


“Monologue about a lunar landscape”



Chernobyl Prayer by Svetlana Alexeivich



I started to wonder what was better:
to remember or forget?



I asked my friends...

Some had forgotten. Some don't
want to remember, because we
can't change anything—

we can't even leave.

Not even that...






What I remember is that...

In the days following the accident, books about radiation disappeared from the libraries. About Hiroshima and Nagasaki, even about x-rays.





There was a rumor going around that it was
an order from above, to avoid causing a panic.

To keep us calm.

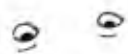


There was even a joke that if Chernobyl had exploded among the Papuans, the entire world would've been afraid—



Everybody except
for the Papuans.








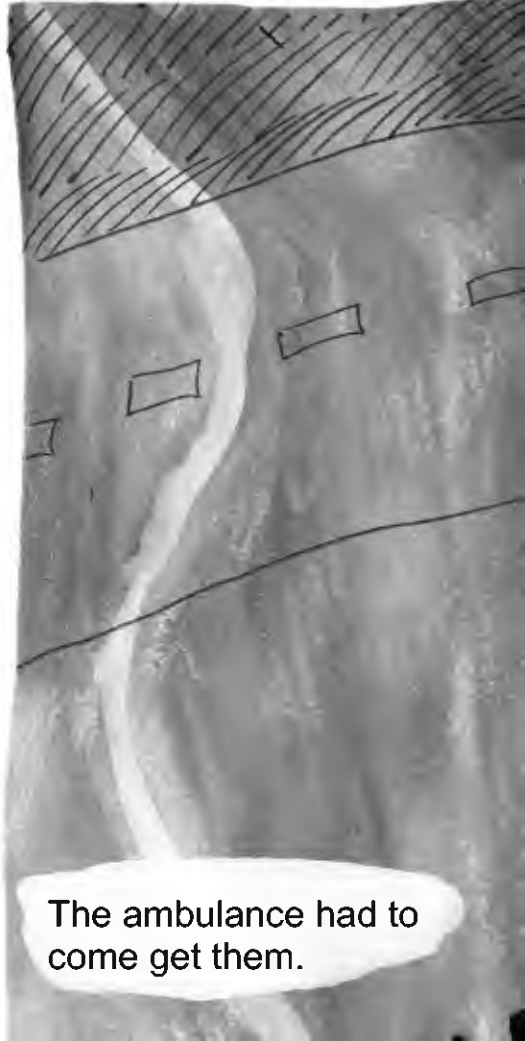
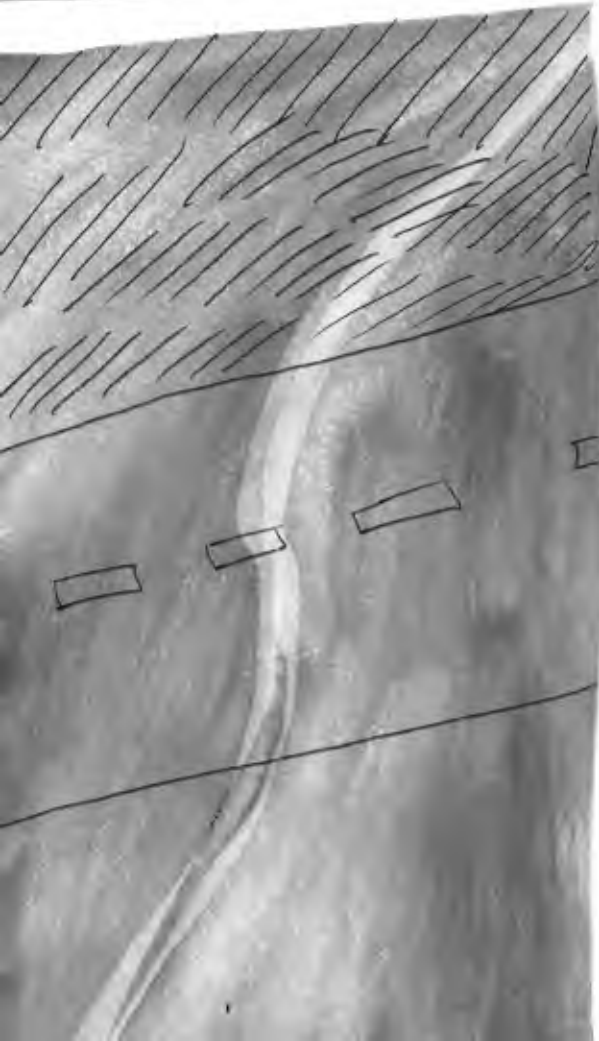

There weren't any medical recommendations of any kind... No information...

Those who could
were getting
potassium iodide
tablets (the
pharmacies in town
didn't have any;
people got them
through connections
to higher-ups).





One time, people took handfuls of them and washed them down with liquor.



The ambulance had to come get them.



The first
foreign
journalists
came...

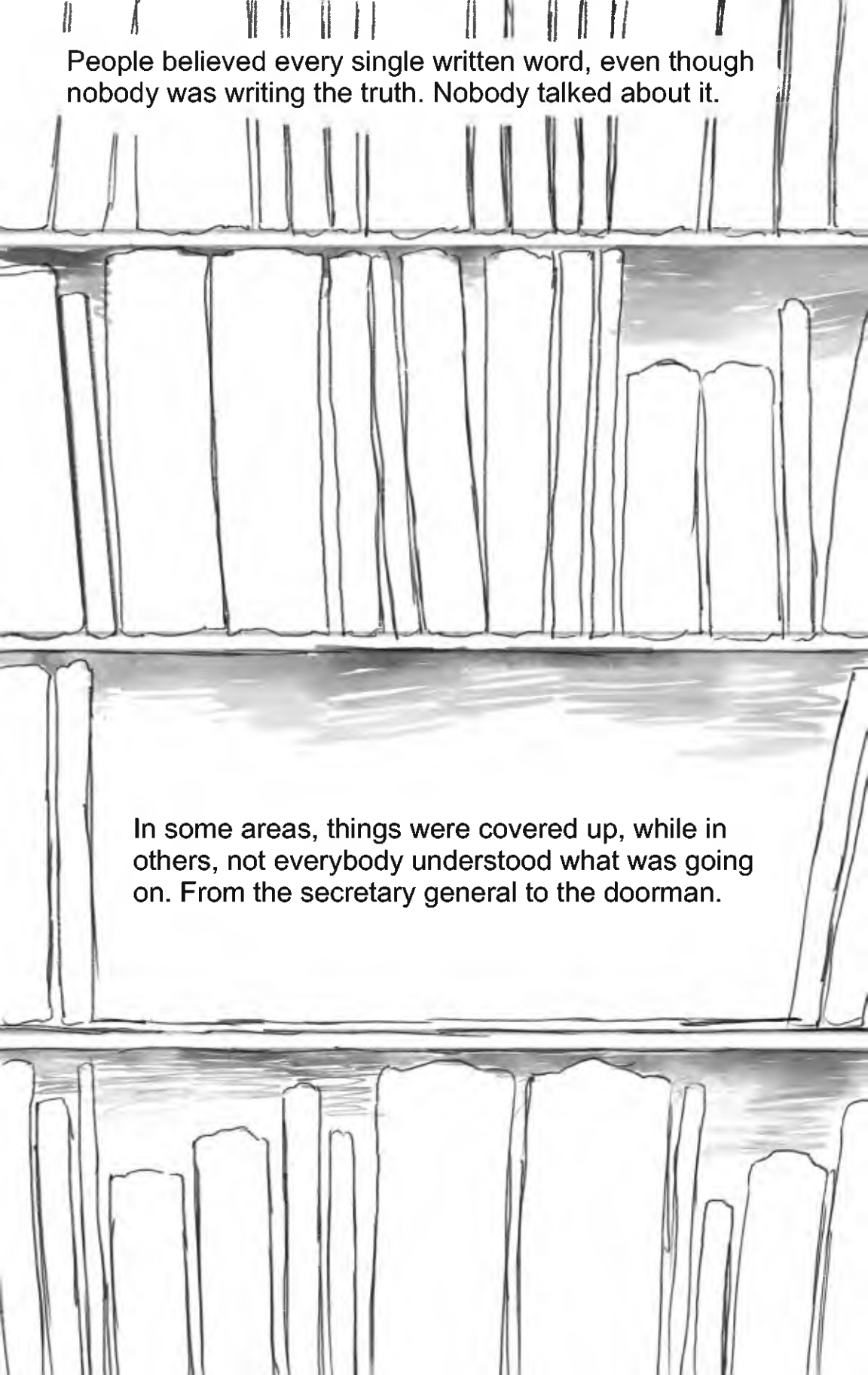
The first film crew...

They were in plastic suits,
helmets, rubber boots, and gloves;

even the camera had a special cover.

A local girl was with them, a translator...
She was in a sundress and sandals...





People believed every single written word, even though nobody was writing the truth. Nobody talked about it.

In some areas, things were covered up, while in others, not everybody understood what was going on. From the secretary general to the doorman.

After signs were put up, everyone followed them: if a city or village had sparrows or pigeons, it was also safe for people to live there.



Bees were out, a place was clean.





I was riding in a taxi, and the driver was wondering why the birds, like they'd gone blind, were dropping against the windshield, crashing into it.

How strange...

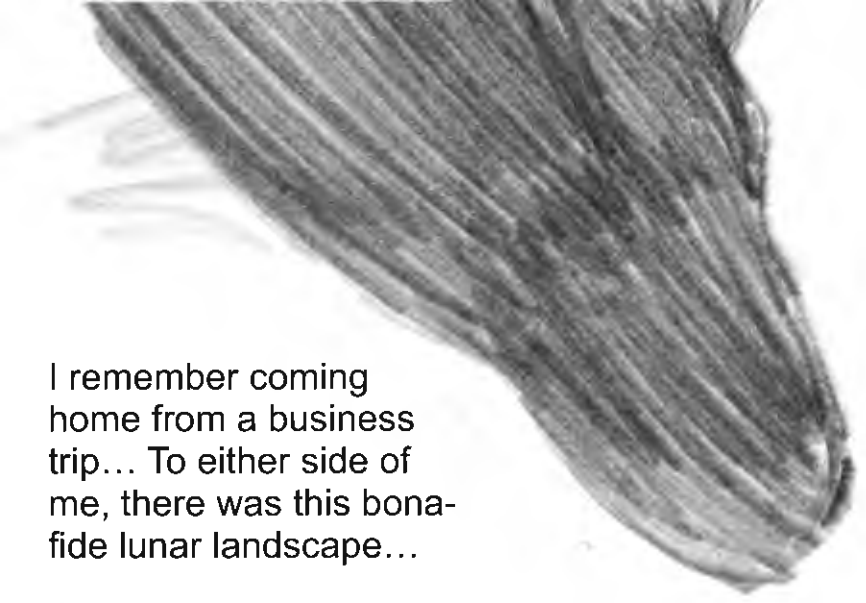
Like they were asleep...

Something about it was like suicide...

After his shift was over, to forget about it, he went to drink with friends.








I remember coming home from a business trip... To either side of me, there was this bona-fide lunar landscape...

The fields, stretching out to the horizon, had been covered in white dolomite.

The contaminated topsoil had been removed and buried, and dolomite sand had been poured on top.

It was like it wasn't earth...
Like it wasn't *on* earth...

A black and white illustration of a person standing on a bridge over a body of water. The person is silhouetted against the light background, wearing a dark coat and carrying a bag. The bridge has a simple railing and spans across the water. The water is depicted with soft, horizontal brushstrokes, suggesting a calm surface. The overall style is minimalist and evocative.

I was haunted by this vision for a long time and tried to write a story.

I imagined what would be here in one hundred years:

a person,

or something else,

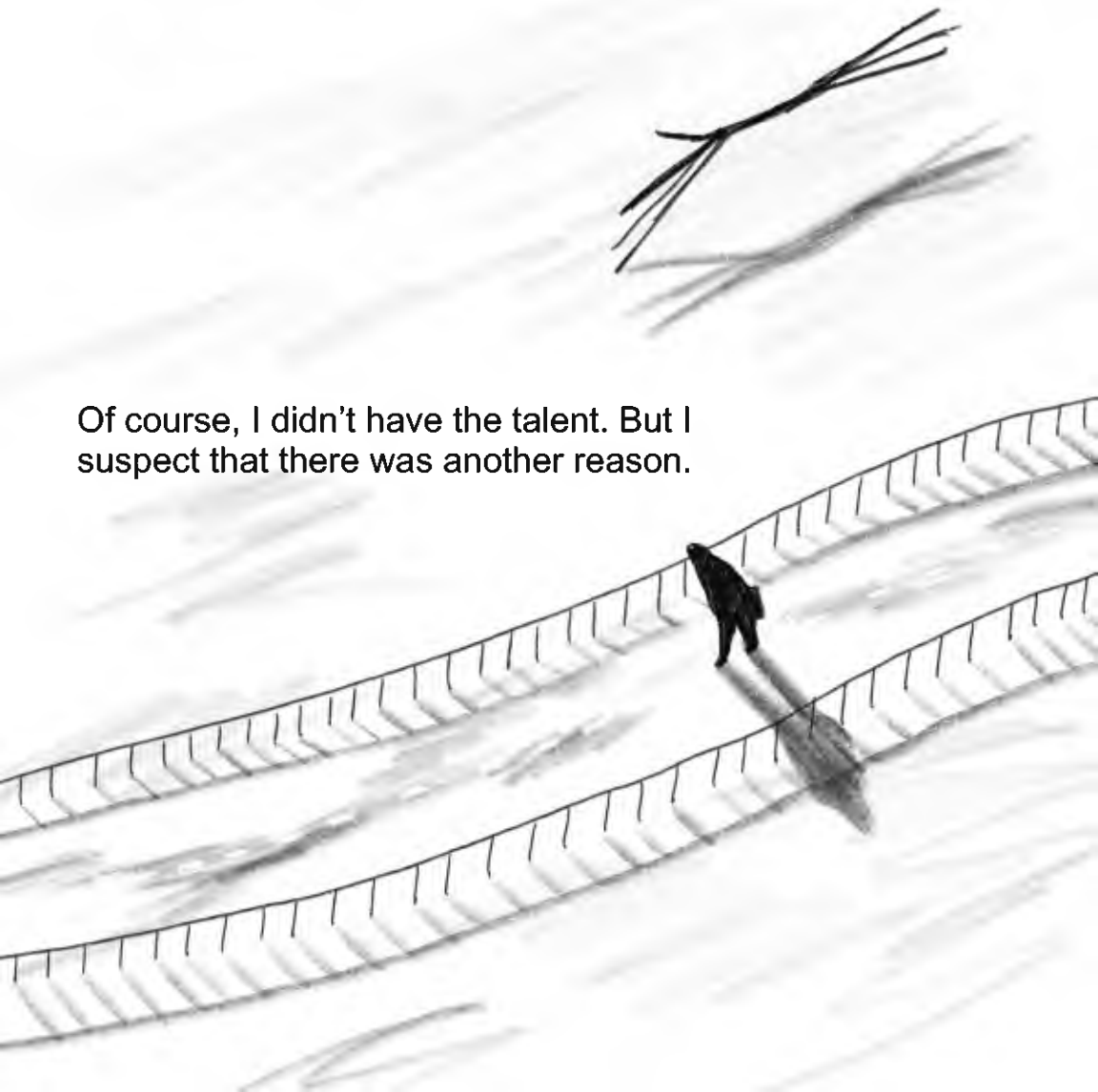


would be galloping along on all fours,
throwing its long hind legs back.

At night, it would see with all three of its
eyes, and its single ear, on the crown of its
head, would hear the running of ants. There
would only be ants left; everything else on
the earth and in the sky would have died.

I sent the story to a literary magazine. They replied saying that this wasn't a piece of literature, but a recollection of a nightmare.

Of course, I didn't have the talent. But I suspect that there was another reason.

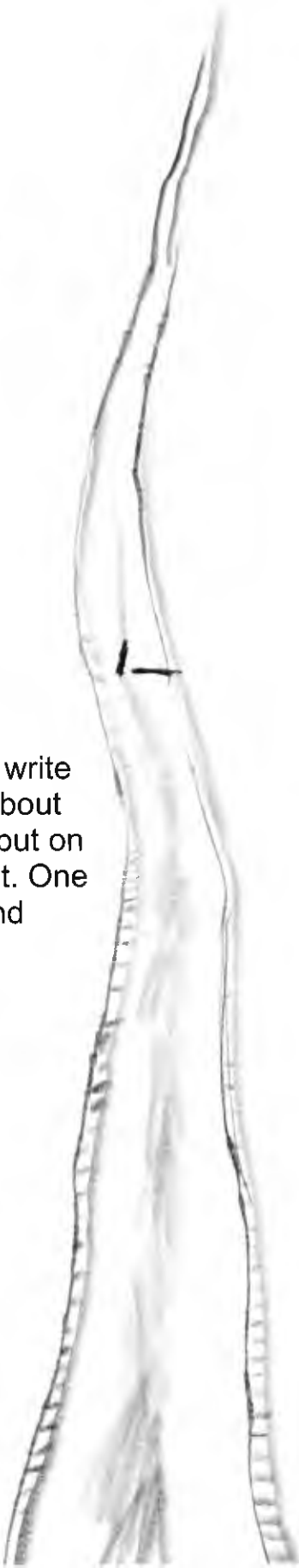





I wondered: why is there so little writing about Chernobyl?


Our authors still write about the war, about Stalin's camps, but on this they're silent. One or two books, and that's it.

Think: is it a coincidence?





The event is still out of the bounds of the culture.
Cultural trauma. And our only answer is silence.



We close our eyes, like little children,
and think:

We hid.

It'll pass us by.



Something from the future is looking back at us,
something disproportionate to us. Something
outside of our own capability to worry.

When you talk to people, they'll tell you
things and be grateful that you've listened to
them. Even if you didn't understand, you at
least listened. Because they don't
themselves understand... Like you're doing...

I don't like reading science fiction anymore...





What is better: to remember or forget?



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