VOICES FROM CHERNOBYL

THE ORAL HISTORY OF A NUCLEAR DISASTER

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HISTORICAL NOTES

There are no nuclear power stations in Belarus. Of the functioning stations in the territory of the former USSR, the ones closest to Belarus are of the old Soviet-designed RBMK type. To the north, the Ignalinsk station, to the east, the Smolensk station, and to the south, Chernobyl.

On April 26, 1986, at 1:23:58, a series of explosions destroyed the reactor in the building that housed Energy Block #4 of the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Station. The catastrophe at Chernobyl became the largest technological disaster of the twentieth century.

For tiny Belarus (population: 10 million), it was a national disaster. During the Second World War, the Nazis destroyed 619 Belarussian villages along with their inhabitants. As a result of Chernobyl, the country lost 485 villages and settlements. Of these, 70 have been forever buried underground. During the war, one out of every four Belarussians was killed; today, one out of every five Belarussians lives on contaminated land. This amounts to 2.1 million people, of whom 700,000 are children. Among the demographic factors responsible for the depopulation of Belarus, radiation is number one. In the Gomel and Mogilev regions, which suffered the most from Chernobyl, mortality rates exceed birth rates by 20%.

As a result of the accident, 50 million Ci of radionuclides were released into the atmosphere. Seventy percent of these descended on Belarus; fully 23% of its territory is contaminated by cesium-137 radionuclides with a density of over 1 Ci/km^2. Ukraine on the other hand has 4.8% of its territory contaminated, and Russia, 0.5%. The area of arable land with a density of more than 1 Ci/km^2 is over 18 million hectares; 2.4 thousand hectares have been taken out of the agricultural economy. Belarus is a land of forests. But 26% of all forests and a large part of all marshes near the rivers Pripyat, Dniepr, and Sozh are considered part of the radioactive zone. As a result of the perpetual presence of small doses of radiation, the number of people with cancer, mental retardation, neurological disorders, and genetic mutations increases with each year.

—"Chernobyl." *Belaruskaya entsiklopedia*

On April 29, 1986, instruments recorded high levels of radiation in Poland, Germany, Austria, and Romania. On April 30, in Switzerland and northern Italy. On May 1 and 2, in France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Great Britain, and northern Greece. On May 3, in Israel, Kuwait, and Turkey. . . . Gaseous airborne particles traveled around the globe: on May 2 they were registered in Japan, on May 5 in India, on May 5 and 6 in the U.S. and Canada. It took less than a week for Chernobyl to become a problem for the entire world.

—"The Consequences of the Chernobyl Accident in Belarus."
Minsk, Sakharov International College on Radioecology

The fourth reactor, now known as the Cover, still holds about twenty tons of nuclear fuel in its lead-and-metal core. No one knows what is happening with it.

The sarcophagus was well made, uniquely constructed, and

the design engineers from St. Petersburg should probably be proud. But it was constructed in absentia, the plates were put together with the aid of robots and helicopters, and as a result there are fissures. According to some figures, there are now over 200 square meters of spaces and cracks, and radioactive particles continue to escape through them . . .

Might the sarcophagus collapse? No one can answer that question, since it's still impossible to reach many of the connections and constructions in order to see if they're sturdy. But everyone knows that if the Cover were to collapse, the consequences would be even more dire than they were in 1986.

—*Ogonyok* magazine, No. 17, April 1996

WORLD BRIEFINGS, BELARUS: PARLIAMENT OUTLAWS CRITICISM

Parliament approved legislation to make it a crime to organize protests, join banned organizations, or speak against the national interest. President Aleksandr G. Lukashenko, who is running for a third term next year, submitted the legislation last week, calling for its urgent passage in the wake of popular uprisings in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan. The legislation would impose prison sentences of up to three years for anyone convicted of advocating the overthrow of the government and up to two years for "discrediting the country." An opposition leader, Anatoly V. Lebedko, compared the legislation to repressive Soviet-era laws. "These actions show that Lukashenko knows he cannot win the election honestly," he said in an interview. The European Union and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe denounced the legislation as a threat to political opposition and civil society.

—*The New York Times,* December 3, 2005

PROLOGUE

A SOLITARY HUMAN VOICE

We are air, we are not earth . . .
—Mesab Mamardashvili

I don't know what I should talk about—about death or about love? Or are they the same? Which one should I talk about?

We were newlyweds. We still walked around holding hands, even if we were just going to the store. I would say to him, "I love you." But I didn't know then how much. I had no idea . . . We lived in the dormitory of the fire house where he worked. On the second floor. There were three other young couples, we all shared a kitchen. On the first floor they kept the trucks. The red fire trucks. That was his job. So I always knew what was happening—where he was, how he was.

One night I heard a noise. I looked out the window. He saw me. "Close the window and go back to sleep. There's a fire at the reactor. I'll be back soon."

I didn't see the explosion itself. Just the flames. Everything was radiant. The whole sky. A tall flame. And smoke. The heat was awful. And he's still not back.

The smoke was from the burning bitumen, which had covered the roof. He said later it was like walking on tar. They tried to beat down the flames. They kicked at the burning graphite with their feet. . . . They weren't wearing their canvas gear. They went off just as they were, in their

shirt sleeves. No one told them. They had been called for a fire, that was it.

Four o'clock. Five. Six. At six we were supposed to go to his parents' house. To plant potatoes. It's forty kilometers from Pripyat to Sperizhye, where his parents live. Sowing, plowing—he loved doing that. His mother always told me they didn't want him to move to the city, they'd even built a new house for him. He was drafted into the army. He served in the fire brigade in Moscow and when he came out, he wanted to be a fireman. And nothing else! [*Silence.*]

Sometimes it's as though I hear his voice. Alive. Even photographs don't have the same effect on me as that voice. But he never calls out to me . . . not even in my dreams. I'm the one who calls to him.

Seven o'clock. At seven I was told he was in the hospital. I ran there, but the police had already encircled it, and they weren't letting anyone through. Only ambulances. The policemen shouted: the ambulances are radioactive, stay away! I wasn't the only one there, all the wives whose husbands were at the reactor that night had come. I started looking for a friend, she was a doctor at that hospital. I grabbed her white coat when she came out of an ambulance. "Get me inside!" "I can't. He's bad. They all are." I held on to her. "Just to see him!" "All right," she said. "Come with me. Just for fifteen or twenty minutes."

I saw him. He was all swollen and puffed up. You could barely see his eyes.

"He needs milk, lots of milk," my friend said. "They should drink at least three liters each." "But he doesn't like milk." "He'll drink it now." Many of the doctors and nurses in that hospital, and especially the orderlies, later got sick themselves and died. But we didn't know that then.

At ten in the morning, the cameraman Shishenok died. He was the first. On the first day. We learned that another one was left under the debris—Valera Khodemchuk. They never did reach him. They buried him under the concrete. And we didn't know then that they were just the first ones.

I said, "Vasya, what should I do?" "Get out of here! Go! You have our child." But how can I leave him? He's telling me: "Go! Leave! Save the baby." "First I need to bring you some milk, then we'll decide what to do." My friend Tanya Kibenok comes running in—her husband's in the same room. Her father's with her, he has a car. We get in and drive to the nearest village for some milk. It's about three kilometers from town. We buy a bunch of three-liter bottles, six, so it's enough for everyone. But they started throwing up from the milk. They kept passing out, they got put on IVs. The doctors kept telling them they'd been poisoned by gas. No one said anything about radiation. And the town was inundated right away with military vehicles, they closed off all the roads. The trolleys stopped running, and the trains. They were washing the streets with some white powder. I worried about getting to the village the next day to buy some more fresh milk. No one talked about the radiation. Only the military people wore surgical masks. The people in town were carrying bread from the stores, just open sacks with the loaves in them. People were eating cupcakes on plates.

I couldn't get into the hospital that evening. There was a sea of people. I stood under his window, he came over and yelled something to me. It was all so desperate! Someone in the crowd heard him—they were being taken to Moscow that night. All the wives got together in one group. We decided we'd go with them. Let us go with our husbands! You have no right! We punched and clawed. The soldiers—there were

already soldiers—pushed us back. Then the doctor came out and said, Yes, they were flying to Moscow, but we needed to bring them their clothes. The clothes they'd worn at the station had been burned. The buses had stopped running already and we ran across the city. We came running back with their bags, but the plane was already gone. They tricked us. So that we wouldn't be there yelling and crying.

It's night. On one side of the street there are buses, hundreds of buses, they're already preparing the town for evacuation, and on the other side, hundreds of fire trucks. They came from all over. And the whole street is covered in white foam. We're walking on it, just cursing and crying. Over the radio they tell us they might evacuate the city for three to five days, take your warm clothes with you, you'll be living in the forest. In tents. People were even glad—a camping trip! We'll celebrate May Day like that, a break from routine. People got barbeques ready. They took their guitars with them, their radios. Only the women whose husbands had been at the reactor were crying.

I can't remember the trip out to my parents' village. It was like I woke up when I saw my mother. "Mama. Vasya's in Moscow. They flew him out on a special plane!" But we finished planting the garden. [*A week later the village was evacuated.*] Who knew? Who knew that then? Later in the day I started throwing up. I was six months pregnant. I felt awful. That night I dreamed he was calling out to me in his sleep: "Lyusya! Lyusenka!" But after he died, he didn't call out in my dreams anymore. Not once. [*She starts crying.*] I got up in the morning thinking I have to get to Moscow. By myself. My mother's crying: "Where are you going, the way you are?" So I took my father with me. He went to the bank and took out all the money they had.

I can't remember the trip. The trip just isn't in my memory.

In Moscow we asked the first police officer we saw, Where did they put the Chernobyl firemen, and he told us. We were surprised, too, everyone was scaring us that it was top secret. "Hospital number 6. At the Shchukinskaya stop."

It was a special hospital, for radiology, and you couldn't get in without a pass. I gave some money to the woman at the door, and she said, "Go ahead." Then I had to ask someone else, beg. Finally I'm sitting in the office of the head radiologist, Angelina Vasilyevna Guskova. But I didn't know that yet, what her name was, I didn't remember anything. I just knew I had to see him. Right away she asked: "Do you have kids?"

What should I tell her? I can see already I need to hide that I'm pregnant. They won't let me see him! It's good I'm thin, you can't really tell.

"Yes," I say.

"How many?"

I'm thinking, "I need to tell her two. If it's just one, she won't let me in."

"A boy and a girl."

"So you don't need to have anymore. All right, listen: his central nervous system is completely compromised, his skull is completely compromised."

Okay, I'm thinking, so he'll be a little fidgety.

"And listen: if you start crying, I'll kick you out right away. No hugging or kissing. Don't even get near him. You have half an hour."

But I knew already that I wasn't leaving. *If I leave, then it'll be with him,* I swore to myself! I come in, they're sitting on the bed, playing cards and laughing.

"Vasya!" they call out.

He turns around:

"Oh, now it's over! Even here she found me!"

He looks so funny, he's got pajamas on for a size 48, and he's a size 52. The sleeves are too short, the pants are too short. But his face isn't swollen anymore. They were given some sort of fluid.

I say, "Where'd you run off to?"

He wants to hug me, the doctor won't let him. "Sit, sit," she says. "No hugging in here."

We turned it into a joke somehow. And then everyone comes over, from the other rooms too, everyone from Pripyat. There were twenty-eight of them on the plane. What's going on? How are things in town? I tell them they've begun evacuating everyone, the whole town is being cleared out for three or five days. None of the guys says anything, and then one of the women, there were two women, she was on duty at the factory the day of the accident, she starts crying.

"Oh God! My kids are there. What's happening with them?"

I wanted to be with him alone, if only for a minute. The guys felt it, and each of them thought of some excuse, and they all went out into the hall. Then I hugged and kissed him. He moved away.

"Don't sit near me. Get a chair."

"That's just silly," I said, waving it away. "Did you see the explosion? Did you see what happened? You were the first ones there."

"It was probably sabotage. Someone set it up. All the guys think so."

That's what people were saying then. That's what they thought.

The next day, they were lying by themselves, each in his own room. They were banned from going in the hallway, from talking to each other. They knocked on the walls with their knuckles. Dash-dot, dash-dot. The doctors explained that everyone's body

reacts differently to radiation, one person can handle what another can't. They even measured the radiation of the walls where they had them. To the right, left, and the floor beneath. They moved out all the sick people from the floor below and the floor above. There was no one left in the place.

For three days I lived with my friends in Moscow. They kept saying: Take the pot, take the plate, take whatever you need. I made turkey soup for six. For six of our boys. Firemen. From the same shift. They were all on duty that night: Bashuk, Kibenok, Titenok, Pravik, Tischura. I went to the store and bought them toothpaste and toothbrushes and soap. They didn't have any of that at the hospital. I bought them little towels. Looking back, I'm surprised by my friends: they were afraid, of course, how could they not be, there were rumors already, but still they kept saying: Take whatever you need, take it! How is he? How are they all? Will they live? Live. [*She is silent.*] I met a lot of good people then, I don't remember all of them. I remember an old woman janitor, who taught me: "There are sicknesses that can't be cured. You just have to sit and watch them."

Early in the morning I go to the market, then to my friends' place, where I make the soup. I have to grate everything and grind it. Someone said, "Bring me some apple juice." So I come with six half-liter cans, always for six! I race to the hospital, then I sit there until evening. In the evening, I go back across the city. How much longer could I have kept that up? After three days they told me I could stay in the dorm for medical workers, it's on hospital grounds. God, how wonderful!

"But there's no kitchen. How am I going to cook?"

"You don't need to cook anymore. They can't digest the food."

He started to change—every day I met a brand-new person. The burns started to come to the surface. In his mouth, on his

tongue, his cheeks—at first there were little lesions, and then they grew. It came off in layers—as white film . . . the color of his face . . . his body . . . blue . . . red . . . gray-brown. And it's all so very mine! It's impossible to describe! It's impossible to write down! And even to get over. The only thing that saved me was, it happened so fast; there wasn't any time to think, there wasn't any time to cry.

I loved him! I had no idea how much! We'd just gotten married. When we walked down the street—he'd grab my hands and whirl me around. And kiss me, kiss me. People are walking by and smiling.

It was a hospital for people with acute radiation poisoning. Fourteen days. In fourteen days a person dies.

On the very first day in the dormitory they measured me with a dosimeter. My clothes, bag, purse, shoes—they were all "hot." And they took it all right away. Even my underthings. The only thing they left was my money. In exchange they gave me a hospital robe—a size 56—and some size 43 slippers. They said they'd return the clothes, maybe, or maybe they wouldn't, since they might not be possible to "launder" at this point. That is how I looked when I came to visit him. I frightened him. "Woman, what's wrong with you?" But I was still able to make him some soup. I boiled the water in a glass jar, and then I threw pieces of chicken in there—tiny, tiny pieces. Then someone gave me her pot, I think it was the cleaning woman or the guard. Someone else gave me a cutting board, for chopping my parsley. I couldn't go to the market in my hospital robe, people would bring me the vegetables. But it was all useless, he couldn't even drink anything. He couldn't even swallow a raw egg. But I wanted to get him something tasty! As if it mattered. I ran to the post office. "Girls," I told them, "I need to call my parents in Ivano-Frankovsk right away! My husband is

dying." They understood right away where I was from and who my husband was, and they connected me. My father, sister, and brother flew out that very day to Moscow. They brought me my things. And money. It was the ninth of May. He always used to say to me: "You have no idea how beautiful Moscow is! Especially on V-Day, when they set off the fireworks. I want you to see it."

I'm sitting with him in the room, he opens his eyes. "Is it day or night?"

"It's nine at night."

"Open the window! They're going to set off the fireworks!"

I opened the window. We're on the eighth floor, and the whole city's there before us! A bouquet of fire was exploding in the air.

"Look at that!" I said.

"I told you I'd show you Moscow. And I told you I'd always give you flowers on holidays . . ."

I look over, and he's getting three carnations from under his pillow. He gave the nurse money, and she bought them.

I run over to him and I kiss him.

"My love! My one and only!"

He starts growling. "What did the doctors tell you? No hugging me. And no kissing!"

They wouldn't let me hug him. But I . . . I lifted him and sat him up. I made his bed. I placed the thermometer. I picked up and brought back the sanitation dish. I stayed up with him all night.

It's a good thing that it was in the hallway, not the room, that my head started spinning, I grabbed onto the windowsill. A doctor was walking by, he took me by the arm. And then suddenly: "Are you pregnant?"

"No, no!" I was so scared someone would hear us.

"Don't lie," he sighed.

The next day I get called to the head doctor's office.

"Why did you lie to me?" she says.

"There was no other way. If I'd told you, you'd send me home. It was a sacred lie!"

"What have you done?"

"But I was with him . . ."

I'll be grateful to Angelina Vasilyevna Guskova my whole life. My whole life! Other wives also came, but they weren't allowed in. Their mothers were with me. Volodya Pravik's mother kept begging God: "Take me instead." An American professor, Dr. Gale—he's the one who did the bone marrow operation—tried to comfort me. There's a tiny ray of hope, he said, not much, but a little. Such a powerful organism, such a strong guy! They called for all his relatives. Two of his sisters came from Belarus, his brother from Leningrad, he was in the army there. The younger one, Natasha, she was fourteen, she was very scared and cried a lot. But her bone marrow was the best fit. [*Silent.*] Now I can talk about this. Before I couldn't. I didn't talk about it for ten years. [*Silent.*]

When he found out they'd be taking the bone marrow from his little sister, he flat-out refused. "I'd rather die. She's so small. Don't touch her." His older sister Lyuda was twenty-eight, she was a nurse herself, she knew what she was getting into. "As long as he lives," she said. I watched the operation. They were lying next to each other on the tables. There was a big window onto the operating room. It took two hours. When they were done, Lyuda was worse off than he was, she had eighteen punctures in her chest, it was very difficult for her to come out from under the anesthesia. Now she's sick, she's an invalid. She was a strong, pretty girl. She never got married. So then I was running from

one room to the other, from his room to hers. He wasn't in an ordinary room anymore, he was in a special bio-chamber, behind a transparent curtain. No one was allowed inside.

They have instruments there, so that without going through the curtain they can give him shots, place the catheter. The curtains are held together by Velcro, and I've learned to use them. I push them aside and go inside. There was a little chair next to his bed. He got so bad that I couldn't leave him now even for a second. He was calling out to me constantly: "Lyusya, where are you? Lyusya!" He called and called. The other bio-chambers, where our boys were, were tended to by soldiers, because the orderlies on staff refused, they demanded protective clothing. The soldiers carried the sanitary vessels. They wiped the floors down, changed the bedding. They did everything. Where did they get those soldiers? We didn't ask. But he—he—every day I would hear: Dead. Dead. Tischura is dead. Titenok is dead. Dead. It was like a sledgehammer to my brain.

He was producing stool 25 to 30 times a day. With blood and mucous. His skin started cracking on his arms and legs. He became covered with boils. When he turned his head, there'd be a clump of hair left on the pillow. I tried joking: "It's convenient, you don't need a comb." Soon they cut all their hair. I did it for him myself. I wanted to do everything for him myself. If it had been physically possible I would have stayed with him all twenty-four hours. I couldn't spare a minute. [*Long silence.*] My brother came and he got scared. "I won't let you in there!" But my father said to him: "You think you can stop her? She'll go through the window! She'll get up through the fire escape!"

I go back to the hospital and there's an orange on the bedside table. A big one, and pink. He's smiling: "I got a gift. Take

it." Meanwhile the nurse is gesturing through the film that I can't eat it. It's been near him a while, so not only can you not eat it, you shouldn't even touch it. "Come on, eat it," he says. "You like oranges." I take the orange in my hand. Meanwhile he shuts his eyes and goes to sleep. They were always giving him shots to put him to sleep. The nurse is looking at me in horror. And me? I'm ready to do whatever it takes so that he doesn't think about death. And about the fact that his death is horrible, that I'm afraid of him. There's a fragment of some conversation, I'm remembering it. Someone is saying: "You have to understand: This is not your husband anymore, not a beloved person, but a radioactive object with a strong density of poisoning. You're not suicidal. Get ahold of yourself." And I'm like someone who's lost her mind: "But I love him! I love him!" He's sleeping, and I'm whispering: "I love you!" Walking in the hospital courtyard, "I love you." Carrying his sanitary tray, "I love you." I remembered how we used to live at home. He only fell asleep at night after he'd taken my hand. That was a habit of his—to hold my hand while he slept. All night. So in the hospital I take his hand and don't let go.

One night, everything's quiet. We're all alone. He looked at me very, very carefully and suddenly he said:

"I want to see our child so much. How is he?"

"What are we going to name him?"

"You'll decide that yourself."

"Why myself, when there's two of us?"

"In that case, if it's a boy, he should be Vasya, and if it's a girl, Natasha."

I had no idea then how much I loved him! Him . . . just him. I was like a blind person! I couldn't feel the little pounding underneath my heart. Even though I was six months in. I thought that my little one was inside me, that he was protected.

None of the doctors knew I was staying with him at night in the bio-chamber. The nurses let me in. At first they pleaded with me, too: "You're young. Why are you doing this? That's not a person anymore, that's a nuclear reactor. You'll just burn together." I was like a dog, running after them. I'd stand for hours at their doors, begging and pleading. And then they'd say: "All right! The hell with you! You're not normal!" In the mornings, just before eight, when the doctors started their rounds, they'd be there on the other side of the film: "Run!" So I'd go to the dorm for an hour. Then from 9 A.M. to 9 P.M. I have a pass to come in. My legs were blue below the knee, blue and swollen, that's how tired I was.

While I was there with him, they wouldn't, but when I left—they photographed him. Without any clothes. Naked. One thin little sheet on top of him. I changed that little sheet every day, and every day by evening it was covered in blood. I pick him up, and there are pieces of his skin on my hand, they stick to my hands. I ask him: "Love. Help me. Prop yourself up on your arm, your elbow, as much as you can, I'll smooth out your bedding, get the wrinkles and folds out." Any little wrinkle, that was already a wound on him. I clipped my nails down till they bled so I wouldn't accidentally cut him. None of the nurses could approach him; if they needed anything they'd call me.

And they photographed him. For science, they said. I'd have pushed them all out of there! I'd have yelled! And hit them! How dare they? It's all mine—it's my love—if only I'd been able to keep them out of there.

I'm walking out of the room into the hallway. And I'm walking toward the couch, because I don't see them. I tell the nurse on duty: "He's dying." And she says to me: "What did you expect? He got 1,600 roentgen. Four hundred is a lethal

dose. You're sitting next to a nuclear reactor." It's all mine . . . it's my love. When they all died, they did a *remont* at the hospital. They scraped down the walls and dug up the parquet.

And then—the last thing. I remember it in flashes, all broken up.

I'm sitting on my little chair next to him at night. At eight I say: "Vasenka, I'm going for a little walk." He opens his eyes and closes them, lets me go. I just walk to the dorm, go up to my room, lie down on the floor, I couldn't lie on the bed, everything hurt too much, when already the cleaning lady is knocking. "Go! Run to him! He's calling for you like mad!" That morning Tanya Kibenok pleaded with me: "Come to the cemetery, I can't go there alone." They were burying Vitya Kibenok and Volodya Pravik. They were friends of my Vasya. Our families were friends. There's a photo of us all in the building the day before the explosion. Our husbands are so handsome! And happy! It was the last day of that life. We were all so happy!

I came back from the cemetery and called the nurse's post right away. "How is he?" "He died fifteen minutes ago." What? I was there all night. I was gone for three hours! I came up to the window and started shouting: "Why? Why?" I looked up at the sky and yelled. The whole building could hear me. They were afraid to come up to me. Then I came to: I'll see him one more time! Once more! I run down the stairs. He was still in his bio-chamber, they hadn't taken him away yet. His last words were "Lyusya! Lyusenka!" "She's just stepped away for a bit, she'll be right back," the nurse told him. He sighed and went quiet. I didn't leave him anymore after that. I escorted him all the way to the grave site. Although the thing I remember isn't the grave, it's the plastic bag. That bag.

At the morgue they said, "Want to see what we'll dress him

in?" I do! They dressed him up in formal wear, with his service cap. They couldn't get shoes on him because his feet had swelled up. They had to cut up the formal wear, too, because they couldn't get it on him, there wasn't a whole body to put it on. It was all—wounds. The last two days in the hospital—I'd lift his arm, and meanwhile the bone is shaking, just sort of dangling, the body has gone away from it. Pieces of his lungs, of his liver, were coming out of his mouth. He was choking on his internal organs. I'd wrap my hand in a bandage and put it in his mouth, take out all that stuff. It's impossible to talk about. It's impossible to write about. And even to live through. It was all mine. My love. They couldn't get a single pair of shoes to fit him. They buried him barefoot.

Right before my eyes—in his formal wear—they put him in that cellophane bag of theirs and tied it up. And then they put this bag in the wooden coffin. And they tied the coffin with another bag. The plastic is transparent, but thick, like a tablecloth. And then they put all that into a zinc coffin. They squeezed it in. Only the cap didn't fit.

Everyone came—his parents, my parents. They bought black handkerchiefs in Moscow. The Extraordinary Commission met with us. They told everyone the same thing: it's impossible for us to give you the bodies of your husbands, your sons, they are very radioactive and will be buried in a Moscow cemetery in a special way. In sealed zinc caskets, under cement tiles. And you need to sign this document here.

If anyone got indignant and wanted to take the coffin back home, they were told that the dead were now heroes, you see, and that they no longer belonged to their families. They were heroes of the State. They belonged to the State.

We sat in the hearse. The relatives and some military people. A colonel and his regiment. They tell the regiment: "Await

your orders!" We drive around Moscow for two or three hours, around the beltway. We're going back to Moscow again. They tell the regiment: "We're not allowing anyone into the cemetery. The cemetery's being attacked by foreign correspondents. Wait some more." The parents don't say anything. Mom has a black handkerchief. I sense I'm about to black out. "Why are they hiding my husband? He's—what? A murderer? A criminal? Who are we burying?" My mom: "Quiet. Quiet, daughter." She's petting me on the head. The colonel calls in: "Let's enter the cemetery. The wife is getting hysterical." At the cemetery we were surrounded by soldiers. We had a convoy. And they were carrying the coffin. No one was allowed in. It was just us. They covered him with earth in a minute. "Faster! Faster!" the officer was yelling. They didn't even let me hug the coffin. And—onto the bus. Everything on the sly.

Right away they bought us plane tickets back home. For the next day. The whole time there was someone with us. He wouldn't even let us out of the dorm to buy some food for the trip. God forbid we might talk with someone—especially me. As if I could talk by then. I couldn't even cry. When we were leaving, the woman on duty counted all the towels and all the sheets. She folded them right away and placed them in a polyethylene bag. They probably burnt them. We paid for the dormitory ourselves. For fourteen nights. It was a hospital for radiation poisoning. Fourteen nights. That's how long it takes a person to die.

At home I fell asleep. I walked into the place and just fell onto the bed. I slept for three days. An ambulance came. "No," said the doctor, "she'll wake up. It's just a terrible sleep."

I was twenty-three.

I remember the dream I had. My dead grandmother comes to

me in the clothes that we buried her in. She's dressing up the New Year's tree. "Grandma, why do we have a New Year's tree? It's summertime." "Because your Vasenka is going to join me soon." And he grew up in the forest. I remember the dream—Vasya comes in a white robe and calls for Natasha. That's our girl, who I haven't given birth to yet. She's already grown up. He throws her up to the ceiling, and they laugh. And I'm watching them and thinking that happiness—it's so simple. I'm sleeping. We're walking along the water. Walking and walking. He probably asked me not to cry. Gave me a sign. From up there.

[*She is silent for a long time.*]

Two months later I went to Moscow. From the train station straight to the cemetery. To him! And at the cemetery I start going into labor. Just as I started talking to him—they called the ambulance. It was at the same Angelina Vasilyevna Guskova's that I gave birth. She'd said to me back then: "You need to come here to give birth." It was two weeks before I was due.

They showed her to me—a girl. "Natashenka," I called out. "Your father named you Natashenka." She looked healthy. Arms, legs. But she had cirrhosis of the liver. Her liver had twenty-eight roentgen. Congenital heart disease. Four hours later they told me she was dead. And again: we won't give her to you. What do you mean you won't give her to me? It's me who won't give her to you! You want to take her for science. I hate your science! I hate it!

[*She is silent.*]

I keep saying the wrong thing to you. I'm not supposed to yell after my stroke. And I'm not supposed to cry. That's why the words are all wrong. But I'll say this. No one knows this. When they brought me the little wooden box and said, "She's in there," I looked. She'd been cremated. She was ashes. And I started crying. "Put her at his feet," I requested.

There, at the cemetery, it doesn't say Natasha Ignatenko. There's only his name. She didn't have a name yet, she didn't have anything. Just a soul. That's what I buried there. I always go there with two bouquets: one for him, and the other I put in the corner for her. I crawl around the grave on my knees. Always on my knees. [*She becomes incomprehensible.*] I killed her. I. She. Saved. My little girl saved me, she took the whole radioactive shock into herself, she was like the lightning rod for it. She was so small. She was a little tiny thing. [*She has trouble breathing.*] She saved . . . But I loved them both. Because—because you can't kill something with love, right? With such love! Why are these things together—love and death. Together. Who's going to explain this to me? I crawl around the grave on my knees.

[*She is silent for a long time.*]

In Kiev they gave me an apartment. It was in a large building, where they put everyone from the atomic station. It's a big apartment, with two rooms, the kind Vasya and I had dreamed of. And I was going crazy in it!

I found a husband eventually. I told him everything—the whole truth—that I have one love, for my whole life. I told him everything. We'd meet, but I'd never invite him to my home, that's where Vasya was.

I worked in a candy shop. I'd be making cake, and tears would be rolling down my cheeks. I'm not crying, but there are tears rolling down.

I gave birth to a boy, Andrei. Andreika. My friends tried to stop me. "You can't have a baby." And the doctors tried to scare me: "Your body won't be able to handle it." Then, later—later they told me that he'd be missing an arm. His right arm. The instrument showed it. "Well, so what?" I thought. "I'll teach him to write with his left hand." But he came out fine. A beautiful boy. He's in school now, he gets good grades. Now I

have someone—I can live and breathe him. He's the light in my life. He understands everything perfectly. "Mom, if I go visit grandma for two days, will you be able to breathe?" I won't! I fear the day I'll have to leave him. One day we're walking down the street. And I feel that I'm falling. That's when I had my first stroke. Right on the street. "Mom, do you need some water?" "No, just stand here next to me. Don't go anywhere." And I grabbed his arm. I don't remember what happened next. I came to in the hospital. But I grabbed him so hard that the doctors were barely able to pry my fingers open. His arm was blue for a long time. Now we walk out of the house, he says, "Mommie, just don't grab my arm. I won't go anywhere." He's also sick: two weeks in school, two weeks at home with a doctor. That's how we live.

[*She stands up, goes over to the window.*]

There are many of us here. A whole street. That's what it's called—Chernobylskaya. These people worked at the station their whole lives. A lot of them still go there to work on a provisional basis, that's how they work there now, no one lives there anymore. They have bad diseases, they're invalids, but they don't leave their jobs, they're scared to even think of the reactor closing down. Who needs them now anywhere else? Often they die. In an instant. They just drop—someone will be walking, he falls down, goes to sleep, never wakes up. He was carrying flowers for his nurse and his heart stopped. They die, but no one's really asked us. No one's asked what we've been through. What we saw. No one wants to hear about death. About what scares them.

But I was telling you about love. About my love . . .

Lyudmilla Ignatenko,
wife of deceased fireman Vasily Ignatenko

MONOLOGUE ABOUT A WHOLE LIFE WRITTEN DOWN ON DOORS

I want to bear witness . . .

It happened ten years ago, and it happens to me again every day.

We lived in the town of Pripyat. In that town.

I'm not a writer. I won't be able to describe it. My mind is not enough to understand it. And neither is my university degree. There you are: a normal person. A little person. You're just like everyone else—you go to work, you return from work. You get an average salary. Once a year you go on vacation. You're a normal person! And then one day you're turned into a Chernobyl person, an animal that everyone's interested in, and that no one knows anything about. You want to be like everyone else, and now you can't. People look at you differently. They ask you: Was it scary? How did the station burn? What did you see? And, you know, can you have children? Did your wife leave you? At first we were all turned into animals. The very word "Chernobyl" is like a signal. Everyone turns their head to look. He's from there!

That's how it was in the beginning. We didn't just lose a town, we lost our whole lives. We left on the third day. The reactor was on fire. I remember one of my friends saying, "It smells of reactor." It was an indescribable smell. But the papers were already writing about that. They turned Chernobyl into a house of horrors, although actually they just turned it into a cartoon. I'm only going to tell about what's really mine. My own truth.

It was like this: They announced over the radio that you couldn't take your cats. So we put her in the suitcase. But she didn't want to go, she climbed out. Scratched everyone. You can't take your belongings! All right, I won't take all my belongings, I'll take just one belonging. Just one! I need to take my door off the apartment and take it with me. I can't leave the door. I'll cover the entrance with some boards. Our door—it's our talisman, it's a family relic. My father lay on this door. I don't know whose tradition this is, it's not like that everywhere, but my mother told me that the deceased must be placed on the door of his home. He lies there until they bring the coffin. I sat by my father all night, he lay on this door. The house was open. All night. And this door has little etch-marks on it. That's me growing up. It's marked there: first grade, second grade. Seventh. Before the army. And next to that: how my son grew. And my daughter. My whole life is written down on this door. How am I supposed to leave it?

I asked my neighbor, he had a car: "Help me." He gestured toward his head, like, You're not quite right, are you? But I took it with me, that door. At night. On a motorcycle. Through the woods. It was two years later, when our apartment had already been looted and emptied. The police were chasing me. "We'll shoot! We'll shoot!" They thought I was a thief. That's how I stole the door from my own home.

I took my daughter and my wife to the hospital. They had black spots all over their bodies. These spots would appear, then disappear. About the size of a five-kopek coin. But nothing hurt. They did some tests on them. I asked for the results. "It's not for you," they said. I said, "Then who's it for?"

Back then everyone was saying: "We're going to die, we're going to die. By the year 2000, there won't be any Belarussians left." My daughter was six years old. I'm putting her to bed, and she whispers in my ear: "Daddy, I want to live, I'm still little." And I had thought she didn't understand anything.

Can you picture seven little girls shaved bald in one room? There were seven of them in the hospital room . . . But enough! That's it! When I talk about it, I have this feeling, my heart tells me—you're betraying them. Because I need to describe it like I'm a stranger. My wife came home from the hospital. She couldn't take it. "It'd be better for her to die than to suffer like this. Or for me to die, so that I don't have to watch anymore." No, enough! That's it! I'm not in any condition. No.

We put her on the door . . . on the door that my father lay on. Until they brought a little coffin. It was small, like the box for a large doll.

I want to bear witness: my daughter died from Chernobyl. And they want us to forget about it.

Nikolai Kalugin, father

SOLDIERS' CHORUS

Artyom Bakhtiyarov, private; Oleg Vorobey, liquidator; Vasily Gusinovich, driver and scout; Gennady Demenev, police officer; Vitaly Karbalevich, liquidator; Valentin Kmkov, driver and pri-

vate; Eduard Korotkov, helicopter pilot; Igor Litvin, liquidator; Ivan Lukashuk, private; Aleksandr Mikhalevich, Geiger operator; Major Oleg Pavlov, helicopter pilot; Anatoly Rybak, commander of a guard regiment; Viktor Sanko, private; Grigory Khvorost, liquidator; Aleksandr Shinkevich, police officer; Vladimir Shved, captain; Aleksandr Yasinskiy, police officer.

Our regiment was given the alarm. It was only when we got to the Belorusskaya train station in Moscow that they told us where we were going. One guy, I think he was from Leningrad, began to protest. They told him they'd drag him before a military tribunal. The commander said exactly that before the troops: "You'll go to jail or be shot." I felt the complete opposite of that guy. I wanted to do something heroic. Maybe it was kid's stuff. But there were others like me. We had guys from all over the Soviet Union. Russians, Ukrainians, Kazakhs, Armenians . . . It was scary but also exciting, for some reason.

So they brought us in, and they took us right to the power station. They gave us white robes and white caps. And gauze surgical masks. We cleaned the territory. We spent a day cleaning down below, and then a day above, on the roof of the reactor. Everywhere we used shovels. The guys who went up, we called them the storks. The robots couldn't do it, their systems got all crazy. But we worked. And we were proud of it.

*

We rode in—there was a sign that said, Zone Off Limits. I'd never been to war, but I got a familiar feeling. I remembered it from somewhere. From where? I connected it to death, for some reason . . .

We met these crazed dogs and cats on the road. They acted strange: they didn't recognize us as people, they ran away. I couldn't understand what was wrong with them until they told us to start shooting at them . . . The houses were all sealed up, the farm machinery was abandoned. It was interesting to see. There was no one, just us and the police on their patrols. You'd walk into a house—there were photographs on the wall, but no people. There'd be documents lying around: people's Komsomol [*Communist Youth League*] IDs, other forms of identification, awards. At one place we took a television for a while—we borrowed it, say—but as far as anyone actually taking something home with them, I didn't see that. First of all, because you sensed that these people would be back any minute. And second, these things were connected somehow with death.

People drove to the block, the actual reactor. They wanted to photograph themselves there, to show the people at home. They were scared, but also really curious: what was this thing? I didn't go, myself, I have a young wife, I didn't want to risk it, but the boys downed a few shots and went over. So . . . [*Silent.*]

*

The village street, the field, the highway—all of it without any people. A highway to nowhere. Electrical wires on the posts to nowhere. At first there were still lights on in the houses, but then they turned those off. We'd be driving around, and a wild boar would jump out of a school building at us. Or else a rabbit. Everywhere, animals instead of people: in the houses, the schools, the clubs. There are still posters: "Our goal is the happiness of all mankind." "The world proletariat will triumph." "The ideas of Lenin are immortal." You go back to

the past. The collective farm offices have red flags, brand-new wimples, neat piles of printed banners with profiles of the great leaders. On the walls—pictures of the leaders; on the desks—busts of the leaders. A war memorial. A village churchyard. Houses that were shut up in a hurry, gray cement cow-pens, tractor mechanic's shops. Cemeteries and victims. As if a warring tribe had left some base in a hurry and then gone into hiding.

We'd ask each other: is this what our life is like? It was the first time we saw it from the outside. The very first time. It made a real impression. Like a smack to the head. . . . There's a good joke: the nuclear half-life of a Kiev cake is thirty-six hours. So . . . And for me? It took me three years. Three years later I turned in my Party card. My little Red book. I became free in the Zone. Chernobyl blew my mind. It set me free.

*

There's this abandoned house. It's closed. There's a cat on the windowsill. I think—must be a clay cat. I come over, and it's a real cat. He ate all the flowers in the house. Geraniums. How'd he get in? Or did they leave him there?

There's a note on the door: "Dear Kind Person, Please don't look for valuables here. We never had any. Use whatever you want, but don't trash the place. We'll be back." I saw signs on other houses in different colors—"Dear house, forgive us!" People said goodbye to their homes like they were people. Or they'd written: "we're leaving in the morning," or, "we're leaving at night," and they'd put the date and even the time. There were notes written on school notebook paper: "Don't beat the cat. Otherwise the rats will eat everything." And then in a child's handwriting: "Don't kill our Zhulka. She's a good cat."

[*Closes his eyes.*] I've forgotten everything. I only remember that I went there, and after that I don't remember anything. I forgot all of it. I can't count money. My memory's not right. The doctors can't understand it. I go from hospital to hospital. But this sticks in my head: you're walking up to the house, thinking the house is empty, and you open the door and there's this cat. That, and those kids' notes.

*

I was called. My assignment was not to let any of the old inhabitants back into the evacuated villages. We set up roadblocks, built observation posts. They called us "partisans," for some reason. It's peacetime, and we're standing there in military fatigues. The farmers didn't understand why, for example, they couldn't take a bucket from their yard, or a pitcher, saw, axe. Why they couldn't harvest the crops. How do you tell them? And in fact it was like this: on one side of the road there were soldiers, keeping people out, and on the other side cows were grazing, the harvesters were buzzing, the grain was being shipped. The old women would come and cry: "Boys, let us in. It's our land. Our houses." They'd bring eggs, bacon, homemade vodka. They cried over their poisoned land. Their furniture. Their things.

Your mind would turn over. The order of things was shaken. A woman would milk her cow, and next to her there'd be a soldier to make sure that when she was done milking, she poured the milk out on the ground. An old woman carries a basket of eggs, and next to her there's a soldier to make sure she buries them. The farmers were raising their precious potatoes, harvesting them very quietly, but in fact they had to be buried. The worst part was, the least comprehensible part, everything

was so—beautiful! That was the worst. All around, it was just beautiful. I would never see such people again. Everyone's faces just looked crazy. Their faces did, and so did ours.

*

I'm a soldier. If I'm ordered to do something, I need to do it. But I felt this desire to be a hero, too. You were supposed to. The political workers gave speeches. There were items on the radio and television. Different people reacted differently: some wanted to be interviewed, show up on television, and some just saw it as their job, and then a third type—I met people like this, they felt they were doing heroic work. We were well paid, but it was as if that didn't matter. My salary was 400 rubles, whereas there I got 1000 (that's in those Soviet rubles). Later people said, "They got piles of money and now they come back and get the first cars, the first furniture sets." Of course it stings. Because there was that heroic aspect, also.

I was scared before I went there. For a little while. But then when I got there the fear went away. It was all orders, work, tasks. I wanted to see the reactor from above, from a helicopter—I wanted to see what had really happened in there. But that was forbidden. On my medical card they wrote that I got 21 roentgen, but I'm not sure that's right. The procedure was very simple: you flew to the provincial capital, Chernobyl (which is a small provincial town, by the way, not something enormous, as I'd imagined), there's a man there with a dosimeter, 10–15 kilometers away from the power station, he measures the background radiation. These measurements would then be multiplied by the number of hours that we flew each day. But I would go from there to the reactor, and some days

there'd be 80 roentgen, some days 120. Sometimes at night I'd circle over the reactor for two hours. We photographed it with infrared lighting, but the pieces of scattered graphite on the film were, like, radiated—you couldn't see them during the day.

I talked to some scientists. One told me, "I could lick your helicopter with my tongue and nothing would happen to me." Another said, "You're flying without protection? You don't want to live too long? Big mistake! Cover yourselves!" We lined the helicopter seats with lead, made ourselves some lead vests, but it turns out those protect you from one type of ray, but not from another. We flew from morning to night. There was nothing spectacular in it. Just work, hard work. At night we watched television—the World Cup was on, so we talked a lot about soccer.

We started thinking about it—I guess it must have been—three years later. One of the guys got sick, then another. Someone died. Another went insane and killed himself. That's when we started thinking. But we'll only really understand in about 20–30 years. For me, Afghanistan (I was there two years) and then Chernobyl (I was there three months), are the most memorable moments of my life.

I didn't tell my parents I'd been sent to Chernobyl. My brother happened to be reading *Izvestia* one day and saw my picture. He brought it to our mom. "Look," he says, "he's a hero!" My mother started crying.

*

We were driving, and you know what I saw? By the side of the road? Under a ray of light—this thin little sliver of light—something crystal. These . . . We were going in the direction of

Kalinkovich, through Mozyr. Something glistened. We talked about it—in the village where we worked, we all noticed there were tiny little holes in the leaves, especially on the cherry trees. We'd pick cucumbers and tomatoes—and the leaves would have these black holes. We'd curse and eat them.

I went. I didn't have to go. I volunteered. At first you didn't see any indifferent people there, it was only later that you saw the emptiness in their eyes, when they got used to it. I was after a medal? I wanted benefits? Bullshit! I didn't need anything for myself. An apartment, a car—what else? Right, a dacha. I had all those things. But they appealed to our sense of masculinity. Manly men were going off to do this important thing. And everyone else? They can hide under women's skirts, if they want. There were guys with pregnant wives, others had little babies, a third had burns. They all cursed to themselves and came anyway.

We came home. I took off all the clothes that I'd worn there and threw them down the trash chute. I gave my cap to my little son. He really wanted it. And he wore it all the time. Two years later they gave him a diagnosis: a tumor in his brain . . . You can write the rest of this yourself. I don't want to talk anymore.

*

I had just come home from Afghanistan. I wanted to live a little, get married. I wanted to get married right away. And suddenly here's this announcement with a red banner, "Special Call-Up," come to this address within the hour. Right away my mother started crying. She thought I was being called up again for the war.

Where are we going? Why? There was no information at all.

At the Slutsk station, we changed trains, they gave us equipment, and then we were told that we were going to the Khoyniki regional center. We got to Khoyniki, and people there didn't know anything. They took us further, to a village, and there's a wedding going on: young people dancing, music, vodka. Just a normal marriage. And we have an order: get rid of the topsoil to the depth of one spade.

On May 9, V-Day, a general came. They lined us up, congratulated us on the holiday. One of the guys got up the courage and asked, "Why aren't they telling us the radiation levels? What kind of doses are we getting?" Just one guy. Well, after the general left, the brigadier called him in and gave him hell. "That's a provocation! You're an alarmist!" A few days later they gave us some gas masks, but no one used them. They showed us dosimeters a couple of times, but they never actually handed them to us. Once every three months they let us go home for a few days. We had one goal then: to buy vodka. I lugged back two backpacks filled with bottles. The guys raised me up on their shoulders.

Before we went home we were called in to talk to a KGB man. He was very convincing when he said we shouldn't talk to anyone, anywhere, about what we'd seen. When I made it back from Afghanistan, I knew that I'd live. Here it was the opposite: it'd kill you only after you got home.

A SCREAM

Stop, good people! We have to live here! You talk and leave, but we have to live here!

Here, I have the medical cards right in front of me. Every day I have them. I take them into my hands—every day!

Anya Budai—born 1985—380 becquerels.

Vitya Grinkevich—born 1986—785 becs.

Nastya Shablovskaya—born 1986—570 becs.

Alyosha Plenin—born 1985—570 becs.

Andrei Kotchenko—born 1987—450 becs.

They say this is impossible? And how can they live with this

in their thyroids? But has anyone ever run this sort of experiment before? I read and I see, every day. Can you help? No! Then why did you come here? To ask questions? To touch us? I refuse to trade on their tragedy. To philosophize. Leave us alone, please. We need to live here.

Arkady Bogdankevich,
rural medical attendant

MONOLOGUE ABOUT A NEW NATION

Speakers: Nina Konstantinovna and Nikolai Zharkov, both teachers. He teaches labor studies, she teaches literature.

She:

I hear about death so often that I don't even notice anymore. Have you ever heard kids talk about death? My seventh-graders argue about it: is it scary or not? Kids used to ask: where do we come from? How are babies made? Now they're worried about what'll happen after the nuclear war. They don't like the classics anymore, I read them Pushkin from memory and all I see are cold, distant stares. There's a different world around them now. They read fantasy books, this is fun for them, people leaving the earth, possessing cosmic time, different worlds. They can't be afraid of death in the way that adults are afraid of death, but death interests them as something fantastical.

I wonder about this—when death's around it forces you to think. I teach Russian literature to kids who are not like the kids I taught ten years ago. They are constantly seeing someone or something get buried, get placed underground. Houses and trees, everything gets buried. If they stand in line for fifteen,

twenty minutes, some of them start fainting, their noses bleed. You can't surprise them with anything and you can't make them happy. They're always tired and sleepy. Their faces are pale and gray. They don't play and they don't fool around. If they fight or accidentally break a window, the teachers are pleased. We don't yell at them, because they're not like kids. And they're growing so slowly. You ask them to repeat something during a lesson, and the child can't, it gets to the point where you simply ask him to repeat a sentence, and he can't. You want to ask him, "Where are you? Where?"

I think about it a lot. It's like I'm painting with water on a wall, no one knows what I'm painting, no one can guess, no one has any idea. Our life revolves around Chernobyl. Where were you when it happened, how far from the reactor did you live? What did you see? Who died? Who left? Where did they go? I remember in the first months the night life started buzzing again—"you only live once," "if we're going to die, let's do it to music." The soldiers came and the officers came. But now Chernobyl is with us every day. A young pregnant woman died suddenly, without any diagnosis, the pathologist didn't give a diagnosis. A little girl hanged herself, she was in fifth grade. Just . . . for no reason. A little girl. There's one diagnosis for everything—Chernobyl. No matter what happens, everyone says: Chernobyl. People get mad at us: "You're sick because you're afraid. You're sick from fear. Radiophobia." But then why do little kids get sick and die? They don't know fear, they don't understand it yet.

I remember those days. My throat burned, there was a heaviness in my whole body. "You're hypochondriacs," the doctor told me. "Everyone's that way now because of Chernobyl." "What hypochondria? Everything hurts, I feel weak." My husband and I were too shy to admit it to one another, but our

legs were beginning to go numb. Everyone complained, our friends, everyone, that you'd be walking down the street and you'd just want to lie down right there. Students would lie down on their desks and lose consciousness in the middle of class. And everyone became unhappy, gloomy, not a single kind face all day, no one smiling, nothing. From eight in the morning to nine at night the kids had to stay in the school building, they were strictly forbidden to go outside and run around.

They were given clothes: the girls got skirts and blouses, the boys got suits. But then they went home in these clothes, and what happened after that we had no idea. According to the instructions, mothers were supposed to launder the clothes every day, so the kids could come to school in clean things. But first of all, they were only given one outfit, one skirt and one blouse, and second of all, mothers were already loaded down with housework—chickens, cows, pigs, and finally they don't understand why they should launder the things every day. Dirt for them is ink, or earth, or oil stains, not isotopes with short half-lives. When I tried to explain any of this to the parents, I don't think they understood it any better than if I'd been a shaman from an African tribe. "And what is this radiation? You can't hear it and you can't see it . . . Okay, I'll tell you about radiation: I don't have enough money paycheck to paycheck. The last three days we live on milk and potatoes. Okay?" And the mother says forget it. Because you're not supposed to drink milk. And you're not supposed to eat potatoes. The government brought some Chinese stir-fry and buckwheat into the stores, but where are these people supposed to get the money for it? We get some compensation for living here—death compensation—but it's nothing, enough for two cans of food. The laundry instructions are for a certain kind

of person, for a certain kind of domestic situation. But we don't have that situation! We don't have that kind of person! And then, it's not that easy to explain the difference between becs and roentgen.

From my point of view—I think of it as fatalism, as a slight fatalism. For example, you weren't allowed to use anything from your garden in the first year, but people ate it anyway, cooked it and everything. They'd planted everything so well! Try telling people that they can't eat cucumbers and tomatoes. What do you mean, "can't"? They taste fine. You eat them, and your stomach doesn't hurt. And nothing "shines" in the dark. Our neighbors put down a new floor that year from the local forest, and then they measured it, its background radiation was a hundred times over the limit. No one took that floor apart, they just kept living there, figuring everything would turn out fine, somehow, without their help, without their participation. In the beginning people would bring some products over to the dosimetrist, to check them—they were way over the threshold, and eventually people stopped checking. "See no evil, hear no evil. Who knows what those scientists will think up!" Everything went on its way: they turned over the soil, planted, harvested. The unthinkable happened, but people lived as they'd lived. And cucumbers from their own garden were more important than Chernobyl. The kids were kept in school all summer, the soldiers washed it with a special powder, they took off a layer of soil around the school. And in the fall? In the fall they sent the students to gather the beet-roots. Students were brought in, tech-voc types, to work the fields. Everyone was chased off. Chernobyl isn't as bad as leaving potatoes in the field.

Who's to blame? Well, who but us?

Before, we didn't notice this world around us. It was there, like the sky, like the air, as if someone had given it to us forever, and it didn't depend on us. It'll always be there. I used to lie in the forest and stare up at the sky, I'd feel so good I'd forget my own name. And now? The forest is still pretty, there're plenty of blueberries, but no one picks them anymore. In autumn, it's very seldom you hear a human voice in the forest. The fear is in our feelings, on a subconscious level. We still have our television and our books, our imagination. Children grow up in their houses, without the forest and the river. They can only look at them. These are completely different children. And I go to them and recite Pushkin, whose appeal I thought was eternal. And then I have this terrible thought: what if our entire culture is just an old trunk with a bunch of stale manuscripts? Everything I love . . .

He:

You know, we all had a military upbringing. We were trained to block and liquidate a nuclear attack. We needed to be ready for chemical, biological, and atomic warfare. But not to draw radionuclides out of our organisms.

You can't compare it to a war, not exactly, but everyone compares it anyway. I lived through the Leningrad Blockade as a kid, and you can't compare them. We lived there like it was the front, we were constantly being shot at. And there was hunger, several years of hunger, when people were reduced to their animal instincts. Whereas here, why, please, go outside to your garden and everything's blooming! These are incomparable things. But I wanted to say something else—I lost track—it slipped away. A-ah. When the shooting starts, God help everyone! You might die this very second, not some day in the future, but right now. In the winter there is hunger. In Leningrad people burned furniture, everything wooden in

our apartment we burned, all the books, I think, we even used some old rags for the stove. A person is walking down the street, he sits down, and the next day you walk by and he's still sitting there, that is to say he froze, and he might sit there like that another week, or he might sit until the spring. Until it warms up. No one has the strength to break him out of the ice. Sometimes if someone fell on the ice someone would come up and help him. But usually they'd walk past. Or crawl past. I remember people didn't walk, they crawled, that's how slowly they were going. You can't compare that with anything!

My mother still lived with us when the reactor blew up, and she kept saying: "We've already lived through the worst thing, son. We lived through the Blockade. There can't be anything worse than that."

We were preparing for war, for nuclear war, we built nuclear shelters. We wanted to hide from the atom as if we were hiding from shrapnel. But the atom is everywhere. In the bread, in the salt. We breathe radiation, we eat it. That you might not have bread or salt, and that you might get to the point where you'll eat anything, you'll boil a leather belt so that you can feed on the smell—that I could understand. But this I can't. Everything's poisoned? Then how can we live? In the first few months there was fear. The doctors, teachers, in short, the intelligentsia, they all dropped everything and left. They just hightailed it out of here. But military discipline—give up your Party card—they weren't letting anyone out. Who's to blame? In order to answer the question of how to live, we need to know who's to blame. Well, who? The scientists or the personnel at the station? The director? The operators on duty? Tell me, why do we not do battle with automobiles as the workings of the mind of man, but instead do battle with the reactor? We demand that all

atomic stations be closed, and the nuclear scientists be put in jail? We curse them! But knowledge, knowledge by itself, can't be criminal. Scientists today are also victims of Chernobyl. I want to live after Chernobyl, not die after Chernobyl. I want to understand.

People have a different reaction now. Ten years have gone by, and people measure things in terms of the war. The war lasted four years. So it's like we've gone through two wars. I'll tell you what kind of reactions people have: "Everything's passed." "Everything will turn out all right." "Ten years have gone by. We're not scared anymore." "We're all going to die! We're all going to die soon!" "I want to leave the country." "They need to help us." "Aw, to hell with it. We need to live." I think I've covered all of them. That's what we hear every day. In my opinion—we're the raw materials for a scientific experiment, for an international laboratory. There are ten million Belarussians, and two million of us live on poisoned land. It's a huge devil's laboratory. Write down the data, experiment all you want. People come to us from everywhere, they write dissertations, from Moscow and Petersburg, from Japan and Germany and Austria. They're preparing for the future. [*There's a long pause in the conversation.*]

What was I thinking about just now? I was drawing out the comparison again. I was thinking that I can talk about Chernobyl, and I can't talk about the Blockade. They sent an invitation for a meeting of "The Children of Blockaded Leningrad," and I went, but I couldn't squeeze a single word out of myself while I was there. Just tell about the fear? That's not enough. Just about the fear—at home we never talked about the Blockade, my mother didn't want us to remember it. But we talk about Chernobyl. No. [*Stops.*] We don't talk about it with each other, it's a conversation we have when

someone comes here: foreigners, journalists, relatives who don't live here. Why don't we talk about Chernobyl? In school, for example? With our students? They talk about it with them in Austria, France, Germany, when they go there for medical care. I ask the kids, what did people talk about with you, what interested them? They often don't remember the cities or villages, or the last names of the people they stayed with, but they remember the presents they got and the delicious foods. Someone got a cassette player, someone else didn't. They come back in clothes that they didn't earn and their parents didn't earn, either. It's like they've been exhibited. They keep waiting for someone to take them there again. They'll show them off again, then give them presents. They get used to it. It's already a way of living, a way of seeing the world. After that big experience "abroad," after this expensive exhibit they have to go to school. Sit in class. I can already see that these are observers. I bring them to my studio, my wooden sculptures are there. The kids like them. I say: "You can make something like this out of a simple piece of tree. Try it yourself." Wake up! It helped me get out of the Blockade, it took me years to get out.

We're often silent. We don't yell and we don't complain. We're patient, as always. Because we don't have the words yet. We're afraid to talk about it. We don't know how. It's not an ordinary experience, and the questions it raises are not ordinary. The world has been split in two: there's us, the Chernobylites, and then there's you, the others. Have you noticed? No one here points out that they're Russian or Belarussian or Ukrainian. We all call ourselves Chernobylites. "We're from Chernobyl." "I'm a Chernobylite." As if this is a separate people. A new nation.

MONOLOGUE ABOUT WRITING CHERNOBYL

The ants are crawling along the tree branch. There's military equipment everywhere. Soldiers, cries, curses, swearing, helicopters rattling. But they're crawling.

I was coming back from the Zone and, of all the things I saw that day, the only one that remained clear in my memory was the image of those ants. We'd stopped in the forest and I stood smoking next to a birch. I stood very close, leaning on it. Right in front of my face the ants were crawling on the branch, not paying us any mind. We'll be gone, and they won't notice. And me? I'd never looked at them so closely before.

At first everyone said, "It's a catastrophe," and then everyone said, "It's nuclear war." I'd read about Hiroshima and Nagasaki, I'd seen documentary footage. It's frightening, but understandable: atomic warfare, the explosion's radius. I could even imagine it. But what happened to us didn't fit into my consciousness.

You feel how some completely unseen thing can enter and then destroy the whole world, can crawl into you. I remember a conversation with this scientist: "This is for thousands of years," he explained. "The decomposition of uranium: that's 238 half-lives. Translated into time: that's a billion years. And for thorium: it's fourteen billion years." Fifty, one hundred, two hundred. But beyond that? Beyond that my consciousness couldn't go. I couldn't even understand anymore: what is time? Where am I?

To write about that now, when only ten years have gone by. Write about it? I think it's senseless. You can't explain it, you can't understand it. We'll still try to imagine something that looks like our own lives now. I've tried it and it doesn't

work. The Chernobyl explosion gave us the mythology of Chernobyl. The papers and magazines compete to see who can write the most frightening article. People who weren't there love to be frightened. Everyone read about mushrooms the size of human heads, but no one actually found them. So instead of writing, you should record. Document. Show me a fantasy novel about Chernobyl—there isn't one! Because reality is more fantastic.

I keep a separate notebook. I write down conversations, rumors, anecdotes. It's the most interesting thing, and it's outside of time. What remains of ancient Greece? The myths of ancient Greece.

Here's my notebook.

"For three months now the radio has been saying: the situation is stabilizing, the situation is stabilizing, the situation is stab . . ."

"Stalin's old vocabulary has sprung up again: 'agents of the Western secret services,' 'the cursed enemies of socialism,' 'an undermining of the indestructible union of the Soviet peoples.' Everyone talks about the spies and provocateurs sent here, and no one talks about iodine protection. Any unofficial information is considered foreign ideology."

"Yesterday my editor cut the story about the mother of one of the firemen who went to the station the night of the nuclear fire. He died of acute radiation poisoning. After burying their son in Moscow, the parents returned to their village, which was soon evacuated. In the fall they secretly made their way through the forest back to their garden and collected a bag of tomatoes and cucumbers. The mother is satisfied: 'we filled twenty cans.' Faith in the land, in their ancient peasant experience—even the death of their son can't overturn the order of things."

"'You listen to Radio Free Europe?' my editor asks me. I don't say anything. 'I don't need alarmists on this paper. Write me up something about heroes.'"

"But hasn't the old notion of the enemy been destroyed? The enemy is invisible, and he's everywhere. This is evil in a new guise."

"Some instructors came from the Central Committee. Their route: hotel to regional Party headquarters in a car, and back, also in a car. They study the situation by reading the headlines of the local papers. They bring whole cases of sandwiches from Minsk. They boil their tea from mineral water. They brought that, too. The woman on duty at the hotel told me. People don't believe the papers, television, or radio—they look for information in the behavior of the bosses, that's more reliable."

"The most popular fable in the Zone is that Stolichnaya Vodka is the best protection against strontium and cesium."

"What should I do with my kid? I want to put him under my arm and get the hell out. But I have a Party card in my pocket. I can't do it."

"The village stores have suddenly filled up with deficit items. I heard the secretary of the regional Party give his speech: 'We'll create paradise for you on earth. Just stay and keep working. You'll be up to your neck in salami and buckwheat. You'll have everything they have in the top specialty stores.' That is, in the regional Party's buffet. Their attitude toward the people is: vodka and salami is enough for them. But, I'll be damned, I've never seen so many kinds of salami in a village store! I bought some imported panty hose for my wife."

"There was a month when you could buy dosimeters, and then they disappeared. You can't write about it. You also can't write about how much radioactive fallout there is. Nor can you

write about the fact that only men are left in the villages, the women and children have been evacuated. All summer the men did the laundry, milked the cows, worked on the plots. And drank, of course. And fought. A world without women . . . They crossed that out. 'Don't forget, we have enemies. We have many enemies across the ocean,' my editor told me again, threateningly. And that's why we only have good things, nothing bad. But somewhere special food is prepared, and someone saw the bosses with their suitcases . . ."

"An old lady stopped me near a police block-post: 'Will you look in on my hut? It's time to dig up the potatoes, but the soldiers won't let me through.' They were transferred. A person in a vacuum, a person with nothing. They sneak into their villages through a military blockade. Through snowy forests, through swamps, at night. They get chased, caught, by helicopters, cars. 'It's like when the Germans were here,' the old-timers say."

"Saw my first looter. He was a young guy wearing two fur coats. He was proving to a military patrol that this is how he's curing his radiation sickness. When they broke him down, he finally admitted: 'The first time, it's a little scary, but after that you get used to it. Just take a shot of vodka, and off you go.' You can't let self-preservation get in the way of your instinct to take what's lying there. Under normal circumstances you'd be afraid. But that's how our kind of person gets impressive things done. Including crimes."

"I went back to the village after a year. The dogs have gone wild. I found our Rex, called him, he won't come. Did he not recognize me? Or does he not want to? He's angry at us."

"During the first weeks and months everyone went quiet. There was silence. Prostration. You need to leave, but until the last day, you think, No. Your mind is incapable of understanding

what's happening. I don't remember any serious conversations, but I do remember jokes. 'Now all the stores have radio-products.' 'Impotents are divided into the radioactive and the radiopassive.' And then suddenly the jokes disappeared."

Overheard in the hospital:

"This boy died. Yesterday he gave me some candy."

In line at the market:

"Oh, good people, there are so many mushrooms this year."

"They're poisoned."

"Oh, strange person. No one's forcing you to eat them. Buy them, dry them up, and take them to the market in Minsk. You'll become a millionaire."

"They picked out spots for the churches literally from heaven. The church fathers had visions. Secret rites were performed before they built the churches. But they built the nuclear power plant like a factory. Like a pigsty. They poured asphalt on for the roof. And it was melting."

"Did you read this? They caught a soldier who'd gone AWOL right near Chernobyl. He'd dug a hole for himself and lived next to the reactor. He'd eat by going to the abandoned houses—some places he'd find lard, other places some canned pickles. He laid traps for animals. He went AWOL because the older soldiers were beating the younger ones 'to death.' He saved himself—at Chernobyl."

"Some day they'll find the remains of some very strange burials. Graveyards for animals are called bio-cemeteries by scientists. These are modern-day temples. There lie thousands of dogs, cats, horses, that were shot. And not a single name."

"Yesterday my father turned eighty. The whole family gathered around the table. I looked at him and thought about how much his life had seen: the Gulag, Auschwitz, Chernobyl. One generation saw it all. But he loves to fish. When he was younger, my mother used to get mad, she'd say, 'He hasn't missed a single skirt in the entire administrative region.' And now I notice how he lowers his gaze when there's a young, pretty woman walking toward us."

Rumors:

There are camps behind Chernobyl where they're going to place those who received heavy doses of radiation. They'll keep them there a while, observe them, then bury them.

They're taking the dead out of the nearby villages in buses and straight to the graveyards, burying thousands in mass graves. Like during the Leningrad Blockade.

Several people supposedly saw a strange light in the sky above the station on the night before the explosion. Someone even photographed it. On the film it turned out to be the steam from an extraterrestrial object.

In Minsk they've washed the trains and the inventories. They're going to transfer the whole population to Siberia. They're already fixing up the old barracks left over from Stalin's camps. They'll start with the women and children. The Ukrainians are already being shipped.

It wasn't an accident, it was an earthquake. Something happened to the earth's core. A geological explosion. Geophysical and cosmophysical forces were at work. The military knew about it beforehand, they could have warned people, but it's all very strictly kept secret there.

There are now pike in the lakes and rivers without heads or tails. Just the bodies floating around.

Something similar is going to start happening soon to humans. The Belarussians will turn into humanoids.

The forest animals have radiation sickness. They wander around sadly, they have sad eyes. The hunters are afraid and feel too sorry for them to shoot. And the animals have stopped being afraid of the humans. Foxes and wolves go into the villages and play with the children.

The Chernobylites are giving birth to children who have an unknown yellow fluid instead of blood. There are scientists who insist that monkeys became intelligent because they lived near radiation. Children born in three or four generations will be Einsteins. It's a cosmic experiment being performed on us . . .

Anatoly Shimanskiy, journalist