

Samosely

by Christian Bell

1

Along the dusty bones of railroad tracks, a lone man in black, face the genetic gloom of Soviet rule, smokes a cigarette. They'll tell you, fire can restart fallout--invisible cesium isotope eating at bones, irrigating organ tumors. He'll tell you the old refrain: if you're not dead yet, you'll die of something.

2

Wolves roam their new empire of blank forests, empty housing tombs, the rusting helicopters and tanks of a long abandoned army. Inside their brains, long-held instincts are fractured. New urges form: roam the day, form groups, give each other names.

3

Maria, the only birth out of many deaths, doesn't know she's a miracle child, the last of her line. She sits in school outside the Zone, as they study math, reconstruct the Ukrainian tongue. They don't talk about the history, the meltdown, the exposure. Her mother told her, don't tell them where you're from.

4

Over the broken rooftops and naked trees, Mikhail spies tourists entering the checkpoint. For a fee, they can make it a daytrip, capture photos of ghost ruins, walk through the abandoned life. If my rifle had bullets, he thinks, I could pick them off, one by one.

5

The old mother sits alone in the desiccated house, overgrown weeds pushing against cracked windows, stubborn world reduced to a faded picture. Husband dead, children long gone. No one left to whisper her name.

6

Leonid collapses on a wasted building's bottom level. Air for windows, the floor brown puddles of water, acned walls. Night falls and he cries. Night falls and the pressure within breaks him at the seams, invisible monster dislocating bones, stretching tendons. Night falls and there are no answers. In zero time it's morning.

7

A man without a name roams the lands of the Black Sea, tells his story to open ears, flowing vodka. I was there when it happened and look, healthy as ever. He's either a mountain of a man with a Stalin mustache and missiles for arms, or a meager bump with Einstein hair and dead twigs for legs. Maybe he's ageless. If you listen to the wind, you might hear him coming. Maybe he's a ghost.

