Taras Kalyna sits turned to the window. Nothing to see but his reflection. Ashy skin, tangled black hair, eyes staring into the dark. A see-through man. He looks past this ghost to the banks along the track where the train’s lamps cast a faint glow. Ghost land. For all he can tell, the world might end in blackness just beyond the light.

He’s travelling west to a place he’s never heard of. He doesn’t understand how he came to lose his freedom. A week ago he had a job laying bricks to build a school in a small town in southern Saskatchewan. Now it’s as if none of that existed. Like the other men in this car, he’s a Ukrainian immigrant to Canada. He thinks this has something to do with why he’s on this train.


Bukovyna is part of the Austrian empire. Canada is at war with Austria and Germany. Taras thinks this also has something to do with why he’s on this train.

Yaroslav nods, taking in the news that Taras is from Bukovyna. Yaroslav must be at least forty. Grey strands crowd out the brown in his tangled hair and beard. He’s skinny and the tendons in his neck stick out like ropes. Now he’s talking again.
“They’ve got no right to hold us.” He looks hard at Taras, seems to expect a response.

“No, they’ve got no right.” Taras tries to suck in a deep breath. The hot moist air sticks to him like sweat. He’s young, he doesn’t know anything about rights. He only knows what happened to him.

It doesn’t occur to him that Yaroslav might be trying to help. That he sees a young man who’s angry and confused and might need to talk. Yaroslav tries again, says he’s from the province of Halychyna – what the Canadians call Galicia – near Lviv, a beautiful old city. Has Taras ever been there?

Taras mumbles that he passed through Lviv once, and turns again to the window. He’s not going to say he was running from the Austrian army at the time. Anyway, what’s the point of talking? With somebody who looks like a starving hound. Sure, he must look nearly as bad himself. His crumpled blue shirt sticks to him, his armpits sting. He hasn’t shaved in a week. Nothing to shave with. He’s been sitting in a detention centre in Lethbridge, waiting for the people in charge to decide what to do with him. They put him on this train eight hours ago. It feels like days. Wheels clank against the track and everything gives way to their rhythm. Hard wooden seats dig into his bones.

He keeps asking himself, What have I done wrong? Why am I here?

He counts about forty prisoners in the car, watched by four soldiers. Two sit at each end, rigid as statues, clutching rifles with bayonets fixed. Somebody must think a bunch of dazed, half-starved men are really dangerous. To hell with the stone-faced bastards.

He looks away from them and in a moment he’s back at the meeting where the police dragged him away. A meeting to start a union at the brick plant. He never wanted to be there in the first place – only went because his friend Moses asked him to. The local police knew he did nothing wrong, knew he didn’t organize the meeting; he’s sure of that much. In fact he’s pretty sure they didn’t want to arrest him in the first place.

He sees the bare room where they interviewed him, hears the
repeated questions. Do you own any firearms? No, but I snare rabbits sometimes for our supper. Do you have any contact with the Austrian government? No, why would I? I left that place. Just answer the question. Do you belong to any subversive organizations? I don’t understand. The policeman explaining what subversive meant. No, I work at the Spring Creek brick plant, and when I can, I help my parents break their land. Land which is unsuitable for any kind of farming, he’d wanted to add, but didn’t.

He thinks the local Mounties believed what he said. But they washed their hands of him and shipped him to a detention camp in Lethbridge, Alberta, where he soon saw that he wasn’t the only one arrested. There must have been a hundred other men, most of them as confused as he was.

In Lethbridge it was soldiers who questioned him. Like the Mounties, they asked about subversive organizations. Spying. Sabotage, which apparently meant blowing up bridges, or buildings. They asked their questions over and over, as if they thought he’d been lying and would eventually slip and tell the truth. “No” was always the wrong answer and they kept on asking. Now he’s on this train.

He wonders if there are subversive organizations in rural Saskatchewan. Where he would even look to find one.

In the darkness Taras no longer has any sense of forward motion. What if the train’s just rocking in place and never arrives anywhere? Hunger bites his belly. Nothing to eat since Lethbridge. He’s desperate to get off this train but doesn’t want to get where it’s going. They told him he’d be going to an internment camp. Taras doesn’t understand the English word, but he thinks it means a kind of prison.

Wheels screech, the car bucks and jolts, and the train enters a curve in the track. The headlamp flashes light on the rails and trees flare into life; darkness swallows them back in a second. Now at least he can feel the forward thrust, his body hurtling into the night.

At the sun’s last light he thought he could make out giant shapes against the sky. But maybe he only imagined them because a soldier at the detention centre said he’d be going to the mountains.
“You’ll work. But you’ll be taken care of.” The soldier wouldn’t look him in the eye.

He’s never seen mountains, but he thinks he can feel them out there. Looming, dark shapes just outside the window, cutting off light.

Half an hour ago the guards agreed the windows could be opened.

“Christ,” Yaroslav said to the nearest guards, “do you think we’re gonna jump out the window? Off a goddamn moving train?”

“Watch your language,” said a private, gripping his rifle stock so tight his knuckles went white.

“I suppose not,” said the sergeant.

“Not yet, anyway,” somebody mumbled, but the sergeant had the private open one window and the prisoners did the rest.

Taras can’t feel much difference. Too hot outside. And the train moves too slowly to create any real breeze. He fingers the back of his seat, scored with the names of people coming to the west. This could even be the same Colonist car that carried him and his parents across Canada to Saskatchewan. He remembers the noise and the clamour of many languages, and the bread and cheese Batko bought along the way. Mama amazed at the idea of buying bread. This all happened not much more than a year ago. A few months before the war began.

If they’d stayed in the old country, he’d be fighting in the war. For the Austrians. Because the province of Bukovyna is ruled by Austrians, and every man has to do service in their army.

He remembers when the train dropped them at Spring Creek and he and his parents looked around in what he now realizes must have been terror. Vast, open grasslands everywhere they looked; and nothing resembling a Ukrainian farm. A language that rushed past their ears before they could grab at the few words they’d learned on the train. And just a few months to get ready for what they’d heard would be a colder winter than any they’d known back in the village. Blizzard was one of the words they learned on the train.
“I wonder if the assholes who planned this trip ever rode a train before,” Yaroslav says loudly. “I wonder if these assholes ever heard that trains can run late. In this case, five hours late.” A few prisoners laugh. Yaroslav speaks in Ukrainian, but he says “assholes” in English.

“Shut up,” the private says, “if you know what’s good for you.” But he can’t get much energy into it. He’s probably wondering about assholes too. They were supposed to make Castle Mountain siding in late afternoon, but there was never any chance of it. The train was late before it reached Lethbridge, and it stopped three times to let freight trains go by.

“The best thing about this?” Yaroslav says in Ukrainian. “The guards haven’t eaten either. Life is seldom that fair.” He sees Taras smile and thinks, That’s a good sign.

Thinks, What would Ukrainians do without humour?

The sergeant announces that they’re getting close to Banff. “Everyone stay in their seats,” he orders.

The train whistle shrieks, echoes up and down a long valley. The train slows, wheels squealing. Taras sees warm light on the station platform. The guards jump to their feet, bayonets thrust forward. The idea seems to be, If you try to escape, this blade’s going into your gut. Would they really do that? Do they really believe the prisoners will try to run for it?

The paying passengers from the sleeping cars step onto the platform. Men in suits and straw hats, women in flowered summer dresses, turn golden in the light and pass in a moment into the station, so quickly Taras could almost believe he imagined them.

The engine shudders, pants like a great beast and heaves them back into the dark.

A voice floats through the car. “No bloody right...”

Taras looks around at the tense faces, the narrowed eyes. He doesn’t want to be like these men. He’s younger than most of them, just turned twenty. Stronger than most, too. In Bukovyna he worked on the land and in his father’s smithy. He can do anything his father can do. He can train horses better than anyone he’s ever seen, including the skilled horsemen of the Austrian army.
Or his father, who learned during his time in the army.

But he is like these men. Prisoner.

Lightning burns through the trees and in the burst of light Taras sees a tracery of branches against the sky. Thunder crackles like a rifle volley – as if the war’s come to him here in Canada – followed by sudden, hard rain. Ferocious rain. Like the rain that fell on Noah when he was in the ark, Taras thinks.

Soon the train will reach the camp and the guards will drive the prisoners out into the wind and rain. It’s only a storm, but after a week of not knowing what’s happening, of never-ending questions, he feels scared. He flexes his fingers; looks at his sturdy hands. Until now he’s trusted their strength and skill to get what he needs. Now nothing is what it was.

About ten minutes later, he feels the train slowing, slowing. Outside the wind picks up and a sudden cool breeze gusts through the car. The train jerks to a stop near a small siding where soldiers hold lanterns against the darkness. The sergeant yells that the prisoners are to get out and follow the path to the camp. At the front end of the car, the guards block the door, while at the back the guards stand waiting to herd them out into the rain.

Taras’s feet have gone numb; his legs are like wood. Men stumble past him down the aisle like sleepwalkers. He flexes his feet back to life and joins the slow march.

In a moment he’s on the platform between the cars, and as he lowers a foot to the metal stepping box, the wind hits him, driving rain into his face, his eyes. He feels a push from behind. Lurches onto greasy earth, falls to his knees, pulls himself up again.

Sheet lightning reveals a dirt trail swelled to a flowing creek of men and mud. Guards on either side, soaked to the skin, point the way, their bayonets giving back a dull gleam in the flashing light. After a few steps Taras’s boots are heavy with mud. He’s been told he’ll be helping build a road, the Banff to Laggan road. This must be it. No, can’t be. Too rough and narrow. He pulls a foot out of the muck and takes the next step. His clothes are plastered against his body.

Trees thrash in the wind. Thunder explodes like heavy field
guns. A streak of fire rips past his face and heat gusts through him. He’s seen thunderstorms before, but never anything like this. There’s a loud crack, very close, and he looks up to see a huge pine split vertically from the top down to the ground. The two halves hover in the air like reflections of each other and then move gracefully apart. One half sails, slowly it seems, toward him. He leaps aside at the last moment and the split trunk lands beside him on the path. He smells scorched wood.

For a moment no one moves. Then men swarm over the blackened trunk like ants over a twig. Why not? That tree can’t fall again.

Pale white shapes appear through the downpour, and he makes out rows of tents inside a barbed-wire fence that must be ten feet tall. At the gate, a framework of wood and wire, guards shout, herding internees inside like cattle. Taras plods on.

Lightning strikes with a slap of thunder that makes his ears ache and a section of fence bursts into a web of fire, its connecting posts sizzling. As he stumbles through the gate, a prisoner with thin hair stuck to his head shoves Taras off the path and into a guard. A bayonet snakes out, tears his shirt sleeve and slices a shallow cut in his arm. Taras feels it like the stroke of a whip, and for a moment imagines turning on the guard and knocking him to the ground the way the lightning felled the tree. He steps back. Blood mixes instantly with rain.

A crash of thunder rolls through him and in the sudden light the towering mass of Castle Mountain burns itself on his eyes.

A guard grabs his arm and heaves him into a milling line of prisoners. Others shout instructions, hand out sodden blankets and straw pallets, assign men to tents. Ahead of him, Yaroslav stumbles. Staggers to his feet. Asks about supper and is told to go to hell. Now Taras decides he’d like to stick with Yaroslav, even though he talks too much, but the thought comes too late. The guards direct the older man to a tent at the far edge of the compound. Taras is sent to one close by. Light spills out the door.

Inside about a dozen men sit around a coal-oil lamp, as if it’s a campfire. Most nod when he comes in. A few don’t make the
effort. Rain drips through the canvas. He has mud all over his clothes, his blanket and pallet are soaked. He must look like a beggar. He feels like one.

A clean-shaven young man of medium height gets up. “I’m Yuriy,” he says in Ukrainian. “I’m a farmer. In Saskatchewan.”

“I’m from Saskatchewan too,” Taras says. “Well, Bukovyna in the old country.”

Yuriy nods as if that’s just what he’d imagined. He’s maybe thirty years old, has a square jaw, olive skin. Blue eyes, wide cheekbones, and an eager look, as if he’s hoping for the best, even as a prisoner in a damp tent in the middle of a violent storm. He finds Taras a place to lay his pallet and blanket. Pats the wet ground. Smiles.

He likes to get things right, Taras thinks.

Several of the men start a card game, playing their cards on somebody’s blanket. Others lie down and sleep, or pretend to.

“Ya Taras Kalyna. I’m a blacksmith,” he tells Yuriy.

“Kalyna? Like the bushes in the old country?”

“Tak, just like that.”

“Did you know they have kalyna here in Canada, only they call it cranberry?”

“No, I didn’t —”

“Hey, your arm’s bleeding.” Yuriy looks worried, as if Taras is an old friend who has come to his door. “I suppose a guard did it?”

“One of them nicked me with a bayonet.” Taras realizes it hurts like hell. For a while the pain was just part of the thunder and fire flowing around him.

Yuriy takes a handkerchief out of his pocket, holds it out in the rain until it’s sopping. Taras rolls up his sleeve and Yuriy cleans the cut. While he’s at it, he cleans mud off Taras’s face. Soaks the handkerchief again, wrings it out and wraps it around the cut.

“There,” he says, “that’s better.”

“Dyakuyiu,” Taras says. “Thanks.” And it is better. Someone has done all that can be done, at least for now.

“What’s wrong with the guards, anyway?” he goes on. “The guy just cut me, without even thinking.”
“Well,” Yuriy says, “they don’t like being here. And they figure we must be guilty of something, or we wouldn’t be here. And also, men keep escaping. The guards have to go out and look for them.”

“Look where?”

“Oh, they search along the road to Banff and check all the train stations. But there’s lots of sidings where freight trains stop.” Yuriy winks. “We know where they are.”

There’s a whump! like a mortar blast and the air flashes white. Taras can’t hear for a while but Yuriy keeps talking.

“... actually think we should like it here,” he’s saying.

“Are they crazy?”

“Some. Most of them just hate their work. And they don’t like surprises.”

An older man sitting on a blanket speaks from the shadows. “You don’t want to make them jumpy, not with those pig stickers on their rifles.” The man must be about forty years old. In the soft light, Taras sees glowing black eyes.

“So if I want to escape, I should try to look like I’m not.”

“Dobre. Lesson one.” The man has black, curling hair and a moustache turned up at the corners, and looks as if he belongs to some earlier time. Taras recognizes him right away as a Hutsul from the Carpathians. Other Ukrainians believe that Hutsuls live a freer life up in the mountains. They say that if you’re in really bad trouble, you can run away to the Carpathians and no one will find you.

“Taras,” Yuriy says. “this is Ihor the mountain man.”

Ihor nods for Taras and Yuriy to sit on his blanket. He fishes in his pocket and brings out three hand-rolled cigarettes. Taras has never been interested in smoking, never liked the smell. Here in this rain-soaked tent, he decides to get interested. The smoke stings his throat and lungs, but it also makes the tent feel like a slightly different place, which seems a worthy goal. It makes him dizzy, too, but who cares about that? In fact, it’s all to the good.

“The guards have guns,” Ihor says, “so they think they should be able to make us obey. But it’s harder than they expect.”

Somehow the smoke swirling in his lungs makes Taras calmer, and he feels something let go inside him. The thunder and light-
ning are moving off, and he’s met two men he thinks he can trust. He’s got a foothold in this strange world.

The card players throw down their hands, complaining that the cards are too tacky to shuffle. A few men are already asleep. Others struggle to pull blankets into clumsy nests.

“Sleep,” Ihor says. “Daylight will be here too soon.”

Taras curls up on his pallet on the bare earth. He throws aside his damp blanket but eventually decides he’s better off with it than without. He tries not to think about food.

In the darkness he sees his old village, where he could catch a glimpse of Halya almost every day. He imagines her light brown hair flecked with brassy gold; her steady blue-grey eyes and small, firm mouth that sets into a stubborn line when she’s angry. He loves her fierceness, the shadow that can come across her face like a cloud over the sun. If he could be with her, he wouldn’t care if she was angry all the time. He’d smile, he’d laugh. Thinking of Halya, he reaches under his shirt for a round pendant hanging from a wire. Hides it under the edge of his pallet.

Cold creeps into his bones. Rain patters on canvas. At last his mind drifts into night.