

The Ghosts' Graveyard

Eugenia Kononenko

The house stood overlooking the raging sea at the edge of a sun-scorched plain and it was indecently spacious. I had stayed there in distant Soviet times, when in our country people lived three or four souls to a room. In those days, if a couple had a room to themselves, they were considered lucky. Suddenly I found myself in a residence where there were more rooms than people. This house had none of the numerous unsightly extensions which were so common in Crimean resorts. The building, which overlooked the sea, was built on a grand scale from the outset.

Slippery stone steps led straight down to the sea. There was no beach. The foaming waves crashed on the sharp rocks that menacingly surrounded anyone daring enough to venture out. The only place you could spread out beach mats was up above, next to the cliff's edge. The owner of the house, a highway engineer who left the house before dawn, could drive you to the beach in the village on his way to work. But you would still have to return on foot, and that would mean walking several kilometers in the blazing sun.

This was my most wonderful seaside holiday. Even if there was no wind, the sea below was incredibly wild and uncontrolled, and the spray splashing onto the sharp crags reached as far as the cliff's edge, just where this wonderful house stood. I don't remember whether it had a garden. I think there were several trees. But I clearly remember the large sitting room with no windows, just a glass ceiling. And numerous doors to adjacent rooms, painted various colours.

The landlord's daughter lived in Simferopol. His son was disabled. He moved around in a wheelchair or on crutches. He was a good-looking, long-haired young man of about thirty. His legs were feeble, but they were not grotesquely misshapen or disproportionately short, like those of many disabled people I had seen on the Crimean coast. He just had poor control of his legs.

He occupied a few rooms in his father's house. I was never in his bedroom and didn't actually know what color its door was. He invited me into the library, where the windows looked north towards the steppe and the door was purple. Or into the office with the red door and windows looking out over the sea, where the walls were hung with paintings of urban landscapes.

"What use are pictures of the sea to me?" he asked. "It's always before my eyes. I don't know whether I'll ever get to a city. When it's dark outside the window I wander around these cities. Until I feel I've got my feet wet." He nodded towards a city in the rain, painted in oils.

"Which city is that?" I asked.

"I don't know. It doesn't matter. But I know very well what's round that bend in the road, and what's in the courtyards of those buildings. Until the sun sets, I look out of the window. At the steppe, or at the sea. It's no coincidence that down there by the sea, for several kilometers to the left and to the right of the cliff, swimming is not permitted. That's to keep visitors to the resort away from here. Except those we invite ourselves. There's no beach, because over there," Roman pointed to the edge of the steppe, "is the ghosts' graveyard."

"The ghosts' graveyard? What's that?"

"Over there, next to the steppe, there's a big ghosts' graveyard. Perhaps the biggest one in the world."

"Do ghosts really have graveyards? Is this some sort of anomalous zone?"

Roman did not answer these questions, so I asked another one.

"Well, whose ghosts are buried in that graveyard?"

"This is the story I am working on now. But not in Russian," he spoke the second sentence in a whisper.

"In Ukrainian?" I asked him.

Roman and I conversed in Russian. But his massive library included quite a number of books in Ukrainian. In Kyiv I knew several people who spoke Russian but wrote poetry in Ukrainian.

"No, I write in that language," said Roman with an odd sort of smile, gesticulating in the air.

"Which one is that?"

"You're a programmer, aren't you? I'm sure you know that besides Fortran and PL you can write programs in code."

"Yes, of course. I can't do it myself, but in our office, there are lots of people who actually do write programs in code."

"There are codes in natural languages as well, of course."

"Are they common to all languages?"

Roman nodded and his eyes lit up. I have never seen anyone's eyes blaze with such enthusiasm.

"And do you know that, er... proto-language?"

"Living for many years between the sea and the steppe, and even close to a ghosts' graveyard, never setting foot elsewhere, you'll know whatever you want to know."

Then it occurred to me that it was not only Roman's legs that were disabled, and I was rather scared. I did not ask what characters the codes of the proto-language were written in. I was afraid he would start showing them to me. It was comforting to know that the mistress of the house, Roman's

mother, an extremely friendly, gentle woman, was always nearby. She came to the library or to the study where Roman and I were meeting, and she would bring a jug of cold fruit drink or a weak dry wine. That woman inspired total confidence. Even if her son was crazy, her presence would ensure that he would not cause any trouble.

At supper, Roman mentioned the ghosts' graveyard, and the owner of the house, the highway engineer, said he could take me there on his day off, as it was very close by.

"What is it?" I repeated my question. "Is it an anomalous zone?"

"It's a ghosts' graveyard," replied the highway engineer. I glanced at the landlady and she nodded—that's right, a ghosts' graveyard.

"We can go there on my day off, and you'll see for yourself what it is."

Early on Saturday evening, when the scorching sun had subsided, the highway engineer reminded me of his offer. I asked whether Roman would be going. He replied that there was room for only one passenger in the cab of his truck and that Roman often went there anyway. Just the two of us went. It did not take long to drive into the middle of the peninsula—about fifteen minutes. We stopped in the middle of the steppe. At first, I didn't notice anything apart from some sort of fallen pillar in the midst of motionless yellow grass. But Roman's father nudged me towards a large hollow. I took a few steps down the gentle slope. I felt a powerful wind whining in my ears. That was all the more astonishing because there was a deathly silence in the steppe. That wind whining in the hollow drove me crazy; it did my head in.

"Don't be afraid," said Roman's father.

If it hadn't been for this man's confident voice, I really would have been scared. But his "Don't be afraid" was so reassuring that I took several steps across the scorching ground, which just slightly, but noticeably, shifted underfoot. The whine in my ears grew louder, and I felt a momentary desire to proceed and discover the ghosts' graveyard.

"Does Roman tell all your visitors about this place?"

"I don't remember whom else he has told. He trusted you so much, you see."

"Is he really writing a book about the ghosts' graveyard?"

"It isn't a book, and he isn't writing anything down; he is creating something, though. Mother says that when I am at work, he often sleeps in the daytime but gets up in the night and goes hobbling to his study."

I did not venture to ask what was meant by "It isn't a book, and he isn't writing anything down." I had been let into some bizarre secret, but I couldn't quite grasp what it was about.

"When Roman and I come here, we sit on this hot stone. It's very beneficial for his bad legs," said the highway engineer, pointing to the fallen pillar.

"But what's this pillar doing here?" I asked, bending down to touch the fluting.

The highway engineer shrugged his shoulders.

"Roman says it's the remains of a gateway."

"So there once used to be a wall here?"

"Roman will tell you more about that. He says that if there's a gateway, a wall isn't actually necessary."

And then came my last evening in this strange house. From the blackness beyond the window came a sound; was it of the sea, or perhaps the steppe, or the whine coming from the ghosts' graveyard in the stillness of the night? I would have expected it to be eerie, but I recall enjoying how enthralling it was. Tomorrow at dawn—probably it's today by now—I would be leaving this place.

"Have you packed all your things? Well, don't go to sleep, because you haven't even heard the night-time sounds here. You're leaving, and once again I'll sleep in the daytime and at night, I'll do the things I told you about. It requires so much effort—you've no idea!"

"But Roman, if you mean a book in some heavenly, angelic language, or a proto-language, don't you think such books actually already exist, and that the authors re-create them in their own languages rather than write them?"

Roman's eyes lit up with joy. Probably because his interlocutor had touched on what disturbed him most of all. Retrieving his crutches from the back of the wheelchair, he stood up and took a few steps towards me:

"It's like this. Look." Roman pointed to the shelves of his bookcase. "Among these books are not many that are scanned from there. But there are some. This one here, for example." He showed me a small book; I had the impression that it was a translation into Ukrainian from Japanese. "I just had this feeling about it, although it is a translation! Whoever undertook the translation of such a book must know whether it was an original work or scanned from Heaven!"

"Evidently, most writers don't have access to these timeless books."

"The texts, not the books—you must use the correct words," said Roman, slightly irritated.

"Yes, that's right. There, they aren't yet books. Whereas here, on Earth, there are so few good books. But in your wonderful home one can find one's way into heavenly libraries. Nowhere else have I had such dreams; now I understand..."

I was interrupted by a crash that made me jump and I fell silent. It was Roman's crutches falling to the floor. He stood before me, looking like a prophet, even though he was wearing a shirt and jeans, not a long gown. But his long hair, the fervor in his eyes—I had never seen such a look on anyone's face in real life, be it of inspiration or insanity, such intensity of feeling—no, only in world-famous paintings. He shuffled towards me with difficulty, telling me in a hoarse voice:

"Look, I am not scanning a timeless text! I am creating it! When I have created it, I will be totally drained! It will exhaust my arms, my throat, and my capacity for human speech!"

What happened next? Next, Roman's mother came running in and supported him under his arms to prevent him falling over; I would not have known what to do with him. She dragged him to a chair, I rushed to pick up his crutches, but she said, gently yet firmly:

"Go to your room and get a little sleep. You have to travel tomorrow."

The following day, at dawn, she came out to see me off. She gave me some pastries and a small jar of stewed fruit for the journey. The highway engineer gave me a lift to the village, where he left me to wait at the bus stop for the bus to Simferopol.

I never visited that house again. I never again had the opportunity to see Roman's sister, whom I had met at the programming course. It was thanks to her that I had found myself in that Crimean house on the cliff top. No material trace of my stay there remains—no souvenir, no photograph. And yet, that is not true. I do have one memento, and it is actually more than that. Roman told me he always gave guests the gift of a book from the library. The one the guest chose. Unabashed, I had chosen a collection of poetry by Marina Tsvetaeva, which in those days cost more on the black market than my monthly income.

"May I?" I asked.

"You may," said Roman, with a nonchalant shrug of the shoulders, and I accepted the book and placed it in my suitcase. When I took it out at the bus stop while waiting for the bus to Simferopol, in the corner of a page I noticed two symbols carefully inscribed in purple ink. They were not Armenian or Georgian characters, nor were they Hebrew or Hindi letters, nor Bengali letters, and not Chinese, not Japanese, or Korean characters. They were the heavenly characters of the ancestral mother of all earthly languages, which Roman, the son of the highway engineer, used to create the text about the ghosts' graveyard. And if he has succeeded in creating it through his incredible exertions, perhaps in years to come some writer will be fortunate enough to scan it from its heavenly carriers and record it in some earthly language.

Translated by Patrick John Corness¹

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