as if he were really doing all that for people who only existed in the abstract.

It might have seemed a trifle, but the casually dropped remark made Petro Demianovych suddenly aware of signs of anxiety and a sense of alarm lurking deep in his heart. Previously, he had also felt his inner stability wavering at times and the worm of doubt stirring somewhere back far in his mind: what if his efforts had really been in vain? Had it been absolutely necessary to build this structure? Nobody, not even his wife suspected that there were moments when he woke up at night and started weighing all the cons and pros. Well then, would it have been better not to touch the Black Ravine at all? And let it be turned into a garbage dump? Once there had been no cathedral on the hill either, but it had appeared there after all, immediately changing the whole landscape. And did time really stop now? Didn’t progress make its demands on people? Sooner or later a bulldozer would have come to the Black Ravine. Supposing he had wavered at one stage or another? Would that really have changed anything? The more the project progressed the less it depended on him and his will becoming as it were autonomous. What a lot of people and machines were in deep water now (that’s a quaint figure of speech for you), and what a lot of money had gone into the project! He had read in some sci-fi story about robots rebelling and getting out of control— he’d hate to find himself in such a situation. He’d have to be careful or

else his creation would throw him from the saddle.

Of course, it was not easy on him, but who had it easy nowadays? At times something bewilderingly unexpected cropped up bringing its changes with it. For instance, he had to have more powerful pumps, but didn’t have them; the drainage system had proved to be insufficiently reliable, and besides, the technical inspectorate kept picking on him, hardly giving him time to offer explanations. Suddenly Petro Demianovych caught himself thinking that it would be wonderful if everything took care of itself without him today. This was the first time he had wished he did not have to see his Aswan, as his relatives called it in jest. But the chauffeur was stepping on the accelerator, and at every crossing, as if on purpose, the streetlights turned green without delay.

The morning promised to be splendid. And here on such a cool dawn in March, when the crevassed ice was breaking with a cheerful snap and crackle on the river and the pussy willows on the islets were bathed in a rosy flush, he had to tear headlong to a place where nothing but trouble and sordid official cares awaited him, where he had to untangle conflicts, give someone a good lashing with his tongue and again and again patch up the quarrels of his municipal engineers in their endless litigation with the brickworks.

After they had passed the squat round building of the tram depot to which he used to run as a boy to meet his father after work, Petro Demianovych felt a familiar thaw in his heart—he was no stranger to this place, because it was here that he had embarked on his working life. He ordered the chauffeur to stop by the newspaper stand on the ancient square that had been cobbled for as long as Petro Demianovych could remember. This vantage point offered the most extensive view of his structure. To tell the truth, what caught the eye first, though, was the golden-domed cathedral that seemed to hover in the sky amid the morning clouds over the hill; beside it, the view was marred by what was called “the block”, a gloomy concrete structure built in an era when cubism was in vogue; and a little to the right of it was the upward tapering Black Ravine whose head seemed to have been screened by the gray shield of the huge dam. And what a shield it was! It didn’t matter that it sliced off a patch of sky for those who lived lower down, because eventually it would be appreciated and would improve all the scenery around, especially when the park, his future garden of Semiramides, burst into leaf. Work at “the site” had already started, because even from below he could see the little figures of men scurrying about the crest of the dam; their presence alone put Petro Demianovych’s mind at rest: if people were at their stations, this might well mean that nothing alarming was afoot. Somewhere in the body of the dam spring water had been found to be seeping through, but that had happened last spring and everything had worked itself out.

The vernal March air made breathing easy. An invalid with a scarred face came up to the newspaper stand in a wheel-chair; he either did not recognize Haidamaka or else didn’t know him at all, taking him perhaps for one of those early tourists who appeared here singly or in groups to admire the architectural ensemble on the hill from below, or capture its incomparable beauty with a camera.

“Well, that’s it, the Black Ravine,” the invalid said, probably believing that Petro Demianovych needed an explanation. “The Nazi bastards used to shoot people there.”

“I know,” Haidamaka said, annoyed.

Of all people, he didn’t need to have that explained to him: he knew perfectly well about the tragedy that had taken place in the Black Ravine during Nazi occupation, although he had been a mere boy when it happened.

“What horrors happened there, but now...”

“What now?” Haidamaka demanded severely.

“Now it’s a window-dressing whopper of a mud tank built over our heads,” the invalid said grumpily, as he motioned with his head towards the Black Ravine and lit a cigarette.

“Yaruzhna!” Haidamaka ordered his chauffeur brusquely. Yaruzhna Street, though no more than a blind alley that only led to the ravine, was Haidamaka’s favorite place because it was the street of his childhood. Following a twisted course and untarmacked to this day (he simply hadn’t had the time to deal with the matter), it ran steeply up the bottom of the gorge between time-blackened little houses and neat yards of the suburb that had been inhabited by tram workers, railwaymen, fishermen and other working people since olden times. These old-fashioned houses with fretted porches, huddles of ramshackle sheds, and brick outdoor cellars standing amid cherry trees and weathered dovecotes, seemed to be meekly waiting for the day when somebody would come round, take a critical look at it all and pull it down, resettling the residents to the far bank where new housing developments had grown up on the sand dredged from the river bottom.

Apart from Petro Demianovych, only a few knew that this would happen, just as only a few happened to know the history of the street, where revolutionaries had once had their safe houses, in the basement of one of which there had even been an illegal print shop—Haidamaka had heard about it when only a youngster, and these stories always filled his heart with pride. No denying it, he was gratified to realize that he belonged by right to this workers’ suburb which had withstood all the storms ever to sweep through it, without losing the warmth of human relations through all the spells of cold. As a matter of fact, this was the only place in the world that attracted Petro Demianovych. He had been especially drawn to it when his mother was alive, because after all the stress and troubles of officialdom, it was only here that he met with sincere empathy, and it was only here that he was known affectionately by his diminutive, grown-up man that he was, and where he heard words of infinite tenderness he had never had to repay.

Had his mother taken the changing ravine bitterly as well, and disapproved of the dam rising across it and shielding a part of the sky? But who could have foreseen that when the project was still on the drawing board?

Petro Demianovych made up his mind that when he reached his father’s house, he’d leave the car there and walk up the footpath winding over the steep hillocks—that was the usual route he followed on his way to “the structure”. But things turned out differently. He saw water gushing its way down all the gutters along Yaruzhna Street. It was slippery and muddy everywhere, the car went into a skid, and then it had to stop altogether, because the street was blocked by a red fire engine; behind it stood another one, just as blood red and huge as the first, and water hoses stretched left and right into the yards—one of the hoses snaked through the cherry orchards to the yard of his father’s house. But nothing seemed to be burning anywhere.

Water, he was told, was flooding the basements and had run into some of the homes; it was being pumped incessantly but kept reappearing as if from under the ground. One of the firemen standing by the fire engine spread his arms out in dismay and said:

“We simply can’t understand where it’s coming from.”

“There’s nothing surprising about it,” Petro Demianovych remarked with a frown, and trying to speak as calmly as possible, added: “Spring waters—that’s clear enough.”

“If it were only spring waters,” somebody behind a fire engine voiced his doubt.

Petro Demianovych started involuntarily: indeed, what if it weren’t only spring waters? What if the water was also seeping through his gigantic mud tank higher up?

Everything seemed to have been foreseen. The ravine was dammed by a thick barrier of earth;

pulp was being spilled into the pit to build up a cushion; the excess water went into drainage canals; the silt and clay had to harden fast and settle, and everything else had to take its usual course. That’s how they had believed it would be. But was that cushion the designers had praised so much reliable enough? the thought flashed through his mind for the first time. Had it swelled with pulp from the brickworks, and with spring waters into the bargain?

He had to be on the crest of the dam as fast as possible to see what was going on there. He didn’t enter his father’s yard —the old man had other worries, just as Petro Demianovych had his. There was his gloomy father, with strings of onions hanging round his neck and wearing fisherman’s boots reaching above his knees, carrying his goods out of the outdoor cellar. In response to the greeting from his madly hurrying son, the old man barely nodded from the other side of the fence and deliberately started hanging the strings of onions on the piers under the dovecote, as if it were flood-time, although high water never reached this place.

“What does that resettlement of yours mean, Pa?” Haidamaka called out to his father with an affectation of cheerfulness. “Don’t scare people.”

“It isn’t me scaring them, but the water,” the old man said, straightening up. “Today the basements are flooded, and tomorrow there’ll be... It’s water, after all.”

His mood far from the best, Haidamaka Jr. walked on up the steep road which soon became a much steeper footpath. Slipping and catching at the bushes, he clambered uphill to “the structure” step by step. This part of the hillside had remained uninhabited; only on the bare hillocks a little to the right of the Black Ravine were the low white buildings of a clinic founded before the Revolution. Here every hill, every rise and terrace was familiar to Petro Demianovych from childhood; on one of the knolls, where the boys used to play volleyball, he saw a crowd of people that had spilled out of the clinic. They were gesticulating animatedly and must have been discussing something, as they kept pointing at the dam hovering over the ravine. What are they holding meetings there for? Petro Demianovych thought disapprovingly, climbing higher and higher.

As, albeit slowly, he drew near to his structure, it seemed to take on a sort of grandeur. No, it was not for nothing that they had gone to all that trouble, he thought glancing upward now and then at his creation. A sense of victory and ambitious accomplishment stirred in his heart.

The footpath proved to be unpredictable in its course—now it led up the hill, then dropped into the ravine where broken bottles were heaped along with all sorts of synthetic rags the fire must have been unable to destroy, and the next moment it crawled up the thawed clay again, which made walking terribly difficult; at times, lest his crepe-soled shoes made him slide downhill, he caught at the crooked trees sticking out here and there from the hillside, their strong bared roots seeming to be holding onto the soggy loam in their last effort to prevent a landslide. In one place, not far from the footpath, he saw an old acquaintance of his, the retired Army officer Perehuda, doing his morning exercises in a glade. The bald, sinewy man in a tracksuit did several knee-bends, after which he approached the nearest tree and did some additional muscle-flexing exercises, pushing his hands vigorously against the chipped, hollow tree, as if he were trying to displace it.

“Let’s embrace trees!” he called out to Haidamaka using the catchword of the yogi instead of a greeting.

“Sure!” Haidamaka responded to the joke, while Perehuda continued pushing with both hands against the old, unyielding tree.

The morning had fully awakened, and the buildings in the upper part of the town were catching the first rays of the sun.

Warmed by the walk, Petro Demianovych turned round. The sun, rising beyond the islets and sailing imperiously into the sky from behind the willow scrub, impressed him with its grandeur and the particularly solemn significance it imparted to the moment. Strange as it may have seemed, the sight of the sun always reminded him of his round-faced mother, who smiled even at times of grief and embodied for him kindness, tenderness, and all the best things in the world. To this day he couldn’t forgive himself for yielding to Zoia’s insistence that he go on a Mediterranean cruise at a time when his mother was gravely ill and awaiting him day after day, hoping to see him once again before she died, while he, unsuspecting of anything, was strolling with a camera round the ruins of Herculaneum and Pompeii, looking at the remnants of human settlement where life had once teemed and then disappeared. He had tried to imagine the state of the people who had found themselves at the epicenter of the catastrophe and suffocated under a cloud of volcanic dust.

Way down below, stretching along the bottom of the Black Ravine, he saw huge heaps of garbage which the sanitary inspectorate probably had no knowledge of. Petro Demianovych made a mental note of it. Climbing higher and higher, he measured with his eye whether he still had far to go, because at the outset he hadn’t allowed for the footpath being so slippery. He was nonetheless drawing closer to “the structure” which seemed to be swelling in size, and soon the streams of mud glittering alarmingly all over the body of the dam covered half the sky. There was something sinister about “the structure” now, and the way it hovered over the ravine made it look exceptionally hostile; he shivered at the impression of the huge bulk of the dam swelling with water before his eyes. As if seeing it for the first time, he suddenly had a boyish urge to shake his fist at it to show that he wasn’t afraid of it, whatever its size and might.

Somewhere below a siren went off shrilly for no apparent reason. Was it a fire engine? Surprised, he turned abruptly and looked at the people below, from whose direction the sound was coming, and in that instant everything above his head shook with a crash and an eerie rumble; it was such a suddenly overwhelming upheaval it stunned his fear. Looking upward, he saw his structure sag and disintegrate as in a slow-motion picture, and presently a black cascade of mud, silt, pulp and rocks hurtled down with an ear-splitting crash.

Black-maned lions of mud rushed furiously down at him from above. It was like a fantastic nightmare.

The shock was so unexpected that he was not fettered by fear. He even rushed forward in a fit of rage, spreading his arms to check that black cascade which, he thought, would not dare to touch him. The mud stream roared as it approached, shattering everything in its way. Haidamaka heard the shouts and moans of the people on the hillocks, and out of the corner of his eye saw the retired army officer rush to the tree and, shouting like one demented, scramble up it with the agility of a monkey.

Overwhelmed and fearless as he was, Haidamaka wanted only one thing now: the miracle that would instantly block the way of this black roaring force. You had it put up, it appeared by your will. So reap your retribution, *your* retribution. . . Something of that sort flashed through his mind in muddled snatches and fear clutched him only when a deafening explosion rent the air and a column of flame shot upward—he realized that a gas substation had been torn down and the escaped gas had ignited. The air shook with roars, crashes, and thunder,. the trees toppled, their roots hurtling right at him.

“Run! You’ll be swept away!” a shrieking voice from a hill reached him.

Enraged and ashamed, he fled down the hill.

The fiendish rumble drew closer as the wave of mud surged down the ravine, carrying sticks,

crates, and metal barrels; an icily cold wave of mud hit Haidamaka in the face, the root of a tree knocked him down, sending his fur hat into a whirl. Picked up by the heavy mud, Haidamaka grabbed hold of the snag with both hands, it turned over and plunged along with him into the cold mire, and then surfaced, as if to let him see the bright world once more.

The maelstrom flung the snag left and right, up and down, as he wallowed in the dirt, holding on to the roots with the tenacity of a drowning man; even now he still could not grasp what had happened and what force was tossing him around in this churning, wrecking current. During the moments when he surfaced he caught the piercing shouts of people on the hills in which he seemed to hear something that promised deliverance from his predicament. The swirling welter of dirt, pulp, mud and trash carried him downhill amid the din and shouts, furiously tossing him like a splinter between shattered fences, wicket gates and lamp posts with pieces of ripped wire which, for some reason, he was now afraid of running into most of all. A metal barrel hit one shoulder, then a piece of fencing hit the other, after which something struck him so viciously that he saw nothing more.

For a long time to come blood-curdling stories would be passed round this suburban neighborhood. They would also be heard by children who had not yet been born—how millions of tons of mud gushed through a burst dam, obliterating everything on their downward path, because the miry current was furious and incredible. There would be stories of soldiers braving all odds to save the victims, helicopters lifting people from rooftops, but in spite of it all, casualties could not be avoided. Those were not legends, but a truth that was shocking in its incredibility—even the patients from the clinic rushed down the Black Ravine to rescue drowning people and carried the children from the kindergarten up the hills to safety, touchingly wrapping them in rough hospital gowns and holding close the little boys and girls who had been frightened to death.

Why have I come to? Why have I been rescued? was the first thought that shot through the mind of Petro Demianovych when he regained consciousness, lying flat on his back on a hill.

His rescuers standing around him in wet, mud-spattered hospital gowns were very excited, and keenly watched this stranger whom they had snatched from the flood; they must have been surprised to see him coming to, and those standing closest to him bent over and looked into his face, hardly believing in his resurrection. One of them asked, an expression of infinite melancholy in his eyes:

“Afraid of standing trial, aren’t you?”

No, he was not afraid of a trial. The most horrible thing had already occurred, although he still could not believe that it had happened to him and that he might have perished. But why such a punishment and “perdition” as he had been condemned to by Skakun? Where was father? Had he managed to reach safety? From somewhere below he heard angry voices commenting on the technical amateurishness of the project, then someone reported on a tram having overturned. Was all this delirium? Oh, how he wished to sink into delirium now!

How much time had passed? A fleeting moment or eternity? It was still morning, overhead the sky blazed with a vernal blue, but down below a strange, desolate grayness met his eye. There were no orchards any more, the street was gone, and the houses nearest the ravine had been torn down and swept away by the current. The entire world of his childhood spread speechless and gray before his eyes, like Pompeii, under a layer of recently settled silt.

He tried to stir, and the dull pain that shot through his maimed body told him that he was still alive.

“Afraid of standing trial, aren’t you?” Another patient with a worn-out look and a red beard bent over Haidamaka and asked him the question with a ring of sincere empathy in his voice.

Having fully regained his senses by now, Haidamaka shifted his eyes toward the upper part of the town and its cathedral. Everything there had remained intact, except for his structure: in the upper reaches of the ravine the sky was shining through the breach in the dam. It was the bright blue of his childhood, which for a second time his mother seemed to have given him as a gift.

Translated by Anatole Bilenko