Dark Ghost in the Corner:
Imagining Ukrainian – Canadian Identity

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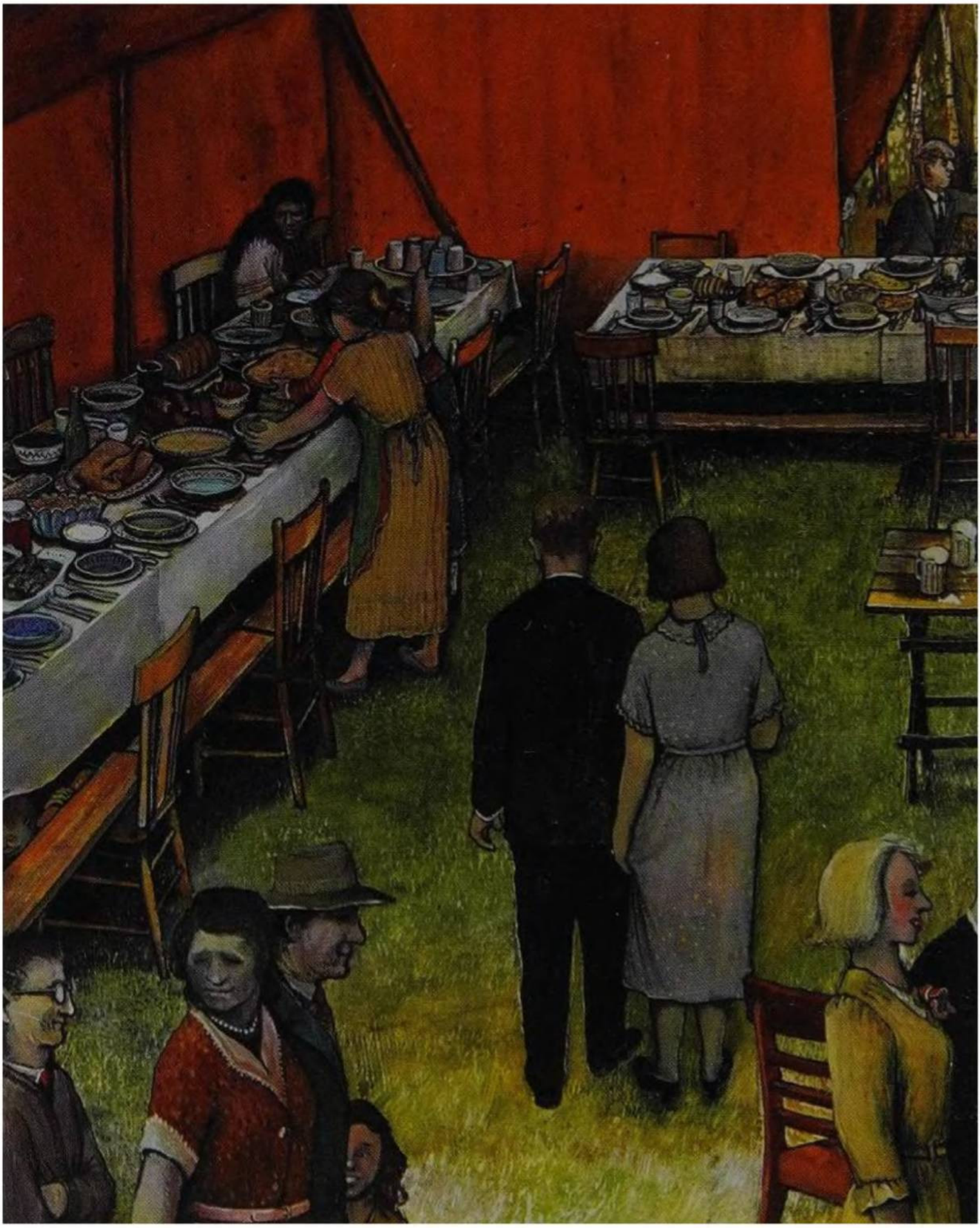
DINNER
$5.00



Preceding page image:
Natalka Husar
Heritage Display, 1985
oil on canvas
191h x 124w cm.
collection of Canadian Museum
of Civilization, Ottawa

William Kurelek
Manitoba Party, 1964
(detail)
oil on masonite
121.9h x 152.6w cm.
collection of National Gallery of Canada.
Courtesy of The Isaacs Gallery, Toronto

1. Serendipity

I am, let me confess, addicted to that irrepressible cultural phenomenon, the yard sale, whose patron saint or tutelary deity is Serendipity. When my children groan about my addiction, I stoutly defend my purchases as items necessary for the well-being, aesthetic or practical, of the household; when my husband complains about the assorted glasses, plates, chairs, bookshelves, mugs, baskets and other random treasures I lug home, I remind him that, according to *Globe and Mail* columnist Heather Mallick, cars are knicknacks, too. In any case, I regularly succumb to our neighbourhood's various yard sales of the century, and thus it was on a summery Saturday morning, not long ago, that I found myself ambushed by a sale at the house across the road. There on the grass, propped up against a hideous table lamp and a damaged crock pot, was a block-mounted poster from our National Gallery. Even from across the road I could recognize the painting reproduced on the poster as a Kurelek: crouching beside it, I saw that its title was "Manitoba Party." My neighbour explained that she had bought the poster ages ago, at an exhibition in Ottawa; the original had featured in a grand retrospective on Canadian art. I did not ask her why she was getting rid of the poster—that is against yard sale etiquette. Perhaps it was because the colours had faded, or the shrink-wrap over the board had wrinkled and torn in places. Perhaps the poster had been hanging so long in the recreation room or kitchen that she and her family had ceased to see it anymore.

I refused to haggle over the five-dollar price for the poster: what I wanted, at all costs, was to rescue this Kurelek—even a reproduction of a Kurelek—from the indignity of being put out, along with other unsaleable items, in the next week's trash. Months later, at the 2004 Toronto Art Fair, I sighed over three small original illustrations by Kurelek mounted together for the asking price of a cool $30,000. On that yard sale Saturday, however, I was happy to march off with my five-dollar purchase under my arm. I ended up hanging it between two snowshoes, on an empty wall in our cottage. And it was only when I was hanging the poster that I looked at it closely enough to make out a detail that arrested and then propelled me along a line of thought connecting ethnicity, identity and belonging, and which became the genesis of this essay.

"Manitoba Party" was painted in 1964, three years before Canada's centennial, and thirteen years before the painter's creator died prematurely of cancer. Using oil paints and pencil, Kurelek has covered a large canvas with a complex image at once festive—a celebration of material success in a land of plenty—and funereal. In a cleared field edged by a thick growth of green-leaved birch, a huge orange tent has been pitched, its flaps pinned up to make an opening echoed by a smaller arch across from it, as if the painter were at pains to show that for every entrance we make there is an exit awaiting us. The tent is so large that the canvas cannot contain it: we must imagine the very top and the full reach of its sides. Smack in the middle of the painting, cutting it nearly in half, is a thick grey pole, tapered like a tree trunk. Two oil lamps are suspended from its cross pieces; directly behind this

pole we must infer, completely hidden behind the first, another towering grey pole, since we see its cross piece hung with an identical though smaller set of lamps, as the laws of perspective decree.

What we notice first in "Manitoba Party" is the wonderfully abundant life the painting captures, a life as profusely and magically detailed as in any canvas by the Flemish master Brueghel who so profoundly influenced William Kurelek. Yet while what usually strikes us in Brueghel's festive scenes is the animation of the people depicted—they are laughing, dancing, kissing, kicking, peeing against fences, playing all manner of games, both grown-up and childish—what catches our attention as we view "Manitoba Party" is the stillness of the people, who seem to be frozen in their poses and gestures. This is true even of the bunch of unruly children in the right hand corner of the canvas. One boy, the biggest of the bunch, is pulling the hair of two startled girls while another girl, in a polka-dot dress, covers her head with her hands to protect herself from the bully—though she seems to be smiling, as if his actions are more attentive than aggressive. A girl with straw-coloured braids looks on and a boy in a sailor suit and with a Buster Brown haircut looks away. He is trapped between the bully and his victims. And then there are the dancing boy and girl —he with a paper crown on his head, she with a rose in her hair.

None of these children looks older than fourteen or so—none of them possesses anything like beauty or grace, though their arrested energy is astonishing, especially when contrasted with the cluster of people at the extreme right of the picture—grownups except for a boy of sixteen or so, his hair scrupulously parted down the middle, the points of his white shirt collar show-

ing over his sweater. His only transgression is to be peering; to be almost but not quite pushing ahead of the other people lining up to greet the hosts of the party—as if he is looking for some friend, perhaps a sweetheart whom he has spotted in the crowd that we can imagine just behind our own shoulders. For it is part of the genius of this painting to make its viewers feel themselves to be guests at the party, guests waiting to make their way into this strangely suspended, symbolical world.

The world Kurelek has created for us here is a strictly patterned one, almost compulsively balanced: a conspicuous gap is counterpoised by a cluster of guests, while the party's hosts are flanked on the one hand, by a band of five musicians (sax and squeezebox, two fiddles and a dulcimer) and on the other, by a family group: mother and father, small girl and smaller boy, and a grown-up son. The latter is decked out in a sports jacket and glasses, as if he were a college student, someone angling for another walk of life than that of his parents, who are obviously farm people in their Sunday best. The mother's face looks grey, her eyes are closed against the sun, her pearl necklace gleams a little spookily against the darkness of her throat. She is the exact opposite of the fair-haired lady with a peach-coloured, prettily-made-up face and fashionable ankle-strap shoes. The lady holds the hand of her similarly fair-haired little daughter, and looks on as her husband—shopkeeper? bank manager? local doctor?—shakes the hand of a grey-haired woman in an emerald dress and what look to be coral beads or *korali* round her neck and dangling from her wrist as her ample hand is shaken. Her son?—is she widowed?—boasts an ample head of dark hair and a dashing

moustache as he gestures towards the feast that awaits us: mugs of foaming beer poured from two great barrels; three giant tables loaded with bread and pickles, roast chickens, platters of *varenyky*, dishes of *holubtsi*, roasts of beef. Crowning the plenty are bowls of *smetana* and pots of *borshch* to fill the soup dishes laid out for the appreciative guests.

It is part of the joy of looking at, of 'reading' this painting, to register the details and find the surprises the painter has cached for us, should we be patient enough to dig them out. Look out for the boy hiding under one of the tables, poised to gobble a piece of red fruit he has filched from the platters. Or the lovely young mother holding her small child who presses his blond head against her cheek. Observe the way she gestures, madonna-like, with her free arm, thumb and index-finger extended, to the empty grass carpeting the ground. In the background of the painting you can make out what looks like a many-candled birthday cake half-hidden by one of the poles holding up the tent. It must be an anniversary cake in honour of the couple at the head table, a vigorous-looking dark-haired man with suspenders, and a rose pinned to his shirt—perhaps the grandfather of the dashing man greeting the guests—and at the old man's side, a grey-haired woman, her hair in a bun and a larger corsage adorning her dress.

Who is the woman in grey with her back to us, betraying her nervousness, or the strangeness of finding herself in her Sunday clothes in the middle of a field, by pulling at the edge of her dress, her whole body trying to fold into that of her black-suited husband? Can we assume, from the gleam of white collar and cuffs that he might be the priest who will bless the meal before everyone

sits down to feast? Whose hand is it that mysteriously grasps that of a dark man with a long shock of hair, standing next to a beautiful woman with long dark hair and lips as red as her dress? She plays with her gleaming beads and gives a Mona Lisa smile as she pushes a young girl in blue towards the heaped-up table.

What a plenitude is offered us by this celebratory conjuration of ethnicity—for though the word "Ukrainian" does not appear in the title of this work, the kind of food served and musical instruments played invite the knowledgeable viewer to identify these revellers as Ukrainian-Canadians. It is the Canadian portion of that identity which is privileged in this painting, though: these partygoers are worlds away from the ancestors whom Kurelek portrayed in his series *The Ukrainian Pioneer*, those who weathered-over brutal winters in their sod huts or *burdei*, and walked impossible distances between their land and the cities where they went to find work, thus permitting their families to barely survive before triumphant crops of golden wheat—as shown in the last picture of Kurelek's series—could be realized. It would appear that, as a crowning gift to these Manitoba revellers, the dark, crowded, terrified old world of their originary homeland has ceased to exist for them, even in memory.

Or has it? I have described this painting as festive, but also as funereal in effect—haunted and haunting. I argue this partly because of the spell the guests at this party seem to be under, with their frozen gestures—even the boy with his stolen fruit is merely holding it to his lips, and has yet to take a bite. Partly, because the sight of so many places laid at the table with so few people sitting down to eat makes me think of the custom at Christmas Eve, or

Sviat Vechir, of setting a place for the dead. And partly—mostly—because of one errant figure in this canvas, someone as out of place at this celebration as an evil fairy at a christening. If you look closely, you will see her—a dark woman sitting at the far end of one of the long tables on the left of the canvas, her hands clutching the cloth. She is the sole figure in this work to be wearing clothing that stamps her unhyphenated Ukrainianness indelibly and unambiguously upon our eyes: a *vyshyvana sorochka* or embroidered shirt, a sheepskin vest or *kyptar*, its fringed fleece trickling like tar onto the shoulder of her shirt, and a dark *hustyna* or headscarf worn low on her brow and cutting into the edges of her face.

Who is she, why is she here? The woman, who is neither old nor young, is looking over her shoulder; her face seems contorted with suffering. Her skin is corpse-grey, the bones of her face as pronounced as those of a famine victim. Is she a witch, did she creep from the depths of the impenetrable forest which hedges-in the tent? She looks over her shoulder, but she is also turning away from the other guests, from the bright plenty all around her. Is she the muse of the children fighting in the corner of the painting—a reminder of the bullying that, as Kurelek's autobiography describes, poisoned his early schooldays and darkened his understanding of human behaviour? Or is this *babunia* meant to have symbolic, even allegorical force? Is she a *memento mori*, a reminder to all the celebrants that after even the most carefree of idylls, death awaits each one of us? Or is she a symbol of that abandoned world and its attendant miseries, a world that has died away, died back, so that these partygoers in Manitoba, so prosperous and well-fed and nicely-dressed, the men in their lace-up shoes, the

women with their nylon stockings, may enjoy a confidence and security their ancestors in the old country could never dream of? Is she perhaps Ukraine itself, the lengthy tragedy of its history, the almost interminable suffering of its people? Perhaps what she bodies forth is the old country that haunts the new, a stark reminder of all those who did not make the crucial journey out, whether for lack of money or imagination or courage, or lack of the heart to abandon their homeland to make an easier life in a new land.

2. KOBZAR

I want to make a detour now, to introduce another, less idiosyncratic symbolic figure connected with Ukraine and its cultural distinctness. It is a masculine figure, this time—the kobzar:

> In Ukrainian, the word literally means minstrel. The Kobzars were the wandering folk bards who performed a large repertoire of epic-historical, religious and folk songs while playing a Kobzar or Bandura. They first became popular in the 15th century and for over 400 years they brought the traditions of culture and storytelling to the people. . . . The word 'Kobzar' also has a Shevchenko meaning. In 1840 Shevchenko published his first collection of poems called "Kobzar," which was a collection consisting of romantic poems and major ballads and later was supplanted by more mature works. His works are so beloved that sometimes Shevchenko himself is referred to as 'the Kobzar.' Storytellers are valued in every culture. The Ukrainian people suffered a tragedy of monumental proportions when in the 1930's hundreds of these Kobzars were rounded up in Ukraine and murdered for their beliefs and way of life. It was Joseph Stalin's attempt to extinguish a thousand years of culture from a people by brutal repression but he failed because the stories carried on.

In 2003 the creation of a hefty new Canadian literary prize was announced, the Kobzar Literary Award, for a published book dealing with the stories of Ukrainian-Canadians. The definition of *kobzar* which I have just quoted is taken from the prize's webpage, set up by the Ukrainian Canadian Foundation of Taras Shevchenko. To continue in the Foundation's own words, "What the Shevchenko Foundation wants to spark is a collection of new Canadian storytellers who will become Canadian Kobzars.... The purpose of this generous prize is to tell great Canadian stories through the pens of Canadian writers. By the end of the 21st century we hope to have created a body of work worthy of many of these Canadian storytellers or Kobzars."

One of the interesting aspects of the Kobzar prize is that it is open to writers of all descents and backgrounds: the Foundation is to be congratulated for its transcultural responsiveness, for its belief that the stories of Ukrainians in Canada will fascinate and inspire writers of, for example, Japanese or Hungarian, Italian or Scottish background. And yet I find a troubling aspect to the conception of this prize, named by a Ukrainian word lodged in a centuries' old Ukrainian cultural tradition, and drenched, as the webpage reminds us, in the atrocity committed by Stalin. In the actual description of the prize, quoted above, there is no mention at all of Ukraine. You could argue that this omission is irrelevant: by "new Canadian storytellers" and "great Canadian stories" the word "Ukrainian" is, or should be, understood. After all, the website's opening page tells us "The Kobzar Literary Award will recognize outstanding contribution [sic] to Canadian literature through the author's representation of a Ukrainian-Canadian

theme." Moreover, the purpose of the Foundation's work, as stated on the website is unequivocal: "The Ukrainian Canadian Foundation of Taras Shevchenko is a national, chartered philanthropic institution providing leadership by building and nurturing a permanent endowment fund dedicated to the preservation and promotion of the Ukrainian-Canadian cultural heritage and the advancement of a flourishing Ukrainian community for the enrichment of Canada."

It could be argued, as well, that this occlusion of Ukraine is a mere discrepancy or error of omission, that the notable difference between the preliminary, background information about the Kobzar Literary Award, and the explanation of how the prize got its name points to no deliberate erasure whereby it is Canadian and not Ukrainian (nor even Ukrainian-Canadian) stories which the Foundation will reward prize-hungry writers for telling. (The question of the quality of the writing, as opposed to the value of the story told, is another matter altogether.) But let us consider—not for the sake of argument so much as the sake of imaginative integrity and historical memory—the possibility that the Kobzar prize is constructed to foil or supersede Kurelek's dark ghost in the corner; to give precedence and maximum attention to the experience of the bright, unburdened partygoers, the blessed heirs of the ones who got away.

Could this signal an important turning point, a new direction in cultural development and production by or about Canadians of Ukrainian descent, diasporic members of the multiple migrations that have taken place since the 1890s from what is now Ukraine to Canada's prairies and to its major eastern cities? Is the Kobzar prize a brave and bold attempt to cut the umbilical cord between

old and new worlds, to jettison the hyphen in the term Ukrainian-Canadian? Does it seek to establish the idea that, through many generations of Ukrainian life in Canada, an ethnic or at least cultural identity has emerged whose energy and passion are directed forwards, not backwards; to the recent or immediate here and not the faraway, originary there?

If this is indeed the nature and purpose of the Kobzar Literary Award, we are confronted with a number of urgent questions. What is to be gained—and lost—by turning the page on the appalling calamities that define even just twentieth-century Ukrainian history—the Great Famine-Terror or *Holodomor,* World War II and Chornobyl? What could be lost (and gained) by focusing exclusively on the Canadian "success" stories of *nashi*—our own Canadian-Ukrainian people—(the stories, as the Foundation website points out, of hockey stars like Bossy and Hawerchuk) or on the stories of injustice undergone by *nashi* here in Canada (most notoriously, the WWI internment camps). In what does the Ukrainianness of Canadians consist? And what can Ukrainians-from-Ukraine be expected to think of the attempts of their Canadian "cousins" to hold onto some meaningful connection to an originary country to which they are, for all intents and purposes, foreigners? Are we *nashi* to the people of *Ukraina*? And are they *nashi* for us?

I wish to explore these questions with the aid of maps drawn by two of the most important visual artists Canada has produced in recent years: William Kurelek and Natalka Husar. But before setting out on this journey, I need to furnish a brief exposition of my own experience of writing as a Ukrainian-Canadian.

3. Writing Ethnicity

When, back in the early 1980s, I started to publish my writing, I made a decision to make my name, first and foremost, as a Canadian writer—no hyphen, no ethnicity, *nada*, *niente*, *nichoho*. The last thing I wanted was to be pigeon-holed an ethnic writer of interest to no one but my fellow ethnics, that is, to other Ukrainian-Canadians. And although I published, in my first books, both short stories and poems that made no secret of my ethnicity, the books which really counted, according to the aesthetic sweepstakes of the day, were my novels —*Constellations* and *Rest Harrow*, which dealt, respectively, with the culture of Acadie on the French shore of Nova Scotia, and with Thatcherite England and current world issues, both political and environmental. It was only in mid-career, when I felt securely established as a Canadian writer, that I began to imaginatively explore what I would call the "burden" of my ethnicity in two works, a novel called *The Green Library*, and a family memoir, *Honey and Ashes*. I do not mean "burden" in a wholly negative way—after all honour, duty, love, empathy—all these weighty entities can—even must—be burdens given the nature of reality, of which, as T.S. Eliot reminds us, humankind can bear so little.

Let me define what my ethnicity means to me and what the Ukrainian part of my identity involves. One part of it has to do with core physiological and psychological factors, with heartstrings and imprinting: with certain kinds of music and dance, and artefacts like embroidery. With language too, not despite but because of the fact that my Ukrainian is rudimentary, and that though I am

fluent in French and competent in German, and can get by in traveller's Spanish and Italian, my efforts to master my mother's mother tongue have failed. This failure has been, all my life, a source of deep shame to me—a shame instilled by refugee teachers at Saturday School, or *ridna shkola*, who were carrying their own burdens, and had no time for spoiled Ukrainian-Canadian kids who stubbornly refused to use the language they were, after all, born knowing how to speak. It was only in my teens, when I was sent to St. Andrew's College for a succession of Manitoba summers, that I learned that Ukrainian was, like Latin, an inflected language: that there was a good reason why its words kept shifting shapes, and that all I had to do to change my bewilderment into understanding was to learn the rules of Ukrainian grammar.

My parents, though they often spoke Ukrainian to each other and always to their parents, never spoke it to me, having been frightened by the tentacles of McCarthyism that had spread into 1950s Canada. (Family legend has it that my older sister, whose first language was Ukrainian, was sent home from kindergarten with a note saying that if she continued to speak 'Russian' in the playground, the authorities would be notified; my father was barred from entering the United States to attend a dental convention in Detroit because, of all subversive activities, he had played violin in a Labour Temple orchestra.) One of my greatest regrets about my upbringing has to do with the chance I never had to learn to speak Ukrainian as naturally, easily and early as I did English.

Since my marriage in 1972 to an *anglik* (whose father's family has been in Canada since the 1780s and whose mother was an English war bride) and since the death of my mother's mother a

quarter of a century ago, I have had little opportunity to speak my halting Ukrainian, except for the research trips to Ukraine I conducted in 1993 and 1997. I have thought, at times, of returning to Kyiv or L'viv to do an immersion course in the Ukrainian language, but have not yet translated desire into act. My feelings, you see, are so mixed when it comes to the possibility of actually living in as opposed to visiting Ukraine. I felt so utterly foreign when I was there; so suddenly and gratefully Canadian.

And yet, when it came to the life of the imagination, it was Canada that had always seemed to me immeasurably dull, blank and dead, growing up as I did in my safe and pleasant suburb of Toronto. For it was the "old country," particularly my mother's village of Staromischyna, that was vibrantly and compellingly alive. My mother's, and my aunt's, and my grandmother's stories of life in that village on the river Zbruch, which then formed the border between Soviet Ukraine and Poland, was the stuff of dreams—and nightmares, too. It was the pressure of this remembered and imagined past that drove me to write *Honey and Ashes,* to set down the family stories before the storytellers themselves vanished into silence. It was this same pressure that made me venture to set foot in the village to which my mind's umbilical cord was tied; I say 'venture' because there were risks as well as ordinary traveller's difficulties involved: the risk that the reality would fall drastically short of the extraordinary images I had formed in my childhood.

There was a certain unwonted responsibility, too, for I felt that I was going 'back' to Staromischyna—a place I had never physically *been*—as a kind of representative and messenger from my

family, the lucky ones who had been able to escape from the impending horrors of war, deportations, forced emigration, and collectivization. I felt what Trinidadian-Canadian writer Dionne Brand attributes to V.S. Naipaul in his journey to the land of his ancestors, India: the brunt of a "discourse on ancestral estrangement and filial longing. . . . the dread of the unknown, the unfamiliar, the possibility of rejection. . . . the possibility that in fact one is unwanted back home, perhaps hated, even forgotten." (MDNR, 61)

But before I could begin to think of writing a history of family and originary place, I needed to take a more detached view of both my ethnicity and of the country I was taught in *ridna shkola* to regard as my true homeland. And this brings me to the second part of what comprises my idea and experience of ethnicity. For under the cultural markers of cuisine and costume lie the deep structures of history and memory in their public rather than private forms. In my novel *The Green Library*, I set out to try and understand the catastrophes of recent Ukrainian history: the terror and purges of the 1930s and that era's forced famine; the Nazi occupation of Ukraine and the genocidal horrors it unleashed; the obscene crime of the Chornobyl disaster and ensuing cover-up. It seemed to me that if the Ukrainian portion of my hyphenated identity were to have any meaning, it had to acknowledge and shoulder the reality of history, famously defined by James Joyce's Stephen Dedalus as a nightmare from which he was trying to awake. As a writer, I felt it obligatory to make such catastrophes better known to a Canadian reading public for whom Ukraine meant only *borshch* and cabbage rolls, vast and shining wheat fields, and pretty girls with whirling ribbons and flashing red boots.

For unlike the readers of, say, Nino Ricci's *Lives of the Saints*, for whom Italy is a well-known, if sometimes stereotyped given, most readers of *The Green Library*—or books like Myrna Kostash's *Bloodlines*—cannot be expected to know anything about the history or even presence of Ukraine in the world. My editor would keep referring, in our telephone conversations during the revision of *The Green Library*, to my character Eva's trip to "Russia," and I would have to keep correcting both his ignorance and a deeply entrenched, cultural *idée fixe*. I decided that my novel had to include some account, however cursory, of Ukrainian history, in order for my characters' struggles and dilemmas to have their full—or any—resonance. And I had to try and broach perhaps the thorniest question raised by this history, a question with long-lasting repercussions for Canadians: the vexed relations between Ukrainians and Jews. The latter—plus an examination of Polish-Ukrainian relations—is a topic to which a substantial portion of *Honey and Ashes* is devoted.

It is because Canada is a multicultural nation, and because so many New Canadians bring along, in the baggage they packed in the old world, an assortment of prejudices and hatreds, ingrown suspicions of the "other" and narrow loyalties to "their own" that I believe ethnicity must be understood and explored in its historical formation, as well as experienced through a "caravan" of sumptuous colours and textures. This is a belief fostered by my experience as a Ukrainian-Canadian living in a predominantly Polish neighbourhood of Toronto, and whose friendships over the years as writer and private person have turned out to embrace as many Jewish-as Ukrainian-Canadians. It has involved me in painful and

difficult situations, and brought me a weight of knowledge, not only of profoundly distressing events and beliefs, but also of underlying systems and structures. The latter knowledge has led me to understand, for example, that racism is not a matter of genetics, but a learned behaviour formed by political and economic conditions. Ultimately, I see this process of learning—and unlearning—as one that leads to the enrichment of our possibilities for being and remaining decent and complete human beings.

4. HYPHENS

In the preceding pages I have used the word Ukrainian-Canadian; unlike the writers of the Kobzar Literary Award webpage, I have hyphenated the term, and I would like to stop for a moment to examine the nature and function of this hyphen. What it signals, to my way of thinking, is a connecting of elements or beings that possess as many differences between them as similarities. A visual translation of just such a connection can be found in a detail from a painting by Natalka Husar entitled "Torn Heart." Whether twins or cousins or mere look-alikes, these women, embracing one another, embody an ineradicable bond linking our Canadian "here and now" to a Ukrainian "there and then"—the old country our ancestors left in the 1890s (Sifton's peasants in sheepskin coats), the 1920s and 30s (Ukrainian emigrants from post-World War I Poland), the late 1940s and early 50s (the Displaced Persons or DPs), and the 1980s and beyond (the post-Glasnost diaspora). "Torn Heart" was painted in the 1990s; in its juxtaposition of Canadian and Ukrainian, city and *selo*, pale or

well-bred imitation and suspiciously dazzling original (v. the scarlet lipstick and gold teeth), relieved guilt and helpless envy, we have the soul of hyphenation.

Whether our families came over in the 1890s or 1990s, whether we are economic refugees from a newly independent Ukraine, or the materially-successful, well-educated and long-established heirs of the wearers of sheepskin coats, the hyphen in "Ukrainian-Canadian" links us to today's and tomorrow's Ukraine as well. For as far as I know, we are still meaningfully hyphenated—there is no such thing as a Ukrainian, that is, someone of Ukrainian ancestry or heritage whose newly-achieved identity in Canada precludes a meaningful connection to that homeland which has not yet perished, as its national anthem urges us to recall. We Ukrainian-Canadians are hyphenated, not hybrids as, I would argue, the Pennsylvania Dutch may be considered to be, or India's Parsis. And while in some ways the hyphen in our identity can be as silken and soft as a ribbon, it can also act as a sliver under the skin, or as a vivid scar marking the infliction of a wound.

I realize that I am offering you an image and a reality of ethnicity, of Ukrainianness, that is a painful—though not reductively negative—complement of that celebratory ethnos we associate with festivals featuring acrobatic dancers, choirs in embroidered costumes, platters of *patochky* and *pyrohy*. These latter items are valid and valuable, but radically incomplete manifestations of our ethnicity; in some cases they have come to represent a petrified or prettified culture based on what has been called 'theme-park' Ukrainianness: postcards from the edge of a Disney-*selo* that appears largely, even utterly foreign to Ukrainians from Ukraine.

This problematic form of the celebratory component of ethnicity is not restricted to diasporic Ukrainians: as Czech writer Josef Skvorecky's Governor-General's award winning novel, *The Engineer of Human Souls* (1984), for example, shows. Thus, his émigré narrator is baffled by the performance of 'traditional' Czech folksongs and dances in church basements or cultural halls by troupes of under-rehearsed children and teenagers who have only a partial grasp of their parents' mother tongue, and whose costumes are supplemented by items never seen in the old country. These dances and songs would not be recognized as part of any living culture by the narrator's contemporaries in then-Czechoslovakia, Skvorecky argues, and this non-recognition has much less to do with the acidic work of Communism in the homeland than with the inescapable evolution and development there of a culture that has not been transplanted and isolated, however much it may have been deformed by the ideology and aesthetics of the heavy-booted State. When the hero of Skvorecky's novel—a thinly disguised version of the author himself—is finally able to return to his country of origin after years of exile, he realizes that home is neither Canada nor Czechoslovakia, but a "Bohemia" compounded of memory and imagination, a world that no longer exists except in his heart, and that will perish when he does.

Nevertheless, the psychic geography of Skvorecky's novel comprehends Canada and Czechoslovakia, however problematic this linkage proves to be. Any equally compelling and important work dealing with Ukrainians or people of Ukrainian heritage in Canada would, I believe, have to achieve some form, however

fore-or back-grounded, of such linkage. The model of ethnic identity it incorporates would have to be one that allows us to take the full measure of what Ukrainianness in Canada means and comprehends, one that pays homage to both Canada and Ukraine, to celebratory tradition and to sobering history. It would have to be a model, furthermore, that acknowledges the difference as well as the bond between these key components of identity, a difference itself marked by the slash or wound, the staple or sliver of a hyphen. This model of the Ukrainian-Canadian, I would conclude, would be one that accommodates what I have come to call "the dark ghost in the corner." To try and show you the power such a model of ethnicity can possess, I will return to the two visual artists whose maps I have already invoked: William Kurelek and Natalka Husar.

5. William Kurelek

By the time of his death in the late 1970s, William Kurelek had become a household name, not just to Ukrainian-Canadians, but also to Canadians in general and to art collectors throughout the world. The fact that his fame has been eclipsed since then by more avant-garde painters such as Harold Town, Michael Snow, Betty Goodwin, and Joyce Wieland, is, I believe, an illustration of the temporary dips and declines that artistic reputations undergo before enough time has passed to enable cultural historians and indeed, the public at large, to obtain a larger picture of a given era and a broader appreciation of artistic possibilities within that era. Then again, Kurelek's zealous Catholicism, his convert's campaign

to spread the urgent news of what his faith could offer a godless, materialistic world, has made him deeply unfashionable or suspect. And yet, the fact remains: Kurelek is a genius, his art as masterful as that of any of his contemporaries, and worthy of his great mentors—Bosch and Brueghel and van Gogh.

My serendipitous purchase of a poster-reproduction of "Manitoba Wedding" led me to a biography and autobiography of the painter: I discovered not only what a tormented man William Kurelek was, but also what a conflicted relationship he had with his parents, and through them, his Ukrainian heritage. His father's harshness and terrifyingly high expectations and his mother's inability to meet her oldest child's huge emotional needs, however much she fostered his physical well-being, seem part and parcel of what I would call the realist version of the 'old country's' village or peasant mentality, in which the family's survival is the supreme good, and tenderness, praise, manifest signs of affection and understanding are luxuries to be disavowed and devalued. I learned that Kurelek's father had frightened and fascinated his firstborn with stories of a Ukraine unbelievably brutal in its day-to-day realities and the demands it made of its children. Here is Kurelek's recollection of his father's youth:

> I can still picture him as an impressionable nine year-old helping to load soldiers' bodies on a wagon after the battle. They were easy to find in the cornfields for they left a trail of blood and trampled corn stalks after being hit. I did a drawing at the time of another of father's stories showing a greenhorn army recruit with his bowels gushing out. He'd accidentally pulled the pin of a grenade while

> boastfully explaining its operation to the assembled villagers. Still another story described a Hungarian contingent's hanging of an old woman. She was one of several villagers found with Austrian state furniture, which had been 'generously' donated by the Russians when they'd occupied the village. Her daughter, seeing her mother still kicking, tried to cut her down. That turned out to be a war crime too, so she was strung up beside her mother. Poor Ukraine had suffered so many centuries of oppression yet, when the war ended, she was once more parceled out by the big nations. . . . A peasant's life has always been hard, but after the war people had to lie, steal, cheat. Even kill, to survive. . . . (SWM, 35-6)

No wonder that in his illustrations for the book *The Ukrainian Pioneer*, the images of the ancestral village are drenched in an eerie blue-black light, with houses claustrophobically close together and people moving fearfully about. Kurelek would not set foot in his father's birthplace until long after he had traveled to Mexico, England, Ireland, Western Europe, and across Canada and the United States: this had as much to do with the difficulty of visiting communist Ukraine as with his tortured relationship with his father. In 1971, he toured Ukraine, where, amid the forced guided tours to power stations and churches-turned-museums, he was allowed a four-hour visit to his father's village of Borivtsi, in the company of two Soviet Intourist guides. He was intrigued and deeply moved by what he saw and heard: he felt, he said, that he had found his roots. When asked whether he felt Canadian or Ukrainian, he replied that it would take another visit to Borivtsi to determine the answer:

> Let the authorities let me come back to spend six weeks painting the real (to me) Ukrainian people in their day to day life, not the townspeople, the intelligentsia. . . . Let me live with these people, dress as they dress, eat their food, sleep on the peech. Let me wander freely from village to village in Bukovina. . . as van Gogh did in Holland and France. This is the real Ukraine and if it speaks louder to me than the farmlands and life of the farm people in Canada, then I will know that I am Ukrainian and not Canadian. . . . (K, 223-4.)

When, six years later, Kurelek was finally allowed to return to Ukraine in the last year of his life, the five paintings and nearly one hundred lovingly-detailed drawings he accomplished show a profound tenderness and lively delight in the traditional ways and tools of the old world, as well as a satirical thrust at the triumphs of materialism and Soviet-style technology. The illustrated text that resulted from the trip, *To My Father's Village*, shows a vastly different village world than did *The Ukrainian Pioneer*: the blue-black night, crowded with terrors and deprivations, has given way to daylight, snowy duck and geese, wonderfully green fields and forests. As the editorial text in *To My Father's Village* explains, William or Vasyl (as he sometimes called himself) Kurelek never had the chance to respond to the question of whether he felt himself to be more Canadian than Ukrainian. Yet in a poignant anecdote related in this posthumously published book, we receive an answer of sorts: it appears that Kurelek must have fainted or fallen while painting in the fields round Borivtsi. Asked whether he felt ill, Kurelek joked: "I'm all right—I'm only searching for my roots." Perhaps identity can only truthfully be achieved as a work in progress, and not as a finished product, signed and sealed.

Belonging is a matter of feeling as much as fact; an emotion that has little to do with birth certificates and residence permits. And deep emotions defy the binary oppositions of conventional wisdom and desiccated logic.

The fact remains, however, that William Kurelek came home to die: at the end, home was Canada, where his wife and children, his family and his oldest or truest friends were to be found. And Kurelek knew Canada as a place that had first punished and later rewarded—with the advent of multiculturalism—'ethnic' difference from an Anglo-Saxon 'norm.' Punished for speaking Ukrainian in his primary school, painstakingly instructing himself in the grammatical complexities of his mother tongue once in high school; guilty at having married an *anglichanna,* a wife who could not bring up their children in a Ukrainian household or teach them Ukrainian, resentful at the traditional values and stunted emotions of his peasant parents, Kurelek was highly conflicted in his response to his ethnicity. He pointed out that it was Jewish- and then Anglo-Canadians who first recognized his worth as a painter, with Ukrainian-Canadians taking some time to buy and praise his work. He painted the lives and stories of Irish- and Jewish- and Polish- as well as Ukrainian-Canadians; he illustrated the lives of the Inuit as well as those of the Guatemalan poor. His highest allegiance was to neither his Ukrainian heritage nor to the treasury of Western art, but to his God.

And yet, though he is hardly a typical Ukrainian-Canadian, his life and his life's work show possibilities for engagement with one's background, one's ethnic origins and heritage that are enlightening and extraordinary. Kurelek's power as an artist, it can

be argued, stems from his acknowledgement of the dark ghost in the corner, his efforts not to exorcise or ignore her, but to wrestle from her a sense of the roots of his being—for surely that is one interpretation of that poignant scene of the painter lying face down on the black, furrowed earth, the *chornozem* of Bukovyna. And while I am not trying to argue that the best of Kurelek's work has to do in some manifest way with his sense of Ukrainianness, I would suggest that his best work engages in both overt and highly nuanced ways with the dark ghost and the inheritance she bestowed upon him, an inheritance from which came one of Kurelek's father's favourite Ukrainian sayings: "'If you weep over the ills of the world, you will wash your eyes away'"(74, KVC). Understandably, this was advice the son refused to endorse; his vision, as an artist, was attuned to the ills as well as the joys of being human. And while he may have wept over the impact of hunger and cold on the lives of the miserably poor, his painting and drawing of those lives is remarkably clear-eyed: he will not look away, he will bear witness and respond as eloquently as his God-given talent will permit him to do.

6. NATALKA HUSAR

Kurelek died all too young, in 1976. Who has taken up the challenges he met and surmounted through his art? One answer can be found in an image that I would place next to the figures in "Manitoba Party." And while there is not a shred of evidence that it was painted as a response to Kurelek's canvas, Natalka Husar's "Heritage Display" provides a fascinating 'update' on the dark ghost and her concerns.

Instead of giving us a panoramic view of a party scene, this painter keeps us in a kind of vestibule, on the threshold of the gathering going on inside. The two older women selling tickets at the cloth-covered table—a vibrant yellow instead of the pumpkin-orange of Kurelek's tent—face us directly, unlike the figures in Kurelek's canvas. And while we might sadly reflect that the kind of festive experience on offer has lost its status as gift and become a commodity—the dinner that awaits these guests will cost them five dollars apiece—at least one of the women, the younger one, seems quite at ease with the situation. The older woman's anxious expression seems to spring from the fact that she is being observed, 'taken down' by painter and viewer alike.

What is most startling, of course, is the fact that the women seem completely unaware of an anomaly far more overt and distressing than the appearance of a dark stranger in ethnic dress in "Manitoba Party." The costumed girl in Husar's painting may be young and beautiful instead of withered by pain, but she is also hanging upside down, in defiance of the laws of gravity. Her condition is not a 'hanging' as in execution—there is something buoyantly magical in the way her ribbons refuse to join the downwards slope of beads and hair; in fact, instead of a 'hanging,' her condition might be better described as a 'hang-up' in the slang sense of obsession or pet anxiety. Does she stand-in for the painter's fascination with an almost-mythical Ukraine, or for the community's hang-up with tradition as expressed by the girl in regional (Poltavan) dress? Her hands are demurely crossed, her blue eyes wide open and her mouth shut, perhaps because her beads are in the way of her lips, or perhaps because a good

Ukrainian girl is, by definition, demure, bashful and silent unless given to innocent folk singing.

Is this *divka* or maiden upside down because she belongs to a completely different sphere or world than the large ladies with their loose dresses, permed hair and big eyeglasses? Are they meant to signify the inevitable fate of Ukrainian-Canadians: to lose the slenderness, beauty, integrity, authenticity of the unhyphenated model of ethnicity; to be adversely affected by the comfort and prosperity—that wealth of merely material things that Kurelek's paintings so often chastise? The *borshch* colour of the girl's vest or *zhupon* links her to the younger matron, in her polka-dotted dark red dress; the coquettish pose of this matron—as if copied from a traditional Ukrainian dancer—seems a parody of the folkloric version of Ukrainian womanhood. Whatever the painting may be 'saying' or better yet, showing, one thing is clear: when we look at it, we enter a topsy-turvy space, full of troubling ambiguities and ambivalences, where Up is Down and Down Up. What more fitting introduction to the world and work of Natalka Husar?

Natalka Husar was born to DP parents in New Jersey, in 1951—the year after William Kurelek, having left the Ontario College of Art, headed for Mexico, which would be his prelude to a much lengthier stay abroad, in England, a country of which he grew so fond that he nearly decided to make it his home. It was in 1973—four years before Kurelek's death—that Husar, after obtaining her BFA from Rutgers' University, emigrated to Toronto, Canada, her home for the last thirty years. Like Kurelek, she grew up with Ukrainian as her first language, but a sophisticated, grammatically correct and stylistically elegant form of Ukrainian. She has said

that there was a strict demarcation between the English-speaking world of school and playground, and of home, where Ukrainian held sway. There was nothing coercive in this rule of tongue, as the catalogues for her exhibitions make clear—though the texts themselves are in English, her name and the title of the exhibition as well as of the paintings themselves appear in Ukrainian as well as in English. This is more than a token gesture: this artist's imaginative power is predicated on her being perfectly at ease in both languages, and familiar with their wealth of proverbs and sayings common in daily use, as well as with more abstruse expressions.

Husar's work is permeated by the 'dark ghost in the corner.' While her take on Ukraine is different from that of her predecessor, she, like him, practices an aesthetics of unease: the uncanny, macabre and the grotesque play as great a role in her oeuvre as they do in Kurelek's, although there is no split in her work, as there is in his, between the popular, sunnily-anecdotal and the less marketable, darkly-menacing. "I only paint what frightens me," Husar has said—a comment Kurelek would no doubt have echoed, for the most part. She shares with him a passion for the representational and figurative as opposed to the abstract and conceptual—her work, however, is more complex and frenetic than Kurelek's, partly because in most Husar paintings the finely chosen and rendered texture of daily life claims equal billing with the symbology of nightmare, as a glance at the evocatively titled painting *Guilt Quilt* makes abundantly clear. Here coils of *kovbasa* co-exist with the boiled-red faces of what are either children or dolls; a pink satin bedspread is perfectly conversant with the hand of a strangler in the kind of yellow latex glove associated with dishwashing.

There is another way in which Husar's oeuvre mirrors Kurelek's, and this has to do with the chequered reception it has received within the Ukrainian-Canadian community. Where Kurelek was often criticized for showing his people as squat, short, coarse, peasants, as sons of the soil and daughters of the dishpan, hard-working to be sure, but uneducated and uncultured in the sense of having neither time nor money for, or experience of the fine as opposed to the folk arts, Husar has been attacked for exposing the kitschy side of the now largely urban manifestations of Ukrainian ethnicity in North America. In a 1985 interview with arts journalist Robert Enright, for example, she lambasted the "fake" "xenophobic" Ukrainian public who have been offended by what she sees as the honesty of her vision. "Embroidery is beautiful, gorgeous, back-breaking work, and then you take it and put it on a ceramic ashtray and you bastardize it—it's ridiculous and ugly and it becomes kitsch." Guilt, nostalgia and a painful awareness "that you really can't just plunge into the mainstream and totally forget your background" comprise her experience of ethnicity. "'There's so much pain there that nobody sees,' Husar says, describing the overall condition of people living within a displaced culture. 'So if you can, just show it. The pain goes for any ethnic group.'" The result, Enright declared in 1986, "is evidence of the first serious questioning of accepted ethnic conventions yet posed by a Ukrainian-Canadian artist" (DSU, n.p.).

Natalka Husar has consistently used her painting to express concerns related to her Ukrainian heritage, as a website devoted to her work explains:

Having visited her parents' homeland, once in 1969 during the communist regime, and then in 1992 and 1993, after independence was declared, Husar has taken the issue of ethnicity and interwoven it with her own feminist concerns. As a Ukrainian-American woman, she grew up with an ideal of womanhood that was silent and compliant, even decorative, and this ideal was always in contrast with the self she saw as powerful and aggressive. In her work, Husar struggles with the conflict between these identities, between the place of her parents' birth and the place she now inhabits, between Ukraine and the North American Ukrainian community with its myths of Ukraine.

Beginning with *Faces-Facades* in 1980, a series of masks hung in frames with clothing to create portraits of the Ukrainian people in Husar's life, the artist has made images of Ukrainians, as they adapt to American or Canadian life, that are at once painful and absurd. . . . In *Behind the Irony Curtain* (1985) Husar explores the Ukrainian immigrant experience through oversized and often unflattering portraits of Ukrainian-Canadian life. In her *Milk and Blood* series (1988) there is a slight shift in subject matter to images specifically related to the female immigrant's experience, in which Husar also begins to use the contrast between elaborate detail and beautifully-worked surface, and difficult, hard-hitting subject matter.

This was followed by . . . *True Confessions* (1991) . . .. and *Black Sea Blue* (1995). In the latter series, the effect of returning to Ukraine with her mother, for the first time since 1969, is a preoccupation for Husar. Referring specifically to the painting "Pandora's Parcel to Ukraine" (1993), Husar writes: "Once I opened to that reality it was like some Pandora's Box—I couldn't fit my feelings back neatly again. Though my mother's house seemed romantic, with big fat peaches against the blue-washed walls, it wasn't in the Theme-Park Ukraine of my Canadian mind" (1994). In complicated images that overlap the past and the present, the land of riches (America) and the land of poverty (Ukraine), Husar depicts her personal journey

> and her perception of the contrast between her mother's world and her own. (AHC)

The website, like most, is hardly up-to date: it was published before the mounting of Husar's most ambitious and accomplished exhibition, *Dark with Blond Roots*. In it, the artist reverses the direction of *Black Sea Blue* by transporting Ukrainians to Canada in the person of young Ukrainian girls who have emigrated to achieve the materialistically good life—as many cell phones, faux furs, trendy shoes and sugar daddies as necessary to ensure a standard of living stratospherically higher than what they would have been condemned to back home. A statement Husar made about her earlier work, however, can stand for her entire oeuvre: "my work is about the ironies and anxieties of people uprooted from a past and trapped by their cultural environment. The images I choose are those which simultaneously fascinate and revolt me" (NHT, np.).

7. AMBIVALENCE

At this point—that of Husar's ambivalence towards her Ukrainianness—we need to pause. How do we respond to this split in the artist, and perhaps, in ourselves, in confronting (*pace* Henry James) the loose and baggy monster of our ethnicity: the jarringly historical as well as the pleasurably traditional?

Let us begin by determining what part "the dark ghost"—historical memory—plays in the development and flourishing of this ambivalence. If the history of Ukraine has been one of almost unadulterated tragedy, of a noble, even sublime resistance to a destiny—obliteration—decreed by powerful others—then how do

we of the diaspora live out our ethnicity in good faith, experiencing as we have the good life in a new land described, famously, as a country "without ghosts"? We certainly can not ignore, downplay or discourage the success which "our people" have had in Canada, whether we speak of hockey players and top fashion models, actors and politicians, artists and lawyers, doctors, university professors, or the business elite, especially since these success stories were accomplished on the backs—often broken—of family members who underwent devastating hardship and struggle to give their children and grandchildren these unparalleled opportunities. We can not don sackcloth and ashes over our *Roots* outfits, and even when we create occasions to remind ourselves and others of events that have devastated Ukraine—the *Holodomor*, say, or Chornobyl—these are rare rather than everyday occurrences. Yes, we must fight to make our own country, Canada, acknowledge some of the injustices meted out to Ukrainian-Canadians—the forced Anglicization in the schools, or the detention during World War I of nominal citizens of the Austro-Hungarian empire in internment camps, an event which can not be understood outside the historical context of old and new countries. Yet we can not help but acknowledge that these wrongs seem like small potatoes in comparison with what Ukrainians have undergone for centuries under their Russian or Polish or Austrian, czarist or communist rulers. This is not to say that there were not appalling hardships to be overcome in Canada, but to argue that the very act of overcoming was made possible by the absence of those factors—gulags, purges, unremitting persecution—which condemned so many Ukrainians to misery.

Now that Ukraine has finally won her independence—however precariously she enjoys it—we may lay down the burden, some might say: the burden of keeping alive the dream of true independence for Ukraine, of keeping the language alive as a counter against the rampant Russification that went on especially in eastern Ukraine, of remembering, in however distorted or hybridized a form, the cultural traditions that create such a visceral sense of identity. It is up to Ukrainians themselves to shoulder the burden of past tragedies as well as the joy of future hopes, we might argue. Though they may be grateful for help offered by the diaspora—help ranging from care packages and gifts of money, to expertise in high tech industries and investment in Ukraine's economy—Ukrainians themselves can be trusted to do their own remembering. It is time for the dark ghost to be repatriated and laid to rest: for the guilt which the diaspora feels at having escaped the horrors and enjoyed the happiness of success in a new land to be honourably discharged.

For all I know, this may be the judgement of many Ukrainians, Ukrainians such as Marta T, a native of western Ukraine and a doctoral student working on Canadian-Ukrainian writers at a European university. She spent much of one summer in the prairie provinces, travelling to Toronto to interview me. She loved Canada, and was deeply grateful for all the hospitality she had been shown, but she had to confess herself mystified—even shocked—by the way in which her Canadian hosts identified themselves as Ukrainian. The sight of Manitobans singing *Shche ne vmerla Ukraina* at a festival was particularly disturbing—for Marta it is a hymn as well as a national anthem: something to be

treated with the reverence due to religion. And though she delighted in invitations to dinner, she was taken aback when her hosts would declare, once the *holubtsi* and *borshch* had been polished off, "*Now* you will feel truly at home!"

"We don't eat *borshch* and *holubtsi* in Ukraine," Marta explained to me—"or at least we eat these dishes as often as we eat pasta or curry or sushi. We don't dress up in costume or perform folk-dances, either; we don't recite Shevchenko when we talk about poetry; these are not the touchstones of our national sense of self. We are born in Ukraine and we speak Ukrainian as our mother tongue: that's what makes us Ukrainian: even if we leave the country, our families still live there, our childhoods were spent there, and events that occur in Ukraine happen to us, wherever we may happen to be. But you are Canadians, you are born here, you are native English-speakers, your Ukrainian, however fluent, isn't the Ukrainian being spoken today on Svoboda Prospekt or the Khreshchatyk in Kyiv, or in the streets of this or that village. You aren't Ukrainian at all."

These words—or something very like them—were spoken in Natalka Husar's kitchen, where Natalka, Marta and I had agreed to meet. I had sent Marta a catalogue with Natalka's work in it; she had expressed a desire to meet the painter during her brief visit to Toronto. As we sat drinking our tea, under a drawing of a Ukrainian village interior by William Kurelek, I tried to argue for a more comprehensive, less reductive definition of identity, but Marta was not buying it. It was only when Natalka spoke that Marta seemed taken aback. What struck her was the emotion in Natalka's voice when she spoke of what Ukraine meant to her

family and to herself: emotion redolent, not of pride or satisfaction, but of a painful and profound attachment to the land where her parents had been born. Marta went on to visit Natalka's studio; she looked through the many catalogues of her work, as well; it is my belief that her certainty in what makes a Ukrainian 'Ukrainian' was shaken by the experience—shaken in the most constructive way. For though there may be *borshch* and *kovbasa*, as well as Cossacks and maidens in native dress in Natalka Husar's paintings, they are contextualized in radically challenging ways. If there are archetypal 'Mama's boys' wearing embroidered shirts under their sports jackets, there are also madly materialistic "new Ukrainians," new to Canada and desperate to shake off historical memory and the frustrations of everyday life in a 'free' Ukraine in economic free-fall.

8. From Sviat Vechir to Lolitochka

To experience something of what Marta did as she made her way through Natalka Husar's oeuvre, consider three interrelated images from Husar's first exhibition held in Toronto at the Ukrainian Canadian Art Foundation in 1977: lifelike ceramic reproductions of an airmail letter from Ukraine, a care package sent to Ukraine, and a fast-food version of the ritual Sviat Vecher or Christmas eve meal. What unites these images? The envelope is common to all three, though the one featured in "TV Dinner *Sviat Vechir*" is less obvious—it is the torn package holding together the ingredients that threaten to spill out of the box. The letter in its envelope, the contents of the care package, and the frozen

ingredients of the twelve-course meal in its damaged carton are all items of exchange and connection between old world and new: the authenticity or good faith of all the objects is questionable, or at least ambiguous. The letter almost certainly contains, as well as news from the family 'left behind,' a request for money or items that cannot be had in Soviet Ukraine; the parcel is a response to the request, but can never satisfactorily answer the larger questions posed by the letter: 'how can you live in exile from your homeland? Why can't you bring us to the new world, to share in your good luck and prosperity?'

"TV Dinner *Sviat Vechir*" is a deceptively 'cheeky' or jocular work, for while it plays with the commodification of tradition it also gestures, through the torn packaging, to the painful divisions imposed by belonging simultaneously to two worlds, and their mutually-exclusive value-systems: that of the convenience-oriented, wastefully-packaged, fast-food North American, and that of the time-honoured, tradition-based, slow-food European. And for viewers in my own situation, who have married 'out' of the community, and who either have no children, or whose children are tourists or strangers to the ritual of *Sviat Vechir*, the piece is redolent of loss, guilt, and an odd kind of relief—that if you can not have the authentic version, there is at least a handy packaged one at hand; you can get your fix of Ukrainianness in a time-and-labour saving way, thus having your twelve-course meal and eating it too.

Consider another image, this one from *Milk and Blood*—an image that is a direct extension and complication of the ceramic "Letter from Ukraine." "Read Between the Lines" shows us the object—the air mail letter—in context, and with a human sub-

ject—a reader—as well. The subject performs double duty: as a self-portrait of the painter, and as a record of the emotions aroused by the letter in the reader—who may be any one of us. The transparently-ghostly figure on the table—the nude who is not reclining, as in Titian or Velazquez, but standing upright—is strangely multiple: one version is anatomically correct if one's criterion is a Barbie (thus minus nipples and genitalia) while another version shows off the jointed shoulders of a doll rather than a human being. She presents to us four faces, ranging from the iconic or frozen, to the maniacal to the traumatized to the resigned; her arm movements mimic those of Michelangelo's David on the Sistine Chapel ceiling as well as the modesty of Botticelli's Venus rising from the waves; her hands hold both the letter from Ukraine and its telltale envelope. On the arborite tabletop—circa the good old 1950s—the era of the Cold War, Sputnik and Betty Crocker—lie a toppled milk container and an opened tub of honey, as well as a pile of airmail envelopes held together by an elastic band—an allegorical foil to the spilled milk on the table. The surface of the table mirrors the surface of the ocean separating Canada from Ukraine; an empty cutting board projects from the table edge, and under a reproduction of the Last Supper in a Hutzulesque carved wooden frame resides a ghetto blaster atop a radio large enough to receive overseas broadcasts—the two separated by a printed, not embroidered, *rushnyk*. Most startling feature of all in this kitchen is the surreal pattern stamped on the wallpaper: sets of clenched and wide-opened mouths, mimicking the expressions on the manic and screaming faces of the figures on the table.

Why so many bodies, or versions of the subject in this painting? How else to show the splits and multiple roles a single person can exhibit, faced with so complex and troubling a matter as identity—ethnic identity to boot? Husar's own explanation of the genesis of this painting, as paraphrased by Grace Eiko Thomson, reads as follows: "Her cousin from Ukraine had been visiting and she had to come to the realization that he was 'really foreign', even though he is Ukrainian. She felt guilty to be relieved that, through chance, she, not he, was lucky enough to have been born to immigrant parents. The letters she carries (with guilt) are those received from Ukraine and they continue the memories of a land which her parents had left reluctantly and which she was taught to love. She feels betrayed. The painting contains various metaphors and symbols referring to these feelings. She appears in a multiple image not too unlike the dance of Siva which destroys the world" (NHT, n.p.).

As for the dark ghost, it has assumed the form of those guilt-inducing letters from Ukraine, flimsy as tissue paper though written in indelible ink; it may also be expressed through the wallpaper's many mouths which represent not writing, as do the letters, but speech, or even sound—something that can not be controlled or kept at a distance as the content of letters can. They are female mouths: out of them, we can imagine, come gossip and the kinds of horror stories of the old country that Kureleks's father used to tell: out of open mouths come screams as well as reasoned discourse, and out of clenched ones comes the silence that follows proscription, or the old adage—'if you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all.'

True Confessions, the show that followed *Milk and Blood*, is to me the most disturbing and nightmarish of all Husar's exhibitions, because of the way in which the borders between nightmare and waking, the surreal and banal are smeared and dissolved. The key work, to my way of thinking, is one called "Born Again," painted a year before the declaration of Ukraine's independence. Thus it is a prophetic work, in which the dilemmas expressed by "Read Between the Lines" are posed in more complex and exacting circumstance. Whereas the signifiers of Ukraine in the earlier painting are kept firmly in their place—the embroidered cloth under the ghetto blaster, the carved wooden frame around the Last Supper, the letters neatly piled on the table—here the objects expressive of Ukraine swirl and burst like bombs. In fact, what this painting seems to give us is the vision unleashed by the guilt that is both splitting and fracturing the reader of the letters: the airplane at the top of the canvas seems to be delivering the artist back "home," making her switch places with the cousin who came to visit her in Toronto. Look at the older man sitting on top of the baby carriage, with his Ukrainian flag and sandaled stocking feet: old country to the core. The Cossacks at the top have become detached from Ilya Repin's painting; the line between image and reality disappears exactly as it does in dreams where, as Freud has shown us, the most unlikely objects—objects that reason insists on keeping in separate compartments—join forces in the process called 'condensation.'

This is a painting about fecundity and birth, feasting and laughter, but also about tears, blindness, radical anxiety and the grotesque. After all, the woman in labour is giving birth to melons:

the real child is a "bald, Chornobyl kid," according to the painter, while the occupant of the baby carriage is a grown woman, a hybrid, decked out in Western sunglasses and a floral kerchief or *hustyna*. The pumpkins under the baby carriage—those traditional symbols of amorous rejection—are ghostly: even more ghostly is the self-portrait Husar gives us, her skin exuding the darkness of lead. Instead of holding a baby she cradles a doll—not a Barbie or Betsy-Wetsy but an archetypically Ukrainian *Kozak-Mamai* doll. Why is this ghostly Husar the sole dark figure in this painting? Is this the reverse of Kurelek's "Manitoba Party," with this dark ghost appearing as the displaced guilt of the Ukrainian-Canadian, a guilt whose ante has been upped by the latest catastrophe to hit Ukraine—Chornobyl?

The next image I wish to consider is the showpiece, as it were, of Husar's *Black Sea Blue* collection: "Pandora's Parcel to Ukraine." The single Chornobyl child has morphed into a chorus line: the effect of these children with their irradiated bodies and anxious faces is devastating to the viewer, especially given the way they collide with the evil step-mother/wicked witch of a factory "directress" whom Husar describes having met when she visited Ukraine with her mother in 1992. We know that "Pandora's Parcel" began as a painting of Husar's mother's birth-house in Skala: "I had this idea to paint this. . . . haunted homestead, and initially composed the painting like a child's stick figure drawing—house, fence, trees, clouds. The house was . . . . rather dreamy, with a rag hanging on the fence and jars drying in the sun." But this poetry aqua-blue house was over-painted with "a ghost of a dinner meal" that, "symbolically, . . . felt more like the house than

the painting of the house." And suddenly "the painting took a turn towards the dark side" with bizarre "relics from a not-so-past regime," including "macabre archangels" on either side of the canvas, a "tough-as-nails blonde with make-up and a cigarette, and the sleazy-looking dollar-dealer in a Chanel T."

But it is Husar's interpretation of the children that I find most powerful: "those young girls with old haunted eyes. They are the future. And they are the present—victims of a country that has been robbed and raped blind. But adorned, with those pretty and pretty silly 'Soviet girl bows' tying them to the fence. The folkloric pattern on the first girl's face is like a tattoo, or a .... folkloric rash. The second girl in line lifts her dress to reveal a coy image of her future self—that scary ghost of limited possibilities" (PPU, 54-5).

It is to these 'futuristic' girls that Husar has turned in her latest work, the paintings comprising *Blond with Dark Roots*. Here, the girls have grown up and, magically, found their way to Canada, although the conditions of their arrival and acculturation are vastly different from those of their sheepskin-coated forebears. Mink, in fact, is the fur *du jour* here. The appearance of an older Chornobyl girl in the painting "Horseshoes and Waves" is even more shocking than that of her younger self, tied to the fence in "Pandora's Parcel." For, in striking contrast to that multiple nude on that arborite tabletop in "Read Between the Lines," she is sexualized. She bears the telltale marks of national trauma—the shaved half of her head is her Chornobyl badge; she pulls the mink coat up to her as if it were a child's security blanket. Yet her gaze, and the way she sucks on her finger—as if it were a cigarette—send an unmistakable 'come hither' message.

Once again, our response to this stimulus must be fascination and repulsion. In the moonlit darkness in which the canvas is plunged, this Chornobyl Lolita stakes her own claim as a dark ghost in the corner; to pretend that she does not exist, or simply is not here among us would be the response of a coward or hypocrite. Husar's portrait does not have any propagandistic purpose: we are not intended to rush out and form a society for the rescue of wayward *divkas,* but it *is* intended to make us see—and having seen, to be altered by our knowledge. The distress provoked in us by "Horseshoes and Waves," the unsettling sense it gives us of loose ends is graphically triggered by that long, dangling white string—or long scrape—on the right hand side of the canvas. "Only connect," we might say, quoting E. M. Forster, that Edwardian English novelist whose work is familiar to most of us through the cinematic triumphs of a Helena Bonham Carter—*Room with a View, Howards End.* But our Chornobyl teen, if she summons up any movie-star image, is closer to Marilyn Monroe than Bonham Carter. And we all know what happened to Marilyn Monroe.

I will finish this journey with a reference to a painting that gives us the latest incarnation of the heroine of "Horseshoes and Waves." The title of this work—"Killing Me Softly" (2004)—might be thought to say it all. Here is our Lolitochka, looking, like Nabokov's Lolita when we last glimpse her in the eponymous novel, decidedly the worse for wear. Her hair has grown long enough to be worn in an upsweep—her hair that remains, that is, for one side of her head is still bald. Perhaps the most arresting, most palpably sensuous aspect of the painting is the masterfully

rendered itchiness of the mohair sweater—probably bought at a Salvation Army shop, to which it was consigned by its previous owner when it shrank in the wash. Our heroine wears it like a combination of status symbol and hair shirt; it provides us with a preliminary, joking reply to our inevitable question, 'just what is killing you, my dear?' We can easily imagine what we would say, in her place—'this sweater's so itchy it's killing me.' What we cannot say, is 'what's killing me is homesickness for my family, my friends, the town in which I grew up so far and forever away.' Nor can we say, 'A million times worse than the loneliness is the possibility of sickness'—a sickness that is not metaphorical but acutely real. For all we and she know, inside this young woman might be the seeds of a cancer—the legacy of Chornobyl—that is killing her, ever so slowly and softly.

9. TRANSFORMATIONS

I began this exploration of dark ghosts with an account of the chance discovery, at a lowly yard sale, of a painting by William Kurelek; I want to end it with a gesture to the context in which this essay was written: that of two of the most important elections to be held during this fledgling century. On the day that I finished writing, the results of the American elections were already known—George Bush was still the leader of the world's most powerful nation, with the military might to decide the fate of the very planet. The results of Ukraine's electoral battle between the Western-looking forces represented by Viktor Yushchenko, and the Russophile affiliations of Viktor Yanukovych were, however,

yet to be determined. And though the attention of the world had been riveted on the deeply divided electorate of the United States, the plight of their Ukrainian counterpart also made it into the front sections of newspapers, and the top stories of media across the world.

What we now know as the "Orange Revolution" was, at this time, in the act of confronting the instances of mass fraud and voter manipulation which had skewed the Ukrainian election, of defying the corruption which was poisoning not only the race for the presidency of Ukraine, but, as seems likely, Viktor Yushchenko himself, and in the most literal way possible. As people all over the world became accustomed to seeing extraordinary images, and reading or hearing inspiring reports, from Kyiv's protestor-packed Independence Square; as they read the pocket summaries of Ukrainian history and studied the maps provided by the web pages of the BBC World news, and by other electronic forums, it was clear that a revolution was occurring, not only in Ukraine, but in the way the rest of the world perceived that country.

For once, the news from Ukraine did not serve to illustrate the horrendous gap between the 'civilized' triumphs of North American socio-political life and the comparative 'barbarity' of Ukraine. For in the run-up to the US elections, it seemed as though as much attention was devoted to widespread expectations of voting "irregularities" and outright fraud as to the polls showing the candidates locked neck and neck. A deep-dyed cynic might even argue that, far from illustrating how backward or corrupt political institutions and processes are in Ukraine, the contest between Yushchenko and Yanukovych manifests a coming of age:

Ukraine has simply joined the pseudo-democratic game long performed by the "first" "free" world, in which media and lobby groups have successfully manipulated public opinion to ensure the election results desired by the powerful. An idealist, on the other hand, might point to the courageous actions of a majority of orange-clad Ukrainians as a model for citizens of long-established democracies searching for ways to reclaim authentically democratic and truly representative forms of government.

As serendipity would have it, some weeks before the Orange Revolution came into being, and while I was still focussing my thoughts on these weighty subjects of ethnicity, identity, and responsibility, Ukraine's renowned Virsky Dance troupe came to Toronto. My brother and I were lucky enough to attend a performance memorable, to me, as much for the bravura of the audience as for the virtuosity of the dancers. There was a full house—a rapturously receptive house, with many of the audience members being under the age of thirty. They applauded, whistled appreciatively, clapped both during and at the end of each number: at times it seemed as if I were at a rock concert, so lively was the ambience. The dancers were artists as well as athletes, performing the regulation leaps and bounds with staggering ease and grace. And yet even as I applauded rapturously with all the others, I found myself experiencing that Husaresque split between fascination and recoil—the wonderfully dynamic programme seemed, paradoxically, so museum-like, or at least, so removed from the culture of the contemporary.

As I made my way home after the performance, I found myself wishing that the Virsky dancers had been accompanied by a modern

dance troupe from Ukraine, showcasing no *sharavary*, no *preshytky*, no *hopak*: none of the war-horse crowd pleasers, but something that would give me a glimpse of the mind and yes, the soul of today's Ukraine. I was perplexed by the disconnect between appearance and reality: entertainment—give 'em what they want, or think they want—and art—challenging them with what they do not want to know—with what must be confronted, however difficult that may be. I felt, more than ever, that stitch in the side of the soul that is the hyphen central to my own identity. I found myself longing for an evolving dialectic to replace the fossilized dichotomy between old world and new, tradition and history, past and future.

As Ukraine—God willing—comes into its own as an independent country; as its history develops—God willing—along constructive rather than tragic lines, and as its culture takes its place in an increasingly globalized world—a culture in which the traditional is sifted by the innovative and transformed by free contact with artistic production around the world—surely the hyphen which attaches the Canadian to the Ukrainian might also change? Not to the preferred usage of politicians: "Canadians of Ukrainian heritage," which has the curious effect of de-politicizing as well as fossilizing ethnicity—could one imagine Canada's French-Canadians agreeing to be called "Canadians of French heritage?" But perhaps to a more elastic, encompassing version of the hyphen, that sign of meaningful, intimate linkage between Canada and Ukraine.

Of one thing I was sure: it would not be by the obliteration but by the acknowledgement and exploration of dark ghosts—abandoned family, assassinated kobzars, grossly corrupt governments, selves painfully fractured along lines of guilt and relief, memory and amnesia—that this transformation will occur. And it is the work of artists able to raise those ghosts for us, and to make us look them in the face, that we must encourage and reward with our heightened, exacting attention.

Texts Cited and Abbreviations Used

(AHC) Art-history.concordia.ca/eea/artists/husar.html

(DSU) "Desperately Seeking Ukrainian: the Recent Painting of Natalka Husar." Robert Enright. *Behind the Irony Curtain* [Catalogue]. Toronto: Garnet Press Gallery, 1986.

(K) *Kurelek: a Biography*. Patricia Morley. Toronto, Macmillan, 1986.

(KVC) *Kurelek's Vision of Canada*. William Kurelek. Edmonton, Hurtig, 1983.

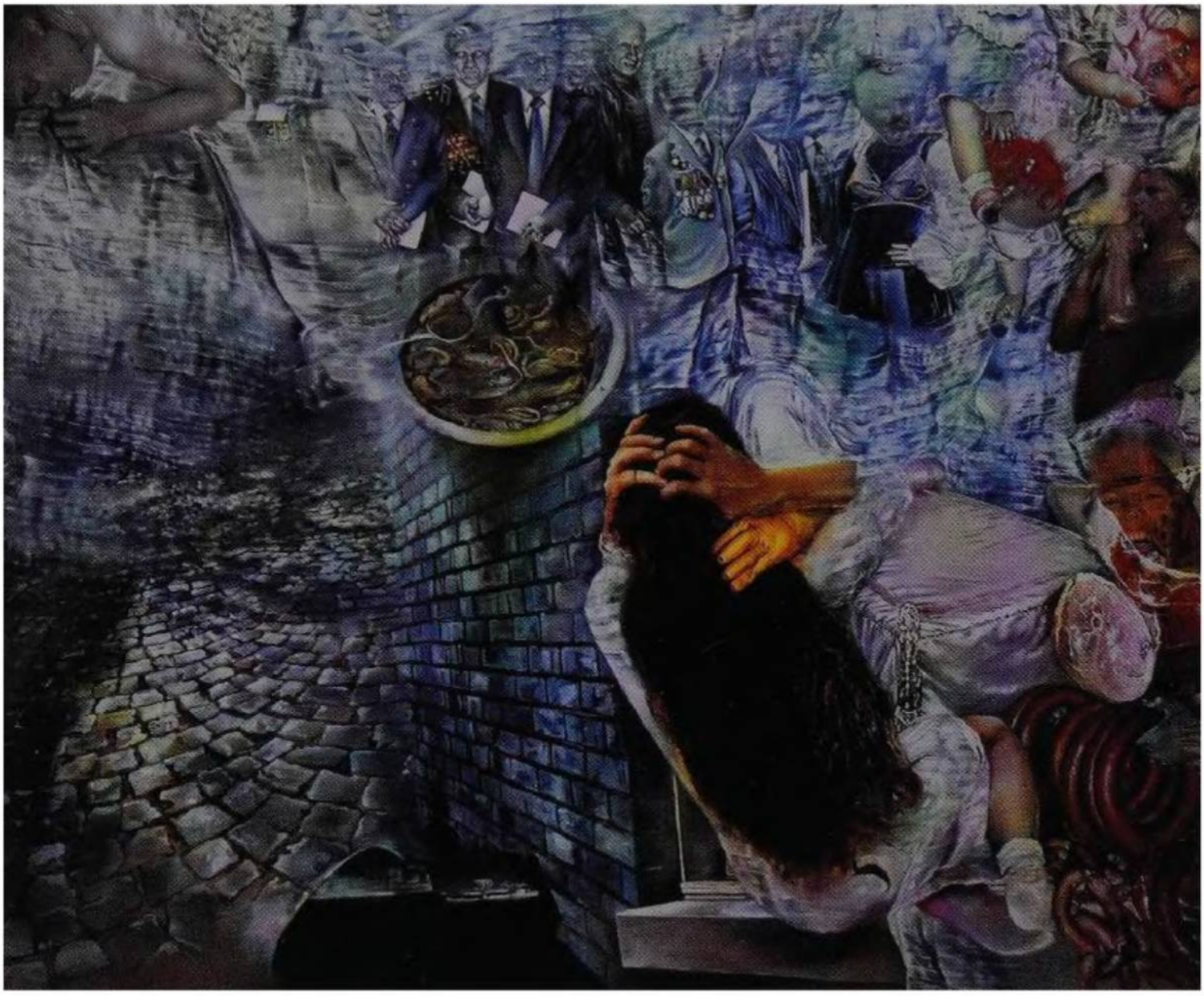
(MDNR) *Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging*. Dionne Brand. Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2002.

(NHT) "Natalka Husar's 'Tarantella.'" Grace Eiko Thomson. *Milk and Blood* [Catalogue]. Toronto, Garnet Press, nd.

(PPU) "Pandora's Parcel to Ukraine." Natalka Husar. *Black Sea Blue: Natalka Husar Paintings* [Catalogue]. Regina, Rosemount Art Gallery, 1995.

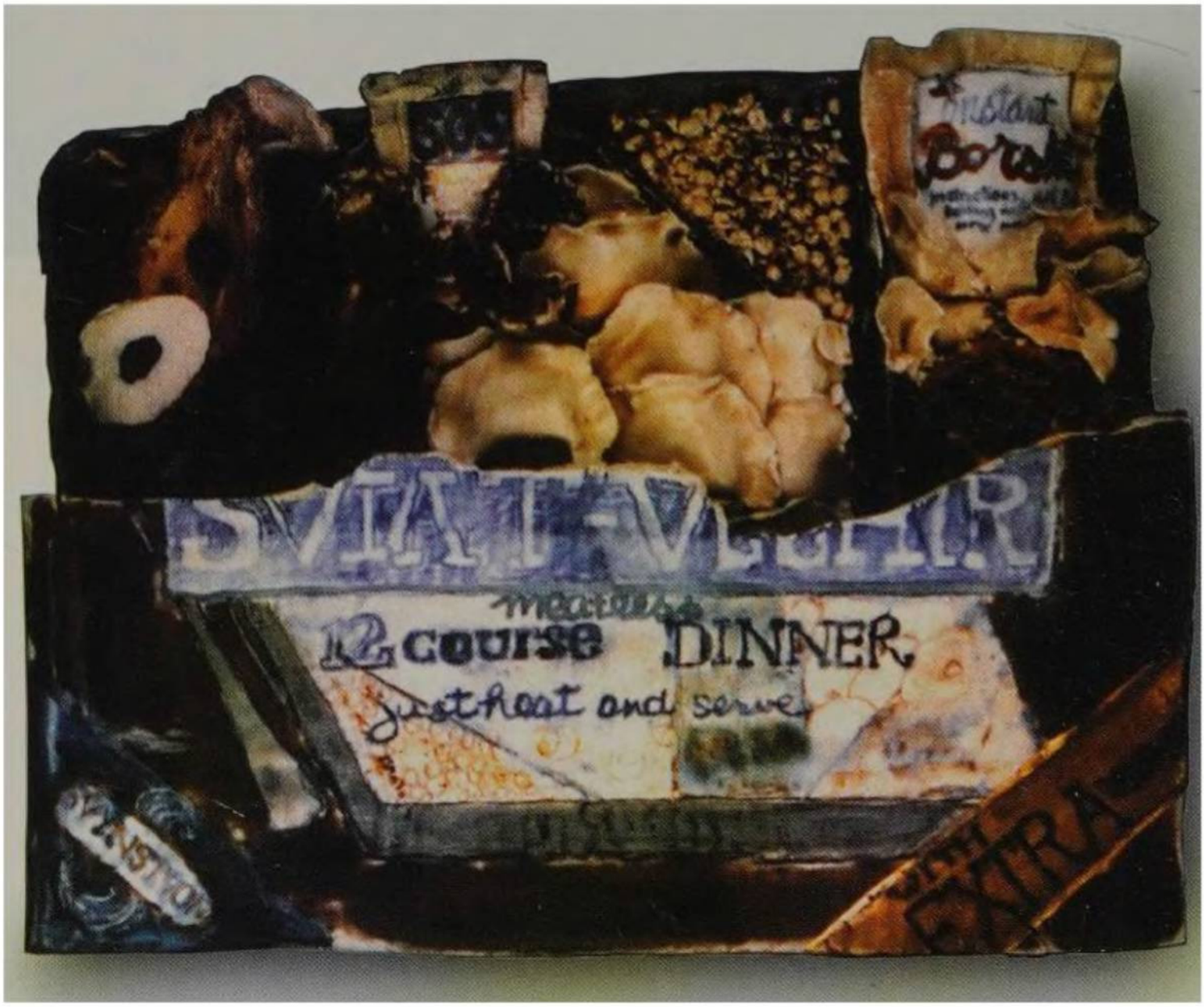
(SWM) *Someone With Me*. William Kurelek. Toronto, McClelland & Stewart, 1980.

Janice Kulyk-Keefer, Professor in the School of English and Theatre Studies at the University of Guelph, is the author of over a dozen works of fiction, poetry, memoir and literary criticism, including *Honey and Ashes: a story of family* (1998); an anthology of contemporary fiction from Canada and Ukraine, *Two Lands, New Visions* (1998); and most recently the novel *Thieves* (2004). Her study *Under Eastern Eyes* (1987) and the novel *The Green Library* (1996) were both shortlisted for a Governor General's award. *Marrying the Sea* (1998), a collection of poetry, won the 1998 CAA Award.

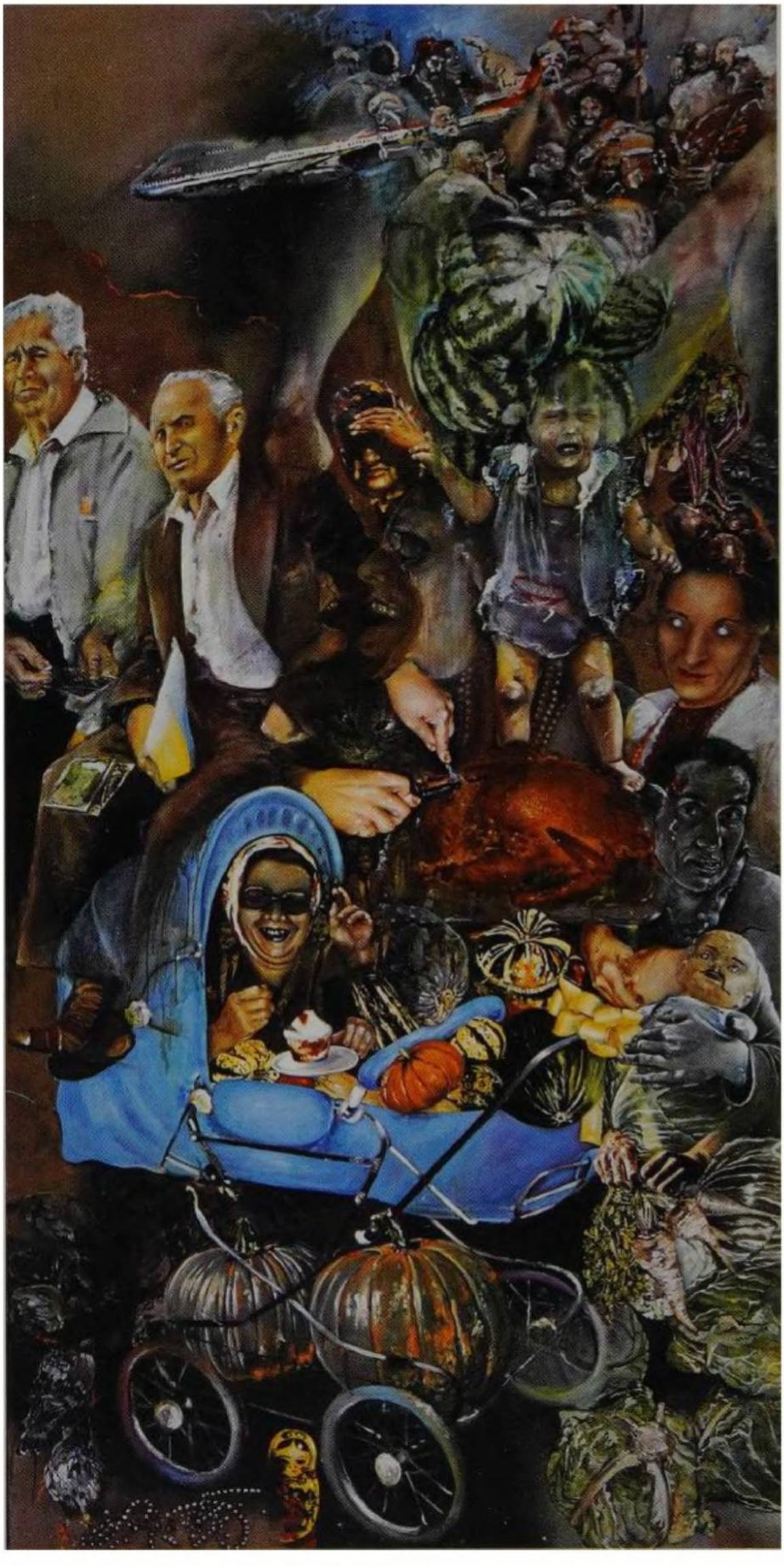


Natalka Husar
Guilt Quilt, 1992–3
oil on linen
218h x 274w cm.

Natalka Husar
TV Dinner Sviat Vechir, 1977
glazed ceramic
25h x 32w cm.

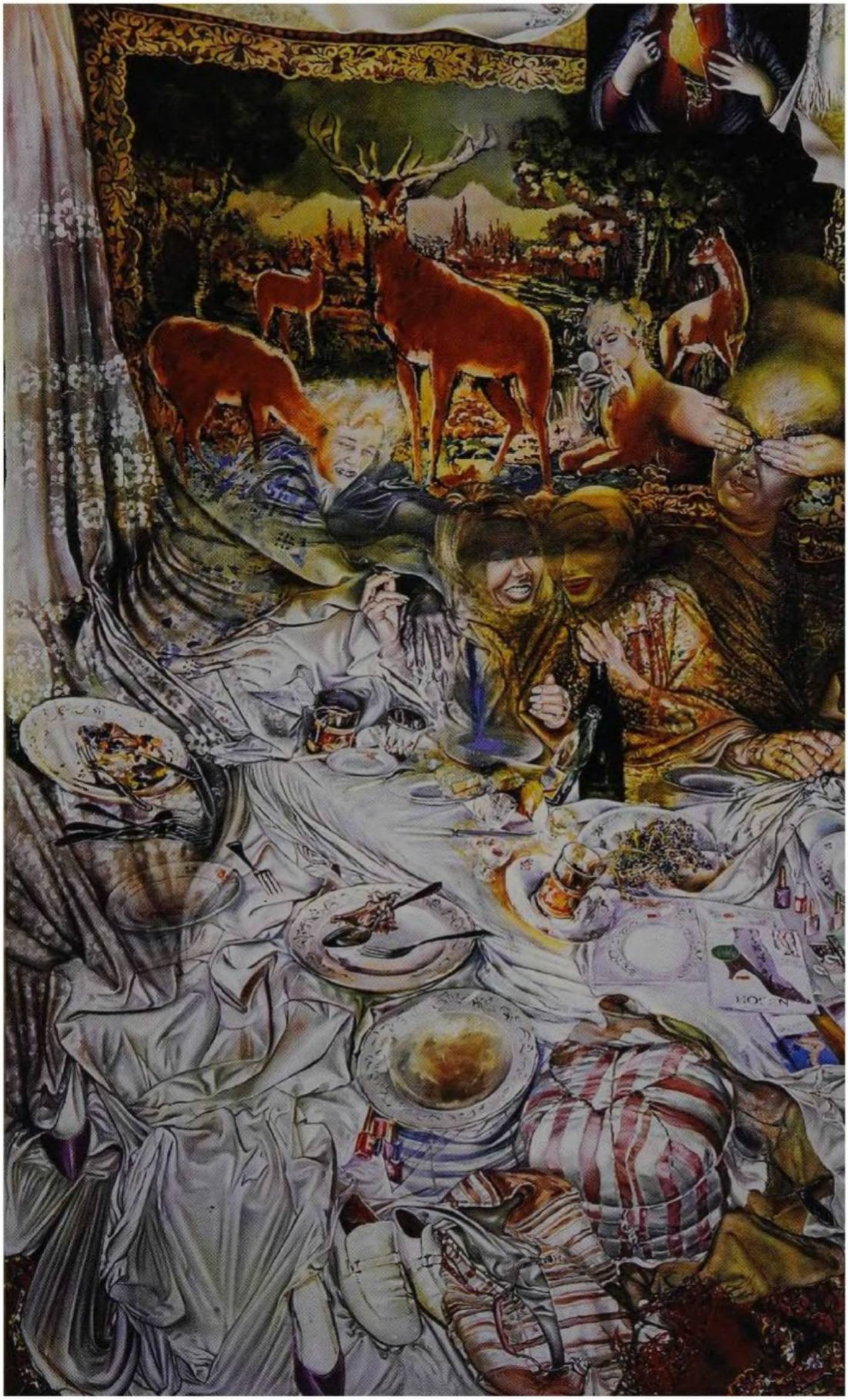


Nataika Husar
Pandora's Parcel to Ukraine, 1993
oil on linen
224h x 274w cm
(collection of National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa)



Verso image:
Natalka Husar
Torn Heart, 1994
oil on linen
224h x 137w cm.

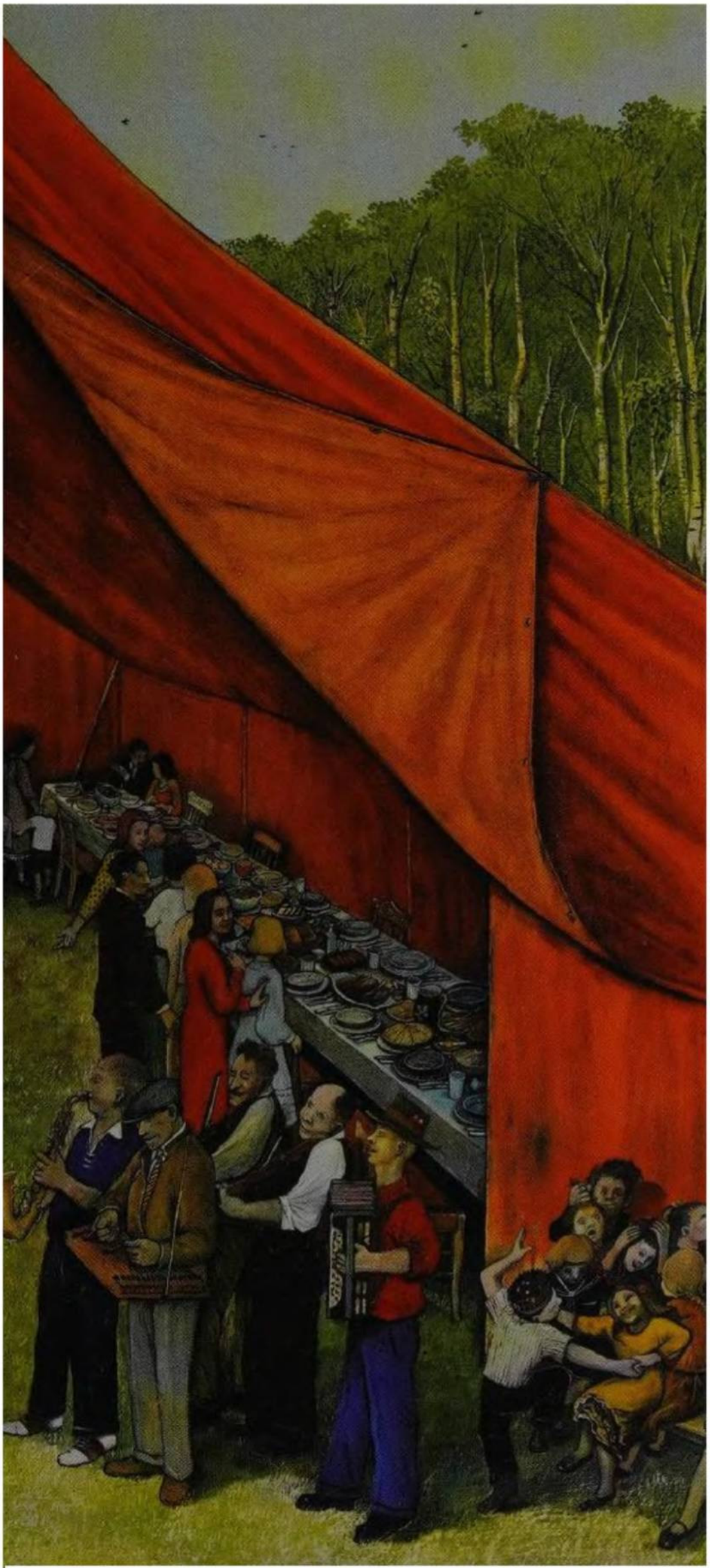
Recto image:
Natalka Husar
Born Again, 1991
oil on linen
127h x 254w cm.



Verso image:
Natalka Husar
Read Between the Lines, 19
oil on linen
203h x 102w cm.

Recto image:
Natalka Husar
Horseshoes and Waves, 2001
oil on linen
218h x 142w cm.

Natalka Husar
Killing Me Softly, 2004
oil on board
81h x 102w cm.



William Kurelek
Manitoba Party, 1964
oil on masonite
121.9h x 152.6w cm.
collection of National Gallery of Canada.
Courtesy of The Isaacs Gallery, Toronto

Two hundred copies of this book were set in Bembo typeface, cut by Francesco Griffo for the Venitian printer Aldus Manutius to publish in 1495 *De Aetna* by Cardinal Pietro Bembo. Stanley Morison supervised the design of Bembo for the Monotype Corporation in 1929.

Produced by the Heritage Press.

Designed by Edison del Canto DESIGN
Printed and bound by Houghton Boston
Canada