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## Dying Under My Eyes

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# Dying Under My Eyes

By Nicole Yurcaba

Pencil.

The cat sits outside.

Footage from a Chornobyl documentary reels across a laptop screen. The washing machine sucks, spins, sucks. Gorbachev recounts Red Square, radiation. Masked soldiers stroll like it's a lazy Sunday afternoon, passing unblinking civilians who don't question the soldiers' masks. Colonel Grebeniuk: *They say radiation has no taste. It was only later we realized it was the taste of radioactive iodine.*

Boulevard Lenin.

Boulevard Ukrayina.

Roentgens.

Burning

reactor

skin

cells

forest

blood.

A plastic-wrapped map, so radioactive many years later it is housed in heavy plastic. A dosimeter placed on top of it screams like a leukemia-plagued child. Civilians absorb 50 times the healthy, scientifically allowable amount of radiation. Children play in streets, wearing shorts and caps, tank tops and dresses and school uniforms.

No one

seals doors

windows

calls children in from playing

calls relatives to give warning

distributes iodine.

Days later, the buses arrive. Three days later, exactly. No panic.

Three days.

No panic.

Three days.

Civilians assemble in queues outside of box-like apartment buildings. Soldiers pass directions in swift Russian:

*one doll*

*one tote of clothes*

*no pets*

*no pets*

*I said no pets!*

*maybe some food*

*onto the bus*

*onto the bus*

*get onto the bus!*

*you'll return soon enough.*

A German Shepherd runs chasing the bus, its paws furiously slapping the tan road in anger at its master's leaving. An old man stays. Weeks later, his body—found in his apartment, on a sidewalk, in another family's

apartment after he bent to take a rotting sausage from their fridge. We don't know. Another soldier: *The first days we were worried. We wore our masks all the time. After that, we forgot about them.*

Gorbachev returns. So does his old criteria, his denial: *I made decisions based on what the scientists told me* blazing as loudly, as misshapen, as oddly as his purple birthmark. Another scientist— wrapped in drab olive green and a white cotton cap, a white cotton facemask pulled tightly over his face: *People will return to the city. They have to.*