

Mikhail BUTOV
Two stories

In the Quarry

The car bottomed out, the tire slipped on the dry clay.

They made it to a firm, flat elevation and stopped.

The boy, exhausted by the two-hour ride and immobility, jumped out right away and ran ahead.

"Dad," he shouted, "there's a pothole up ahead. Lots of potholes, do you hear me, dad?!"

The father, without turning off the engine, leaned out of the open door and estimated the grassy shoulder on the side of the road, turned around in three maneuvers and backed up a bit. Now the car was surrounded with tall - reaching all the way to the roof - golden plumes of a wild grain which overtook the once cultivated field.

The boy came back - he was afraid of walking too far and losing sight of his father and the car.

In the ensuing silence, the rumbling, heavy sound of the fan, working at its own pace under the hood, appeared particularly impertinent to the boy. Impertinent, impertinent, prt, prt, mprt - the word grew thinner with repetition, the meaning disappearing, becoming only a combination of sounds which would have been appropriate in the language of certain goblins. In the past the boy heard the word impertinent applied only to other people, rarely to himself, and hardly ever said it, even to himself. And all of a sudden he felt that it was capable of interlocking firmly and precisely with a multitude of various things, just like the joining of Lego blocks. This discovery surprised the boy. And he wanted to tell his father about it, but the boy felt shy, thinking that his father would laugh - even if in a good-natured way - at his naïve amazement.

The clay road, at times only a rut, which led here from the highway, went past lots designated for dachas. It was a weekday, and the father didn't see any people on the lots, but noticed well kept gardens and here and there unfinished - with a touch of hopelessness - wooden structures. Here even prime needs, such as fences, were not met - the dachnicks ran out of money and steam - only here and there stood low pletens made of gray sticks, old branches and wire.

"Wow!" exclaimed the boy. "Look dad, I just found."

"There you go," said the dad. The boy was holding oblong fragments in his hand. "They are all over the field here. One must suppose the gardeners are digging up excellent samples out

of their vegetable beds. You can toss these ones. This is nothing. Soon you'll gather some genuine ones."

"Are these devil's fingers?" asked the boy.

"Yes," said the father. "Belemnites. Devil's fingers. A common name."

"People probably think that there were tons of devils here on this field," said the boy and laughed.

"People didn't know about prehistoric animals. And when they found fossils, they tried to explain them somehow to themselves. Especially the huge bones - like the ones that belonged to your beloved dinosaurs - they demanded an explanation. In America a skeleton of a fossilized whale was once taken for a fallen angel. What does a belemnite resemble? A finger, a claw. And it's well known who has claws..."

One of the plot owners must have been excessively overzealous at the start, wishing to keep up with the dacha building fashion - but managed only the frame of a large wooden house with a tall pointed tower, reminiscent of a watch tower. Now over the skeleton of the tower the dachnicks raised a red flag - thrown in the face of the wilderness as a sign of hatred and resentment. The distant flag and the fragile tower, the wild yellow field, the grass blowing steplike in the gentle breeze - under a photographically blue sky with bulky pure white clouds. Such slightly deathly landscapes, reclaimed from people by nature, the father, who was capable of sharply feeling the beauty of desolation, loved, perhaps, more than any other.

"And now do the people know?" asked the boy. "About the prehistoric animals?"

"Now it's all the rage," said the father. "Movies, books. You haven't even started school, and are already something of a dinosaur professor. You know more about them than some of the academics did at the turn of the century."

"That's true," said the boy and even jumped up from excitement. "I know more than Mishka Muchin."

It was enough for them to walk away a few steps and it was impossible to spot the car behind the grass. The father looked around, searching for reference points to come back to; he found a convenient one: the closest mound of the quarry dump was the third in the first row from the field.

"And on such a bad road," asked the boy, "would a Rover Defender make it"

The father shrugged his shoulders.

"It could even whip through the field effortlessly. It was, actually, meant for such driving."

"Do we have a good car?" asked the boy.

"We have a Russian car," said the father. "You constantly expect something to fall out. Otherwise, it's all right, it runs. It would be a sin to complain."

"Will we buy a Rover Defender some day?" asked the boy.

"Well, you know," the father shrugged. "It costs quite a lot. Mother and I don't have that much money."

The boy became thoughtful. Then he said:

"So is that your dream?"

"What?" the father didn't understand.

"Rover Defender."

The father laughed.

"It seems to me it's more likely your dream. But I of course wouldn't refuse a very reliable and very enduring car. Only the maintenance would make us broke."

"We'll find an ammonite this big," showed the boy. "Shiny. Big as a wheel. We'll sell it to a museum for an exhibit. And we'll have enough money for a Rover Defender."

"You think we'll have enough?" said the father. "That's fine. But you see, this is the deal: the large ammonites didn't get preserved well here. The size of a palm is one thing. But the size of a plate. You see it on the ground and it takes your breath away: there it is, all in one piece, sparkling. But with first touch it crumbles into dust."

"But if we are lucky," said the boy.

"If we are lucky, then of course," said the father. "Now be more attentive."

"Wow!" said the boy.

The dump - an oblong mound five meters high, covered with sparse grass - consisted, it seemed, in equal measure, either of dry black soil, or gray-brown cylinders and cones of belemnite, both intact and smashed, the width of a bottle neck or thinner than pencils. The boy rushed to gather them, scooping them all up into a plastic bag, but all of a sudden he froze when he realized that the belemnites were actually countless and everywhere.

"Wait, stop," said the father. "Not this way, without discrimination. Why don't you pour everything back out. Try to search for the ones that are undamaged, in good shape, the sharp edge intact. Then we'll select the best ones for the collection."

He walked up the slope and from there he could see, on the other side of the crest, more and more mounds: gray, black, muddy brown, even red - they stretched and stretched, one

after the other, in several rows, like the ridges of smoothed, ancient mountains, when one looks at them from a plane.

The grass didn't conceal the color of the soil and from a distance the dumps appeared similarly naked. Their monotonous order was broken by the sandy patches sparkling under the sun. Down below, in the flooded quarry, water gleamed. The father turned around. The unfinished dachas, the red flag, the yellow field, the clear blue sky.

How many years was it - ten, more than ten? - since the time when he was filling his very first independent order here: twenty thousand belemnites at ten cents apiece. The money was paid by an eccentric looking but sharp Italian, a collector and dealer of fossils - such energetic people, who descended on the previously closed country, were not uncommon in those days. The father took a tent and asked a buddy to come along. There were no dachas in sight, a bumpy bare field with patches of growth. It was fall, it was cold, a dusting of snow was on the ground. They didn't even descend into the quarry and didn't climb on the dumps, but collected everything right on the field in two days. They ate cold canned food, warmed themselves with rubbing alcohol, were very cheerful and couldn't believe that they were actually about to receive such an astronomic sum. And it would have been strange not to be skeptical, and foolish not to be cheerful, since their last salary, which they received at their state run jobs, didn't quite amount to four dollars. Every time they meet, his friend still remembers with delight the adventures and the amusing incidents of those days, which, to him, were indeed an endless adventure and one amusing incident. It made the father jealous because he was no longer could incorporate into one "I" his present self and the one from ten years ago.

*

The Price

On Saturday Oborin took his family – they drove off to a friend's birthday party. The friend was one of those rare ones that one acquires in mature years, and by now their wives had befriended each other, and the kids. He was a music producer and his friends were mostly from that circle.

While visiting, Oborin ate a lot and with pleasure, but drank only one glass of red wine since he was driving and they had to return home early. He was worried about the car, the racket of the joint in the front suspension, he was hoping to visit the nearest garages first thing tomorrow morning and catch the local mechanics before they had a chance to fall under the influence.

Right before departure, while his son and the host's kids were looking through computer game discs, he walked out onto the stairs for a smoke and found himself in the company of

a bard, well known, among other things, for his reticence, his prickly relationships with people. The bard was a true celebrity – at least for the public who knows and loves his?? songs.

An acquaintance, even if superficial, with a famous bard, flattered Oborin. Though today he caught himself thinking that about twenty years ago it was more likely that the bard would have been flattered to drink in the same company with a physicist, Doctor of Science and a Professor.

It wasn't their first meeting, but they always met here in this house and besides such meetings - once a year at the birthday party of a common friend - they did not keep up a connection. At the table today they were conversing like old acquaintances, but only on the usual worthless topics: gasoline prices, approaching winter, some story about a pre-prepared chicken dish, even football.

The house was on the edge of a Moscow suburb. The window of the landing was facing a sand quarry. Excavations in the quarry ceased a long time ago, it was flooded with water and had turned into a spot for swimming and fishing for the local inhabitants. Oborin went for a walk there a couple times with his child. The pass to the high slopes, out of which protruded, like ancient bones, the roots of pine trees, led through a field of fine quartz sand, glazed by the wind, completely white. It wasn't more than half an hour to sunset. Even in the rays of the low orange sun the white sand still looked like snow.

"Here we go again," said Oborin, turning to the window, "it's only a few weeks till the actual dreaded snow. And in May it always seems – so far away..."

He did not expect an answer. Two people can smoke on the stairs in silence, experiencing no awkwardness. For that reason it startled Oborin when the bard replied with a tinge of urgency in his tone:

"And what do your people think? Does anyone at all know, what to do with it now?"

"With what?" asked the surprised Oborin. "With winter?"

"The war, Chechnya, explosions, hostages? Do you technocrats have your own opinion on this point? Does anyone in the country think about it at all, is anyone looking for a resolution?"

Oborin was at a loss. In his thoughts he was already at home, figuring what still needed to be done that day: feed the fish in the aquarium...

"What kind of technocrat am I?" There was still a chance to bring the conversation to an end or at least turn it around. "I attempt to deal with fundamental science."

"But at least you are not a humanitarian, or a politician, or a commentator." Now the bard's voice was tense, as if he was choked up, like one who talks about things which truly don't leave him in peace. "With the rest of them it's clear, only bla-bla-bla, or else they directly

incite you. Who hasn't had a chance to offer an opinion yet? Only science. Perhaps business, normal, humane, the kind not involved in these affairs. Perhaps it's you who needs to be heard? You are more rational than the rest, you must be capable of seeing not just the illusory ways..."

"I'm afraid," interrupted Oborin, "you overestimate science. Today's scientist is occupied with his own theories. He is lucky to have two or three of them in a lifetime. And regarding everything else he has the same philistine opinions as anyone on the street."

He started getting angry. Was the bard provoking him or something? He must understand quite well, can't not understand, that in such conversations the one asking the questions has the higher ground, and the responder not only gets caught off guard and must collect his thoughts in a panic, but is forced to make excuses for some unknown guilt. Still reluctantly, but gradually, Oborin began to get carried away, he started rehashing considerations that seemed to him more or less intelligent, which had come to him earlier in conversations with other people. Well, you have to take into account their charismatic leaders. Let the Chechens, in the end, set up their own little gray government. And then methodically bribe it, so that on one hand, they could comfort themselves with thoughts of their own independence, and on the other, they would have more interest in contacts with Russia, not only resistance. They must agree with acceptable concessions, strive to let off some steam, put the breaks on. The explosions, of course, will not cease for a long time, and the Chechen war has been conducted for a long time not exclusively with liberating purposes. The goal is to maximize the separation between the population and the fighters so that the majority of the population would not feel sympathetic to them. Then conduct our affairs to such a conclusion that our exit from there would not cause a splash of ethnic butchery and violence – or else it will blow back to us. And later, perhaps, in many years, it is necessary, possibly, to let go. And then it will be a different country – put up a barrier, so that no one from there would simply seep in here to abduct people. As the writer Solzhenitsyn suggested from the start. The humanitarians, Oborin knows, are expected to chuckle at Solzhenitsyn. But Solzhenitsyn's predictions, more often than not, proved to be right..."

He barely had time to finish a phrase, and in his mind were already five objections. Oborin felt ashamed. Here he was, arguing a mile a minute: his thoughts not well formed, not picked out of numerous contradictory, but seemingly equally correct, choices.

The bard honestly shook it off.

"But what will we bribe them with now, how will we attract them, entice them? It's more handy for them to get money from the other side. And from what I've heard – our guys have done such things there. Mind that I heard it from our own people: war correspondents – they told me themselves. In whispers. Now they'll seek revenge for about a hundred years. And we will get more savage. They will seek revenge, we will be savage, their revenge will be even harsher. A dead end. It is strange actually that their methods are still so primitive. In a big city it would be easy to create a real end of the world..."

At this point a child appeared on the landing with an untied shoelace and a bag full of disks.

"Yesterday I was returning from my parents, in Serpukhovo," said the bard. "I get into the train and understand that I picked out the seat with care. That is, first I chose the carriage – the last one, who would bomb the last carriage? And the bench – the first one, facing the exit. So that the explosion would hit me in the back; if the explosion is in the middle of the carriage the bench would protect me. I make the choice almost automatically. What are we all turning into?"

"Why can't you," said Oborin's wife who appeared on the landing with the hosts, "make the child tie his shoelace?"

The bard hastily and without particular warmth shoved his hand into Oborin's and disappeared behind the metal door.

Oborin tried to forget this unpleasant and even humiliating conversation foisted on him for inexplicable reasons – and he did. Today he was getting a particularly intense pleasure from the fact that it was still warm and the leaves were almost all in their place and there was still no need to brush snow from the car, scrape the frozen windows and mirrors, steer at random at the approaching headlights which turned, on the frozen windshield, into a continuous stream of light. He didn't like driving around Moscow on his own all that much, but the very same routes, and the irritating frequent stops at streetlights and even traffic jams, brought him joy if there was a child in the car with him. That is the only time when he could peacefully chat about what his son was interested in without getting distracted by his own problems, respond to his questions, tell him things.

At home he drank a cup of tea, pressed the buttons on the TV remote: emptiness and stupidity on all the channels, as always on weekend evenings. You watch for ten minutes and begin to understand the Islamic terrorist who dreams of blowing up this hollow world in the name of Allah. On weekdays one can at least occasionally find some educational program or a documentary film.

The child was refusing to go to sleep, was convincing his mother that it was still quite early and that he had rights – and managed to bargain out forty extra minutes. They installed, under Oborin's supervision, one of the games he brought, but agreed that the son would figure it out tomorrow. But for now Oborin sat down at the computer himself and went through, in the end, with the excited commentaries of the child in the background, the most hideous track on sand between cliffs, and won a second division cup in an all-terrain race. The son clapped his hands.

No, in general, of course, he understood the bard. What is happening troubles everyone, but for a creative person this must be especially painful since it mercilessly rips the cover of autonomy in which a creator must exist, in order for the secret to be unfolded within. In such an atmosphere it is simply impossible to concentrate! He has been dealing with science far too long to equate it with creativity, but even he found it harder every day to concentrate his thoughts on his subject.

When their son was finally lured into bed, Oborin got on the internet. He wanted to find references to the works of a Novosibirsk colleague – Oborin was going to write a review of

his works for a journal. In the headlines of the homepage he read that two of the airline bombing suspects were charged. He clicked and looked at the entire report. These were not terrorists, not even their accomplices, only the militiaman who detained, but immediately released the female shahids in the airport, an airport scalper who sold them their tickets, and the airline employee who worked in cahoots with the scalper. The militiaman, in the opinion of other militiamen, wasn't guilty since he followed all the instructions: the documents of the Caucasus women were in order, they answered the questions coherently, and the law did not require a search.

And all of a sudden everything that he should have said in the recent conversation started coming back to him, as if Oborin was recalling a thoroughly prepared and researched report before a presentation. Forgetting to disconnect from the phone line, he got into Word and, irritated by the cheerful pre-bedtime arguing between his wife and his son, which he usually enjoyed overhearing through the closed door, started clicking on the keyboard. Now his opinions were clear, as if they were the only ones possible, the phrases clinging together and pulling each other along.

He should have said that to approach war with peacetime notions is hypocrisy. War does not accept anyone's laws, but forces its laws on everyone. To search for war crimes during wartime is the same kind of hypocrisy. War is a crime in its entirety, the place of death and violence. Today, while starting wars, countries confidently state that they are capable of containing violence within certain degrees and limitations, but no one has ever succeeded at it. A human being goes to war, regardless of his cultural roots and personal outlook, in order to perpetrate cruelty and to kill. If not by choice, then due to the set of circumstances. Even if by a miracle one manages to evade it, he will not be able to restrain others.

Of course, the state is obligated to appear to somehow control this cruelty. That's why periodically someone is arrested, found guilty of torture and murder of the civilian population and given over to the courts. It's theater. The general whirlpool of violence pulls in all the warring parties.

War can appear more or less noble only in one case: if the winning side worships the culture of the defeated side. Thus Russians beat Napoleon – with respect. But only where the maneuvers were conducted by officers. As soon as guerillas entered the action – immediately a different game would begin. And very soon the distinction between our side and their side stops. It's all the same to the ax.

Actually, Oborin had the idea of calling his friend, the birthday boy, asking for the address, sending his considerations to the bard via electronic mail. Perhaps they could start a correspondence. Since he constantly wanted to talk to someone about all this anyway. But when he tried, he encountered a strange phenomenon: his intelligent interlocutors seemed more than anything afraid to show that they perhaps didn't understand something about what was occurring, that they were in doubt, that they simply didn't have an opinion in this regard: not ripe yet, not worked out. Almost everyone has ready-made impenetrable positions – as if they were born with them. And the set of memorized facts gets restocked with fresh information, chosen so that it fits well into the given formula: and they shower the interlocutor with these facts, as if pelted with pomegranates from behind a parapet: do

not approach, do not touch my line of defense. In ninety-five everyone sympathized with the freedom fighting Chechens, and he tried to explain that the war, actually, was started by them, when all over Chechnya they were killing Russians – for apartments, money, for no apparent reason. These days, when he would say that after so many years of mutual annihilation he was capable of understanding a Chechen - avenger and, on a human level, did not hate him (only, of course, if we are talking about an actual avenger, and not about an Arab guest, Islamic fanatic or wartime profiteer), he is looked at, at times, as a traitor to the interests of the motherland.

He was about to go to the other room to get the phone, but noticed now that he was still connected to the phone line - the Internet money dripping into nowhere - cursed and remembered: the bard boasted today at the table that he does not have any contact with computers – doesn't understand them, doesn't like them, doesn't use them. All right. In his notebook there are phone numbers of journalists writing for the best analytical publications. Some of them he's known since childhood. At times they will help him to place a notice, perhaps even an article – in the editorial section. That anthropology professor acquaintance of his publishes his material all over and just about everything: from ladies' journals to economic weeklies. No matter that he is of an advanced age.

Oborin wrote: a war should not be started. During wartime, guilty is the one who starts killing first. But if the war is already underway – it must be won quickly even if by the cruelest of means. The number of victims and the level of suffering will still seem lower than in a war in any way dragged out. Politicians, flirting here with false humanism, carry far more evil than the most straightforward fighter-generals.

Confucius said something along these lines: battles are decided in temples. And long before the troops' arrival on the battlefield. And we don't even know whether we are actually fighting or not, or just enabling well-organized hooligans. After the events in Breslan we somehow admitted: yes, this is war. But then why do explosions and taking of hostages make us so bewildered? How do they differ from the not so distant, quite legitimate city bombardments, acts of retribution? Because they are directed against the civilian population? And when was the last time an army fought an army? If the strong countries boast about their "super-precise" weapons, capable, supposedly, of hitting exclusively military targets, - this only underscores, that on the whole, wars are conducted precisely against people. Far more civilians died from "super-precise" weapons in recent conflicts than in terrorist acts.

By recognizing war we are at least ensuring the right for adequate response. More accurately, could have ensured. But we just can't decide with whom we are fighting. With Chechnya? With the entire Islamic world? With international terrorism, propagating a new world order? As if we are afraid to name it. Because as soon as we say it out loud, we will have to take action in regards to the enemy, and not only those who hold arms in their hands, but even those who are capable of holding them. Is it possible to imagine that in 1914 Germans would have been actively engaged in real estate purchasing in Petrograd and Moscow? But the world community! But all the sacred cows tied to nationalities and religions! Only now we are talking not about abstract justice and not about general principles – we are talking about our survival. It is quite possible that the Chechen war is fueled today by new powerful entities reshaping the world, at Russia's expense, to their advantage – and our main task is to

get out of it as soon as possible and at any cost. But one way or another we can't allow ourselves to simply be slaughtered like cattle.

Only it is very difficult to commit oneself to certainty (his own conclusions are unpleasant to him, they scare him, they are reminiscent of the calls to mobilize the entire country, he thinks about his son). Then the war will inevitably become everyone's business. In any country where it is hard to earn a living, where there is no one to protect you from bandits, people's civic consciousness disappears. They think about themselves, their loved ones, and the elite – about their own precious property. And all of a sudden everyone in some way or another will be asked to show their decisive selflessness. In whose interest? The power, the state? And who needs them today, who believes in them besides the scripted TV pundits? Now it's still convenient. Is this war, or not. Is there an enemy or are we fighting shadows. The chance to die from a shahid bomb is far smaller than the chance to die in a car accident. Someone somewhere pays with his blood for the owners of elite dwellings and suburban homes, for TV and pop stars, for the politicians, oil magnates and their lawyers, for the bards, the scientists, for everyone who still lives a peaceful life and is horrified, sitting in front of the box, at the villainy of terrorists. Little by little: five people, ten, drip-drip. Three hundred people. But what's that to a country that is used to counting the dead by millions.

An hour and a half later he is able to scroll through five written pages on the monitor. He feels that he succeeded: the text is energetic and bears the stamp of his inner pain, anxiety and fear, and consequently – lacks didacticism, but still carries weight. But he doesn't like the last paragraphs, their tone. He sees that he was too carried away by the form that presupposed at the end a conclusion, an inference, a result – but who can sum things up here? His contemplations should have begun in the middle of a phrase and in the same way broken off – it would have been more honest. Yes, he was let down by the form, but that's not hard to fix: a few sentences throughout the text, get rid of emotionalism, change the ending a bit... now the task is becoming harder. He writes a chunk, deletes, types again, changing words or their order, searches for an authentic tone.

At some point his fingers make a mistake, slip off the needed keys, pressing simultaneously two or three in a combination, which he of course cannot remember and cannot then reconstruct. And instead of a Word window in front of him there appears the cloth surface of the "desktop."

But he is not the bard, he gets computers, and knows that they never do anything irreversibly, without asking beforehand – and often even twice – are you sure. For that reason he searches down below for the minimized program. Nothing. All right, the file is saved automatically every five minutes and the most he could have lost was his tinkering in the last paragraph. Stop. Only a week ago some stupid game, installed by his son, changed his Office settings - he had to reboot the system. And clearly he forgot to activate autosave after the rebooting.

He gets back into Word, thinking that the program will inform him about the reconstructed files and will inquire what to do with them – even during a severe crash the computer usually manages to somehow retain the data. On the screen, as if nothing had happened, without

any questions, there appeared a clean sheet, the cursor blinking invitingly. He looks through the Word directory, folders for temporary files, checks the recycling bin, everywhere where the program might have saved something. Nothing. On the "desktop" the animated icon of the new computer game spins around its axis. He looks at the green cloth of the "desktop" (earlier, before the rebooting, here was an uplifting screensaver of the bluest sky with clouds and a biplane in mid-turn/swoop), as if staring into some finite objects, numbed by their hopeless simplicity.

"That's it," he said. "That's how we pay for our important thoughts. That's their price."

translated from the Russian by Anna Barker
