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# DOCUMENTS

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## *Kolyma Tales*

### *(1) Shock Therapy—By VARLAM SHALAMOV*

**D**URING one blissful period in his life Merzlakov had worked as a stable hand and used a homemade huller—a large tin can with a perforated bottom—to turn oats intended for the horses into human food. When boiled, the bitter mixture could satisfy hunger. Even then his thoughts kept returning to one simple question. Large workhorses from the Mainland were given twice as much oats as the stocky, shaggy Yakut horses, although all the horses were worked an equally small amount of the time. Enough oats were dumped in the trough of the monstrous Percheron, Thunder, to feed five Yakut horses. This was the practice everywhere, and it struck Merzlakov as being only fair.

What he could not understand was the camp's rationing system for people. The mysterious tables of proteins, fats, vitamins, and calories intended for the convicts' table did not take a person's weight into consideration. If human beings were to be equated with livestock, then one ought to be more consistent and not hold to some arithmetical average invented by the office. This terrible "mean" benefited only the light-weight convicts who, in

fact, survived longer than the others. The enormous Merzlakov—a sort of human analogue to the Percheron, Thunder—felt only a greater gnawing hunger from the three spoons of porridge given out for breakfast. A member of a work gang had no way of supplementing his food supply, and furthermore, all the most important foodstuffs—butter, sugar, meat—never made it to the camp kettle in the quantities provided for by the instructions.

Merzlakov watched the larger men die first—whether or not they were accustomed to heavy labour. A scrawny intellectual lasted longer than some country giant, even when the latter had formerly been a manual labourer, if the two were fed on an equal basis in accordance with the camp ration. Not calculated for large men, the basic nourishment could not be essentially improved even by food bonuses for heightened productivity. To eat better, one had to work better. But to work better one had to eat better. Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians were always the first to die—a phenomenon that the doctors always explained away by claiming that peoples of the Baltic states were weaker than Russians. True, their normal way



IN MOSCOW I tried to see Varlam Shalamov, but I was told he was old and sick and nearly blind, isolated from the outside world (both the official and the dissident). He had been arrested in 1937 during the Great Purge; his crime was that he had praised

the Russian prose of the exiled Nobel Prize laureate, Ivan Bunin. For some 17 years he was a slave labourer in the Arctic camp of Kolyma, where (according to the estimates of Robert Conquest in his recent study of "Kolyma; the Arctic Death Camps") several millions had perished in the Siberian hardships.

Solzhenitsyn's "Gulag Archipelago" scarcely treats the Kolyma tragedy, and in fact he had asked Shalamov to co-author the book with him. As he said, "Shalamov's experience in the camps was longer and more bitter than my own, and I respectfully confess that to him and not to me was it given to touch those depths of bestiality and despair toward which life in the camps dragged us all. . . ." Of Shalamov's poetry, Solzhenitsyn wrote that when he first came upon it in an anthology he "trembled as if he were meeting a brother. . . ."

Shalamov's "Kolyma Tales" circulated in manuscript in the USSR and, recommended by Saul Bellow ("Westerners are often made uncomfortable by such powerful books . . ."), they will shortly be published in English (translated by John Glad) by W. W. Norton in New York and London.

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of life was more dissimilar to that of the camps than was the world of the Russian peasant, and it was more difficult for them. The primary reason, however, was quite different: it wasn't that they possessed less endurance, but that they were physically bigger than the Russians.

ABOUT a year-and-a-half earlier Merzlakov had arrived as a newcomer at the camp. In a state of collapse from scurvy he had been allowed to work as a stand-in orderly in the local clinic. There he learned that medical dosages were determined according to the patient's weight. New medicines were tested on rabbits, mice or guinea pigs, and human dosages were then calculated according to body weight. Children's dosages were smaller than adult dosages.

The camp food ration, however, had no relation to the weight of the human body, and it was precisely this improperly resolved question that amazed and disturbed Merzlakov. But before he completely lost his strength, he miraculously managed to get a job as a stable hand so he could steal oats from the horses to stuff his own stomach. Merzlakov was already counting on surviving the winter. Perhaps something new would turn up in the spring. But it didn't work out that way. The stable manager was fired for drunkenness and the senior groom—one of those who had taught Merzlakov how to make a huller—took his place. The senior groom had himself stolen no small amount of oats in his day, and he knew exactly how it was done. Wanting to impress the administration and no longer in need of oatmeal for himself, he personally smashed all the hullers. The stable hands began to fry or boil oats and eat them unhulled, no longer making any distinction between their own stomachs and a horse's. The new manager reported this, and several stable hands, including Merzlakov, were put in solitary for stealing oats. From there they were dismissed from the stable and returned to their former jobs—in the general work gang.

IN THE general work gang Merzlakov soon realised that death was near. He staggered under the weight of the logs he had to carry. The foreman, who had taken a dislike to this husky man, forced Merzlakov to carry the thick end of the log every time. At one point Merzlakov fell and, unable to get up from the snow, in a moment of decision refused to carry the damn log any farther. It was already late and dark. The guards were hurrying to their political indoctrination session; the workers wanted to return to the barrack to food; and the foreman was late for a battle at cards. Merzlakov was the cause of the entire delay, and he was punished. At

first his comrades beat him, then the foreman beat him, then the guards. The log remained lying in the snow; instead of the log they transported Merzlakov. He was freed from work and lay on his bunk. His back ached. The paramedic rubbed it with machine grease since there were no rubbing compounds in the first-aid room. Merzlakov kept waiting, half bent over and insistently complaining of pains in the small of the back. The pain had long since disappeared, the broken rib quickly healed, and Merzlakov was attempting at any price to save himself from being signed out to go back to work. And they didn't sign him out. At one point they dressed him, put him on a stretcher, loaded him into the back of a truck and transferred him together with some other patients to the regional hospital. There was no X-ray machine there, and it was time to think things over seriously. Merzlakov did precisely that.

For several months he lay bent in two and was finally transferred to a central hospital which, of course, had an X-ray machine and where Merzlakov was placed in the surgical division. In the traumatological ward the patients in their simplicity referred to the ward as the "dramatological" ward, not even realising the bitterness of the pun.

"THIS ONE", said the surgeon, pointing to you, Merzlakov's chart, "we're transferring to you, Peter Ivanovich. There's nothing we can do for him in surgery."

"But you write in your diagnosis—'ankylosis resulting from a trauma of the spine.' What am I supposed to do with him?" asked the neuropathologist.

"Well, yes, ankylosis, of course. What else can I write? After beatings, even worse things turn up. I remember there was an incident at the Sery Mine. The foreman beat one of the men. . . ."

"I haven't got time to listen to your incidents, Seryozha. I ask you, why are you transferring him to me?"

"It's all written down. He has to be examined to make up the papers. You poke him with needles for a while, we do the papers, and we put him on the boat. Let him be a free man."

"But you did X-rays? You should be able to see any problems without needles."

"We did X-rays. Take a look." The surgeon held the dark film negative up to a gauze curtain. "The devil himself couldn't find anything in that picture. And that kind of smear is all your X-ray technicians will ever produce until we get regular current."

"What a mess", said Peter Ivanovich. "OK, let's let it go at that." And he signed his name to the medical history, giving his consent to transfer Merzlakov to his own ward.

THE SURGICAL WARD was noisy and confusing. There was nothing funny about the northern mines, and the ward was filled with cases of frostbite, sprains, broken bones, burns. Some of the patients lay on the ward floor and in the corridors where one totally exhausted young surgeon with four assistants could only manage three or four hours sleep a day and had no time to examine Merzlov carefully. Merzlov knew that the real investigation would begin in the neuropathological ward.

His entire despairing "convict will" was concentrated on one thing: not to straighten out. And he did not straighten out, much as he wanted to—even for a moment. He remembered the gold mine: the cold that left him breathless with pain; the frozen, slippery stones, shiny with frost; the soup he slurped without any spoon; the rifle butts of the guards and the boots of the foreman. And he found within himself strength not to straighten out. Already it was easier than it had been the first few weeks. Afraid to straighten out in his sleep, he slept little, knowing that all the attendants had orders to keep an eye on him and unmask his duplicity. And after such an unmasking he would be sent to a "penal mine." What must such a penal mine be like, if even an ordinary one left Merzlov with such terrible memories?

On the day after his transfer, Merzlov was taken to the doctor. The head doctor asked briefly about the origin of the illness and shook his head in sympathy. He remarked in passing that even healthy muscles forced into an unnatural position for many months could become accustomed to the position and a man could make himself an invalid. Then Peter Ivanovich took over the examination. Merzlov responded at random to needle pricks, pressures, and taps with a rubber hammer.

PETER IVANOVICH spent more than half of his time exposing malingerers. He, of course, understood the reasons for their conduct. Peter Ivanovich had himself recently been a prisoner, and he was not surprised by the childish stubbornness of the fakers or the primitiveness of their tricks. Peter Ivanovich, a former associate professor at a Siberian medical institute, had laid his own scientific career to rest in those same snows in which the convicts were saving their lives by deceiving him. It was not that he lacked pity for people, but he was more of a doctor than a human being; first and foremost he was a specialist. He was proud that a year of hard labour had not beaten the doctor, the specialist, out of him. He understood his task of exposing cheating—not from any lofty, socio-governmental point of view and not from the viewpoint of morality. Rather, he saw in this activity a worthy application of his knowledge, his psychological ability to set traps, into which hungry, half-insane people were to fall for the greater glory of science.

In this battle of doctor and faker, the doctor had all the advantages—thousands of clever drugs, hundreds of textbooks, a wealth of equipment, aid from the guards and the enormous experience of a specialist. The patient could count only on his own horror before that world from which he had come and to which he feared to return. Precisely this horror lent him strength for the struggle. In exposing any malingerers, Peter Ivanovich experienced a deep satisfaction. He regarded it as testimony from life that he was a good doctor who had not yet lost his qualifications but, on the contrary, had sharpened them, who could still "do it."

"These surgeons are fools", he thought, lighting up a cigarette after Merzlov had left. "They either don't know or have forgotten topographic anatomy, and they never did know about reflexes. They get on with X-rays alone, and without X-rays they can't even diagnose a simple fracture. And the bullshit they throw around!" It was crystal clear to Peter Ivanovich that Merzlov was a faker. "Let him stay for a week. We'll get all the tests worked up to make sure the formalities have been observed and glue all those scraps of paper into the history of the illness." Peter Ivanovich smiled in anticipation of the theatrical effect of the new exposé. In a week a new group of patients would be shipped back to the mainland. The reports were compiled here in the ward, and the chairman of the board of medical commissioners would arrive to examine personally the patients prepared by the hospital for departure. His role amounted to examining the documents and checking that the formalities had been observed; an individual examination of the patient took thirty seconds.

"My lists", said the surgeon, "contain a certain Merzlov. The guards broke his back a year ago. I want to send him home. He was recently transferred to Neuropathology. The papers for his departure are ready."

The chairman of the commission turned to the neuropathologist.

"Bring in Merzlov", said Peter Ivanovich.

The bent-over Merzlov was led in; the chairman briefly glanced at him.

"What a gorilla", he said. "But I guess there's no reason to keep that kind around." Pen in hand, he reached for the lists.

"I won't give my signature", said Peter Ivanovich in a clear, loud voice. "He's a faker, and tomorrow I will have the honour to prove that to both you and the surgeon."

"Let's set him aside then", said the chairman indifferently, setting his pen aside. "And, in general, let's wrap things up. It's already getting late."

"He's a faker, Seryozha", said Peter Ivanovich, taking the surgeon by the arm when they were leaving the ward.

The surgeon withdrew his arm.

"Maybe", he said with a disgusted frown. "Good

luck in exposing him. I hope you get your kicks out of it."

THE NEXT DAY Peter Ivanovich gave a detailed report on Merzlkov to the head of the hospital at a meeting.

"I think", he said in conclusion, "we'll expose Merzlkov in two stages. The first will be the Rausch narcosis that you forgot, Seryozha", he said triumphantly, turning to the surgeon. "That should have been done right away. And if the Rausch doesn't produce any results, then..." Peter Ivanovich spread his hands in a gesture of resignation. "Then we'll have to try shock therapy. I assure you, that can be very interesting."

"Isn't that going too far?" Aleksandra Sergeevna asked. She was a heavy woman who had recently arrived from the Mainland. Here she ran the tubercular ward, the largest ward in the hospital.

"Not for that son-of-a-bitch", the head of the hospital answered.

"Let's wait and see what kind of results we get from the Rausch", Peter Ivanovich inserted in a conciliatory fashion.

Rausch narcosis consisted of a stunning dose of ether for a short-term effect. The patient would be knocked out for fifteen or twenty minutes, giving the surgeon time to set a dislocation, amputate a finger or open a painful abscess.

The hospital bigwigs, dressed in white gowns, surrounded the operating table at the dressing station where the obedient, stooped-over Merzlkov was brought. The attendants reached for the cotton strips normally used to tie patients to the operating table.

"No, no", shouted Peter Ivanovich. "That's totally unnecessary."

Merzlkov's face turned upward, and the surgeon placed the anaesthetic mask over it, holding a bottle of ether in his other hand.

"Let's begin, Seryozha!"

The ether began to drip.

"Deeper, breathe deeper, Merzlkov. Count out loud."

"Twenty-six, twenty-seven", Merzlkov counted in a lazy voice, and, suddenly breaking off his count, started to mutter something fragmented, incomprehensible and sprinkled with obscenities.

Peter Ivanovich held in his hand the left hand of Merzlkov. In a few minutes the hand fell limp. Peter Ivanovich dropped it, and the hand fell softly on to the edge of the table, as if dead. Peter Ivanovich slowly and triumphantly straightened out the body of Merzlkov. Everyone gasped with amazement.

"Now tie him down", said Peter Ivanovich to the attendants.

Merzlkov opened his eyes and saw the hairy fist of the Hospital Director.

"You slime", he hissed. "Now you'll get a new trial."

"Good going, Peter Ivanovich, good going!" the chairman of the commission kept repeating, all the while slapping the neuropathologist on the shoulder. "And to think that just yesterday I was going to let him go!"

"Untie him", Peter Ivanovich commanded. "Get him down from that table."

STILL NOT completely aware of his surroundings, Merzlkov felt a throbbing in his temples and the sickeningly sweet taste of ether in his mouth. He still didn't understand if he was asleep or awake, but he had frequently had such dreams in the past.

"To hell with all of you!" he shouted unexpectedly and bent over as before. Broad-shouldered, bony, almost touching the floor with his long, meaty fingers, Merzlkov really looked like a gorilla as he left the dressing station. The orderlies reported to Peter Ivanovich that patient Merzlkov was lying on his bed in his usual pose. The doctor ordered him to be brought to his office.

"You've been exposed, Merzlkov", the neuropathologist said. "But I put in a good word for you to the head of the hospital. You won't be retried or sent to a penal mine. You'll just have to check out of the hospital and return to your previous mine—to your old job. You're a real hero, brother. Made us look like idiots for a whole year."

"I don't know what you're talking about", the gorilla said without raising his eyes from the floor.

"What do you mean, you don't know? We just straightened you out!"

"Nobody straightened me out."

"All right, friend", the neuropathologist said. "Have it your own way. I wanted to help you out. Just wait. In a week you'll be begging to check out."

"Who knows what'll happen in a week", Merzlkov said quietly. How could he explain to the doctor that an extra week, an extra day, even an extra hour spent somewhere other than the mine was his concept of happiness. If the doctor couldn't understand that himself, how could he explain it to him? Merzlkov stared silently at the floor.

Merzlkov was led away, and Peter Ivanovich went to talk to the head of the hospital.

"We can handle this tomorrow, and not next week", the head of the hospital said upon hearing Peter Ivanovich's suggestion.

"No, I promised him a week", Peter Ivanovich said. The hospital won't collapse."

"All right", the head of the hospital said. "We can handle it next week. But be sure to send for me when you do. Will you tie him down?"

"We can't", the neuropathologist said. "He could dislocate an arm or a leg. He'll have to be

held down." Merzlakov's case history in his hand, the neuropathologist wrote down "shock therapy" in the *Treatment* column and inserted the date.

SHOCK THERAPY consisted of an injection of camphor oil directly into the patient's blood stream. The dose was several times that used in hypodermic injections for seriously ill coronary patients. It produced a sudden seizure similar to seizures of violent insanity or epilepsy. The effect of the camphor was a radical heightening of muscle activity and motor ability. Muscle strain was increased incredibly, and the strength of the unconscious patient was ten times that of normal.

Several days passed, and Merzlakov had no intention of voluntarily straightening out. The morning of the date scheduled in the case history arrived, and Merzlakov was brought to Peter Ivanovich. In the North any sort of amusement is treasured, and the doctor's office was packed. Eight husky orderlies were lined up along the wall. In the middle of the office was a couch.

"We'll do it right here", Peter Ivanovich said, getting up from behind his desk. "No sense going to surgical ward. By the way, where is Sergey Fedorovich?"

"He can't come", Anna Ivanovna, the physician on duty, said. "He said he was busy."

"Busy, busy", Peter Ivanovich repeated. "He ought to be here to see how I do his job for him."

The surgeon's assistant rolled up Merzlakov's sleeve and smeared iodine on Merzlakov's arm. Holding the syringe in his right hand, the assistant inserted the needle into a vein next to the elbow. Dark blood spurting from the needle into the syringe. With a soft movement of the thumb the assistant depressed the plunger, and the yellow solution began to enter the vein.

"Pump it in all at once", Peter Ivanovich said, "and stand back right away. You", he said to the orderlies, "hold him down."

Merzlakov's enormous body shuddered and began to thrash about even as the orderlies took hold of him. He wheezed, struggled, kicked, but the orderlies held him firmly and he slowly began to calm down.

"A tiger, you could hold a tiger that way", Peter Ivanovich shouted in a near ecstasy. "That's the way they catch tigers in the Zabaikal Region." He turned to the head of the hospital. "Do you remember the end of Gogol's novel, *Taras Bulba*. 'Thirty men held his arms and legs.' This gorilla is bigger than Bulba, and just eight men can handle him."

"Right", the head of the hospital said. He didn't remember the Gogol passage, but he definitely enjoyed seeing the shock therapy.

While making rounds the next morning Peter Ivanovich stopped at Merzlakov's bed.

"Well", he said. "What's your decision?"

"I'm ready to check out", Merzlakov answered.

## (2) *My First Tooth*

THE COLUMN OF MEN was just as I had dreamed all through my boyhood years. Everywhere were darkened faces and blue mouths burned by the Ural sun in April. Enormous guards leaped into sleighs which flew by without stopping. One of the guards had a single eye and a scar slash across his face. The head guard had bright blue eyes and we all, all two hundred convicts, knew his name before half the first day had passed—Sherbakov. We learned it by magic, in some unfathomable, incomprehensible way. The convicts uttered his name in an off-hand fashion as if it were something they had long been familiar with and this trip with him would last forever. Indeed he entered our lives for eternity. That is just the way it was—at least for many of us.

Sherbakov's enormous, supple figure appeared briefly everywhere. He would run ahead of the column and meet it and then follow the last cart with his eyes before rushing forward to catch up and overtake it. Yes, we had carts, the classic carts of Siberia. Our group was making a five-day march in convict file. We carried no special goods with us and whenever we stopped anywhere or had to be counted, our irregular ranks reminded one of recruits at a railway station. It would be a long time, however, before the paths of our lives led us to any railway stations.

It was a crisp April morning, and our yawning, coughing group was mustered in the twilight of a monastery courtyard before setting out on the long journey.

The quiet, considerate Moscow guards had been replaced by a band of shouting, sun-tanned young men under the command of the blue-eyed Sherbakov, and we spent the night in the basement of the Solikamsk Police Station, located in a former monastery. Yesterday, when they dumped us into the cold basement, all we could see was ice and snow around the church. There was always a slight thaw during the day and in the evening it would freeze over again. Blue-gray drifts blanketed the entire yard, and to find the essence of the snow, its whiteness, one had to break the hard, brittle crust of ice, dig a hole and only then scoop out the flaky snow that melted joyously on the tongue and cooled dry mouths, searing them with its freshness.

I WAS ONE of the first to enter the basement and was thus able to pick a warmer spot. The enormous

icy chambers frightened me, and I searched with all the inexperience of youth for something that would at least resemble a stove. But my chance comrade, a stunted thief by the name of Gusev, shoved me right up against the wall next to the only window, which was barred and had a double frame. Semicircular and about a yard high, the window began down at the floor and looked like a loophole. I wanted to find a warmer spot, but the crowd kept coming through the narrow door and there was no opportunity to return. Very calmly, without saying a word to me, Gusev kicked the glass with the tip of his boot, breaking first one pane and then the second. Cold air rushed through the new opening, burning like boiling water. Caught in this icy draught and already terribly chilled after a long wait and head-count in the courtyard, I began to shiver. Immediately, however, I understood the wisdom of Gusev's action. Of the two hundred convicts we two were the only ones that night who breathed fresh air. People were so packed into the cellar that it was impossible to lie down or even to sit; we had to remain standing.

The upper half of the room was hidden by the white fog of our breath, unclean and stuffy. The ceiling was invisible, and we had no idea if it was high or low. People began to faint. Choking for breath, men tried to push their way to the door in which there was a crack and a peephole. They tried to breathe through it but every now and again the sentry outside the door would shove his bayonet through the hole, and the men didn't try again after that. Naturally, no medical assistance was rendered to those who fainted. Only the wise Gusev and I were able to breathe easily at the broken window. Muster took a long time. . . .

WE WERE the last to leave and, when the fog in the cellar had cleared, we saw within arm's reach a vaulted ceiling, the firmament of our church-prison. In the basement of the Solikamsk Police Station I found huge letters drawn with a lump of coal, stretching right across the vaulted ceiling: "Comrades! We were in this grave three days and thought we would die, but we survived. Comrades, be strong!"

Accompanied by the shouts of the guards, our column crawled past the outskirts of Solikamsk and made its way toward a low area. The sky was blue, very blue, like the eyes of the guard commander. As the wind cooled our faces the sun singed them so that by nightfall of the first day they became brown. Accommodation, prepared in advance, was always the same. Two peasant huts were rented to put up the convicts for the night. One would be fairly clean, and the other rather dingy—something like a barn, and sometimes it was a barn. The trick was to end up in the "cleaner" one, but that was not for the convicts to

choose.

Every evening at twilight the commander of the guards would have the men file past him. With a wave of his hand he would indicate where the man standing before him should spend the night. At the time Sherbakov seemed to me to be infinitely wise, because he didn't dig around in papers or lists to select "more distinguished criminals", but simply picked out the necessary convicts with a gesture of his hand. Later I decided that Sherbakov must be unusually observant; each selection, made by some unfathomable method, turned out to be the correct one. The political prisoners were all in one group, and the common criminals in the other. A year or two later I realised that Sherbakov's wisdom did not depend on miracles. Anyone can learn to assess others by outward appearance. In our group, our belongings and suitcases might well have served as secondary signs, but our things were being hauled separately, on the carts and peasant sleighs.

ON THE FIRST NIGHT something happened. That event is the subject of this story. Two hundred men stood waiting for the commander of the guards when, off to the left, a disturbance was heard. There was an uproar of shouting, puffing, and swearing and finally a clear cry of "Dragons! Dragons!" A man was flung out on to the snow in front of the file of convicts. His face was bloodied, and someone had jammed a tall fur hat on his head, but it could not cover the narrow oozing wound. The man, who was probably Ukrainian, was dressed in homespun. I knew him. He was Peter Zayats, the religious sectarian, and he had been brought from Moscow in the same train car with me. He prayed constantly.

"He won't stand up for roll call!" the guard reported, excited and puffing.

"Stand him up!" ordered the commander.

Two enormous guards supported Zayats, one on each side. Zayats, however, was heavier and a head taller than either of them.

"You don't want to stand up? You don't want to?"

Sherbakov struck Zayats in the face with his fist. Zayats spat into the snow.

All at once I felt a burning sensation in my chest and I realised that the meaning of my whole life was about to be decided. If I didn't do something—what exactly, I didn't know—it would mean that my arrival with this group of convicts was in vain, that twenty years of my life had been pointless.

The hot flush of shame over my cowardliness fled from my cheeks. I felt them cool down and my body lighten.

I stepped out of line and said in a trembling voice:

"How dare you beat that man!"

Sherbakov looked me over in sheer amazement.  
 "Get back in line."

I returned to the line. Sherbakov gave the command, and heading for the two huts as indicated by his finger, the group melted away in the darkness. His finger directed me to the poorer hut.

We lay down to sleep on wet, rotting, year-old straw which was strewn on bare smooth earth. We lay in each other's embrace because it was warmer that way, and only the criminal element in the group played the eternal card games beneath a lantern hanging from a ceiling beam. Soon even they fell asleep and so, mulling over my act, did I. I had no older friend, no one to set an example. My sleep was interrupted by someone shining a light in my face. One of my comrades, a thief, kept repeating in a confident, ingratiating voice:

"He's the one, he's the one."

The lantern was held by a guard.

"Come on outside."

"I'll get dressed right away."

"Come as you are."

I walked outside, shivering nervously and not knowing what was going to happen.

Flanked by two guards, I walked up on to the porch.

"Take your underwear off!"

I undressed.

"Go stand in the snow."

I went out into the snow, looked back at the porch and saw two rifle barrels aimed directly at me. How much time I spent there that night in the Urals, my first night in the Urals, I don't remember.

I heard a command:

"Get dressed."

As I pulled on my underwear a blow on the ear knocked me into the snow. A heavy boot struck me directly in the teeth, and my mouth filled with warm blood and began to swell.

"Go back to the barrack!"

I returned to the hut and found my spot, but it was already occupied by another man. Everyone was asleep or pretending to be asleep. The salty taste of blood wouldn't go away. There was some object in my mouth, something superfluous, and I gripped this superfluous thing and tore it forcibly from my mouth. It was a knocked-out tooth. I threw it into the decaying straw on the earthen floor.

With both arms I embraced the dirty, stinking bodies of my comrades and fell asleep. I fell asleep and didn't even catch cold.

IN THE MORNING the group got under way, and Sherbakov's blue imperturbable eyes ranged calmly over the convict columns. Peter Zayats stood in line. No one beat him, and he wasn't shouting about dragons. The common criminals in the group peered at me in a hostile, anxious fashion. In the

camp every man learns to answer for himself.

Two days later we reached "headquarters"—a new log house on the river bank.

The commandant, Nestorov, came out to take over the group. He was a hairy-fisted man, and many of the criminals in the group knew him and praised him highly.

"Whenever they brought in escapees, Nestorov would come out and say: 'So you boys decided to come back! All right, take your pick—either a beating or solitary confinement.' Solitary had an iron floor, and no one could survive more than three months there, not to mention the investigation and the extra sentence."

"A beating, sir."

"He'd wind up and knock the man off his feet! Then he'd knock him down again! He was a real expert. 'Now go back to the barracks.' And that was all. No investigations. . . . A good supervisor."

Nestorov walked up and down the ranks, carefully examining the faces.

"Any complaints against the guards?"

"No, no", a ragged chorus of voices answered.

"How about you?" The hairy finger touched my chest. "How come you're answering as if you had cottonwool in your mouth? And your voice is hoarse."

"No", I answered, trying to force my damaged mouth to enunciate the words as firmly as possible. "I have no complaints about the guards."

"THAT'S NOT a bad story," I said to Sazonov. "It's even got a certain amount of literary sophistication. But you'll never get it published. Besides, the ending is sort of amorphous."

"I have a different ending", Sazonov said. "A year later they made me a bigwig in camp. That was when there was all that talk about rehabilitation and the new society 'reforging' men. Sherbakov was supposed to get the job of second-in-command of the section I worked in. A lot depended on me, and Sherbakov was afraid I still hadn't forgotten about the tooth I'd lost. Sherbakov hadn't forgotten it either. He had a large family, and it was a good job, right up on top. He was a simple, direct man and came to see me to find out if I would object to his candidacy. He brought a bottle of vodka with him to make peace Russian-style, but I wouldn't drink with him. I did tell him I wouldn't interfere with his appointment."

"Sherbakov was overjoyed, kept saying he was sorry, shifting from one foot to the other at my door, catching the rug with his heel and not able to bring the conversation to an end."

"We were on the road, you understand. We had escaped prisoners with us."

"THAT'S NOT REALLY a good ending either", I said to Sazonov.

"I have a different one then."

"Before I was appointed to the section where I met Sherbakov again, I saw Peter Zayats on the street. He was an orderly in the village. There was no trace of the former young, black-haired, black-browed giant. Instead he was a limping, gray-haired old man, coughing up blood. He didn't even recognise me, and when I took him by the arm and addressed him by name, he jerked back and went

his own way. I could see from his eyes that Zayats was thinking his own thoughts, thoughts that I could not guess at. My appearance was either unnecessary or offensive to the master of such thoughts who was conversing with less earthly personages."

"I don't like that variation either", I said.

"Then I'll leave it as I originally had it."

Even if you can't get something published, it's easier to bear a thing if you write it down. Once you've done that, you can forget. . . .

### White room, white tiles

Not just the thin scalpel:  
somehow they always bring you back  
efficiently,  
so that in time the economy recovers  
and the same people  
win all the prizes.  
It is strange this belief  
that we will not die:  
it is almost  
all we live on.

Perhaps it is to lie  
in a strange room  
among strangers and give them your sleep:  
it is so personal, your eyes closing  
as you begin your dream;  
it is no place for aliens.  
Yet we are crowded among aliens,  
gowned, scrubbed, masked and  
operating as though humanity  
had been scrubbed off with its dirt.  
In this dream  
even scrubbed dirt is indestructible.

This poem is a clean nightmare.  
I am not blaming anyone:  
I scoured the walls, used white  
paint and plain white tiles;  
I washed the air as it came in

from the thick outside.  
I opened the door and invited  
these people in, paid for  
their training and encouraged  
their clean white gloves.

Today not even their presence  
is necessary, and this room  
transports itself from town  
to country and back again.  
In it we dream of rain  
and all the old seasons, imagine  
everywhere trees falling and  
rotting into more trees;  
remember the way life begins  
in a mess of happiness and  
thin blood. In it we talked  
all night and believed  
the morning would connect  
through open windows.

I am not blaming anyone:  
it was my mistake from  
the beginning: I did not know  
that in a clean room  
there is only room for one  
clean life; nor that  
scrubbed, masked and gowned,  
my strangers would spread  
this whiteness everywhere.

*Edwin Brock*