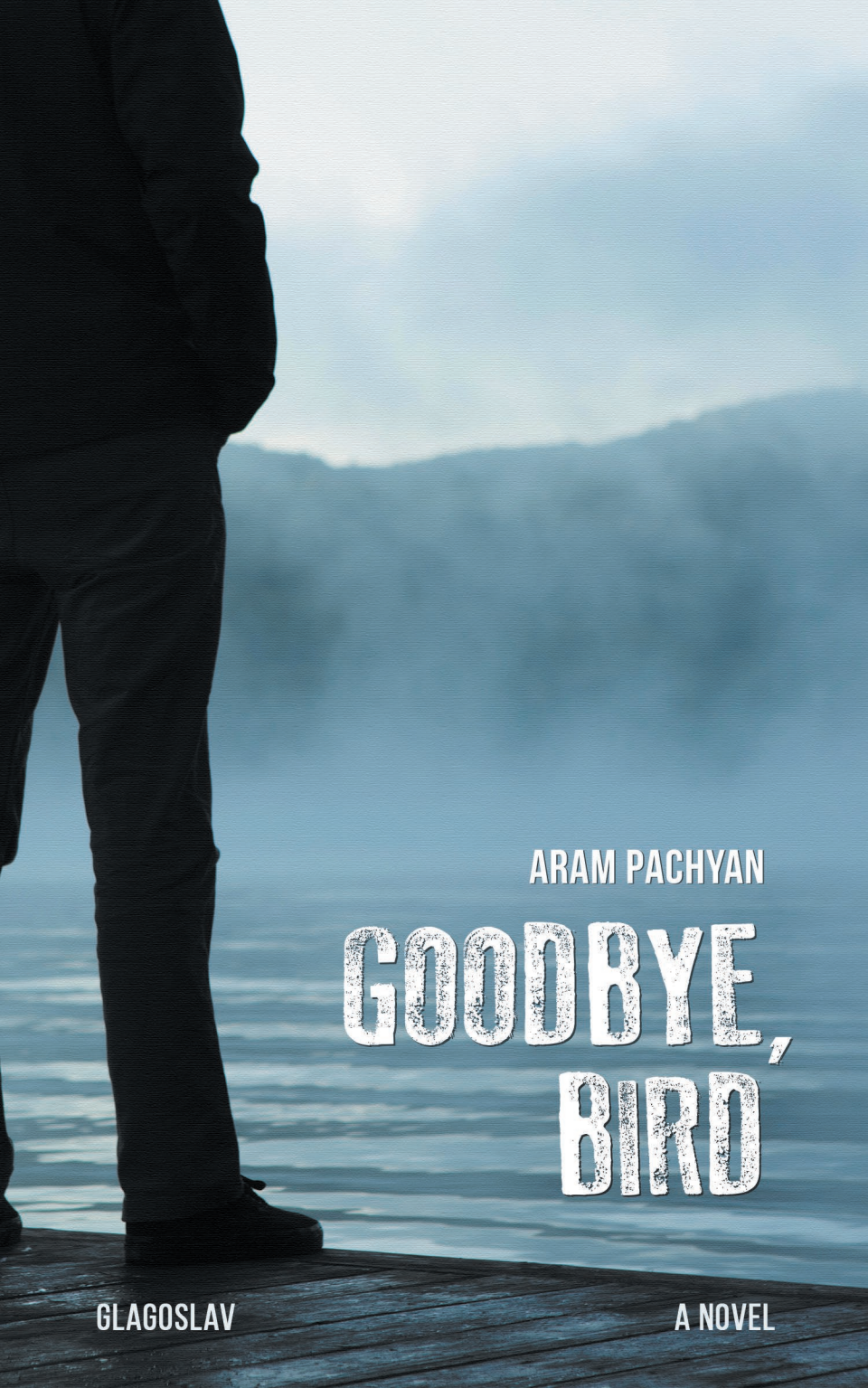




ARAM PACHYAN

GOODBYE, BIRD

GLAGOSLAV

A NOVEL

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Translated by Nairi Hakhverdi

GLAGOSLAV PUBLICATIONS

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“Ich ruf zu dir, Herr Jesu Christ”

Johann Sebastian Bach

And I imagine that we are going
to set out the two of us alone
perhaps three and that no one
in the world will ever know
anything of our precious voyage toward
nothing but simply toward somewhere else and
forever
On this sea bluer still bluer
than any blue on earth
On this sea where no one would ever shout:
“Land!”¹

Guillaume Apollinaire

1 Guillaume Apollinaire, “Love, Disdain and Hope,” in *Selected Writings: Guillaume Apollinaire*, trans. Roger Shattuck, New York: New Directions Books, 1971.

one

I am 28 years old. That's what it says at the beginning of every page in his notebook, which he opens up every hour, leafs through, and incessantly repeats that he is 28 years old, repeats it with his skin turning dark red with anxiety, first looking at his arms to check that two has not suddenly turned into three. Then he hangs his melon-looking head like the limp head of a dead man over one of the pages in his notebook and writes: two will never become three, because after being discharged the only governor of space and time is you, just like your grandfather who, at the break of dawn, finally closed the books on history. Look at how the 28-year-old Dürer depicts the savior's movement in his self-portrait! The mastery of improbable, mystifying brushstrokes. It's as if the brush worked from deep outer space with a guiding mix of the mind and the senses. The self-portrait of the 28-year-old Dürer is a creation challenging God to a duel; his time will always remain eternal, while you, who are already 28 years old, have no time left to yourself besides Bird. Absent-minded soldier. They're not embarrassed by the honesty of their own gaze and they don't kill the enemy from fear of shame. Not even a grain of soft honesty has remained in you to see time. SOFT honesty. At least make a promise to yourself now. Promise that you won't kill your dream from fear of shame. I promise that I will always be 28 and that I will not scratch up my face from fear of shame, and that every morning, until dawn, like my grandfather, I will eat a banana and drink a cup of coffee, feed Bird, bathe him, pet

his fur, and at least once a month I will smoke Alejo's native tobacco and maybe one day, with a stroke of luck, like Schiele, I will catch some interesting 21st-century viral disease. He didn't know when his grandfather had eaten a banana for the first time—maybe it was while roofing in Russia or on the train that took orphans to Europe. But he remembers the day his grandfather lit his first cigar. That thin-veined brown cigar that moved the imagination seemed taller than his grandfather. He somehow jammed it between his lips, struck a match and brought it up to the tip of the cigar, all the while drilling him not to swallow the smoke. For one hour they took turns enjoying the cigar. They smoked and smiled. They smiled and smoked. Meanwhile, his grandfather elucidated the secrets of smoking cigars. He said that the chest should absolutely be puffed-out and that the lower lip should arrogantly droop down. Know that as long as this blue smoke is rising, you are a man standing nearest to God. He said this with a straight face and seeing his puffed-out chest and twitching lip, he suddenly chortled and laughed for a long, very long time. His grandfather's last friend, which was peeled strip by strip—his fingers feel the constraint, but they try to slow down so that he can live just a little longer, five more minutes, until he reaches the last morsel, which will be the most painful. The softness of the fleshy pulp will burn his throat and the drops of coffee will evaporate with a fizz. Then he will walk, he will walk out of the house to no longer walk and no longer return. Bravo, banana, you did not leave my grandfather's side. Bless your heart. There's silence in the office. I need to leave. It's as if my body is glued to the stiff chair. So leave without your body. There's knocking on the glass of the window. He turns around. It's the little banana. It's standing in front of the window, pressing its peel against the cold glass. It's pleading. Come on, come, you're

running late, they're waiting for you. I'm coming. On the desk. My desk has the color of pomegranates and is strewn with a letter of resignation, a notebook, a pen, and shredded pieces of my girlfriend's photograph. He slowly collects his possessions. He crams his notebook and pen into the sack-like bag hanging from his chair, then he crouches under the table and somewhat shyly puts the shredded pieces of the photograph one by one into his mouth, working, as he chews, on softly grinding his molars. My crazy kitten, today at noon, as I was saying goodbye to the office, I ate one half of a half of you, then the other half, chewing our memories with care so that they would be digested easily. Let your body live inside of me. Walk with me. Tingle all over. Flutter with delight. I've made up my mind. I'm going. There's no time. He crouches. He goes under the chair on all fours. He shoves the rest of the pens and pencils he took from the desk under the carpet. He kisses and licks the fuzzy little tassels of the carpet. Forgive me, my friend, please, forgive me for everything, I didn't want to hit you, I burned your beautiful face for those dirty plates. You went and shot straight into your mouth. Does one feel the taste of bullets in one's mouth? A current of air ripples the tassels of the carpet like grass. He gets up. He throws his bag over his shoulder. He sadly looks at his fur coat and scarf swaying on the coat rack. He puts on his fur coat and wraps himself with the scarf you gave him. Which shop in Paris did you get it from? The shop is probably called "Blue Peace" or "Crocodile Heart." Lying in bed at night, he imagines the display windows of the shop and the saleswoman whose face looked like it had been scratched up with the tip of a thick nail. From one of the shops in Paris, you picked out a scarf for me, a s c a r f, with your delicate fingers. In the dark, it's as if the word flies out of your mouth. It has entered my mouth, it has opened my mouth, and with my mouth it is

drawing the scarf that was knitted in another country and exudes the maddening scent of your skin. The excitement makes the palms of your hands sweat. Thump, th-thump, thump, thump. The heart. Courage is needed to listen to the beats of the heart in the dark. You want to drink. He reaches under the bed. His fingers rub against Bird's whiskers. He gently strokes the nose of the cat for a long time, then he somehow finds the bottle, picks it up, puts it to his mouth, and, contracting the muscles in his face, slowly chugs it down. Your fingers rest on my shoulder blades, because I sleep on my stomach to begin our dialogue, and very often I pretend, like you, to be sleeping so that you hold my back with your gentle hand, so that your lips lightly press on my shoulder and quiver with your dreamy breathing. Sky-blue lip lines turned dark red with excitement. Your tongue glides over the edges of your lips, wetting the dry heat. Hold the tip of your tongue with your teeth and thrust it into my mouth. To steal your tongue, to take it between my lips, to feel its sharp presence. One strap of your black bra has slipped down your shoulder and fallen on your thin sparkling gold fuzzy arm. You rub against the strap of her bra with your nose and lightly nibble her arm with a quaver. Don't you wake up, don't you come out of that sweet slumber. I don't want to hurt you with my shameless presses, but I know that you're not sleeping, because your cheek slowly caresses the pillow softly. You wait for my nightly surprise attacks, you wait with crafty hints. Suddenly you envelop my back with your legs, pull your short nightgown to your hips and roll like a cat, embracing my body. The warm current that flows between your legs burns my thighs. And I dream that any minute now you will simply take off your nightgown, that any minute now you will finally remove from your body that final silky gauze that separates us, and you know that I'm waiting for you to

suddenly kiss my neck around dawn in your wakeful sleep, for your tongue to stick out through your lips and prick my skin like a little fish nose, and for everything to start all over again under the first droplets of sun shining through the window. But you continue to rub against the corner of the pillow. Her shiny black nipple, covered with tiny little glands, whose tip you gently hold between your incisors and stroke with your tongue, massaging it endlessly. The heat of your palate fills her breast. She's moaning intensely, digging her fingers in your hair, and pressing your head down with her other hand, she pushes her breast deeper into your mouth. The room becomes permeated with the semi-sweet scent of your naked and lone bodies. It was only inside of her that you could forget about your presence; it was inside of her that you could make your own body disappear; it was through her kindness and moisture that you could come to yourself. Irises swallowed by the whites of the eyes. They already sparkle on the distant horizon. Deep, deep penetration. The throbbing of pleasant pain. With sweet thrusts. It penetrated deeply, so deeply that there was a new beginning after that, a new space, a new meaning, so deeply that for a moment happiness was almost attainable, palpable and found, so deeply that death and separation seemed unattainable then. There was as much silence inside of him as there was inside of a house that had been abandoned a long time ago. You would succumb to the craze of return and that escape was her only light, which was surrendered to you as a last chance, a willful surrendering pull, a confession not uttered in a long time. You leave the bed. She sits on the carpet. You stand over her head and look at the dark cleavage separating her breasts. She starts to move her breasts with her palms, back and forth, taking long breaks. She squeezes them. She pushes them together. And you have bent over almost breathlessly, you are stroking her shady

hair draped over her shoulder blades with your mouth and cheeks, carefully, trying not to touch her skin, and then you hold her back, and then you kiss her fragile shoulders, and then you lie on your back, and then she comes to you, very slowly, slowly; slowly; your expectation is so impatient that your skin tingles, and she knows that you can never bear it and she uses it to her advantage, turning seconds into centuries, her nipples sticking out before her breasts, which descend down the back of your neck, drawing singular lines with their tips all the way to the end of your median furrow, and ascend again. You feel the breasts entering your body, and they like each of the layers of your body, then the breasts move through you, break open your rib cage, and burst out. Now you can feel her breasts on your body, you can feel her hips, her groin, her thighs, her knees, her lips, the ankles of her feet, the thin, thin veins going through her ankles.

You probably walked down Flaubert's streets in Paris and felt my impatient and wet tongue play from your neck to your mouth. Now I've wrapped the scarf you gave me around my throat, and with my bag over my shoulder I stand frozen between the desks: tell me, what should I do? I don't know, but you have a colleague you're not saying goodbye to. You hate that person. His haircut. The way he sits. His accent. The artificial hiss under his breath every five minutes. His everyday presence. For a moment today, you wonder what the mole on your cheek looks like from where he's sitting: does it look big or small? Does he cast a brief glance at your face? What does he think of the pocks on your cheeks? Will he know that those are leftover traces from chickenpox? Chickenpox. The end of a daydream. Little green dots. The sun is a little green dot. Each one has its own character. No little green dot feels pain

the same way. At night they itch like crazy. I want to scratch my skin off with my nails. My mother hugs me. Where did you get that much strength from? You've turned into a skeleton. You're tired of waiting for your husband. Don't give yourself hope, the war will go on for a long time, and you, you coward, you don't have the courage to betray your husband. You forgot to wash your hands. The smell of spilled oil from the pipes of the heater wafts from your fingers. Jeans-wearing woman quickly tapping heater pipes. Are you playing mother? Under the flickering light of the lamp you resemble an old sallow woman. Your skin hangs from your cheeks like the withered skin of a peach. You're holding me in your arms. My temple is leaning against your rib cage where once upon a time one could feel two triangular breasts for which you can no longer find fitting bras. You push the balcony door with your foot. We get out into the clean air. You somehow stop me. Lean against the balcony balustrade. You say, look at how pretty the lights of the street lanterns are. You stand behind me and blow with all your might so that my burning back cools down a little—whooooooooooooosh, whooooooooooooosh, the burn intensifies. I can't take it anymore. I try to get on the balcony balustrade. Throw myself down. You grab my sides terrified, you pull me towards you and hold me tight. Let go of me! How beautifully the light that flows out of the little lanterns ripples! I want to catch the movements in the air with my mouth. Dense green suns, one by one stamped on my face with care. You're not leaving. You have fallen asleep next to me. Coward. Who told you to get pregnant and warm up your protruding belly in the sun every day? Now you're not sleeping. I know. You've supposedly closed your eyes. For show. You gave birth to me with your eyes closed out of fear; chicken's pox. Instead of preventing the doctor from slapping my behind, you were howling in

labor pains. At least the doctor slapped fair and square, without gloves. And my first word, without anyone asking me, without my permission, was a terrifying screech born from the pain of the slap that had been given me. Two little dots on my eyelids; the tips of my lashes are steeped in green algae; green world.

Bird has jumped on the bed and is lying at my feet meowing restlessly. He takes a burning cigarette out of his mouth and tries to put it in the cat's mouth. It turns its head. It doesn't want it. Then he puts his hand under the bed again. There should be another bottle. Suddenly his fingers rub against a familiar and disgusting bald spot. It's impossible. My God. It's the commander again. He shakes his body and tries to call for help, and through the half-open door of his room he sees the contortions of his own terrified face, his mute mouth opening and closing in weightlessness, and his mouth's resilient movements in a vacuum. Drops of cognac slowly flow down the edges of his lips. He tries to strain his consciousness, tries to understand whether anyone in the house can hear that terrifying screech leaving his throat or whether it's him, only him who can hear his own screech. The commander breathes steadily. The air blowing out of his nostrils burns. I've been discharged for a while now, you hear? Leave me alone, commander! What do you want, you son of a bitch? Every night you come and hide under my bed and scatter my brain with the chain in your hand. But your chain doesn't hurt me anymore. Flog the corpse as much as you want. I neither have flesh nor blood. Are you that stupid, you still don't get it, you deformed miscarriage? Don't you understand that your beatings now are completely meaningless? You're nothing outside of the military base, you one-legged scarecrow planted in a field! Impotent. Back then, in your room, you hit me so much that the skin on my face, my

nose, my mouth, my chin shattered, then you made me sweep up every piece of my face one by one, and splitting your sides with laughter, you said, take it to the open window and let the wind carry it away. You bequeathed me an eternal pastime after my discharge, commander! Now I stand by the window all day looking out for hours and I make up facial features in the rising wind that turn into sharp shards, glide away, and get lost in a cloud of dust. But, do you remember, commander, how you scratched up my face with your teeth? You turned everything on its head. The boys were saying that you supposedly sharpened your row of gold teeth with an electric sharpener every morning. They were probably joking or maybe they were telling the truth. I didn't feel any pain, commander, it's just that the more you hit my head, the deeper my inner emptiness and sadness grew. Every hit on my head taught me how to think, taught me how to remember again and go, leaving my body behind under your shoes. He tightly closes his mouth with both hands. He clenches his teeth and presses his fingers together so that through no crack, through no narrow passage, your spit, your disgusting spit, will bound into my mouth. During the morning formation, in the motionless silence, I couldn't hold in my friend's wonderful mime jokes and I chuckled, and I didn't know that for laughing I would have to pay with my mouth for two years, I didn't know that my laugh would be my mouth's last goodbye. When you dragged me into your room, closed the door, and started to break my body with dull and rhythmic strikes, at that moment the strikes seemed so real to me, so angry and blunt that I experienced them as an important acquisition to what had been missing from my body all these years—as an honest flattery. But you moved to my mouth. My mouth was what you needed. You laughed with this trap, didn't you, birth of a whore? This is the trap you couldn't shut,

wasn't it, soldier? Now watch me shut it! I have to fight for you, lay down my life, hold up a homeland for a motherfucker like you, so that you can't control your trap? Foaming stream with popping white bubbles. Slowly, very slowly, from your blood-gushing cheeks, which will later glitter in a sad wooden box in the middle of your living room like a little isle veiled with makeup. You couldn't hold your laugh during the morning formation. Your friend Zizu's face contorted and changed with such improbable flexibility into different moods and conditions that not laughing would simply equal to not breathing. The commander holds your throat with one hand and with the fingers of the other hand he squeezes your jaw, trying to open your mouth. The pressure of his fingers makes the corners of your lips crack open. Your mouth opens up. You move your head from side to side, shaking uncontrollably. You are struck against the floor with your temple and the top of your forehead. The commander gathers up a good swill of saliva and spits straight into your mouth. Suddenly you start to laugh, laugh, laugh hysterically with cackles and snorts. Your chest thunders and your legs point straight up into the air. Somehow confused by the surprise, the commander grabs you by the hair and starts to beat your head against the floor. Your laugh becomes even more intense. The dull and inescapable roar thudding against the walls of the room is reborn. The commander starts to erratically sputter in your face. Then he closes your mouth with the palm of his hand. Shut up, asshole, shut up! Are you trying to call the cops on me? You want me to kill you, is that what you want? His palm has embalmed your mouth. Now your laugh fills up inside. It finds its own way. It goes to a place you've never been. It laughs for silence, modestly rejoicing at itself. Before going to the army, your mother would tell you what a beautiful soldier you'd make. Now she won't even look at my

face. We speak with our shoulders. I stand in front of the mirror for hours and comb my hair with a little comb, my hair is not visible, or, more precisely, I don't see myself, I positively realize that I don't see. I don't exist and I realize the realization that I don't exist, it seems as if I have existed and I do exist, but you can't see that I have existed and I do exist, it seems as if it's the comb that's grooming my hair, but without a comb and without hair. I point my finger at the mirror where a young man stands, but without a finger and without a young man—I'm simply a blind spot. Shame on you, you little whore. You've dragged your heavy stars, you've come after a dead man. Why did you come? What do you want? Do you have amnesia? And now you come after your discharged soldiers? Did you open a corpse factory? I'm looking for a job, if there's a vacancy, I'd love to work there. But why do you slither every day and lie under my bed? Doesn't your wife like you either? I know, you're one of those tough old boys used to fields and soil, facing your face up to space. Don't you have a home and a wife, don't you have soldiers to violate anymore? What do you want from me? I already know where you live and I quit my job, because I've already saved up all my money for a gun, beeeeeeeeeee caaaaaaaaareful veeeeeeeeeeery caaaaaaaaareful, commander, IIIIIIIIIII will shoooooooooooooooooot straight into your forehead, I'm not afraaaaaaaaaaaaaaid. I keep a knife under my pillow now. I'm serious. I'll turn on the light and cut your throat or call my mother. You don't know my mother very well. If she comes, she'll kick the life out of you, and don't you ever touch Bird again. You hear? Bird is not one of the boys you knew. It doesn't have a mouth. Instead of coming and making coffee even just once and talking about our service, the military tactics of the enemy, the fate of the army, your glorious past, I think you've accomplished quite a few heroic feats, no, or did

For a twenty-eight-year-old young man who returned from the army several years ago but has yet to reacclimatize to ordinary life, every step, gesture, word, and vision is a revelation, which takes him back to the beginning, to a time when reality had lost its shape, and turned into a new and imperceptible world. In his imagination, he embodies a number of different characters, he feels the presence of his girlfriend again, and remembers friends from his childhood and from the army, who are now gone.

This is a book of questions, and the answers to these questions are to be found by the reader. The novel is like a puzzle which needs to be pieced together, and the picture is not complete until the last piece is in place, until the last word of the book has been read.



Aram Pachyan is an acclaimed writer from the new generation, who writes fiction and non-fiction, and has won several awards and prizes, including the honorable Presidential Prize for Literature in Armenia. His first novel, *Goodbye, Bird* became a national bestseller in 2012 and is still at the top of the charts for bestselling literature.

Aram Pachyan was born on March 19, 1983, in Vanadzor, Armenia, into a family of medical professionals. From 1999 to 2004 he studied at the law department of Yerevan State University. His work was published for the first time in 2007, and later his stories were printed in various local literary periodicals and literary magazines. Currently he works as a journalist and columnist for the *Hraparak* newspaper, as well as hosting a radio program and being the author of a literary series.

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