

The road I must travel to reach my grandmother's lost village is like tracing the progression of an equation designed to restore lost time. Each kilometer that carries me from Riga seems to subtract five years.

First there are the gas stations and Swedish supermarket chains, signs ever burning. Next come the old Soviet-era apartment buildings, stubborn blocks of concrete and pebble-dash, their facades brittle and peeling like the skin of old wasps' nests. Down in the parking lots, old women pile bones for the stray cats.

From this point, the land begins its reclaiming, grass and Queen Anne's lace rooting through abandoned concrete slabs. Occasionally, a house will appear, canted and suffering, maybe with a slope-shouldered figure poking at a smoldering brush pile in the yard. But just as quickly, these glimpses are smothered by the trees.

Sometimes a house stands still long enough to admit that it is abandoned, portions of the roof skinned away to reveal blackberries growing on the inside, the surrounding fields neck-high and riotous.

Soon the village center announces itself: first come the thumps of the railroad tracks and then the houses, clad in wood worn as gray as lichen. Sheets snap on clotheslines. A van parked in a gravel turnout advertises smoked carp. A man teeters along the shoulder on a child's bicycle, a bottle wrapped in brown paper poking its neck from his jacket pocket. The center holds for a few more seconds and then abruptly, it gives up and lets the fields resume their patter: rapeseed, rye, rapeseed, rye.

Eventually, the fields stop just long enough to take a breath, revealing a long rutted driveway.

At the end sits a home made from brick, modern by the standards of the countryside, clearly built within the last sixty years, after the Second World War, though the sun and the snow and the rain have worried it to the point of exhaustion.

The yard is still, except for three chickens, muttering and picking their way across tindered grass. The house acts as if it is empty, though I know someone is inside, waiting for me.

I sit for a moment, listening to the car's cooling engine, the chickens clapping their beaks, skimming the air for insects I can't see.

And just as I am trying to think of what I want to say— how to introduce myself to someone I have always and never known—the door to the little house opens, and I see my grandmother.

Of course, by this time, my grandmother, the woman who raised me, has been dead for more than five years.