

Aram PACHYAN
Excerpt from the novel [Goodbye, Bird]

"Ich ruf zu dir, Herr Jesu Christ"

Johann Sebastian Bach

And I imagine that we are going
to set out the two of us alone
perhaps three and that no one
in the world will ever know
anything of our precious voyage toward
nothing but simply toward somewhere else and
forever
On this sea bluer still bluer
than any blue on earth
On this sea where no one would ever shout:
"Land!"¹

Guillaume Apollinaire

one

I am 28 years old. That's what it says at the beginning of every page in his notebook, which he opens up every hour, leafs through, and incessantly repeats that he is 28 years old, repeats it with his skin turning dark red with anxiety, first looking at his arms to check that two has not suddenly turned into three. Then he hangs his melon-looking head like the limp head of a dead man over one of the pages in his notebook and writes: two will never become three, because after being discharged the only governor of space and time is you, just like your grandfather who, at the break of dawn, finally closed the books on history. Look at how the 28-year-old Dürer depicts the savior's movement in his self-portrait! The mastery of improbable, mystifying brushstrokes. It's as if the brush worked from deep outer space with a guiding mix of the mind and the senses. The self-portrait of the 28-year-old Dürer is a creation challenging God to a duel; his time will always remain

eternal, while you, who are already 28 years old, have no time left to yourself besides Bird. Absent-minded soldier. They're not embarrassed by the honesty of their own gaze and they don't kill the enemy from fear of shame. Not even a grain of soft honesty has remained in you to see time. SOFT honesty. At least make a promise to yourself now. Promise that you won't kill your dream from fear of shame. I promise that I will always be 28 and that I will not scratch up my face from fear of shame, and that every morning, until dawn, like my grandfather, I will eat a banana and drink a cup of coffee, feed Bird, bathe him, pet his fur, and at least once a month I will smoke Alejo's native tobacco and maybe one day, with a stroke of luck, like Schiele, I will catch some interesting 21st-century viral disease. He didn't know when his grandfather had eaten a banana for the first time—maybe it was while roofing in Russia or on the train that took orphans to Europe. But he remembers the day his grandfather lit his first cigar. That thin-veined brown cigar that moved the imagination seemed taller than his grandfather. He somehow jammed it between his lips, struck a match and brought it up to the tip of the cigar, all the while drilling him not to swallow the smoke. For one hour they took turns enjoying the cigar. They smoked and smiled. They smiled and smoked. Meanwhile, his grandfather elucidated the secrets of smoking cigars. He said that the chest should absolutely be puffed-out and that the lower lip should arrogantly droop down. Know that as long as this blue smoke is rising, you are a man standing nearest to God. He said this with a straight face and seeing his puffed-out chest and twitching lip, he suddenly chortled and laughed for a long, very long time. His grandfather's last friend, which was peeled strip by strip—his fingers feel the constraint, but they try to slow down so that he can live just a little longer, five more minutes, until he reaches the last morsel, which will be the most painful. The softness of the fleshy pulp will burn his throat and the drops of coffee will evaporate with a fizz. Then he will walk, he will walk out of the house to no longer walk and no longer return. Bravo, banana, you did not leave my grandfather's side. Bless your heart. There's silence in the office. I need to leave. It's as if my body is glued to the stiff chair. So leave without your body. There's knocking on the glass of the window. He turns around. It's the little banana. It's standing in front of the window, pressing its peel against the cold glass. It's pleading. Come on, come, you're running late, they're waiting for you. I'm coming. On the desk. My desk has the color of pomegranates and is strewn with a letter of resignation, a notebook, a pen, and shredded pieces of my girlfriend's photograph. He slowly collects his possessions. He crams his notebook and pen into the sack-like bag hanging from his chair, then he crouches under the table and somewhat shyly puts the shredded pieces of the photograph one by one into his mouth, working, as he chews, on softly grinding his molars. My crazy kitten, today at noon, as I was saying goodbye to the office, I ate one half of a half of you, then the other half, chewing our memories with care so that they would be digested easily. Let your body live inside of me. Walk with me. Tingle all over. Flutter with delight. I've made up my mind. I'm going. There's no time. He crouches. He goes under the chair on all fours. He shoves the rest of the pens and pencils he took from the desk under the carpet. He kisses and licks the fuzzy little tassels of the carpet. Forgive me, my friend, please, forgive me for everything, I didn't want to hit you, I burned your beautiful face for those dirty plates. You went and shot straight into your mouth. Does one feel the taste of bullets in one's mouth? A current of air ripples the tassels of the carpet like grass. He gets up. He throws his bag over his shoulder. He sadly looks at his fur coat and scarf swaying on the coat rack. He puts on his fur coat and wraps himself with the scarf you gave him. Which shop in Paris did you get it from? The shop is probably called "Blue Peace" or "Crocodile Heart." Lying in bed at night, he imagines the display windows of the shop and the saleswoman whose face looked like it had been scratched up with the tip of a thick nail. From one of the shops in Paris, you picked out a scarf for me, a s c a r f, with your delicate fingers. In the dark, it's as if the word flies out of your mouth. It has entered my mouth, it has opened my mouth, and with my mouth it is drawing the scarf that was knitted in another country and exudes the maddening scent of your skin. The excitement makes the palms of your hands sweat. Thump, th-thump, thump, thump. The heart. Courage is needed to listen to the beats of the heart in the dark. You want to drink. He reaches under the bed. His fingers rub

against Bird's whiskers. He gently strokes the nose of the cat for a long time, then he somehow finds the bottle, picks it up, puts it to his mouth, and, contracting the muscles in his face, slowly chugs it down. Your fingers rest on my shoulder blades, because I sleep on my stomach to begin our dialogue, and very often I pretend, like you, to be sleeping so that you hold my back with your gentle hand, so that your lips lightly press on my shoulder and quiver with your dreamy breathing. Sky-blue lip lines turned dark red with excitement. Your tongue glides over the edges of your lips, wetting the dry heat. Hold the tip of your tongue with your teeth and thrust it into my mouth. To steal your tongue, to take it between my lips, to feel its sharp presence. One strap of your black bra has slipped down your shoulder and fallen on your thin sparkling gold fuzzy arm. You rub against the strap of her bra with your nose and lightly nibble her arm with a quaver. Don't you wake up, don't you come out of that sweet slumber. I don't want to hurt you with my shameless presses, but I know that you're not sleeping, because your cheek slowly caresses the pillow softly. You wait for my nightly surprise attacks, you wait with crafty hints. Suddenly you envelop my back with your legs, pull your short nightgown to your hips and roll like a cat, embracing my body. The warm current that flows between your legs burns my thighs. And I dream that any minute now you will simply take off your nightgown, that any minute now you will finally remove from your body that final silky gauze that separates us, and you know that I'm waiting for you to suddenly kiss my neck around dawn in your wakeful sleep, for your tongue to stick out through your lips and prick my skin like a little fish nose, and for everything to start all over again under the first droplets of sun shining through the window. But you continue to rub against the corner of the pillow. Her shiny black nipple, covered with tiny little glands, whose tip you gently hold between your incisors and stroke with your tongue, massaging it endlessly. The heat of your palate fills her breast. She's moaning intensely, digging her fingers in your hair, and pressing your head down with her other hand, she pushes her breast deeper into your mouth. The room becomes permeated with the semi-sweet scent of your naked and lone bodies. It was only inside of her that you could forget about your presence; it was inside of her that you could make your own body disappear; it was through her kindness and moisture that you could come to yourself. Irises swallowed by the whites of the eyes. They already sparkle on the distant horizon. Deep, deep penetration. The throbbing of pleasant pain. With sweet thrusts. It penetrated deeply, so deeply that there was a new beginning after that, a new space, a new meaning, so deeply that for a moment happiness was almost attainable, palpable and found, so deeply that death and separation seemed unattainable then. There was as much silence inside of him as there was inside of a house that had been abandoned a long time ago. You would succumb to the craze of return and that escape was her only light, which was surrendered to you as a last chance, a willful surrendering pull, a confession not uttered in a long time. You leave the bed. She sits on the carpet. You stand over her head and look at the dark cleavage separating her breasts. She starts to move her breasts with her palms, back and forth, taking long breaks. She squeezes them. She pushes them together. And you have bent over almost breathlessly, you are stroking her shady hair draped over her shoulder blades with your mouth and cheeks, carefully, trying not to touch her skin, and then you hold her back, and then you kiss her fragile shoulders, and then you lie on your back, and then she comes to you, very slowly, slowly; slowly; your expectation is so impatient that your skin tingles, and she knows that you can never bear it and she uses it to her advantage, turning seconds into centuries, her nipples sticking out before her breasts, which descend down the back of your neck, drawing singular lines with their tips all the way to the end of your median furrow, and ascend again. You feel the breasts entering your body, and they like each of the layers of your body, then the breasts move through you, break open your rib cage, and burst out. Now you can feel her breasts on your body, you can feel her hips, her groin, her thighs, her knees, her lips, the ankles of her feet, the thin, thin veins going through her ankles.

You probably walked down Flaubert's streets in Paris and felt my impatient and wet tongue play from your neck to your mouth. Now I've wrapped the scarf you gave me around my throat, and with my bag over my shoulder I stand frozen between the desks: tell me, what should I do? I don't know, but you have a colleague you're not saying goodbye to. You hate that person. His haircut. The way he sits. His accent. The artificial hiss under his breath every five minutes. His everyday presence. For a moment today, you wonder what the mole on your cheek looks like from where he's sitting: does it look big or small? Does he cast a brief glance at your face? What does he think of the pocks on your cheeks? Will he know that those are leftover traces from chickenpox? Chickenpox. The end of a daydream. Little green dots. The sun is a little green dot. Each one has its own character. No little green dot feels pain the same way. At night they itch like crazy. I want to scratch my skin off with my nails. My mother hugs me. Where did you get that much strength from? You've turned into a skeleton. You're tired of waiting for your husband. Don't give yourself hope, the war will go on for a long time, and you, you coward, you don't have the courage to betray your husband. You forgot to wash your hands. The smell of spilled oil from the pipes of the heater wafts from your fingers. Jeans-wearing woman quickly tapping heater pipes. Are you playing mother? Under the flickering light of the lamp you resemble an old sallow woman. Your skin hangs from your cheeks like the withered skin of a peach. You're holding me in your arms. My temple is leaning against your rib cage where once upon a time one could feel two triangular breasts for which you can no longer find fitting bras. You push the balcony door with your foot. We get out into the clean air. You somehow stop me. Lean against the balcony balustrade. You say, look at how pretty the lights of the street lanterns are. You stand behind me and blow with all your might so that my burning back cools down a little--whooooooooooooosh, whooooooooooooosh, the burn intensifies. I can't take it anymore. I try to get on the balcony balustrade. Throw myself down. You grab my sides terrified, you pull me towards you and hold me tight. Let go of me! How beautifully the light that flows out of the little lanterns ripples! I want to catch the movements in the air with my mouth. Dense green suns, one by one stamped on my face with care. You're not leaving. You have fallen asleep next to me. Coward. Who told you to get pregnant and warm up your protruding belly in the sun every day? Now you're not sleeping. I know. You've supposedly closed your eyes. For show. You gave birth to me with your eyes closed out of fear; chicken's pox. Instead of preventing the doctor from slapping my behind, you were howling in labor pains. At least the doctor slapped fair and square, without gloves. And my first word, without anyone asking me, without my permission, was a terrifying screech born from the pain of the slap that had been given me. Two little dots on my eyelids; the tips of my lashes are steeped in green algae; green world.

Bird has jumped on the bed and is lying at my feet meowing restlessly. He takes a burning cigarette out of his mouth and tries to put it in the cat's mouth. It turns its head. It doesn't want it. Then he puts his hand under the bed again. There should be another bottle. Suddenly his fingers rub against a familiar and disgusting bald spot. It's impossible. My God. It's the commander again. He shakes his body and tries to call for help, and through the half-open door of his room he sees the contortions of his own terrified face, his mute mouth opening and closing in weightlessness, and his mouth's resilient movements in a vacuum. Drops of cognac slowly flow down the edges of his lips. He tries to strain his consciousness, tries to understand whether anyone in the house can hear that terrifying screech leaving his throat or whether it's him, only him who can hear his own screech. The commander breathes steadily. The air blowing out of his nostrils burns. I've been discharged for a while now, you hear? Leave me alone, commander! What do you want, you son of a bitch? Every night you come and hide under my bed and scatter my brain with the chain in your hand. But your chain doesn't hurt me anymore. Flog the corpse as much as you want. I neither have flesh nor blood. Are you that stupid, you still don't get it, you deformed miscarriage? Don't you understand that your beatings now are completely meaningless? You're nothing outside of the military base, you one-legged scarecrow planted in a field! Impotent. Back then, in your room, you hit me so much that

the skin on my face, my nose, my mouth, my chin shattered, then you made me sweep up every piece of my face one by one, and splitting your sides with laughter, you said, take it to the open window and let the wind carry it away. You bequeathed me an eternal pastime after my discharge, commander! Now I stand by the window all day looking out for hours and I make up facial features in the rising wind that turn into sharp shards, glide away, and get lost in a cloud of dust. But, do you remember, commander, how you scratched up my face with your teeth? You turned everything on its head. The boys were saying that you supposedly sharpened your row of gold teeth with an electric sharpener every morning. They were probably joking or maybe they were telling the truth. I didn't feel any pain, commander, it's just that the more you hit my head, the deeper my inner emptiness and sadness grew. Every hit on my head taught me how to think, taught me how to remember again and go, leaving my body behind under your shoes. He tightly closes his mouth with both hands. He clenches his teeth and presses his fingers together so that through no crack, through no narrow passage, your spit, your disgusting spit, will bound into my mouth. During the morning formation, in the motionless silence, I couldn't hold in my friend's wonderful mime jokes and I chuckled, and I didn't know that for laughing I would have to pay with my mouth for two years, I didn't know that my laugh would be my mouth's last goodbye. When you dragged me into your room, closed the door, and started to break my body with dull and rhythmic strikes, at that moment the strikes seemed so real to me, so angry and blunt that I experienced them as an important acquisition to what had been missing from my body all these years--as an honest flattery. But you moved to my mouth. My mouth was what you needed. You laughed with this trap, didn't you, birth of a whore? This is the trap you couldn't shut, wasn't it, soldier? Now watch me shut it! I have to fight for you, lay down my life, hold up a homeland for a motherfucker like you, so that you can't control your trap? Foaming stream with popping white bubbles. Slowly, very slowly, from your blood-gushing cheeks, which will later glitter in a sad wooden box in the middle of your living room like a little isle veiled with makeup. You couldn't hold your laugh during the morning formation. Your friend Zizu's face contorted and changed with such improbable flexibility into different moods and conditions that not laughing would simply equal to not breathing. The commander holds your throat with one hand and with the fingers of the other hand he squeezes your jaw, trying to open your mouth. The pressure of his fingers makes the corners of your lips crack open. Your mouth opens up. You move your head from side to side, shaking uncontrollably. You are struck against the floor with your temple and the top of your forehead. The commander gathers up a good swill of saliva and spits straight into your mouth. Suddenly you start to laugh, laugh, laugh hysterically with cackles and snorts. Your chest thunders and your legs point straight up into the air. Somehow confused by the surprise, the commander grabs you by the hair and starts to beat your head against the floor. Your laugh becomes even more intense. The dull and inescapable roar thudding against the walls of the room is reborn. The commander starts to erratically sputter in your face. Then he closes your mouth with the palm of his hand. Shut up, asshole, shut up! Are you trying to call the cops on me? You want me to kill you, is that what you want? His palm has embalmed your mouth. Now your laugh fills up inside. It finds its own way. It goes to a place you've never been. It laughs for silence, modestly rejoicing at itself. Before going to the army, your mother would tell you what a beautiful soldier you'd make. Now she won't even look at my face. We speak with our shoulders. I stand in front of the mirror for hours and comb my hair with a little comb, my hair is not visible, or, more precisely, I don't see myself, I positively realize that I don't see. I don't exist and I realize the realization that I don't exist, it seems as if I have existed and I do exist, but you can't see that I have existed and I do exist, it seems as if it's the comb that's grooming my hair, but without a comb and without hair. I point my finger at the mirror where a young man stands, but without a finger and without a young man--I'm simply a blind spot. Shame on you, you little whore. You've dragged your heavy stars, you've come after a dead man. Why did you come? What do you want? Do you have amnesia? And now you come after your discharged soldiers? Did you open a corpse factory? I'm looking for a job, if there's a vacancy, I'd love to work there. But why do you slither every day and

lie under my bed? Doesn't your wife like you either? I know, you're one of those tough old boys used to fields and soil, facing your face up to space. Don't you have a home and a wife, don't you have soldiers to violate anymore? What do you want from me? I already know where you live and I quit my job, because I've already saved up all my money for a gun, beeeeeeeee caaaaaaaareful veeeeeeeeery caaaaaaaareful, commander, IIIIIIIIIII will shoooooooooooooooooot straight into your forehead, I'm not afraaaaaaaaaaaaaaid. I keep a knife under my pillow now. I'm serious. I'll turn on the light and cut your throat or call my mother. You don't know my mother very well. If she comes, she'll kick the life out of you, and don't you ever touch Bird again. You hear? Bird is not one of the boys you knew. It doesn't have a mouth. Instead of coming and making coffee even just once and talking about our service, the military tactics of the enemy, the fate of the army, your glorious past, I think you've accomplished quite a few heroic feats, no, or did you make those up? Well, whatever, even if you were making things up, that's okay, we all make things up. The measure of things made-up is never excessive. His sheets are drenched and clinging to his body. The big drops of sweat quiver on the apples of his cheeks. He picks up the cat and tightly presses it against his chest. Bird is not a soldier, you whore. You won't slaughter it anymore, you won't catch it under the wall of the mess hall and you won't break its neck, and you won't hurl its head at our feet. It's all the same, we won't tell you whose cat it is. Asshole, "whose is it?" never relates to a cat. It was the unit's cat whose head you tore off. The fur by its neck was torn. Its coagulated blood had stuck to its fur like a little tick. It wasn't breathing. You shouldn't kill a cat, commander. It's a sin. I know, I read it somewhere. The ancient Egyptians cursed those who raised their hand against a cat, they subjected them to terrible tortures. Cats are friends to humans. They cure many diseases. They cure everybody, even babies born sick. The babies are born sick--they're born, they feel pain and then they die. But suddenly one day between life and death they suddenly see a cat in the window and they extend their plump little hands towards it. Their little cheeks tremble in joy and their irises sparkle as sparks of being alive. You, too, have extended your finger towards a cat and your finger was also plump, but at that time they had lied to you. At the military base, we did not eat cat meat. We preferred dog. Don't laugh, the Egyptians won't forgive you. I've asked those old boys. Whoever kills cats falls into their world. The cats enter your body and then they meow, they constantly meow. They don't kill you, they don't bite your lungs, your kidneys, your windpipe, because you fall into their world gutted, so that it's spacious for them inside. They only meow and meow and meow. The cats have made you immortal so that you hear their meows forever, so that you're the only one who hears their echoes. They say that cats meow to forget their own nightmares. There's no escape from consciousness. You try to die from the terror. No, it's not working. You have no strength. You cat-filled bag, meeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeooooooooooooooooow meeeeeeeee meeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeooooooooooooooooow what are you staring at, commander? Are you trying to remember my name? Anonymous cadet. Remember? To leave the room I now have to empty the whole bottle of cognac and find courage again, open the door and scurry out. He empties the bottle to the last drop. He holds Bird and keeping his balance somehow he opens the heavy door. Now you have to start walking, little soldier. Don't be afraid. Walking will distance you. Lift your foot. Put it on the floor or on the window sill. But make sure to look at the traffic on the street first. Make sure there aren't any children on the street. They'll get very scared. They don't have to see. Lovely children with gentle smiles and soft hands. It'll probably rain outside. Fine, if you want, let it rain. And to get to the marketplace you have to keep walking down the street. You're right, to get somewhere you always have to walk. So here we go, don't forget to move your feet first. The bus full of conscripts is waiting for you. Your family waves goodbye. You see that moment a few times. You're standing in front of the bus doors with a waxed bag in your hand. How wretched and weak the waxed bag in your hand looks! I don't understand, wasn't there another bag in the house? Your mother's, sister's, grandfather's... their faces are stuck to your face. They're breathing straight into your mouth. They move their hands back and forth and slap your cheeks with all their might. Why are they slapping you, why can't they kiss your cheeks at least, instead of painfully slapping them?

They've pressed their faces firmly on my face. It'd be better if they entered my mouth. I'm still confident that my mouth is the safest place, that no one in the military unit will find out that I hide my family in my mouth. When everyone is fast asleep at night, I'll take them out, I'll line them up on the blue camouflage bedding of my mesh base bed and I'll share my thoughts with them, and then we'll play war games together like little tin soldiers, and at dawn I will put them back in my mouth. I'll hide them. Eeeeeeeeh, hurry up, soldier, you're not expecting us to wait for you for hours, are you? Say goodbye and be done. You're no longer a part of the outside world. Hurry up, say goodbye. The short lieutenant with crooked legs squealed like a pig annoyed at the heat. Dumbstruck waxed bag: sad and swaying in front of the open doors of the bus. Am I not talking to you? Are you not listening? Say something, too, sad swaying waxed bag. The engine of the bus starts with a sputter. Burning throat. A bag swaying in a kind breeze: the neck did not ward off the rope. The powerful kick of the lieutenant's half-shoe on your back throws your body to the ground. Fall in! Fooooorward, march! One, one, one, two, three, left, left, left, right, left

He's trying to trample the leaves that have fallen to the ground on the street, he's walking down the familiar road, free, with his eyes closed, as if it were the hallway in his house that leads from the bathroom to the bedroom. You are led by shop signs, by pediments of nearby buildings, by open balconies, by half-wet whites hanging from clotheslines, by rippling window glass, by sheer valance curtains, by chandeliers oscillating from ceilings and flickering shadows, by traces in windows of hideous old women's cheekbones, by waxing and waning silhouettes of unfamiliar women. Your face contorts at some uncertain anxiety. You're sweating. You're breathing heavily. Your mouth is parched. You walk up to a newsstand and ask the saleswoman for a glass of water. Staring through the little window, she extends a yellow glass filled with water. You drink slowly, one gulp after another, looking restlessly around you. With your head down, you return the glass through the little window. The saleswoman takes it, then extends her hand once more through the window and suddenly digs her fingers in your hair and gently strokes your hair with the weak movements of her fingers and the tips of her nails. Gentle fingers, moving joints that hardly quiver under thin skin, your nails, painted dark red, dig into my hair, stroke the back of my neck, with both arms you hold my back, the more I pressed down your body, the deeper you dug your nails into my skin, and I could see the movement of your fingers with nails painted with dark red polish stroking my back, I could see it pressed against the ceiling of the room as if I were separating from my body, examining your half-closed eyes from a little distance, your cheek pressed against my cheek, my lips kissing your shoulder, a pale face turned to the ceiling, the bloneness of locks mixed with shadows, then the light of the street lanterns shining through the window flickering under the soles of your feet walking over my back, whose cold, pleasant presses slowly moved over my spine to my nape, weightless, bare feet--soft steps, feathery--you've opened your hands like the wings of an aeroplane, and somehow keeping the balance of your body, you walk over my back, counting out loud: oooooooooooooone, twooooooooooooo, threeeeeeeeeeee, and near the back of my neck you suddenly crash down on my back, turn my head around, and kiss deeply. Through your parted lips, the tip of your naughty tongue discernible in the dark shadow comes to prod itself into my mouth, probe around, and demolish my insides. Waited for two years for the naughty tongue discernible in the dark shadow through your parted lips, got discharged, waited, and did not find it. The dark red nail polish paints your nails to dig into someone else's skin. At least don't use my favorite dark red nail polish. At least change the color in my memory. Is everything okay? Nothing happened, huh? Are you not feeling well? No, I'm walking. I've just started getting tired faster. Okay, then go, only look under your feet when you walk and don't suddenly raise your head or they'll notice you. He draws down the window and leaves the depths of the newsstand. A street with gray sidewalks leading to a fruit market; the neon cross of a pharmacy with a green flickering snake coiled around it; the egg-shaped, whiskey-colored perfume vials; the loud din coming out of pizzerias. As you walk, they are imprinted in your memory as dim, transitory shimmers of colors, subjects, sensations, and sounds.

One day, when you're passing time in bed, they will become images, like a little baby playing with the toy hanging from his crib with his hand, all alone in the silence of the dark room. As you cross the intersection, you suddenly freeze, unexpectedly turn around and look at me, then you avert your gaze, as if you were looking in another direction all along and you count the leaves trampled under your feet again: one, two, three, three, wait a second, four, five, six. Listen, do you remember the giant oak tree by the office under which it's very probable there are fallen leaves? Let's go crush them. Wait, let me think a little. You're barely able to stop yourself. You'd really like to turn around and crush all of the leaves under the oak tree, but it's late. I'm sorry, I can't come. You go, I have people waiting for me. You continue to walk, pushing your hands into your pants pockets. You touch two sunflower seeds in one of them. There was only supposed to be one seed. Where did the second one come from? The first one was there from last week. You had bought it at the beach for 20 drams. The seller was a little fisher boy with a giant hump on his back. He had covered one of his eyes with a black patch and tied a toy truck to his foot. He was a real pirate.

That day, instead of going to the office, you picked up Bird, bought two bottles of whiskey, grabbed your bag, sat on the number 72 yellow bus from the bus stop on Babayan Street, got off at the last stop, and walked for an hour over blackish, gloomy stones until you reached the beach. In the mottled morning mist that has still not lifted, you and Bird have frozen side by side on this deserted shore. Both of you are looking. You gulp down the strong whiskey, mixing it with a mouthful of tiny pebbles and slimy shells, which are not chewed properly because of the weak movements of your jaws. The little pirate walks up unnoticeably. He suddenly pops up in front of you, tightly holding a fishing rod in his hand. It's the first time in your life that you see a fishing rod that small for catching fish. It's the size of a pen. Hands up, the boy says, holding the rod to your forehead. I'm the world's most evil pirate. They call me one-legged, one-eyed Bear. I aaaaaaaaam aaaaaaaaas strong aaaaaaaaas a Bear, because IIIIII caaaaaaaaan hit. He presses the rod against your forehead. His little hand shakes a little. Who gave you permission to look at my sea, eh? To hide your inebriation from the child, you try to avoid looking into his eyes, you stroke Bird's back, which is purring and sniffing and rubbing its tail against Bear's leg. I'm sorry, one-legged, one-eyed Bear, I'll leave now. But Bear suddenly steps back, the rod in his hand loosens and slips down your forehead. Bear crouches down before you, lowers his head and, finding your downcast eyes, he looks at you with a pitiful gaze. The sea waves in his irises bring to mind sparkling boats on the horizon, and the sea is so sad in the child's eyes. Deep down he probably doesn't want you to leave. Well, fine, I won't hit you. It's sad. Is this your cat? Watch me kill it. Bear jumps back on his feet, erratically sticks the rod up in the air, and angrily looks at the cat. Psht. Run, moron. Psht. Unfazed, Bird squints and casts such an indifferent glance at the rod erratically sticking up in the air and another glance at Bear's angry face, then sprawls again on the stones. It's not afraid? You don't say a word, and with your index finger you play with the fuzzy brown moss covering the round pebble. If your cat died, would you be very sad? Your voice is smothered by the thunder of giant waves crashing against the cliffs. Fine, I'll let you look at my sea, but on one condition, you have to buy the fish I caught, you hear, let's go, I'll show you,--the boy says, pointing his finger in an unclear direction, then pulling twice on your wiry hair with his little thumb and index finger, he walks. You pick up the bottle and bag and silently follow the excited little boy's short and angry steps. Bird walks next to you meowing. Clunk, clunk, clunk--almost half of the truck tied to his foot has fallen apart from crashing against stones. Some time later he suddenly stops in his tracks and opens up his arms wide as a bird's. This is it. We're here. Don't move. You're standing in a thick feather of mist, as if on a swaying carpet. You're barely able to see anything. You feel little mounds and large beachrocks under your feet. He bends over and beckons you. You slowly walk up to him and crouch next to him. Bear lifts up an egg-shaped beachrock and points at a barely visible sunflower seed in the brittle sand. Have you ever seen a fish like this in your life, with five eyes and blue feathers? It doesn't even have a heart. He's glowing with happiness. His cheeks are blushing. No, I've never seen one. See? I was after it for

sensation of feeling gifts being put under their pillow on New Year's Eve and of their shoulders being covered with a soft blanket, I know, they have; turning and folding water wrinkles, a couple of loose silky threads, fluttering coffin shroud brushing against your deathly pale frizzy hair, and your mother's fingers softly stroking your frizzy hair, the tips of her nails now and then brushing against the fluttering shroud and the coffin's shiny polish, plucker of fruit from grandpa's tree, its zealous conscience that singles out fruits to be plucked from the branches one by one, no, it had no conscience, because the overripe fruits neighed in terror at being eaten and plucked, but there was happiness, there was a little girl's screech in the suspensions of the leaves and branches, the orchard was evil, but it was old and had the good gaze of a wine-drunk man, while his movement was like flesh pulled down to the bone and, on the bone, braids and groups of muscles, then blood, as if someone has poured zest from the wine decanter into rivers called veins, in Karin, hands of masters built carriage wheels, knobby lumps on their fingers, warts, crystallized on the inside, knuckles covered in calluses with the gloomy, skin-tearing roughness of branches, but it was gentle, gentle, it shaved down the wood ferociously, but the pulp and the splinters gently, with an almost impalpable smoothness, like the dream of your hand caressing a girl's skin, sliding from one curve to another, sliding and letting the softness make the heart pound; the popping crackles of fire in the quiet of the night, the wheel sings the orange tongues with every turn, the firmness of that rough hand carving wheels of eternity, that rough callused carving hand pouring sand down your nape as you sit under trees grown under the weight of the sun as mirrors of the sun, the rustling leaves betray the ferity of grandfather's short steps, his fierce hand, which had wrapped three knots around the rope so that goddamn death would not suddenly seize him from life; one hand, one rope, one stumble, a stump under your feet, the shadows of trees on shaved and clean ruddy cheeks, a small dark spot on the edge of your lips, they received an order in Karin from Paris for carriage wheels, I know, the most amazing wheels were prepared for Gustave Flaubert and his lover Louise Colet, who were then going to play Bovary and Leon, and those amazing wheels roll through the streets of Paris by Saint-Sever, the Quai des Curandiers, the Quai aux Meules, the Place du Champ de Mars, behind the hospital gardens, they saw it, they see it at La Rouge-Marc, at Place du Gaillardbois, then they see in on Papazian, on Aram Khachatryan, it goes down on Komitas, enters Sayat-Nova through Baghramyán, turns onto Teryán, goes down, goes down, sir, what is your final destination? wherever you want, the familiar voice rings from an intangible distance; they see the shadow of the carriage in the narrow streets of the Cascade, they see it coming down Abovyan, suddenly near the Puppet Theater, in front of the Chess House, at the hard-to-cross intersection of Kond, gliding by "Kostan Zaryan" books and little bow tie shop windows; without stopping, the carriage goes on until dawn, feeling the moist non-dewiness of alleys, the cobblestones, the wheels' obstinate but smooth turns; grandfather's hand that cut ornamental carvings on the wheels, that upon seeing me in the courtyard in the morning dug into my hair like a pickaxe, rumpling my hair, and asked, are you okay? You look sad, did something happen? And you get greedy, you shake your head like a lunatic, you glide into the forest and roam around until late in the night, feeling all day on the surface of your head his heavy right, how much bottled-up noise there was in the silence of his hand, how many shadows of trees there were and waters, which streamed after work, washed the length of his arms, even if you shaved your hair, the trace won't vanish, the weight of his five fingers, like flowing thick black earth, is one feisty man, you take one handful of black earth, it's a man, or the eye of a fallen soldier by a sniper rifle, or the small bun on the back of a girl's neck, or a bird, or the scut of a rabbit, well now, a handful of earth is human and that's what's important; no one else besides your grandfather in the mornings has asked you whether you're okay, no one else has come to terms with your piggish personality, your innately evil inclinations, your tendency to sullenly torture everyone for pleasure, your genuine disgust for your mother and father, your endless deceptions; centimeter by centimeter, to not die in the winter, branches were cut from the trees in the forest, which were turned into brooms, made and sold with the little boy's little hand, which was familiar, which was a familiarity, it was somehow necessary for you, it was a comforting

moment; contractions of muscle tendons that stroked your head shamelessly bridled the horse-woman; no one, except for that hand, has accepted you the way you are, they accepted you the way you are not, they provoked you into deception and subservience right from the start, they tried to distract you from how you were made, they forced you to become good, they forced it, but they never showed you, they lied to you that you are the best, while you are the worst, which is your truth; they taught you not to blame, that is not to blame disability, they taught you to work and work, work and work, work, work, so that your life becomes a savage and numb immobility; you are a total egoist, because you only value that one hand that stroked your head, with the savage honesty of a prehistoric man, without the haughty voice of the tree, that asked in the morning, are you okay? You get up on the stump, rolling on the deserted shore of the sea, rolling from the tall waves, now rolling on the sand, now rocking on the peak of the waves. Bird is happily playing with the stump. The hair on its back rises with a hiss, it freezes under the stump and waits. He hits it hard out of fear with a trembling paw and hysterically hops around trying to push it back.

Through a net of sand grains filled in your eye sockets, you see with half-opened eyes. You're face-down on the ground. You no longer have anything to drink, the bottle's not there anymore--it's probably voyaging through the open sea. The sand grains rasp in your mouth. Let the waves lick all of you, and you watch how he barely rises like rolling and folding shadows, whimpering in pain and emptiness, he clenches his teeth and holds his cat, then stands for a long time, undecided, gazing at the tears in his pants around his knees, then he leaves, feeling disgust at the sullen hollowness of the stones, and with wretched, crude steps, he somehow reaches the bus stop. The pack of cigarettes is lost in the water. He pulls a crumpled smoke out of the pack and puts it in his mouth. He can't find a lighter. The doors of the yellow number 72 bus soon open right under his nose. How to conquer these few black steps? The yellow bus will take him to a place where they speak in whispers. He strolls with half-closed eyes from where he's standing. Bird has fallen asleep on his lap. He sees a strange man waiting at the bus stop who's having trouble walking and decides to help him by letting him lean on his arm, lifting him over the steps one by one, carefully seating him in a seat, and putting his hand on his shoulder, asks somewhat shyly whether he should call emergency. If you don't feel well, I'll call now. Every day in the morning when you'd leave your house and enter the people-filled street, you always thought that there must be someone in the crowd who, if need be, would call emergency, and you thought about the life of the emergency-calling person, which is most mystifying. You don't know why you're convinced that that life is outside of all life, that it's insignificant, a sort of unimportant solitude-loving self-satisfaction. That person probably also loves dogs. He has put his hand with such care and respect on your shoulder, it's as if he doesn't want the pressure to cause even the slightest annoyance or pain. No, thank you, I just want to lean my head against the cold window; lean against the cold glass of the window and feel my return to her, because you aaaaaare sleeeeeeeeping ooooooh craaaaaaaaazy giiiiiiiiirl, and I'm returning from the military base, my return is your body's memory, while your body is my return's desire, and I am stroking your naked shoulder sketched in the flooding light, sliding under your blouse with a breeze in the flooding light, caressing and rubbing your skin, recognizing her entire breathing and maddening fragrance that soaks up my numb existence like dawn's hidden shadows, shines through me, pours out or explodes inside of me, embracing our past and future, all of our unembraced days, while you curl up your gentle shoulder even more, and I, in the milky mist, suddenly hunt down your curling movement's soft wave that ripples across your breast; your skin tingles, surprised at the touch of my lips, at the slow excavations of my awaited lips in your curves, which are simply imperceptible, indomitable to our consciousness; my slender girl, I've returned right at this moment and I'm standing in front of you; I'm looking again at your bra's thin, black strap, which in the light is simply a black flit, a bent trail; this is the path of final return, and I am walking over your bra's thin, black strap, I'm walking without looking back, without responding to the commander's threatening commands, just like a mute leaf spinning in the wind; I'm coming, with skulking

courage, because I know that you're my last salvation, my last word; I've come to love your body, to enter it, to remember and maybe find myself again; I'm coming to you, to conquer the concavity of your tiny collarbone, to tear apart with my face the wet barrier of your locks while feeling the touch of our encounter every second; I bend over and take in my mouth your bra's thin, black strap, under which our only skin awaiting me loudly pounds, then with my teeth I clench the strap, pull it towards me, and glide my tongue under it, push it into your skin, and with my fingers I draw your firm body's arched opening where my gifted pendant quietly lies with a red stone that agrees so well with the paleness of your skin, then I squeeze your throat, and my hushed whispers, my I-love-yous, become barely audible, because they already reverberate inside of you, on your distant isle, where besides our deep presence, there is nothing else; we turn off the light of the room, trusting our nudity to the blemished rays reflecting through the window, whose shadows have hues that flicker over our bodies, protecting an unprotected solitude; I'm caressing your shins, squeezing your thighs, I'm sliding my fingers, they burn on your soft hips, and swim through the narrows of your groin; I melt inside of you second after second; we melt into each other second after second, the weight of my body gulps down your transparent, cotton weightlessness; the gentle movement of your fingers dug into my hair stroking the back of my neck and the arrows of your nails that every now and then pierce my skin are so pleasant; I'm titillated by the involuntary kisses of your half-dry lips on my ear and your closed eyes, which see with eyes closed, because I'm convinced that our eyes are now closed and will never open again, that from now on our bodies will live with the same rocking rhythm, and our tongues will explore each other forever, probing and discovering new worlds, and I know that you are my eternal return and I bequeath myself to you as a surprise inheritance, because, my slender girl, I have returned and have leaned my head against your shoulder. The bus is moving; the elastic reflection of a desire for a cafe blurrily appears in the glass. You wave goodbye to his wiry hair leaning against the window. The bus turns onto the intersection. The sight disappears.

It gets really cold somehow. You're shivering. Now you only dream of warm coffee or warm wine cooked over low heat with thorns plucked from thin slices of quince and peach. If you were sitting at a cafe wearing a green dress with tiny little flowers that betrayed the butterflies fluttering in your body, out of the wine and through my lips, one whole clove would suddenly plop on the tip of your tongue, because I would stretch forward, stick out my tongue and pass the clove on to your tongue, as I caress the edges of your lips. For days I thought about your only muscle that produces terror out of happiness, that appears at the speed of light and suddenly spins in my mouth with insane whirls like a flapping fish on hot ash. My heart would stop, my mouth would get dry, I would gulp down water, I would walk up to the window, and look out for a long time, following the headlights of cars passing through the street, the neon lights of shops, trying to soothe my prickling imagination. Nothing was working. Your tongue, which had cuts like exclamation marks on it, was sliding in, inside, into the depths. The soft sweet slime, almost tasting like skin, desensitized my palate with happiness and closed my eyes, and with eyes closed, I would sniff the air and then spin around the office blinded, crashing into random cabinets. I pondered for a long time, trying to comprehend the mystery of your body and character, and reaching that final conclusion that all big and crazy loves are born not from an agreement of eyes, bodies, or hearts, but from a disagreement of tongues, from their intolerant struggle until the end, and in the end their play and rhythm become apparent, their harmony and music, if they don't harm each other to the level of piercing each other like sieves, they make up before even touching each other, they're good love games, so everything is a passing succession. I'm in love with your tongue, yes, first of all just your tongue, only then you, your personality, your irises, the line of your neck, the little mole on your shoulder, your body, I don't know, your mind. I'm in love with your tongue, whose tip I'd kiss or hold with my teeth, stretch in my mouth, and shake with orgasm the next moment. And always, when I remember you, the first thing I see is your tongue--our linked and honest happiness.

knooooow, hooooow bbeeeaaautifuul yooouuur eeeyeeess are, they are laughing, they are laughing, they are laughing, laughing; you've put your tilted head in your hands and through the milky mist you're looking at the two girls, each with ravishing eyes, sitting at the table leaning against the window; the ray of light shines through the window and glides over the girl's sea-colored eyelashes, reaches your table and, swiping against the nose of your shoe, refracts over the floor, mmmmy mmmom mmmisssses yooouuuuu, ccccoooooome toooooo ooouuur hhhooooouuse oooooone daaaaayyyy; definitely, I also miss your mom very much, I remember how much we laughed; what she was explaining to us; they are laughing, they are laughing, laughing; what thin, gentle fingers, well-tended fingers, fingers that flick back the few locks that fall on your brow every now and again, that lightly ruffle your honey-colored locks after you flick back those locks; your lips slightly quiver, you smile; I see, I see for the first time your effortless smile from surprise and happiness, you're stupefied somehow, just like these two girls who are far removed from the human world, sitting at a cafe and delighting in each other, it's as if by looking they see each other eternally for the first time, they see and they delight, they see and they delight, they see and they delight, they see and they delight; with the honesty of a child, subconsciously, selflessly, thrown into the passion of delight, that bewildering ability whose homeland is childhood, to those eyes who were simply not going to break by force from those colorful balls that the clown juggled, from the soaring birds in the sky, from the red trams, which you ran after in your dreams, from the little girl with two stiff pigtailed playing with a bald doll in the courtyard whom you loved like crazy and now you're convinced that you will never love anyone like that anymore; these two girls are living in a child's world, they succeeded in settling, in staying and never leaving, and they probably don't even know it; you try to remember the last time you felt simply delighted, but nothing comes to mind and suddenly, with an inner, certain voice you are convinced that it's a loss of the ability to feel delighted, that all the answers to your questions have been irrevocably erased while they were in your wet and small hand; the gentle fingers of the lock-flicking girl caress the dimple formed on your cheek, and right at that moment you feel a strange sort of familiarity, and that's why you're smiling, with the same unconscious, selfless, and honest smile, feeling a drunken happiness that bestows ringing laughter on the girls, and this is delightful; right at this moment you are delighting; you are delighting in the same way those girls are delighting and you try to hold on tightly, to fasten yourself for the surprise return of your delight; your smile widens, but your eyes start to close, your eyelids have become incredibly heavy, a deep numbness slowly conquers your consciousness, IIII'mmmm weeeeeaaaarring rrrred nnaaaaiiil pppppolish, it'ssss Frrrrrench, I'llllll gggiivvve yooouuuu ssssome, it's nice and it'll look good on your nails, my crazy kitten, I have so much nail polish, if you want, I'll give you some, lots of it; nnnooooo, that's mmyyy Frrrench, it'ssss goood, they're laughing, they're laughing, laughing, the voices grow louder, and gradually blend into each other; you try to salvage your consciousness with one last effort, the ray of light gliding from the girl's lashes barely reaches your shoe, you somehow extend your hand, you try to make your fingers touch the ray, thinking that by touching the ray you will still be able to salvage the last little shred of your delight; they are laughing, they are laughing, laughing, laughing; and you have fallen asleep, your head on one hand, your other hand has slipped down and fallen to the ground; the smile on your face does not efface, the quivering dimple on your cheek is like evidence of your delight. Its momentary return and final goodbye.

Translated from the Armenian by Nairi Hakhverdi

¹ Guillaume Apollinaire, "Love, Disdain and Hope," in *Selected Writings: Guillaume Apollinaire*, trans. Roger Shattuck, New York: New Directions Books, 1971.

² From Kostan Zarian, *United States*

³ From T.S. Eliot, "Four Quartets."