

Przewalski's Horse

by Elizabeth Vignali

Here they are, thriving in the Chernobyl exclusion zone. A hardy gold-coated thing of extremes, of grassy steppes and shrubland, highest highs and lowest lows. They shoulder the burgeoning

recovery among wolves and ravens. Span the Samosely selfsettlers, the sturdy evacuation refusers.

The world's worst nuclear disaster has given way to this: glints of sunlight in the reactor shadows, brown voles

in the paint-peeled kitchen, the silvered Babushka making moonshine from her garden potatoes.

Firebreaks turned sand-ash highways for the wild survivors. Elk, moose, badger, boar, rabbit. Swans coast

across the radioactive cooling pond, the Red Forest's needles rusted to dust. Beaver, roe deer, brown bear, fox. The old man trowels up summer lettuce from the poisoned dirt. Wild, isn't it—to turn his back on the government-funded

tenements in Kiev, to choose instead an illegal shorttrich life in the home he loved. They all suspire the toxic and thrive, trees fall from beavers' teeth one by one, land returns to bog, becomes what it was a hundred years ago. Thirty years

post-meltdown, 1000 square miles of wild, the half-life of cesium-137 decayed into barium. A 1986 heirloom, this patchy spread of fallout. When given a choice between civilization and radiation, the wild choose to burn.