

[...] For many years a plumber lived in our apartment. This was known to be a fact, although no one had ever seen him, but the children who misbehaved and ran screaming through the corridor were threatened that he would jump out at any moment and eat them [...] Once, when it had already got quite cold and it was necessary to check the heat, we were visited by three grease-covered men with wrenches in their hands who demanded that we tell them where the plumber was located. Uncle Misha, who was the chief tenant responsible for the apartment, pointed to the door where the plumber supposedly lived. The door was locked. The grease-covered men were on duty and they had to start up the heat, and since the chief tenants and witnesses were present, it was decided to break down the door, and this was done in an instant.

There was no plumber in the room. The men with the wrenches left, but all those who had entered with Uncle Misha couldn't regain their wits for a long time and stood still, transfixed, looking around in amazement.

The entire room, from floor to ceiling, was filled with heaps of different types of garbage. But this wasn't a disgusting, stinking junkyard like the one in our yard or in the large bins near the gates of our building, but rather a gigantic warehouse of the most varied things, arranged in a special, one might say carefully maintained, order. Flat things formed a pyramid in one corner, all types of containers and jars were placed in appropriate boxes along the walls. In between hanging bunches of garbage stood some sort of shelving, upon which myriad boxes, rags and sticks were set out in strict order ... Almost all the shelves where these things were placed were accurately labelled, and each item had a five- or six-digit number glued on it and a label attached to it from below. There were also lots of things – piles of paper, manuscripts – on a big table standing in the middle of the room, but these didn't have numbers or labels on them yet ... Chief tenant Uncle Misha bent over one of the manuscripts and read 'Garbage' (an article):

Garbage

Usually, everybody has heaps of accumulated piles of paper under their table and their desk, magazine and telephone notices which stream into our homes each day. Our home literally stands under a paper rain: magazines, letters, addresses, receipts, notes, envelopes, invitations, catalogues, programmes, telegrams, wrapping paper, and so forth. These streams, waterfalls of paper, we periodically

sort and arrange into groups, and for every person these groups are different: a group of valuable papers, a group for memory's sake, a group of pleasant recollections, a group for every unforeseen occasion – every person has their own principle. The rest, of course, is thrown out on the rubbish heap. It is precisely this division of important papers from unimportant that is particularly difficult and tedious, but everyone knows it is necessary, and after the sorting everything is more or less in order until the next deluge.

But if you don't do these sortings, these purges, and you allow the flow of paper to engulf you, considering it impossible to separate the important from the unimportant – wouldn't that be insanity? When is that possible? It is possible when a person honestly doesn't know which of these papers is important and which is not, why one principle of selection is better than another, and what distinguishes a pile of necessary papers from a pile of garbage.

A completely different correlation arises in his consciousness: should everything, without exception, before his eyes in the form of an enormous paper sea, be considered to be valuable or to be garbage, and then should it all be saved or thrown away? Given such a relationship, the vacillations in making such a choice become agonizing. A simple feeling speaks about the value, the importance of everything. This feeling is familiar to everyone who has looked through or rearranged his accumulated papers: this is the memory associated with all the events connected to each of these papers. To deprive ourselves of these paper symbols and testimonies is to deprive ourselves somewhat of our memories. In our memory everything becomes equally valuable and significant. All points of our recollections are tied to one another. They form chains and connections in our memory which ultimately comprise the story of our life.

To deprive ourselves of all this means to part with who we were in the past, and in a certain sense, it means to cease to exist.

But on the other hand, simple common sense tells us that, with the exception of important papers, memorable postcards and other letters which are dear to the heart, the rest is of no value and is simply rubbish [...] But where does this view come from, cast from the sidelines onto our papers? Why must we agree with this detached view and allow it to determine the suitability or uselessness of these things? Why must we look at our past and not consider it our own, or what is worse, reproach or laugh at it?

Yes, but who can, who has the right to look at my life from the outside, even if that other is me? Why should common sense be stronger than my memories, stronger than all the moments of my life which are attached to these scraps of paper which now seem funny and useless?

Here, of course, one might object that these memories exist only for me, while for others who don't know my memories, these papers are simply trash.

Yes, but why do I have to part with my memories; memories that are contained in such a state of scrap that externally they resemble garbage?

I don't understand this.

Grouped together, bound in folders, these papers comprise the single uninterrupted fabric of an entire life, the way it was in the past and the way it is now. And though inside these folders there appears to be an orderless heap of pulp, for me there is an awful lot in this garbage, almost everywhere. Moreover, strange as it seems, I feel that it is precisely the garbage, that very dirt where important papers and simple scraps are mixed and unsorted, that comprises the genuine and only real fabric of my life, no matter how ridiculous and absurd this may seem from the outside.

Uncle Misha raised his head and, bewildered, looked around the small room. He saw his neighbours swarming in the diverse garbage. He mechanically went up to the shelf where brown folders were tightly packed together, the kind that are usually used for files in book-keeping departments. He pulled out one of these at random and read: 'Garbage Novel', volume XIX. It consisted of carefully bound pieces of paper on which were glued the most diverse nonsense – receipts, envelopes, simple scraps of paper or cardboard, string, etc. Under each scrap there was a number, and above it an asterisk.

Uncle Misha glanced at the back of the book, and saw that the last pages were devoted to commentaries on these scraps of rubbish. So, there was a note corresponding to the tram ticket under No. 8 that read: 'I went to Maria Ignatievna's with things. It was raining and I didn't have a raincoat, I left it at home.' A needle, glued, along with a thread, under No. 48, corresponded to this commentary: 'I found this on 17 February under the table, but I didn't need it any more'... Uncle Misha began to understand what was happening around him. Now, going up to the large bundles of old boots, tin cans and similar junk hanging on long ropes attached to a nail which was driven deep into the wall, he could already guess what might be written on the white square tied to each of these things.

These were also commentaries: under a pair of old shoes was written, 'I took these from Nikolai last year but I didn't return them, I forgot for some reason ...'; under an old rusty can which contained sprats in tomato sauce was this: 'Volodya and I had lunch last year when he was passing through on his way from Voronezh.' For some reason the chief tenant felt not quite himself. He looked around. There was no one left in the room but him. The tenants of the communal apartment, apparently not considering the affairs of the other tenants to be interesting enough, had wandered back to their own corners. The chief tenant also decided to leave quickly, especially since it was getting dark, and less and

less light was penetrating the dusty, though large window of the room. But near the door, struggling through dozens of cardboard boxes filled with innumerable papers, documents, certificates and the like, he found one on which was scribbled: 'Book of Life', volumes XVIII-XXVI. He again stopped near an enormous pile of manuscripts. Having decided to satisfy his curiosity for the last time, Uncle Misha again took out his glasses, leaned over and read the following:

A Dump

The whole world, everything which surrounds me here, is to me a boundless dump with no ends or borders, an inexhaustible, diverse sea of garbage. In this refuse of an enormous city one can feel the powerful breathing of its entire past. This whole dump is full of twinkling stars, reflections and fragments of culture: either some kind of book, or a sea of magazines with photographs and texts, or things once used by someone ... An enormous past rises up behind these crates, vials and sacks; all forms of packaging which were ever needed by man have not lost their shape, they did not become something dead when they were discarded. They cry out about a past life, they preserve it ... And this feeling of a unity of all of that past life, and at the same time this feeling of the separateness of its components, gives birth to an image ... It's hard to say what kind of image this is ... maybe an image of some sort of camp where everything is doomed to perish but still struggles to live; maybe it's an image of a certain civilization slowly sinking under the pressure of unknown cataclysms, but in which nevertheless some sort of events are taking place. The feeling of vast, cosmic existence encompasses a person at these dumps; this is by no means a feeling of neglect, of the perishing of life, but just the opposite – a feeling of its return, a full circle, because as long as memory exists that's how long everything connected to life will live.

... But still, why does the dump and its image summon my imagination over and over again, why do I always return to it? Because I feel that man, living in our region, is simply suffocating in his own life among the garbage since there is nowhere to take it, nowhere to sweep it out – we have lost the border between garbage and non-garbage space. Everything is covered up, littered with garbage – our homes, streets, cities. We have no place to discard all this – it remains near us.

I see all of life surrounding me as consisting of only garbage. Since it just moves from place to place, it doesn't disappear. In the entrance to our building, a person goes downstairs with the garbage pail, losing half of its contents along the way, and he himself can't quite understand where and why he was carrying it, and he throws away the pail, having never reached his goal... And this merging of the two spaces – the place from which garbage must be taken, and the place to which it must be taken – this kind of 'unity of oppositions' which they told us

**The whole world, everything
which surrounds me here, is to me
a bonp**

dump with no ends
or borders, an inexhaustible,
diverse sea of garbage.

**In this refuse of an enormous
city one can feel the powerful
breathing of its entire past.**

**This whole
dump is full of
twinkling**

**stars,
reflections
and fragments
of culture.**

about when we were still in school, acts as a real unity. How does a building site differ from a rubbish heap? The building across the street has been under construction for eighteen years already, and it is impossible to tell it apart from the ruins of the other buildings which they took down in order to build this new one. This new one, which for a long time now has been a ruin in which some men occasionally swarm about, may at some point be finished, although they say that the blueprints are very outdated and have been redone many times and it even seems that they have been lost, and the first floor is flooded with water ... Looking at it, it is difficult to understand whether it is being built or torn down, and it may be both at the same time ...

Of course, one may look at the whole unity from an optimistic point of view. A dump not only devours everything, preserving it forever, but one might say it also continually generates something: this is where some kinds of shoots come from new projects, ideas, a certain enthusiasm arises, hopes for the rebirth of something, though it is well-known that all of this will be covered with new layers of garbage. [...]

Ilya Kabakov, 'The Man Who Never Threw Anything Away' (Moscow, c. 1977); first published in English in *Ilya Kabakov: Ten Characters* (London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1989); reprinted in Boris Groys, David. A. Ross, Iwona Blazwick, *Ilya Kabakov* (London: Phaidon Press, 1998) 99–103.