

THE WOLF'S PATH by Sylvain Tesson
Sample translation by Jo Heinrich

Back on the train, destination: Neryungri, Siberia. The journey takes a week, via Novosibirsk. I spend the bulk of my day lying in my cabin. Through the window, I watch the birches pass by: they signal the start of Slavonic land. You wait for years for a birch and then several thousand all come along at once, playing peek-a-boo to keep you entertained until the Pacific.

The Trans-Siberian consists of two parallel rails laid down for thousands of miles by decree of the Tsar. At that time there was no reason to make a detour to skirt around a village or an izba (a traditional Russian log cabin) that may have been in its path. As a result, it is entirely straight. The plain passes by and each minute is faithful to the last. Friedrich von Paulus, who led the Germans to their defeat in Stalingrad, stuck his head out of the turret when his Panzer tank gave up the ghost, bogged down in a quagmire, and, removing his helmet, sighed, 'In Russia there are no roads, only directions'.

One evening, it even stops getting dark, as it is the end of May and we are approaching high latitudes. A milky half-light bridges the gap between dusk and dawn.

When the train stops, two Russians, Nina and Sergei, come into my compartment. They are on their way home from three weeks' rest in a sanatorium in Kazakhstan. They climb on the train dragging a military bag full of provisions. They eat constantly. They scoff sausages. They lap up lard. They cram in everything they can. They drink lukewarm beer from bottles with a label promising 'no less than 6° alcohol'. They invite me to help them: the bag is stout and they seem to want it emptied before they arrive at their station – in three days. They rejoice in force-feeding me. I dare not come down from my bunk for fear of finding myself wedged between them, compelled to gorge myself. Occasionally I take refuge in the restaurant car where Ludmilla the Blonde, fat and drunk as a lord, insists on serving me glasses of milk vodka as soon as I have finished my borscht. And when, full and a little tipsy, I push the cabin door open to return to my bunk, there are Nina and Sergei, sat before a mess tin of untouched steaming mash:

'Ah there you are! We were waiting for you – now we can all start!'

Eleven days have already passed since I left Paris [...] Inside, the hours dissolve in torpor; outside, mud mingles in the *rasputitsa* (the spring thaw). The Trans-Siberian is a meltdown of time. I slip into a form of rail-induced hibernation.

[...]

One morning, while Sergei and Nina are attacking a second smoked chicken, an eerie luminescence dispels the steely glare of dawn. I look out of the train window. It is Lake Baikal, acting as a giant reflector, sending the sunbeams shooting through the nimbus clouds back to the sky. The railway line skirts the south of the lake, towards Chita. In a few weeks, if everything goes as well as I'd like, I will be progressing on foot along the eastern shore of the Baikal. I climb back up to my berth and ponder.

For the first time in months, I can feel the fear mounting in me, and the train wheels hammering against the steel of the rails drive it further home with each thump like a nail in my heart. There are too many trees in this taiga, the birch thickets are too white, the skies are too claustrophobic, and then there's this endless plain, more daunting than any prison, because as far as the eye can see, there isn't even a place to hide...

I flick through *The Long Walk* by Slavomir Rawicz, the book that I know by heart and the book that brought me here, as I lie stretched out on the top bunk surrounded by the aroma of chicken, on a Russian train heading east through the great Siberian forest. I first discovered *The Long Walk* in a 1960s paperback copy. I was fifteen, and that tale heralded the first of many nights given up to reading Céline, Lawrence, London, Hamsun and Russian novels.

Rawicz is a 24-year-old Polish officer who was arrested during the Second World War by the NKVD (a forerunner of the KGB) and deported, by train then on foot, to a prisoners' camp situated three hundred kilometres south of the Siberian Arctic Circle, in the Yakutian taiga. Forced labour, icy winter, subhuman life: the gulag. Rawicz is to serve a sentence of twenty years. His crime? Being Polish. His only hope? Death or escape. Six months after his incarceration, in April 1941, he escapes into the taiga, in the throes of winter, with a band of six comrades: two more Poles, a Latvian, a Lithuanian, a Yugoslav and an American. They have two things in common: one, being wrecked on the rocks of the Red Terror launched by the Great October Revolution and perpetuated by

Stalin's purges, and two, refusing the slave's fate bestowed on them, even risking their lives to do so. They have no choice but to head south, towards India. They have no food, no maps, no equipment and no weapons. As their knowledge of High Asia's geography is sorely lacking, they think they can reach the Bay of Bengal in a few weeks, having no inkling of the thousands of kilometres separating them from it. Possessed by the thought of regaining the freedom that the Moscow hatchet men had stolen from them, they press onwards like hunted animals, without respite, for a year, relying only on the sun's position to direct them south. They are forced to walk across the taigas of Siberia, the Baikal region and Buryatia (now a republic within the Russian Federation), the Mongolian steppes, the Gobi and Tsaidam deserts, Tibetan plains, the Himalayas and the Sikkim jungles. [...] Four of them die en route. The others, reduced almost to corpses by the suffering they have endured, arrive at the end of their nightmare a year after their escape, and are picked up by the British Army in India.

Rawicz will go on to publish his account in 1956 in Western Europe, and – the final ordeal – will have to face the suspicion of a number of travellers and geographers who believe that an escape like his can be nothing more than fantasy. The tragedy of a man whose existence reads like a novel is that people take him for a spinner of yarns when he talks about his life. When the book appears, a few explorers, with Peter Fleming at the helm, dissect the book's chapters, taking note of anomalies, omissions, errors in the descriptions of places, ethnographic approximations, exaggerations (Rawicz claims to have survived ten days without water), and delusional scenes (the encounter with a couple of yetis). The saga is judged too incredible, the achievement too far-fetched, the account too vague to be true. Fleming delivers his conclusion in the press: 'One is regretfully forced to the conclusion that the whole of this excellent book is moonshine...he did not do the journey at all'. Rawicz is therefore apparently an impostor, a fake escapee who only ever fled in his imagination. All that remains for misled readers is to put *The Long Walk* away on their bookshelves alongside Marco Polo, H.G. Wells, Swift, Jules Verne, Munchausen and Homer, on the shelf for fantastical journeys or flights of fancy.

The zeal of Rawicz' detractors also has a political root. The book appears at a time when Europe wants nothing to do with the Russian prison tragedy: the gulag archipelago has not yet come to light, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* has not been published (it was only authorised by Khrushchev in 1962), Solzhenitsyn is still in the

camps, and in Western democracies, the Communists are bathing in the glory of victory over Nazi Germany. And now a Pole, who has supposedly gone through hell and back via the taiga, is trying to lift the lid on the horror of these concentration camps. How could they accept the claim that someone could escape from camps whose existence, in 1956, has not even been officially recognised?

Slavomir Rawicz responded timidly to the attacks: 'I would remind everyone that we were not an expedition of exploration: we were starved fugitives fleeing from a terror that only those who have suffered under Communism can understand. I do not remember what roads or mountains we crossed – we never knew the names of most of them and had no maps or previous knowledge.' The book was nevertheless a success, before sinking into oblivion – except with a handful of unwavering fans who awaited its reprint with religious fervour. As for Rawicz, he shut himself away in silence, in London, where he still lives.

Six decades after the escape, the Trans-Siberian is taking me towards Lake Baikal's shores because I want to retrace Rawicz' and his fellow escapees' journey, on foot, on horseback, by bike, purely at the pace of my own efforts. And I don't really care whether their story is fiction or not. After the research that I did in Paris, and everything that I have read and mulled over, I am convinced that even if Rawicz was lying, it is a fact that other men escaped from the Soviet prison system and went south. Orthodox monks, Buddhist priests, political dissidents, zeks (a term for Russian prisoners), lost soldiers, Mongols, Jews, Buryats, Tibetans: there were so many who strove for freedom by escaping from Siberia with an itinerary on a par with Rawicz'. These 'roads to freedom' are not just the paths taken by one group of isolated fugitives, but turn out to be a major corridor where hundreds and thousands of refuseniks (how could we put a number on it?) would make a dash.

[...]

My aim is to celebrate the 'spirit of escape': summoning all one's strengths, hopes and skills, to do everything in one's power to regain freedom, without ever letting despondency get in the way of determination. Escaping means passing from a state of sub-life existence (incarceration) to a state of survival (evasion) through a love of life. As for me, now, lying on a Russian railway company blanket, I want to find out, step by

step, slowly and alone, what the price of crossing the great Central Asian lands to reach the shores of freedom was for the Red Century's castaways, the iron fist's outlaws.

I won't be using any mechanical means to travel. Not for the pleasure of clocking up the miles purely under my own steam, but because making slow progress, on foot or on horseback, is a good way to enter the mindset of an escapee who stands alone, deprived of everything, armed with nothing but his muscles, on the cusp of six thousand kilometres of immensity. Labouring along a track is also a way of paying homage to those who have suffered there before you. The English have a lovely phrase they use in mountaineering: they say that climbing up a face without using pitons or ropes is rock-climbing by "fair means". I have always wanted to travel as the English climb, by "fair means", or in other words, honestly. On horseback, on foot, by bike. To me, it would be cheating to stand before geography armed with a motor, and I know that human footsteps, or a horse's strides, are the best instruments for measuring the world's immensity. I have been finding peace along footpaths for the last ten years, and nothing has given me more joy than a horizon slowly avoiding my attempts to catch up with it. Sometimes, as those great birds of passage, the Mongols, say, I do feel that 'Ground is hard, sky is far', but I am so grateful to the former for serving as my mattress and to the latter as my canopy that I am prepared to put up with the miserable complaints from my joints. I don't much like to stay in places where everything is handed to me on a plate. I find that Murmansk and Ulan-Ude offer better rewards. Neither do I much like paths that are too well trodden. If I am crossing a steppe, I want to extend a hand to the steppe. The only thing I can give to the landscape is my time, and so I like to give whole days to glacier slopes, weeks to windy deserts, long months to tracks.

My plan for this May (in Russia a plan is essential) is as simple as the fugitives' ambition was pure: to reach the city of Yakutsk, to find the ruins of a gulag in the area described by Rawicz and, from there, to progress through nature keeping a southerly direction, without a break, until, after six months or a year, the Bengal jungles herald my journey's end, just as they signalled the beginning of a new life for the zeks.

The Trans-Siberian has reached Neryungri station: my stop. I get off and, at the end of the platform, I chance upon Yuri, a former policeman, who agrees to take me in his Lada to my starting point, by the edge of the river Lena, twenty-four hours by road. We go at breakneck speed, directly north, on the white track that slices through the

empty taiga. Nothing but bleak forest. At the end of the afternoon, we pass a sign with its lower edge buried, proclaiming 'Danger! Radiation, altitude 1,300 metres'.

'This used to be the Aldan gulag; we're not allowed to stop', says Yuri, turning off the engine.

We are at a high vantage point; from here we overlook a wide dip filled with mud. It could be a hole filled with tears. At the bottom, a feeble taiga lives on, eaten away by marshy puddles of a dreary silver-grey colour. The stripped pines look like bayonets belonging to an army buried under a layer of mercury. Melting snow snakes over the bare slopes in channels before dying in the hollow. A two-metre-high orthodox cross stands over it, maybe planted there in memory of years of sorrow. If this landscape had a throat, it would have a lump in it. I climb down the bank from the road, and approach the ruins of the prison building. I have to follow the fingers of snow so that I do not sink up to my knees in the mire of the *rasputitsa*. From the camp that ran until Stalin's death in 1953, all that is left is foundations, walls, some sealed-up windows. A sob seems to hang in the air beyond the horizon. Yuri, gesturing, calls me back.

'*Sylvann!* Don't be an idiot! You'll be exposed to the radiation!'

We head off again at full pelt. I really hate speed.

'Yuri! It's dangerous to go so fast', I say as he has just righted the car after skidding across the whole width of the track.

'Don't worry', he replies, 'I used to be a policeman'.

[...]

'The Lena!', cries Yuri.

He goes down to the riverside and parks the car along the frozen bank. We wait for the ferry. The river drags along blocks of ice, which pass by, creaking like meringues. Spring is late this year and the Lena is still crowded with chunks of ice that the ferry pushes in front of its bow as it berths.

In Yakutsk, there are a few chimneys, the port's articulated cranes and a statue of Lenin. His arm points southward: the path to freedom, the route to take. Here, it is five hundred kilometres from the Arctic Circle but, as it is summer, in their haste to make the most of two months of warmth, girls have swapped fur coats for miniskirts in one

fell swoop. The lovely Vera, with big dark eyes reminiscent of an arctic seal, shows me around the city during the few days I stay there. Alexis Romanov, director of the Yakut cinema studios, is working on a film project about gulags. He invites me to dinner with a Russian filmmaker, Genali, who is nostalgic for the Brezhnev years. Romanov has sad eyes. No doubt from keeping them turned towards olden times.

‘Yakutia was the heart of the concentration camp system,’ he says, ‘a prison without bars. The ice, the cold, the marshes, the mountains: all retain a zek better than any web of barbed wire. Two hundred years ago, the Tsars started sending exiles here. In our leaders’ minds, this land was destined to be the human dustbin of the Empire, a dumping-ground for renegades’.

‘It’s strange to have chosen expanses open to the winds, never-ending horizons and endless skies as a place to confine people in. Were there many escapes?’

‘From here? Almost impossible, without help. There are thousands of miles of forests, there are wolves, bears...’

‘And thugs...’, says Masha, an anthropologist from the university who has joined us.

The two old men that I meet the next day in the NKVD archives office cut a fine figure. White hair, Soviet jackets with medals and most strikingly, their way of standing ramrod straight. They are trying to tread water in the ocean of documents and papers that submerged them when the Soviet Union fell, when all the institutions lifted state secrecy and opened the flood gates on their archives. Since 1991 the two old gentlemen have been patiently compiling an inventory of deportees and rehabilitees in Yakutia, rummaging ceaselessly through boxes of files stamped ‘*secret*’. Each year, they also publish a kind of gulag directory. It lists the names of political prisoners who have been traced, with each zek’s date of birth, date of arrest, length of sentence, and rehabilitation date. The photos they publish show sombre faces – mug shots of beaten-up convicts, half-mad, with far away eyes: hints of Gogolian ‘dead souls’. I look for the name Rawicz. I find one Pole beginning with R: Stefan Rafalski. Nothing else. The archivists have never heard of an escape party reaching India.

‘You should meet Inina, a deported Latvian who lives in the centre of Yakutsk. She is an old woman, but she has a good memory. She spent twenty years in a camp. She knows an escapee.’

A house built from planks. Three storeys with dark stairwells leading to individual apartments: the Soviet dream. It must be bad in winter when the thermometer goes down to -40°C outdoors. Inina sits in an armchair, a blanket draped over her knees. A child of twelve, her granddaughter, as dainty as a fairy, serves tea. Before I have even opened my mouth, the old lady begins:

‘I’ve never known why they sent me to cut wood on the banks of the Amur for twenty years.’

She does not look at me while she talks. But her eyes are beautiful: deep blue, with a rather tragic stillness as if they had never seen daylight.

‘They came to take us away: me, my sister and my mother. My father had already been interned. They told us that we had two and a half hectares of land and that we were rich. They shut the door behind us and then took everything. In the gulag they made me carry fifty-kilo sacks of potatoes. I still wonder how my back could bear it... then I was sent to the logging camp. I had to chop down trees with a ration of two hundred grammes of bread a day. People were dying around me. They were put in a hole. And throughout those years, I would cry every day.’

‘Did you think about escaping, Inina?’

‘I thought about it. But my mother was ill. How could I have left her? One of my friends, an Ashkenazi Jew, escaped and managed to reach the United States. He used to write to me from New York but I haven’t heard from him for some years. Maybe he died...’

‘And now?’

‘Now, I forget things, I walk with a limp and I wait.’

Then another person to meet: Bock, a German, deported, when he was five, to the frozen shores of the Laptev Sea in March 1942. He has put on a necktie and a white shirt for our meeting: a man commands respect while dredging up memories of cursed times. He describes being deported in a train of cattle wagons, the grandfather dying of hunger in the wagon and being buried in the ground under the rails, arriving at the Arctic shoreline, and building the hut, with the help of Chukchi people, from driftwood and frozen peat, in which he will spend twelve winters, with blocks of ice sliced through with a saw for window panes (‘Oh, such clear glass!’).

‘One day, the deportees organised a party as some of them had managed to bring their musical instruments with them. It was winter; I was a boy. Outside, it was -50°C

with a raging wind. Inside, men played the violin, the accordion. Women were dancing. Someone went outside for a piss, in the storm. He never came back. He must have got lost, despite the ropes stretched between the huts. The musicians played loudly and for a long time, to guide him in the dark. The NKVD didn't even go looking for him. He was found in the spring under the ice thirty metres away from us. After that he was always just 'the man who died at the party' ...'

The next day, I visit a logging gulag's ruins, in the middle of the taiga, a hundred kilometres to the west of Yakutsk. The old men from the archives office are taking me there. We drive for a long time in the ruts of a track to reach a clearing in the forest.

'There it is!'

It could be Camp 303, where Rawicz left the first footprint of his long walk, although he does not give its location in his account. The place looks like so many of those other lands, depleted from having carried the burden of so many sentenced men. Sometimes geography can exude sadness in the same way that skin can sweat under the sun. There is a vast deforested area enclosed by four rows of barbed wire. Nothing has grown on the surface of the former camp. No trees appear where tears have flowed. I can still see the metal stake that was used to retain guard dogs so ferocious that their masters could not even get near them. A barrier of wooden frames covered with long spikes, a dozen piles of bricks and the traces of the external sentry walk also remain. Here and there I can see a rusty camp bed, a mess tin, the odd piece of saw, window bars ripped off their frames: mementoes from Dostoyevsky's *House of the Dead*. Everything else has been burnt.

The day before I leave, Vera accompanies me to the hospital for my vaccination against tick-borne encephalitis, the bane of the taiga: the creature bites, infection takes over, pain travels up to your head and you're dead. A female doctor from Krasnoyarsk smelling of fresh rubber gives me a shot in the back. She tells me that it's a new vaccine that she has never used before, so she isn't familiar with its contraindications and she can't be certain if it is compatible with the injections I had in Paris. But she phones Vera's number in the evening, a thoughtful touch from Russian doctors who aren't too sure of what they are prescribing you but who take the trouble to worry about how your treatment is going after the event.

At dawn, I give Vera a kiss. It is the beginning of June: time for me to go. When it's time for goodbyes, Galina, a friend of Vera's, gives me a little bell.

‘To announce your presence to the bears...’, she explains.

‘And to make the one that eats you jingle’, says Vera.

For my starting point, I have chosen a fishing village on the left bank of the Lena, a day’s journey upstream from Yakutsk, towards the town of Olekminsk. To get there, I am taking a paddle steamer dating from the Fifties. On board, some Russian holiday-makers are killing not only time but also the unpleasant sensation of floating on a moving river by drinking good Cristal champagne at 45°. The captain, who looks like a young Wagnerian troubadour turned Mexican admiral (blonde hair, mild expression, uniform with embroidered braids and gold buttons), regularly broadcasts strains of Tchaikovsky’s *Pathétique* or a military march at full blast through the boat’s loudspeakers. The paddlewheel keeps the beat. On board, the drinks are flowing. I go back to sleep.

I have given the captain the details of the place where I want to disembark: Marka, sixtieth parallel north, left bank. On the morning of the second day, he turns off the engines just beyond the village. The boat drops anchor close to the untouched shore covered in tall pines and blocks of ice which are living out their last days. This is where I get off.

‘Frenchman! Ashore!’, says the captain as a farewell.

Two sailors lower a rowing boat into the water. The passengers leaning on the railings watch the spectacle. The captain, who was overseeing the manoeuvre from the lower deck, returns to his command post to switch on the tape recorder: Stravinsky at full volume. I climb into the boat. I salute to the passengers, who wave back. The boat moves away from the steamer. We glide through the Lena, accompanied by music. The paddle boat’s large hull moves further away and, as we approach the bank, it seems that I have left the refuge of a welcoming womb and thrown myself into the wolf’s jaws. The rowers are pulling hard. I jump onto the silt. Ivan, one of the sailors, pulls the boat ashore and says:

‘Sit down, on the side. In Russia, we always pause for a moment like this before leaving; sit quietly for a few seconds.’

The symphony’s echoes can be heard drifting over the water’s surface. To my ears, it sounds like a funeral march. In front of me is the edge of the taiga, separated from the shoreline by a sandy beach. Not a trace of human life. Here, the journey begins.

I stand up and walk off upstream. The rowers go back to the boat. For six months I have been waiting for this moment, and all the fever and all the impatience of these last months suddenly dissolve as soon as I make the first step, in the moment's haste. Fifteen minutes later the ferry overtakes me, leaving snippets of Stravinsky in its wake.

I am alone; I have started on my road to freedom. I will not stop until I have reached India.

[...]

I only stay in the town of Bodaybo, by the river Vitim, for one day. Enough time to dispel the gloom that had overwhelmed me during a long day of walking in the rain the day before. Enough time, too, to go to the town's museum and browse the archives about the nine hundred and sixty political deportees who were banished here, between 1920 and 1930. While I am here, I take the opportunity to look for a distress flare that could defend me from a bear attack. Accompanied by Veronika, a local television journalist who interviewed me earlier, I meet the captain of the smokejumpers' fire brigade. He explains to me that in the summer, when wildfires can threaten a village, the firefighters parachute into the flames with a chainsaw strapped to their leg. Then they cut down trees non-stop for twenty-four hours, to open up firebreaks in the forest.

'Give you a distress flare?' he exclaims. 'Are you crazy? So that you can start up a fire at the first opportunity?'

It is true that it was a rather stupid idea to go and ask a fireman to lend me a box of matches. Veronika suggests the airfield instead. A pilot explains to us that if there is a plane crash, a distress flare is useless and he never carries one when he flies. So I leave Bodaybo without one. At dawn the next day I reach the banks of the river Vitim, which flows south of the town. This is an important landmark for me because it is one of the few geographic pointers that Rawicz specifies in his account. The fugitives walked over the ice here. I am two months later than them, and so I take the ferry.

On the other side, I climb on the bike I bought the day before (there were a total of two on sale in the town). The track which crosses the mountain range south of the Vitim serves the lorry drivers who haul the fruits of the gold mines to the Baikal-Amur Mainline, two hundred kilometres to the south. The track goes across taiga-spiked mountains, runs along passes over 1,000 metres high, and rises up bleak valleys. Before

seeing this route, I knew it might be difficult, but it turns out to be so arduous that at the end of a day, after clenching my teeth too much, my jaws are so inflamed that I cannot open my mouth. To avoid having to carry my bag on my back, I tie it to the handlebars with the cotton scarf I will need further south to shield my head from the sun. I reach a pass separating the Vitim from the river Telmama. I am done in. I had forgotten how much a bicycle can alienate the spirits. On a bike, all your spiritual energy is devoted to maintaining physical tension. And what you gain in speed, you lose in intellectual production. The body works, while the brain sleeps. So it is in this total state of stupefaction that I fly by four passes between 800 and 1200 metres high. Millions of years of geological shaving have ironed out dips in the landscape, yet even the beauty of the wetlands carpeting these folds fails to buoy up my spirits. Then the darkness begins to eat up the day.

One hundred and ten kilometres from my departure point that morning, some loggers welcome me into their hut. They live there all year round, in a shack covered in soot, with all their worldly possessions: a hurricane lamp, some straw mattresses, a ticking alarm clock and a few books.

'In the winter, we work in the forest until it's -50°C, and below that we don't go out. There are limits,' Sasha tells me.

'-50°C? We haven't a clue what that feels like, where I come from in France,' I say.

'At -40°C, we go out with just three layers of clothing. When you're working, you don't feel the cold.'

I sleep very badly that night, because of Sasha's tubercular coughing fits and because a question eats at me: what difference is there between the lives of my two hosts and those of the zek-loggers who once lived in the gulags?

[...]

Severobaikalsk very much disappoints me. I was expecting a lakeside resort, of the kind that Central Europe is so good at: something along the lines of Interlaken or Bellagio. But instead I discover a concrete town whose interaction with the lake is confined to an industrial jetty, an unloading dock and a parade ground with a soldiers' barracks. Fortunately, at the edge of the town, there is the yacht club (pronounced 'yart

cloob') which harbours some sailing dinghies and three or four handsome yachts in the shade of a pine shack. I spend two days here: days as languid as the lake itself.

At this latitude, Lake Baikal only measures forty kilometres wide. Severobaikalsk stands at the start of the western shore, at the lake's most north-western point. I intend to go along the shoreline, from north to south, on the opposite side. I strike a deal with Sasha, one of the yachtsmen: I give him my bike in return for a yacht crossing to the other shore. We agree to go the following day. In the evening, all the cloob members (Julia, Natalia, Georgiu, Andrei and Sasha) drink to our good fortune, gathered in the belly of the yacht *Nadezhda* ('hope', in Russian). Practising the art of the vicious-circle-shaped toasting that the Russians first established, we alternately swallow slices of fatty sausage and glasses of vodka: the former to extinguish the fire that the latter has kindled and the latter to dissolve the greasy memory that the former has left behind. Indulging in the Russian style of drinking is a little like planing wood: you need to know how to handle both the plane and the lubricant in turn.

[...]

Every day I pass two or three rocky headlands which, from afar, look like landscapes from Chinese woodblock prints, with cascades of black pines covering a jumble of rocks. The headlands make up the extremities of sandy coves or pebbled creeks which predict tortures to come for my legs. Sometimes the forest-covered bank overhangs the lake by ten metres or so. I press on, happy and alone. Happy because alone. I have the lake, and need nothing else. When I tire of contemplating its surface, I go into the woods. The light falls differently through cedars, birches or pine trees. On the animal path that I take, I spot very fresh excrement, studded with red berries much loved by bears.

Sometimes, on a damp sandy beach, I follow their tracks for three hours on end: huge clawed footprints beside which my steps only leave a faint mark. Following the path a bear has taken (a bear thoroughfare?) gives me the strange impression of being exactly where I shouldn't. When I take a break, however short, I build a little fire from driftwood to ward off visitors. I light it with dry birch bark which burns like nothing on earth. When I camp by the shore, I have to go through the arduous task of putting my bag of food in a treetop far away from my tent, to prevent the bears, attracted by the

smell, from visiting me. If my tent is set up at the edge of the woods, I hear them roaming in the undergrowth all night and their racket interferes in my bad dreams. I take care to set the alarm on my watch so that I climb out of my tent every two hours to restoke my wood fire: my protective, reassuring, paternal fire, whose prehistoric flame was once man's first god.

[...]

When I am at the same latitude as the city of Ulan-Ude, the capital of the country of Buryatia and now only two hundred and fifty kilometres away, I leave the Baikal to head east. I am walking towards Lake Kotokel, situated a few kilometres from the Baikal. For half a day I wander through marshes and forests on the Kotokel's northern shore before discovering an almost abandoned sanatorium, where a babushka in a white coat serves me a bowl of kasha.

'The sanatorium still accepts some patients,' she explains to me. 'But we no longer receive any government support. Today, my little Sylvain, you've caught us at a bad time: all the residents are drunk. It's because we're celebrating the Water Festival.'

I follow the small lake's western shore. A clearing opens up, occupied by the ruins of buildings from the 1930s: Soviet vestiges. A man is sunbathing beside the water. He is Lithuanian, and half-crazy, but entirely drunk.

'I'm happy you're a Frenchman. You're the second one I've seen in my life. You and me, we're not like the Russians!'

He tells me that the island of Manar, which sits in the middle of Lake Kotokel, is home to the foundations of a monastery.

'There were twenty-eight monks there. But one night in the spring of 1918, a few months after the revolution, the Bolsheviks went onto the island and shot them.'

Hearing his tale, I am seized by an irrational desire to go to the island. It is exactly the sort of tragic spot that I love to reach and where, once there, I like to pause for a few moments with my eyes closed, before going on to look for the next one. So I go back to the sanatorium in search of a boat. I spot a family of fisherfolk lying in the long grass, blind drunk. Logically, I should make a sharp about-face straightaway. Instead of which I hand two dollars to Sasha, who seems the best bet.

'Can you take me to the island? Here's something towards the petrol.'

‘Of course.’

We go to fetch the motor from a storeroom in the sanatorium. The wife, sisters and mother-in-law, all with a skinful of schnapps, join us. They are roaring drunk, groping me on the way. I let them get on with it, as I only have eyes for the island. I carry the petrol cans. Sasha, tottering, lifts the motor onto his shoulders and cuts his ear on the propeller, which makes it bleed profusely. The promised boat is a rotten wooden rowing boat. The mother gets in, but miscalculates her momentum, carries on across the boat and falls into the water on the other side. An obese walrus fattened in captivity would have been more nimble. We need to push the boat through the mudflats for a long way to reach deep water, a difficult operation as the mother has decided she will be the boat’s figurehead and she adds ballast with her terrifying weight. The rain starts to fall, the daughter to cry. The motor won’t start. Sasha is still bleeding. The expedition is a disaster, but for some obscure reason the island is still calling me. At last we are off. The edge of the boat is ten centimetres above the water, which starts to come in over the bow. The island of Manar slowly gets closer. Still raining. We reach the southern point, following the shore. Thick vegetation draws a dark curtain over the bank, sometimes streaked with the white flash of a giant birch. The mother is feeling sick. Sasha’s shirt is red with blood. At last, an orthodox cross, four metres in height, at the end of a headland, shows us where to dock. This is where the journey ends. Where monks, reclusive in the silence of their island, bore the brunt of the October madness. Where they felt the shockwave from a revolution born six thousand kilometres from here, that was of no concern to them. Where men of God prayed before the liberators’ bullets hit them. We stand among the weeds. Some blue cedars balance on the island’s slopes overlooking the taiga, this northern jungle which draws all its strength from light rather than rainfall. Even Sasha and his family are affected. Gravity is sobering.

The trip back is pitiful. We run out of petrol two kilometres from the shore. I pull on the oars as if crazed, to bring back the three drunks who are falling asleep on the floor of the boat. Night is falling. Once off the boat, I walk south for four hours in the dark to cleanse myself of all this filth.