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WHAT I THOUGHT ABOUT DURING THE BUS RIDE TO SEE MY FORMER CLASSMATE

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SHORT STORY FROM LITHUANIA
TRANSLATED BY RITA DAPKUS

During the bus ride to see my former classmate, the dampness and odors of the gloomy underground melancholy or the Green Thickets would intermittently waft by, to be more exact, underground melancholy *and* Green Thickets. Later a trite thought would go on humming in my mind: *He who uses only his eyes is not the one who sees. He is just a half-blind, lost wanderer, walking away from the flower of fiery matter, continuously away, all his life — away. . . A Gertrude Stein pigeon in the grass, reflected in Koeppen's mirror ...* I doubt that I myself thought this way. Someone else was thinking for me (about me?), forcing a sickness upon me. Perhaps it was my classmate, who was drawing closer at a speed of fifty slow kilometers per hour.

The bus was early. A meek Indian summer sun appeared, cloaking the hills and lakes with the quiescence of a weary animal. People rode mostly short trips; the bus would suck them in from the roadsides along with sacks and baskets, and after two or three stops, spit them out in some sleepy village. We would stand there for a while longer, the driver would shut off the motor, consequently severing the thoughts about my classmate (or maybe his thoughts about me?), and with a sense of relief I'd give myself over to abstract meditations: *Souls converge only at the height of tragedy or farce ...* A poor excuse for an idea would break loose and slide along the glistening pavement ahead, disappearing behind the nearest hill. The driver would spit out the window and forge on, not realizing that for me, the spans between stops were an attempt to vanish, without a trace, into the gloomy underground melancholy which had one border, but probably not another, making its measurement impossible by spatial dimensions known to us. The driver had blue eyes, a frank, sincere face and light, curly hair like a lamb's. He was a typical *pigeon in the grass*.

He who uses only his eyes is not the one who sees. I now knew that the underground, which had swallowed up and endlessly kept my classmate, smells of late autumn forests and thickets — of marshes, rotting leaves, animal urine and clotted human blood.

Since childhood I had searched for its place, as if for the location of paradise. I longed to experience the point from which he suddenly emerges into the light and stretches — anxious, energetic, determined.

Quod licet Iovi, non licet bovi, I thought, during the bus ride to see my former classmate. *Non licet bovi*, a bull is only allowed so much: with its horns to rush a small white cloud, born of the dew of Eden's olive trees. Too massive a structure of nature to penetrate an alien dream and feel the lick of fiery matter.

I was completely in his control for a long time. And I was happy. I was in seventh heaven, embracing his duffle bag with the jersey bearing our town emblem's colors and other soccer gear, figuring out his algebra, although he knew his algebra a hundred times better than I. These, no doubt, were just marks of a superficial dependency. During the bus ride to see my former classmate, I saw myself as a sooty, hard-working vessel, hurling an astronaut out into the limitless ether to gather some regalia of honor. He walked with bulging pockets, while I spent my time mending the vessel's flanks, banged in by meteors. I could not do otherwise. Neither, it seemed, could he do otherwise.

We were twins.

Not brothers, but twins. Our yards were separated only by a symbolic fence. Our mothers went into labor at the same time, and our fathers simultaneously hailed the only taxi in the town square, ruining the driver's day by not losing their heads and sharing the cab fare. On the way to the hospital the driver grumbled that nothing under heaven is a sure thing anymore, you count the town broads' stomachs, you cultivate them like watermelons, yet there comes a time when it seems that now two stomachs cost what one used to.

I can clearly imagine them letting the cabbie go by the hospital and returning by the only town road. Two men, bound only by a deck of cards and a jug of home-made beer. A skillful sharpener of knives and a former Green Thicket ranger, who had purchased a house in the neighborhood a month or two ago. They returned proud as gardeners, convinced that each had grafted a tree. How could they have known that they picked the same trunk, only its opposite sides?

During the bus ride to see my former classmate, I thought how handsome he had been in the ridged and grooved stadium arena.

Still in eighth grade, I believe, he sampled the laurels of victory as the local soccer team favorite. Heated up by the activities on the field and in the stands, where a glass traveled from hand to hand, the townspeople predicted an intoxicating future for him: "I'll eat my hat, you hear me, if we don't see him on TV sometime."

The rake and ax factory team is not televised. But, chasing mouthfuls of sunflower seeds with cheap wine, the critics nodded in assent. Wine distorted their sense of distance and they saw their idol in a green, smooth, thousand-seater stadium field, attired in the most brilliantly colored uniform, not in this dusty wasteland, almost bald of grass.

I'll note what could be seen from the stadium's only stands: the town, overgrown with linden trees on all sides, gardens at the foot of the bluff and, rising above all, the steep Gothic nose of St. Peter and Paul Cathedral . . . The town was laid out on a hill and at the foot, in the valley of the Nevėžis, the rake and ax factory team chased after the ball and the competitors. The competitors were not allowed to leave smiling; this sacred rule was set by the crowd's demands, and eleven of its executors worked off their tails in the town valley. The eleventh was my classmate. In the left wing position.

During the bus ride to see my former classmate, I thought that it wasn't right to say eleven executors worked their tails off. Only ten. Even having come onto the field, the left winger didn't break out of the gloomy underground melancholy, out of the damp Green Thickets in which he was begot; he slunk along the edge of the game, indifferent to the ball, often from whistle to whistle. The officials also didn't run after him much, the crowd would say, because they more or less knew my classmate. The crowd knew too, what was most important — his sluggishness was filled with the potential of a dozing snake. The crowd also did not know what was most important — when the snake would strike. It did not know the system.

Some sort of infantility covered the town valley. Infantile, were those 40-year-old fathers of nearly grown children (balding, pot-bellied, eyes swollen from frequent sitting in the Hot Dog House), when they huddled together in their arena of punishment and, like St. Sebastians, pulled arrows out of the opponents' bodies. Not approving of scrimmages, they poured generous libations to Dionysus and simply huddled, pulling arrows, and the hour was dedicated to putting a stop to kicking the ball into the Nevėžis' current.

During the bus ride to see my former classmate, I thought maybe the valley believed it could bathe in the score as if in a spring, when like a granite cliff it withstood another town which had a couple hundred more inhabitants. Maybe the valley needed the score like a grade for its very existence in Lithuania: the condemnation or acquittal of its existence?

It seemed as if the opponents could empirically endure all: the elegant and unusually rational technique of my classmate, his ability to concentrate every force of Newton's last law into one spot on the ball; it seemed, they had as much time as they wanted to prepare — to dig their trenches, build reinforcements, web a barbed wire fence — they had also experienced the dozing snake's potential more than once. But they too did not know what was most important — the system. They did not know when my classmate would emerge into the light — anxious, energetic, determined, burning everything in the vicinity with the gloomy, wolflike, Green Thicket melancholy. That is why, with naive fury, they rushed the small white cloud, born of the dew of Eden's olive trees — *quod licet Jovi, non licet bovi*. They hunted the small white cloud as if it were a spirit, those *pigeons in the grass*, and during that time the balding and pot-bellied Dionysus worshippers from the rake and ax factory team would tear out the remaining arrows, stretch, and raise such a storm of dust in the Nevėžis valley that, after the dust settled, only a sad label of the opponents' ambitions would survive. The crowd would whistle, the crowd would howl, the crowd would hasten the journey of the wine glasses, the crowd would be swallowed, into the depths of infantility, where it could wash off all of Cain's blemishes and return with a fine grade for the town's existence on the hill, for the gardens at its foot and the linden trees in the evening sun.

There was only one thing the crowd didn't care for — having stung once again my classmate slunk along the edge of the game.

During the bus ride to see my former classmate, I remembered our math teacher's attempts to establish functional dependence. Having observed a while, he concluded that my classmate's outbursts are not due to the atmospheric temperature, to the degree of precipitation, to the size of the crowd, to the productivity of the crop year, to the activity of the sun . . . Later he discovered, from his point of view, a horrible antidependence — the outbursts did not depend on the score. *Quod licet Jovi, non licet bovi* — and the math teacher's encounters with soccer came to an end.

He had done all that he could. The next step would have been for him to rush the small white cloud, born of the dew of Eden's olive trees. Or to convert to a different system of measurement, of course, first having created that system. The backwoods teacher was slight, myopic, raised a flock of chickens and prepared an outline for every lesson. Of the *pigeons in the grass* breed. It seemed to me he even began to fear my classmate afterwards and started giving him good grades for almost no reason.

Here again it is very appropriate to state: He who uses *only his eyes* . . . The math teacher, who had discovered antidependence and hadn't taken the next step to the side of truth, so remained in the tepid dusk of falsehood, where pretty are the shadows that fall on the prosecutor's white toga and gallant does the prosecutor's finger look, held up toward heaven, incriminating my classmate during the rare moments of inspiration, during the rare dedications in honor of the town's emblem. Tossing your head back, you might not see that his own chickens are tearing up his toga skirts with their beaks, and sometimes even completing their calls of nature upon them. But more about that — later. After I recall the tables, which were lined up in the half basement's gym for our graduation.

The girls brought in flowers to kill the smell of armpits, which had eaten its way into the walls and floor. The director spoke a little about azure spaces, sat down, and in agitation bit into her cigarette. A literature teacher portrayed those very spaces in a poem of her own creation. My classmate sat under a basketball hoop intertwined with birch branches and his face shone with unconcealed contempt. It was the first time I discerned open emotion on his face, broken away from the gloomy underground melancholy. A shudder went through me. They announced the dance. Some dashed to the auditorium, and a good sized bunch, grabbing the math teacher along the way, took to the honeysuckle in the schoolyard, where a fair stock of intoxicants was stashed. The math teacher put on airs, mumbled something about official reprimands, but upon receiving a glass said: "What's left for us ordinary mortals to do when even soccer stars don't pass up a nip."

"You saw me play?"

"I used to. But now I only hear. I hear, how the whole town sings in the Hot Dog House after the game."

"Do you like those songs?"

"I vote for almighty human solidarity."

"Just solidarity?"

"That's too little for you?"

"Is it enough for you?"

The question was to hang in the air permanently. Someone shouted that the director's messenger Barčas was coming, and the math teacher was the first to evaporate at the news. He skidded the length of the fence, away from the official reprimands, and a section of future big men skidded after him — three Ph.D. candidates, a couple of journalists, one famous surgeon and, other than these, all sorts of small timers. Again contempt shone in my classmate's eyes. We sat down on a stack of old planks and lit a cigarette.

"Solidarity", he repeated. "But, to tell you the truth, maybe there's no more serious meaning than miserable solidarity."

"What are you talking about?"

"About the fact that Sir Newton was an idiot. Gravity exists for a person's behind, and not for a person's soul."

"It seems he didn't deny that."

"That's why our math teacher denies it. He invented a form of gravity of the soul — namely, solidarity."

The school guard, Barčas, strolled into the honeysuckle thicket.

"Pardon my interruption," he said. "Maybe you have some empties?"

"Go ahead and collect them," my classmate said.

Then he asked: "Barčas, do you like your job?"

"Job?", the guard straightened up, holding the bottlenecks between his fingers. "Job? And what, in your opinion, is there for me to do? If it wasn't for my leg, maybe I'd be a chauffeur."

"You heard him", said my classmate. "Barčas's dream is to have a chauffeur's blazer."

"And what should it be, soccer?" said Barčas, shrugging his shoulders sadly.

My classmate carefully clambered down from the stack and went up to the invalid.

"Boredom, Barčas, soccer is sheer boredom," he said.

Barčas threw back his head as if he'd been spit at. My classmate crept even closer to him.

"Yes, old man, boredom. It can put you to sleep."

Barčas stepped backwards and whispered: "You greenhorn. You pig."

And my classmate laughed in his face.

Suddenly he struck. Barčas let the bottles slide out of his fingers and doubled over, squeezing his stomach with his palms. I don't remember jumping down from the planks, grabbing my classmate by the wrist and pulling him toward me. I collected myself only when his eyes seared me and pierced the whole of me through and through with the cold, sharp Green Thicket melancholy of the growing wolf cub. Its tongue lolling, it panted with unexpected joy (I thought), that it was finally allowed to flare up. It struck me that the enemy's goalie used to see it; he would lose his coordination over it and forget the very colors of his town emblem. That was by far worse than the kick in the groin which made me double over a second later.

Barčas was lifting me by the armpits and I couldn't tear my eyes away from my classmate who, having crammed his hands into his pockets, took off across the schoolyard, becoming smaller, until he disappeared altogether into the graduation evening twilight.

During the bus ride to see my former classmate, I thought about the chickens which had torn the prosecutor's toga with their beaks. Naive was the gallantry of the prosecutor's finger held up toward heaven, with which the math teacher incriminated my classmate during the rare dedications in honor of the town's emblem. What dedications? For what town? What kind of foothills and stands, what kind of St. Sebastians from the rake and ax factory team? My classmate merely struggled closer to the flower of fiery matter, blooming in the gloomy underground melancholy and Green Thickets, until in the end he picked it, stole it, held it in his palms for a few seconds and fainted in satisfaction, at which time it scalded his heart with an inhuman coldness.

Later the flower died out.

But that didn't happen in the honeysuckles, although there he was especially close to the flower, already reaching for it, laughing in Barčas' face.

He crossed the schoolyard and disappeared, leaving an irritability to hang in the air for an hour or so, similar to Satan's: *Ech . . . isportil pesniu . . . durak!*

At the station, having stepped off the bus, I thought about what I would say to him. In what respect do I differ from the math teacher who, frightened by antidependence, scuttled the length of the fence, taking a department of future big men with him? How am I any better, even if I've stepped out of the tepid dusk to the edge of truth. Quod *licet Jovi, non licet bovi*, no one is allowed to manage things in an alien dream exactly like in one's own, I thought, drawing closer to the tall stone walls, with the iron gate blindly shut and the wide open wooden door next to it. I went through the door into cramped premises, where not a single person was present at the moment, and knocked on the little barred window. The bust of a uniformed man appeared. I told the guard whom I came to see.

"You're his brother?" asked the officer. "No", I answered. "And not a relative?" "He was my classmate."

"In that case, there's no way I can help you. We only allow those who are close to visit."

"But I am close to him; you don't understand, or don't want to understand?"

"Show me in writing. Where's a document?"

"Here," I said, rapping the left side of my chest with my fist.

The officer dryly spat out the crumb of tobacco stuck to his lip and said, "That there's a poor document. But I'll do what I Bring him a package."

"A what?" I asked.

"A package. The store's right here, around the corner. You can bring bacon, butter. A popular product — crumbled bacon, but you're not a local, you won't be able to make it. Candy. Only something more plain, not chocolate."

"What do you mean, don't they feed him well here?"

"We feed everyone here according to his or her merits", the guard growled, and I heard a *pigeon in the grass* intonation.

In the store, packing the groceries into my briefcase, I thought about how this could have happened. I had heard the story about the restaurant and the fork, although my imagination created a *mise-en-scene* with such deftness that, whether I wanted to or not, I began to believe that it wasn't that student, but me who had sat in front of my classmate.

I dug into my first scholarship lunch schnitzel. My former classmate sat in front of me. He sat alone. He didn't even look at me. He tarried, immersed in the gloomy underground melancholy. Tarried? The student didn't know, the math teacher also didn't know, but I already knew that he never tarried there without work, that his soul forever dives to the very depths of the underground, howls in fury, flung back near the gate, and again dives into the depths, where the flower of fiery matter blooms. He sits in the restaurant and feels its cold breath, and the breath turns into frost, and my former classmate stretches his hand toward the stem of the flower, carefully, still forever doubting his luck, picks the blossom, holds it as if embracing a tiny bird with his palms, and his heart, scalded by the frost, faints in satisfaction.

And to all the others dining in the restaurant of life — to me, to the father of several children at the adjacent table, to the couple sucking on a cocktail, to the orchestra's musicians playing blues from Satchmo's repertoire, and to the math teacher, frightened by antidependence, and to the officer, whose instructions are the only elements which hinder him from admitting that he who is close on paper is not the only close one, and to the St. Sebastians from the rake and ax factory team, striving to get a good grade for the town's existence on the hill, — to all, *quod licet Jovi, non licet bovi*, too all the *bovi*, to all the *pigeons in the grass*, it was not a blossom, nor a tiny bird, but a stainless steel fork, whose shaft my classmate still grasped for an instant, although its teeth had already torn through my clothes, my skin, and had pierced my liver. I still stand with the fork in my liver, and he falls half dead, weak, like the old fascist in Koeppen's novel who disgraced and raped the Jewish girl.

"Is that all?", the sweet young cashier asked me.

"And some candy."

"What kind?"

"Assorted. A little of each."

"Only the wrappings differ. Other than that it's the same old junk."

She scooped up a handful from each box, threw the bag on the scale and said, "If you're taking these to a child, you'd be better off getting chocolate."

"This child doesn't like chocolate." "Strange child."

I studied her small face, the protruding collarbone, the scarcely discernible mounds of her breasts under the smock. After all, you're also a *pigeon in the grass* longing for a good grade for your existence in Lithuania, I thought, overtaken by an insane tenderness.