Task for The Garret: Alex Miller

Extract from *Comrade Pawel* by Alex Miller

I was startled, and I carefully searched the sky in all directions. But the hawk, which every day hunted above the plain, and whose horizon of course lay beyond ours, had indeed departed. But whatever it was that the keen-eyed bird had seen was still hidden from us, for the plain was as silent and empty as ever.

I turned to Pawel and laughed – not of course because I was amused, but because I was afraid. 'Really Pawel,' I said scornfully, 'you're a proper yokel. What old woman's superstition will you come out with next? Now tell me,' I went on, in a condescending tone and as if I were speaking to a child, 'what do you suppose that bird knows about war?'

Pawel shrugged, he knew nothing of war himself. 'The bird knew when it was time to run,' he said, again without in the least attempting to conceal the contempt he felt for my inability to comprehend the obvious. He actually looked at me then, and grinned in a peculiarly malicious way. 'And you, my friend,' he said, poking me in the chest with his finger and leaning close to me, 'will learn something of running when our time comes.'

Pawel was an illiterate peasant. I, on the other hand, was an educated young man of the new generation, so naturally I pretended to be unimpressed by his foreboding. Even so, I secretly watched the sky in the hope that the hawk would reappear. Nor did I feel sufficiently confident to go on teasing Pawel about it at that moment.

That night I woke up and lay still, watching the broken clouds above me and listening. I felt that something had woken me, though what it was I couldn't tell. Off to the south of the line I could hear the quiet clink of hobble chains, and a little behind us and to the north a group of officers were drinking in the back of a truck. The officers' laughter was coming in uncertain gusts, like fitful wind before a change in the weather. There was nothing in all this to alarm me, yet I continued to feel uneasy and could not get back to sleep.