

Trees, Woods and Literature – 30

Early next morning, before the little girl had woken up, the tenant and her husband set off for the next village. There they'd be able to buy some white bread with his army ration-card.

They walked along hand in hand, without saying a word. They had to go one and a half kilometres through the forest, climb down the slope and then walk along the shore of the lake.

The snow here hadn't thawed. Its large, rough crystals were filled with the blue of the lake-water. But on the sunny side of the hill the snow was just beginning to melt. The ditch beside the path was full of gurgling water. The glitter of the snow, the water and the ice on the puddles was quite blinding. There was so much light, it was so intense, that they seemed almost to have to force their way through it. It disturbed them and got in their way; when they stepped on the thin film of ice over the puddles, it seemed to be light that was crunching under their feet, breaking up into thin, splinter-like rays. And it was light that was flowing down the path; where the path was blocked by stones, the light swelled up, foaming and gurgling. The spring sun seemed to be closer to the earth than ever. The air was cool and warm at the same time.

The officer felt as though his throat, which had been scorched by frost and vodka, which had been blackened by tobacco, dust, fumes and swear-words, had suddenly been rinsed clean by this blue light. They went into the forest, into the shade of the young pine trees. Here the snow hadn't melted at all. There were squirrels hard at work in the branches above; the icy surface of the snow was littered with gnawed fir-cones and flakes of wood.

The forest seemed silent. The many layers of branches kept off the light; instead of tinkling and gurgling, it was like a soft cloak swathed around the earth.

They walked on in silence. They were together – and that was enough to make everything round seem beautiful. And it was spring.

Still without saying anything, they came to stop. Two fat bullfinches were sitting on the branch of a fir tree. Their red breasts seemed like flowers that had suddenly blossomed on enchanted snow. The silence was very strange.

This silence contained the memory of last year's leaves and rains, of abandoned nests, of childhood, of the joyless labour of ants, of the treachery of foxes and kites, of the war of all against all, of good and evil born together in one heart and dying with this heart, of storms and thunderbolts that had set young hares and huge tree-trunks trembling. It was the past that slept under the snow, beneath this cool half-light – the joy of lovers' meetings, the hesitant chatter of April birds, people's first meetings with neighbours who had seemed strange at first and then became part of their lives.

Everyone was asleep – the strong and the weak, the brave and the timid, the happy and the unhappy. This was a last parting, in an empty and abandoned house, with the dead who had now left it for ever.

Somehow you could sense spring more vividly in this cool forest than on the sunlit plain. And there was a deeper sadness in this silence than in the silence of autumn. In it you could hear both a lament for the dead and the furious joy of life itself.

It was still cold and dark, but soon the doors and shutters would be flung open. Soon the house would be filled with the tears and laughter of children, with the hurried steps of a loved woman and the measured gait of the master of the house.

They stood there, holding their bags, in silence.

From the novel *Life and Fate* by Vasily Grossman (pp 869-871), The Harvill Press, London, 1995. Reproduced by permission of the publishers.

Life behind the Russian lines during the Second World War and the battle for Stalingrad form the main backdrop for *Life and Fate*. The extract forms the concluding passage of the book.

Life and Fate has an interesting history. When Grossman submitted the book for publication to the Soviet journal *Znamya* in 1960 it was passed to the Cultural Section of the Central Committee. A year later it was returned to the writer – with a note to say the novel was anti-Soviet. Shortly afterwards the KGB confiscated the manuscript from Grossman's home, as well as all other material associated with the book, even down to used carbon paper and typewriter ribbons. Grossman however wrote to the Politburo asking for his manuscript to be returned, only to be told that the book would not be published for another two hundred years. Despite many setbacks the manuscript did eventually gain publication, to great acclaim, in the early 1980s, with the first British edition published in 1985.

The book has been compared to *War and Peace*, no surprise given Grossman's great admiration for Tolstoy. In his war memoirs - *A Writer at War*¹ - he recounts persuading his companions to take a twenty kilometre detour to visit the Tolstoy estate, Yasnaya Polyana, while being hotly pursued by the advancing Wehrmacht. (The incident recalls to this writer other literary detours while in the company of senior forestry officials, not all in similar perilous circumstances, but undertaken with similar determination. Official travel claims were course adjusted to remove nugatory expenditure.)

Vasily Grossman was born in 1905 in the Ukrainian town of Berdichev. After an eventful childhood he enrolled in Moscow University in 1923 to study chemistry. Following graduation he worked as a mining engineer in his native Ukraine, but returned to Moscow shortly after his appointment, having been misdiagnosed as suffering from tuberculosis. There he began a successful writing career and he became a member of the Writers Union, a position of considerable privilege.

¹ **A Writer at War. Vasily Grossman with the Red Army 1941-1945.** 2006. Edited and translated by Anthony Beevor and Luba Vinogradova. Pimlico, London.

Immediately following the outbreak of war with Germany in 1941 Grossman sought to enlist in the Soviet army. Although he was initially turned down on physical grounds, his determination to contribute to the war effort resulted in him becoming a war reporter for the Red Army newspaper *Red Star*. His reputation grew throughout the conflict, and by its end in 1945 he was an acclaimed war hero.

After the war Grossman's fortunes fluctuated, but from 1960 onwards *Life and Fate*, its content, and his attempts to publish it, brought him into disfavour with the Soviet authorities. He died in 1964, without seeing his masterpiece published.

Grossman's descriptive and allegorical skills as a writer come to the fore in the extract. His choice of a forest scene, the description of the early morning thaw and the play of light, all chosen with deliberation, and at the end of the novel, serve to counterbalance the life and fate scenes played out in the preceding pages. The silence between the two persons, the wildlife in the forest, the stillness – are brilliantly staged to provide an extended reflection on life and fate, on the end of conflict, on spring and on new beginnings. Anyone who has walked through a forest on a sunlit morning in early spring can appreciate how acutely one can sometimes sense the awakening of nature, and of how well Grossman conveys this sense.

(Selection and note by *Lia Coille*)