

Poetry from Chernobyl

[Professor Sarah Phillips](#), Professor of Anthropology, Director of Russian and East European Institute, Anthropology Department, Indiana University



Professor Sarah Phillips has published several academic articles about Chernobyl, including research on post-Chernobyl [food practices](#) and ‘[Chernobyl’s Sixth Sense](#)’. She has also published two Samotosphere articles on nuclear issues, one reflecting on the 25th anniversary of Chernobyl (available [here](#)) and the other comparing Fukushima with Chernobyl ([here](#)). More recently she has researched disability in Ukraine, as well as the role of gender during Ukraine’s [Maidan Revolution](#). You can find out more about Professor Phillips’ work [here](#).

Cover image: An elderly lady or ‘baba’ who lives near the Exclusion Zone in Chernobyl, Ukraine. Photograph by Thom Davies.

Mova (Language)

Which is the best language for speaking Chernobyl?

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| Ukrainian | the language of the first allusion to the disaster in the <i>Evening Kyiv</i> newspaper, three days after the explosion, on page 3 in the "Weather" section? |
| Russian | the language of Gorbachev's first "Chernobyl speech," 18 days after the accident? |
| Belarusian | the native language of some of Svitlana Alexeevich's Nobel prize-winning voices from Chernobyl, or were they prayers, first offered up in 1997? |
| English | the language of the 2006 IAEA-driven reports of the Chernobyl Forum urging the world to believe that "the mental health impact of Chernobyl is the largest public health problem unleashed by the accident to date?" |
| Japanese | now that there's something terrible to compare? (Not that there already wasn't.) |
| Other | |

Which is the best language for hearing Chernobyl?

Bleep...bleep...bleep said the dosimeter. Stop! Forbidden Zone! said the 30-year-old sign. I'm hungry said the child. Click...click said the abnormally formed insect. Love it here said the wolf, stretching his legs. *Vegetovascular dystonia* said Vera's medical card. I shoveled sand into sandbags for days on end they told me if I didn't do my part as a volunteer liquidator after the accident I'd lose my job little did I know we'd leave Pripjat and never come back and I'd lose my job anyway and I was thirsty so thirsty and there was a bad metallic taste in my mouth and now I'm sick and so weak I don't know if I can go on and we call it "radiation AIDS" and I wonder if my son will get it too said Vera.

Strawberries

And my boys spend their summers with grandma

or should I say baba,

near Rivne

or should I say near Chernobyl.

Rivne's sandy soils, turns out they're the worst

or should I say best, no definitely worst, perversely great at reuse and recycle

For generations radiation in the food chain

or should I say in the food.

Summer with grandma is not supposed to be radioactive.

\$12.99 and up

They're selling fine
art photography of Pripyat
on the Internet.

Adorn your home interior

with the ghostly rubble

of someone's else's.

Someone you'll not ever meet

who left their home thirty years ago

for three days they thought.

Three days now three decades.

Photographs of peeling paint

weed-choked courtyards

those damned rusty yellow carousel cars.

'Décor to adore.'

'The aesthetics of decay.'

Those were people's lives. \$12.99 and up.

Manya

Baba Tania sold her cow.

She was too skinny anyway, was Manya,
and never gave much milk.

When you have a cow
you wake up
to let them herd at 5:15.

Baba Tania doesn't feel good
She wants to sleep in.

The cows wait in the yard
patient at the gate
and file out in the road
one by one
to join the neighbor cows
as they saunter by
destination riverview grass buffet.

They come home
in reverse
at lunchtime
udders full, ready for relief.

The milk looks good.

The milk's not good.

But baba Tania worries not—

she's sold her cow,
sold skinny Manya.

Baba Tania just drinks her neighbor's not-good milk.