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The Children by the Road

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The Children by the Road

I.

After waking alone, as I'd worried,
I try to ignore the clock sounds,
the click and roll of hammer and gear,
as I look over the paper. A woman
bashed from behind with a concrete block.

Fighting in Chechnya. I guess the woman
I love has gone to the store for eggs,
muscled legs swishing beneath her skirt
(she wore one on Sundays out of habit),
the tick-tick of heels on sidewalk.

II.

The slant of sun illuminates the news,
so the Red Sox triumph alongside
tired Russian troops, superimposed
backward on the translucent
page. This is how I imagine her,
in hazy theoretical gray, walking
to the mart, or feeding pigeons
in the park, or beginning back to me,

simultaneously. Authorities found
the woman bleeding, a man cradling
her head, saying, *Don't move, honey.*
Don't go anywhere, as her mind
worked out to the polished shoes
of passersby, the sign saying Stop.

III.

The soldiers are watching peasants
whisper or women hauling rags or water,
from behind the mines and wire.
They wait in the village school cluttered

with casings and waste for the next convoy.
Boys in the weeds count the cars of troops
to tell the rebels. I remember Sasha's anger
when I asked when he'd be in the Ukraine.

Ukraine, he told me, *Only Russians use the article*. Suma, his relatives' town, houses strewn on ten brown roads, has water four hours a day, electric twelve.

Soviets killed the educated. No one knows how these things are done. As jets bombard the rebels in the forest, boys ten years old keep track of all that passes.

IV.

Sasha told me not to write; nothing gets there in time. His family has been here fifty years, and he bears a suitcase full of cheese and heating oil, gifts for his Cossack land. He speaks only a little, and these are hard times – suppose he is sprawled face down in Kiev, victim of some xenophobic ambush, friendless foreigner. They haven't been free for long. *Cossack blood boils hot for our freezing home*, Sasha told me once, grinning drunk. A noise like newsprint rustle, but the paper's still in my cold hands. The patch of sun is past me – was that a grocery sack? My love leaves the bedroom (how did I miss her there?), pulling her hair to the back of her head, squinting. Does she even know where I am? *She's conscious*, said an authority, *It appears she's going to be fine*.

—Chris Million '02