

## **Natan Dubovitsky - An Imitation of Homer [based on a post-true story]**

### **EPIGRAPHS**

Ye Gods, your dealings now injurious seem  
And cruel. [...] your pleasure is alone  
To please Achilles, that pernicious chief,  
Who neither right regards, nor owns a mind  
That can relent, but as the lion, urged  
By his own dauntless heart and savage force,  
Invades without remorse the rights of man  
*Homer - The Iliad*

Over the Cossack his mother cries.  
Don't weep, mother, dry your eyes!  
For your son has wed a wife,  
The fairest young girl of his life.  
*Gogol - A Terrible Vengeance*

The first idol, eyeless and made of foreign stone  
The second one, made of wood domestic and beast-faced  
Which one of them will you feed me to  
Oh my beloved empire?  
*RashaOnMars - Tweets*

### **ON THE GRASS**

Grass. The grass I'm lying on. The grass I'm lying on smells of dust. The grass I'm lying on smells of dust, diesel and something else. Maybe my blood.

I don't feel any pain. Can't move - the body doesn't hear the cries of the soul. Doesn't react, doesn't move. But it's there, and it must be in a lot of pain, but it's as if I'm not in it. As if shifted by a micron, I'm unable to match up with it.

Is that it? Seems so. Sh... So, I'll never know what'll happen to me next. Because there won't be a me anymore. My dreams won't come true. And, good riddance, maybe. After all, everything I dream about and what I really want is publicly reprehensible and criminally punishable. Nothing good would have come from it anyway. From this life. From this life, which is mine, which is about to disappear.

Ridiculous. But how else? Is it even possible to take all this garbage around you seriously? You can only play it. Now the game is over and - lost. But the question isn't whether you win or lose. You'll lose, of course. The question is how exactly. I did my best. Put up a good fight. Played the guitar, played Hamlet, played cards, played war. And now I'm here, lying. Consider my posture a very deep bow. To all of you, dear viewers.

Would I have fallen otherwise, backwards, then I'd be lying on my back, like Prince Andrew, and looking at the sky. But the explosion pushed me forward, face down, and instead of the Austerlitz sky the dusty Donetsk grass fills my eyes.

### **TREF AND STERN**

Tref and Stern entered without reporting, and even lighting their pungent non-electronic cigarettes as they

entered. Commander Fraiser grimaced; he was enraged by the unstatutory behavior of the old-timers. He almost managed to exterminate all these presumptuous tendencies in the ranks of the militia, to which the soldiers became accustomed to during the first, most horrific and unbridled months of the war, when field commanders did not obey anyone and fought with each other no less than with the enemy. But some of the most famous and respected heroes, such as Tref and Stern, retained some privileges. For example, to break in on the boss like that. And to address him as "you". Fraiser endured, patiently, at the same time gradually, without transgressing, without inciting a mutiny, increasing the distance between them and himself. He knew that by the new year he'd have everyone behaving like everyone else.

Actually, he himself was one of those, primordial and legendary, but his thinking was somehow unfree, square. And if someone stood out from the rest, he'd beat everything outstanding out of him without hesitation, sometimes losing the most useful qualities, just so that he wouldn't stand out and disrupt the formation. That's why, in the Center they chose him and placed him above all the, once equal, commanders. Out of the merry partisan rabble, he made a gloomy, invincible army. On all fronts, he won boring undeniable victories. His battles were lacking in grandeur. He was not loved by his soldiers. His enemies were not afraid of him. But his soldiers defeated his enemies.

"What d'you want?" - asked Fraiser and looked at the steppe. At night, a rocket flew in from the steppe and exploded a floor below. The outer wall of the office collapsed, and a beautiful view opened up: villages, tents, and lurking near the station, flocks of tanks. On the right stood a large blackened spoil tip, on the left a gentle eastern wind was blowing, a lone peregrine falcon gliding on it at ease.

"You know what" responded Tref. Fraiser noticed that Tref's awards had increased since yesterday: some kind of dirty yellow medal protruded from under a mysterious eight-pointed star somewhere on his stomach. His chest has long been completely covered with all kinds of selfmade crosses, medals, stars that Tref made from anything that glitters - from cans, old coins, copper wire. He developed the designs and came up with the names and statutes himself. Those that turned out better, he awarded himself. The rest he handed over for merits and distinctions to whom he wanted. He reasonably believed that you won't be awarded any orders from the authorities in such a war so you'll have to settle that yourself somehow.

"No beer?" said Fraiser.

"Still joking, still fu\*\*ing around" hissed Stern, approaching Fraiser. - "Come on, let's cut out the jokes already."

"Let's" Fraiser turned to Stern with a quick K.O. look. Stern recoiled.

"You know what... commander, you eh... need to rescue Minus." - His speech changed to a different tone.

## **MINUS**

Minus was the most deranged, the most undisciplined of the leaders of the militia. Pathologically carefree and obtuse, he'd sometimes perform real feats of courage, then suddenly show overt cowardice, backing out at the most inopportune moment. Sometimes it'd seem impossible to drive the fighters of his small noisy squadron into an ordinary, unimportant, not particularly deadly battle, even under threat of execution. Then a few hours later, they'd suddenly, without any order, rush off and get involved in some dashing and seemingly hopeless affair.

Minus lived like a gypsy, played the guitar, wandered, arbitrarily changing locations, robbing and fooling the people. His crew consisted of three BTRs, three Lexuses, one BMP, a tank without a turret, and a pair of covered trucks carrying girls: dancers, journalists, and cooks.

Fraiser could not stand him. Even Stern and Tref gradually resigned themselves to the need to obey and serve more or less according to the regulations. And they were people much more merited and professional than Minus. But there seemed to be no way to keep Minus in check, not for the foreseeable future. The commander actually wanted to put him before the tribunal, not doubting that the verdict would be execution by firing squad, as there were plenty of good reasons for it. But the Chief of the Special Department with the verbose callsign Sickle-and-Hammer (abbreviated as Sam) dissuaded:

"You can't put Minus before the tribunal, comrade commander. He's a popular creature. The people will not

understand us. He must be removed comradely, delicately, with all, so to speak, due honors. For example, order a sniper, maybe Ginger from the reconnaissance battalion, on the, say, other side of the front. And from that side, God forgive us, execute him. With the tribunal there'd only be losses for us, but this way there's benefits all around. There is no Minus anymore, and we get one more fallen hero: here's, like, a glorious death from an enemy bullet, during service, an eternal memory, an example to all fighters and so on, all such crap that's good for educational purposes. Huh?"

Fraiser did not like Sam's idea, but he decided not to rush with the tribunal either.

## REFUSAL

"So what about him?" - asked Fraiser.

"Who 'him'?" asked Stern.

"Minus?"

"But you know already..."

"Answer the question."

"He's cornered. He went in too far, delved into enemy territory. They spotted him, started surrounding him ..."

"They likely have him surrounded by now, one hundred percent, an hour has passed already since he messaged me that they hit him in the rear..." Tref interjected.

"That's right, most likely. Moreover, we're unable to establish communications with him," agreed Stern.

"If he doesn't get in touch, then maybe he's not even alive anymore. Maybe they got them all.", suggested Fraiser.

"Who are you going to rescue then?"

"And if he is still alive, just that the radio is broken, huh? Say, they went into a gully or behind a slag heap, so there's no connection, but he's alive? Huh?"

"Stop with the hysteria, Tref." - The commander looked at the ridge of heaps. They, like the great mountains, had names. Here is the Merry High-rise, covered with a few rare shreds of forest, there, beyond the front line, the Devil's Embankment, followed by the black-gray Matveevsky, then the Yuzov Pikes with a bifurcated always snowy peak and, finally, the highest in the Donbass, solemn, similar to Mount Elbrus, the Kara-Kurgan. Somewhere at its foot, mad Minus was about to vanish. "Stop with the hysteria, better tell me, who ordered Minus' squadron to secretly cross the front line, delve into enemy territory for fifty-four kilometers and intercept the railway train? Who ordered Minus to do all this? You? Me? Authorities from the Center?"

"No, sir!"

"Then who? Who?! Why the silence?"

"No one" Stern replied for Tref.

"That's it! No one! No one gave any order. He did it without permission, risking to provoke the enemy to inadequate retaliatory actions on the entire front. That's at most. And at least - without any operational necessity, condemning hundreds of my soldiers to death."

"They're his guys, they knew what they were getting into..."

"They're not his fucking guys! They're fucking soldiers of the Second People's Army. And while I command this army, while I fucking command it, they are my soldiers. With whom this moron does not have any right to do as he pleases!"\

In midst of a plain sky, a huge gray cloud suddenly swelled and expanded like an explosion, from which thick snow started scattering in all directions. Serrated snowflakes, flying past the sun, were colored by its flames and covered the steppe. In the office, a snowbank appeared in a minute.

"I'll go fucking crazy from this weather someday," Stern hissed through a suddenly frozen beard. "You, Fraiser, of course, are right. And so on. But still. You can't leave your own. Minus needs to be rescued. The men are gathered at the plaza, they want to go."

"What men?"

"My squadron in full force. And two platoons from, uh, Tref's company."

"Firstly," said Fraiser, "there's no such thing as your squadron, there's the Special Reconnaissance Group of the First Infantry Battalion. Secondly, there's no such thing as Tref's company, there's the Second Company of the

First Infantry Battalion. Thirdly, Minus' squadron is actually called 'Separate Assault Company of the Fourth Infantry Battalion.' Fourth, the members of the Special Reconnaissance Group and the Second Company of the First Infantry Battalion are among the most experienced and capable. And I will not allow them to be put under fire because of the gross violation of army regulations of the Separate Assault Company of the Fourth Infantry Battalion, who not only don't deserve to be rescued, but should rather be put before the tribunal. No one is going anywhere. That's all."

"What's wrong with you, commander?!" - Tref threw his cigarette butt into the snow. - "Are out of your mind? This is Minus we're talking about, our brother!.. Remember the siege, how we rejoiced when he entered the city. We were already thinking the Ukrs would finish us - no grub, nor ammunition, nor fuel. And there he is, fresh, cheerful, triumphant, with a mountain of ammunition, with tanks ... We all, all, and you too, owe him our lives! Remember and let us go. We'll just quickly get in and back out, we won't let you down."

"That's how it is, Fraiser, let me go. For our brother. And so on..." - said Stern. "That's how it is? Remember the siege of Donetsk? How we rejoiced when he entered the city? Maybe we did rejoice. But not for long. Afterwards, remember, remember, we had to evict him out of the city with force, after his punks made such a... mess. Robbery, boozing ... All the Jews raped, the women robbed ... That is, the other way around. Well, fuck's sake, it doesn't matter... In short, you remember all this. Barely moved them out of there. Had to point guns at their base, and that didn't even help. Bought him off in the end; looked for something to give him, him especially, something most profitable, most seductive and, most importantly, far away from the city. And still he complained: I don't want this, I don't want that, this won't be enough ... Ended up giving him the meat processing plant, the largest in the region, and in addition he solicited three sacks of money, plus a carriage of weapons. Only then he bowed out... this Danish fucking prince, this Hamburg rooster<sup>1</sup>..."

"Come on, commander. Back then everybody used to rob, our people, and the Ukrs as well..."

"Not only that, but a week later he declared the territory of the meat processing plant the Novoukrainian Democratic Republic, and himself, it's fucking president. And he refused to fight the Ukrainians until we recognized his fucking sausage state and concluded a collective security agreement with him! And while we were dying at the frontline, he toured at the rear with his gang, appropriating mines<sup>2</sup>... Well, that's all, the evening of reminiscence is over... He got in there by himself, let him get out of there by himself, too. I tolerated his antics for a long time, hoped he'd take the easy way and wise up. But he doesn't want to. Well, in that case I don't want to, either. If he returns alive - he'll go before the tribunal. And if he's killed - it's his own fault, to hell with him!"

The blizzard subsided. The sun that seemed to have cooled down quickly flared up again. The snow on the floor began to melt. The three comrades stood in a pool of meltwater, not looking at each other; in silence.

"And so on," - unable to stand the silence, but also not knowing what to say, Stern repeated his senseless saying.

"Comrades officers!" - quietly but clearly said Fraiser. - "I order: cease all non-statutory chatter. Personnel to return to location. Weapons to be handed over to the weapons room. Proceed with exercises in physical and ideological preparation."

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1. One of those enigmatic Russian swear words with no discernible consensus about it's meaning, possibly just an embellished version of "rooster". It was popularized by a scene from the 1971 Soviet comedy movie *Gentlemen of Fortune*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B9Nd7x5c0gw>

2. RU/UKR копанка: referring to illegal mining operations, mostly coal, common in the Donbass region: <http://miningwiki.ru/wiki/%D0%9A%D0%BE%D0%BF%D0%B0%D0%BD%D0%BA%D0%B0>