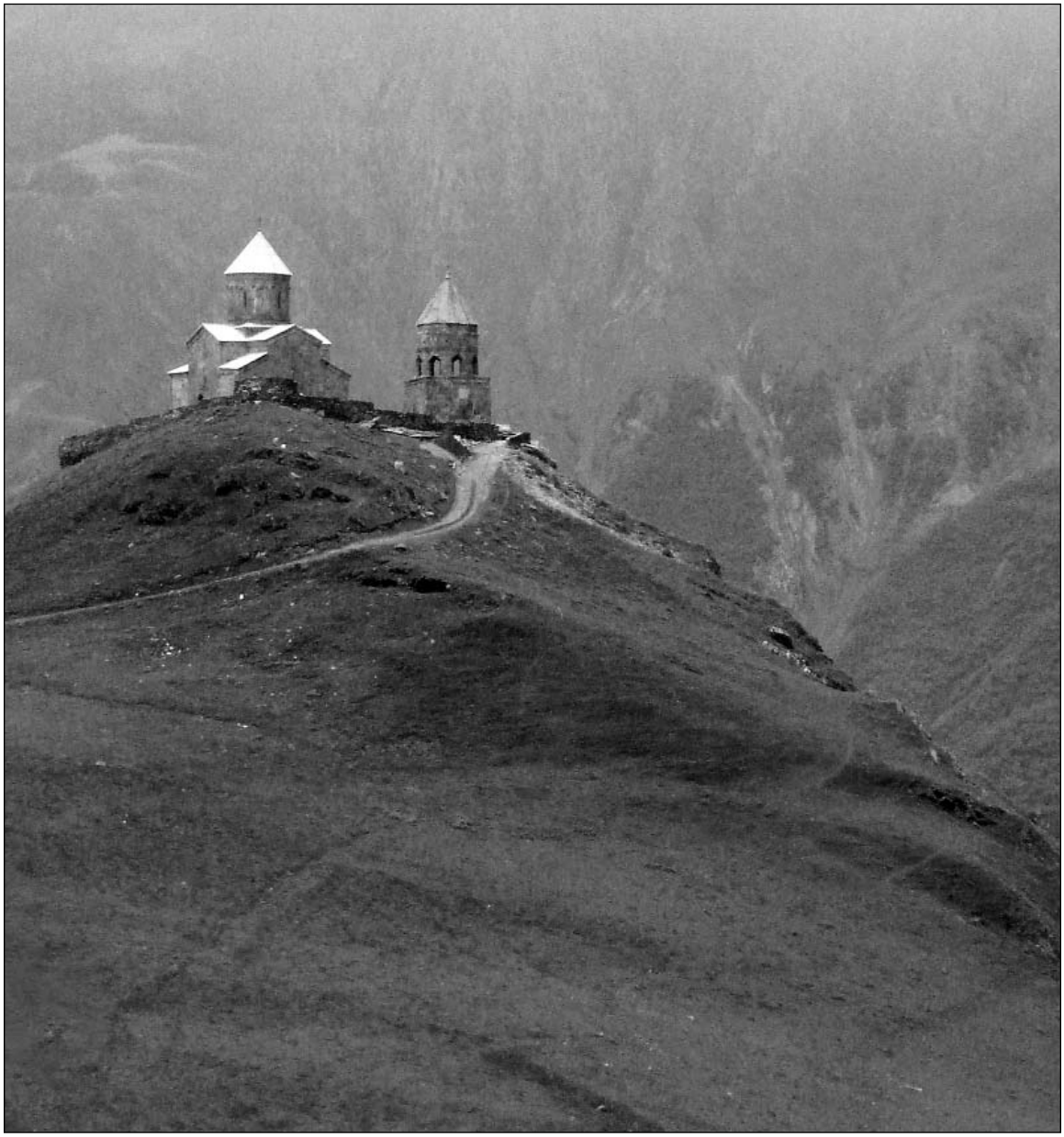
the birch

a journal of Eastern European and Eurasian culture
columbia university | spring 2007

interview issue
gary shteyngart
lara vapnyar
keith gessen
albert fayngold



creative writing | literary criticism | culture and affairs | photography

EDITOR'S NOTE

The cover of this issue of *The Birch* is supposed to look familiar. If you are a loyal reader, then you may recall the first issue of the magazine, which looked much like this one. I can promise you that the similarity is not the result of a lack of imagination; it is an homage, or, read less generously, a little bit of self-congratulation.

I believe that we deserve it, as the fifth issue of *The Birch* marks the magazine's second birthday. There are some easy comparisons to make—this issue is longer than our first one, and unlike the first issue (which was limited to Columbia), this one features contributions from undergraduates at universities in the United States and the United Kingdom.

But there is also something else—namely, the fifth issue seems timelier and more relevant than ever before. In making such a statement, I do not mean to discount the contemporary resonance of previous issues, but it seems that more than ever, *The Birch* matters.

The question of civic engagement may not be a crucial one within the confines of an undergraduate literary journal, but I believe that it is one worth asking. Literature is not created in a vacuum, and much of our content is a testament to the worldliness and wisdom of its creators.

In my interview with Gary Shteyngart and Keith Gessen, both writers stress the urgent need to respond to a political reality; Julia Butareva and Ashley Cleek review recent books by two major writers who readily acknowledge the complexity of modern Russia; and Dorothy Pinkney sheds light on young Russian writers' struggles to define their own society.

In the spring of 2007, it may be difficult to efface politics from our immediate consciousness, and I hope that this issue of *The Birch* can speak to that feeling. That said, I also believe that the magazine is, as always, a display of truly great talent from across the world. That fundamental quality remains unaltered from the first issue, and it will continue to be the driving force behind every subsequent edition of the magazine.

Thank you for your support, and enjoy our fifth issue.

- Mark Krotov

Cover Photograph by Paul Sonne

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the birch

A NATIONAL STUDENT-RUN UNDERGRADUATE JOURNAL

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PHOTOGRAPHY

BY MARK KROTOV, ELENA LAGOUTOVA, EMILY LOWRY (DRAWINGS), PAUL SONNE, AND KATERINA VOROTOVA

Special Thanks

Though editors and writers guide every phase of the magazine's production, there are many other individuals who have made a great contribution to the *The Birch*. First and foremost, we would like to thank The Harriman Institute for its continued assistance. In particular, we owe our deepest gratitude to Catharine Nepomnyashchy, Alla Rachkov, Frank Bohan, and Natalia Novikova for their support, their generosity, and their patience. In addition, we are grateful to the Activities Board at Columbia. Its continued support ensures our vitality as a publication, and as a part of the Columbia community.



Elena Lagoutova

Сказка, которая не была написана.[1]

KATARZYNA KOZANECKA
COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

"...не знаю сам, что буду
Петь – но только песня зреет."
Афанасий Фет, 1843[2]

1

Даже сказки спят,[3] sometimes very soundly, for a thousand and one nights,[4] or else fitfully, for one woeful line of recitative at a draw. Hark! Stirs one yonder in example, unearths her eyes, slips back into the thin trappings of her voice. The curtain hurries aside to make way for her stare, dull and ashen.[5] Below, only the courtyard[6] lies wide and awake; its arched eye without a lid can neither shut nor squint nor blink, even as the Watch slows his rounds to a symbolic shuffle. His lantern bangs and clatters against his knees; chimneys stamp out their last cigarettes and turn up their collars against the glow of the moon.

If she tells a tale now, it's

чтоб…найти слова
[себе] для песни колыбельной.[7]

She is ready to row herself to the island of dreams with her own arms for oars.

2

В этом доме жил-был велосипедист-рыцарь Илюша Олегович.[8] Said little prince, beginning to bloom

1. The fairy tale that was not written (down).
2. "I myself do not know, what I will sing – but lo!, the song ripens." Afanasii Fet.
3. Even fairy tales sleep (Ikea). Сказка is a feminine noun.
4. Also a sort of крупнолистовой Chinese-Ceylon black tea with slivers of pineapple and petals of rose, and flavored, to boot, with plums and passion fruit.
5. Взор, уныл и страшен (Набоков).
6. Двор.
7. So as to…find the words for a lullaby for herself. In Pasternak's original, тебе (for you) stands the stead of себе (for herself). The ellipsis swallows the words в тоске.
8. Once upon a time in this house lived the cyclist-knight Ilyusha, son of Oleg.

a beard at the height of fourteen years, gave the epithet Basque to the object of his nostalgia, on behalf of which he'd tied a string around his table leg, in the hopes that the домовой[9] would return it (or her).[10] Но домовой, судя по его долгому отсутсвию – все Илюшино детство! И никаких писем! – сам и пропал.[11] And so, having done the right thing by the домовой, that is, having tied очередную нитку[12] around the table leg, Илюша Олегович отправился в дорогу по неуловимой набережной Москвы,[13] which changed names more often than the kingdom of Poland once changed hands.

He'd sat with his mother перед дорогой,[14] and, hearing an iron chain of doubt anchor his leg to that of the table, he'd asked if mayhaps he were going in vain. Not at all, she'd answered. В принципе,[15] she'd said, quoting the rim of the tea cup in her hands, as you beelieve so you shall achieve. And she'd tucked into hiding the Made in China tag of his jersey. And she'd uncurled his fisted fingers for long enough to leave among them an Озорной Тузик.[16] And she'd traced the threshold with her stockinged foot. И Илюша Олегович отправился в дорогу, humming

В королестве у края земли[17]

to accompany the stokes-and-settles rhythm of his spokes and pedals, and the slap of the river Moskva against the embankment, which changed names.

На самом деле,[18] Ilyusha was quite far from the sea: not gulls, but crows, thoughtful gentlemen in little grey sweaters, startled into unpanicked flight at his approach, and the Santa Maria-esque ship, her entire hull above the water, and a giant on her deck, turned out to be but a памятник Петру Великому.[19] Yet the towers of the Кремль[20] rose promisingly here and there on the collage that sold in the trinket-markets as a skyline, and, once he'd put the ungodly gaudy gold dome of Cathedral of Christ the Savior behind him, the stars perched atop their spires winked at Ilyusha in beckon. And so he braved the swarms of cars, dodging foot-soldiers and foot-citizens (who were also braving the swarms of cars), to reach the Red Wall of the Кремль, and having reached it, he followed it, to find a break or breach in it. He cycled uphill on Vasilievskiy Spusk,[21] circled St. Basil's

9. House elf or goblin, with an emphasis on house, because дом means house.
10. A Russian superstition.
11. But the домовой, judging by his long absence – Ilyusha's entire childhood! And not a letter to speak of! – had also fallen off the face of the earth.
12. Yet another string.
13. Ilyusha, son of Oleg, sallied forth along the elusive embankment of the river Moskva [in the city of the same name].
14. Before the road. A Russian tradition.
15. In theory. But Ilyusha mistook the phrase for, In the principality. He figured that if his mother did not elaborate, it meant there weren't but one.
16. Конфета (a piece of candy). Made by Красный Октябрь (Red October). On the green wrapper (meadow), a joyous brown puppy meets noses with a bee sitting on a daisy.
17. In a kingdom by the sea (Edgar Allan Poe).
18. Actually; in fact.
19. Monument to Peter the Great.
20. Fortress; the Kremlin.
21. Vasilievskiy Spusk.



Katerina Vorotova

Cathedral, which, he decided, had been lifted from a fairy tale,[22] and across the endless deserted Red Square, whose curve-slope matched that of the round earth. He passed the Лобное Место[23] quickly, shuddering. In the Александровский Сад,[24] he slowed his peddling to peer into the fountains, where stood the Prince and the Frog, and the Fox and the Stork, up to their ankles in water, and on a dry spot,[25] Thumbelina wept.

And there, at the Borovitskiy Gate and Tower, there hung a sign:

Кремль закрыт по техническим причинам.[26]

And Ilyusha's heart fell, but only so far, because it was on a string. And so, having come full circle, he turned back. The water level in the fountains was higher on account ofThumbelina's tears.

Не переживай,[27] Ilyusha told himself: so the Kremlin was not the aforementioned principality! Walls and towers did not mark the borders of a kingdom always; sometimes rivers did, or chains of hills or mountains, flung with a flick of the wrist, like cream from a spoon. He wandered, if the wheels of a bicycle can be said to wander, and wondered and pondered the various and sundry things under the sun. He soon came upon a huge billboard spanning the facade of a building under капитальный ремонт.[28] On it was a bicycle like a caterpillar, with seats and pedals for a dozen, with the command Собери друзей.[29] In the corner crouched a circle, striped black and yellow like a bee, captioned Билайн.[30] After that he began to see these bee stripes everywhere: on footballs, spinning tops, матрешки,[31] and even butterflies. Короче,[32] this motif had replaced all patterns familiar to him and humankind. It hung in the windows of every other street kiosk, none of which he could make up his mind to enter until towards sundown he dizzied into defeat and did so, locking his bicycle to a lamp post.

Here Misfortune, dressed as a bicycle thief, overtook him. Ilyusha stepped out of the kiosk with hung head, for Билайн was but a mobile phone company who hoped to sell him a device he could not use, for he did not know what (or who) he was looking for…to find his steed gone. Yet his New York City chain,[33] a gift from kin living в эмиграции,[34] was still fixt to the lamp post, a ready appeal to the домовой, if the city possessed one, if the city were a home to begin with. И Илюша понял[35] that he was being robbed from all sides of his sight.

22. Most probably Hansel and Gretel. Recall the witch's house, its facade plated with candy.
23. General term for a place of execution in a public square.
24. Alexander Gardens.
25. The chest of her bird-friend, which would heave no more.
26. The Kremlin is closed for technical reasons.
27. Don't take it so hard.
28. Major renovation. Sooner a way of life than a temporary state.
29. Gather your friends.
30. Beeline.
31. Nesting dolls.
32. In short.
33. A heavy-duty bike lock.
34. Abroad; in a foreign land to which one has emigrated.
35. And Ilyusha understood

He looked down at his own jersey and blinked: it was an original yellow, of a different gist and cut than the Билайн yellow. It screamed.

И Илюша Олегович опять отправился в дорогу,[36] to collect color. He began to frequent florists, making the rounds of all the shops at the hour of closing and offering to sweep their floors in return for all the dropped petals, which he carried in a bag inside his jersey, so that by the time winter took the reign and reins of the city, his belly appeared quite round. In the far end of one shop along a rushing Russian boulevard, on the eve of the new year, a little old woman slept with her head on her hands and her back to the door and her firs, bundled with twine. Ilyusha added some pine needles to his stash, and pressed on. They pricked him repeatedly. Тогда стало худо.[37] The quest became a way of life.

There was no place Ilyusha did not look. In the post office he memorized all the series of stamps while a German lady complained about the long line, saying, Я привыкла к другому порядку.[38] In museums he rushed from tapestry to painting to sculpture.

He peered in window displays – and met the models' empty eyes – and in the medals and arrays of soldiers. He pressed his nose flat against the Teremok[39] windows, following the hands of the women spreading варенье[40] on блины[41] which they folded into envelopes. He checked the Disney Princess shopping bags that богатыри[42] knowingly carried. He looked at the gloves which merchants in the переходы[43] arranged into rainbows by hue, and in the chimneys; on one roof he met the soot-black Трубочист,[44] enjoying the moonrise with his Пастуха.[45] (This was before she grew afeared and made him take her down.) Ilyusha looked в Подмосковье[46] and под Москвой.[47] In the metro every other man held a rose, a gerbera, for his flame, and every other man, having lost his cause for a rose, held a bottle by the neck, and when he'd emptied it into his throat, gave it away to a man with a rose, a gerbera, so that man's flame would not need to buy a vase. He found unlikely titled music albums – I do not want, what I haven't got – and dropped kopecks. He heard that a gorgeous play called Питер[48] was being staged up north and decided to go; he inquired at the train station and they told him the only remaining spots were in the twenty-ninth car, which he never reached because somewhere near the fourth car he decided that they'd lied to him; that there wasn't a twenty-ninth car; that the platform would stretch north and further north and he would end up walking all the way there, in cycling shoes, with humid petals plastered to his skin, which pine needles in turn tickled….

Ilyusha was in the throes of this woe when he met Lady M. She stood on the corner with an enormous satchel slung across her shoulders: it was filled with every shade of rose and violet and crimson and berry. She

36. And Ilyusha, son of Oleg, sallied forth again.
37. Then things thinned. (Then things took a turn for the worse.)
38. I have grown accustomed to a different kind of order.
39. A chain of eateries.
40. Jam.
41. Russian crepes…or maybe crepes are French блины.
42. Russian epic heroes, or big strapping men.
43. Underground passageways via which pedestrians cross major streets; many are home to all sorts of shops.
44. Hans Christian Anderson's Chimneysweep.
45. Anderson's Shepherdess.
46. In the outskirts and suburbs of Moskva.
47. Underneath Moskva, that is, in the metro.
48. Piter, soft for St. Petersburg.

smeared some of each variant of lipstick on his arms, so that he looked a blushing tiger. But he still hadn't found what he was looking for. She told him there was more where this came from, and he believed her, and followed her home, where she gave him a bowl of mush and tea in a cup swarmed with painted bees. He was bolstered by their non-standardized stripes. Он выпил до дна, за тех кто в море,[49] and Lady M. bundled him off to sleep after reading in his palm that he would meet a girl who'd gotten bit by a bee while running around a monastery.

He slept fitfully, trying to remember if Sleeping Beauty had indeed fallen into a hundred years of slumber at the prick of a needle…or if it had been the sting of a bee. He dreamt that if you painted a woman alone, you could not show her distraction, but that if you painted her with her knees at her spinning wheel, and further if you placed both figures (the woman and the wheel) in the path of light falling from an opened door, and within hearing of footfalls…then that was another story altogether. He woke to find a full vase on the table in his room; the flowers were not the ones that had been there the night before.

Each day for a week it was like this: a schlep through the city, a bowl of mush, a new bouquet. He noticed that Lady M. had two rooms whose doors she kept closed and which she always entered from the corridor: he decided that they were actually connected and collectively contained a garden, which Lady M. guarded. One day while Lady M. was taking out the garbage, he opened these two doors and behind each found reason to riot: in the first, a bird in a cage; in the second, a balcony. And said balcony held his bicycle. И Илюша Олегович понял, что он пришел в не дом, и в не сне он ушел,[50] with his bicycle under his arm, разумеется.[51]

And Ilyusha, son of Oleg, sallied forth for the third time,

через майдан[52]

on which beekeepers from all over the former Soviet Union had strung up stalls from which to sell their sweet sap. Bees fluttered astray humming even amidst the spinning spokes of his wheels. His attention caught, suddenly, on a trio of students lying in sleeping bags outside their pitched tents. He inquired and found that they were protesting. A gainst what, he asked. Против ректора,[53] they answered. Я тоже против ректора, когда погода хорошая,[54] piped a girl in passing. Horse and rider turned to see what stuff that dream was made of.

3

In the morning sparrows found the сказка[55] asleep at her spinning wheel, her needle an oar, and the thread of sleep flowing through her eyes to the river, and from there to the sea.

February 2005. Moskva.

49. He drank to the bottom, for those who were in the sea.
50. And Ilyusha, son of Oleg, understood that he had come to what was not his house, and in what was not a dream, he left. This sentence mimics Russian fairy tales, in which не дом (non-house) is usually a dark forest or other unfamiliar and dangerous space.
51. It is understood.
52. Across the square. The refrain of a bard song.
53. Against the rector (of the university).
54. I'm also against the rector, when the weather's good.
55. Fairy tale. The noun is feminine.

The Codgers' Women

ROSS UFBERG
HAMILTON COLLEGE

"Da, Da, Da," the ladies chime
When gossiping about their men.
They nod their heads, with red cheeks mime
Some mocking imitation, then
Commence again: it's Anna who
Speaks first. "My Fedka never knew
How much he'd spent. His gambling debts
Would pile high; his epilepse
Would reappear. And me, to raise the kids!—
One died," she moans in an aside—
Yet, I was not ready when *he* died."
A rough finger taps the teacup's lid.
She takes her gloves off:
"These hands typed *The Brothers Karamazov*."

"Oh Anechka! You had it good!"
Cries Sophia, as she lifts a cake,
"If I were you I'd knock on wood.
My Lev, if I can claim that rake
As mine, and I'm not sure that I may,
Can burn forever and a day
In hell for how he treated me.
I copied over perfectly
That book of his, that *War and Peace*—
Which he later, with a change of heart
Would back away from calling art.
Thousands of pages of elbow grease!"
The tea-cake, covered now in spittle,
She puts back down and sighs a little.

A waiter, dressed in white, with tails,
Comes near to pour more tea;
Like a parent to a child he assails:
“My dears, in our eternal century
There are no bills; You eat for free.
That is, the game is over. Be
Less insistent to alter the past.
Your husbands’ busts are long since cast.
Redemption is a myth and so
Is Justice. Of your pain, those now addressing
The writers’ busts and wrestling
With demons, will never know.”
The women, staring through the teacups’ steam
Bite their lips to suppress a scream.



Mark Krotov

Matryona and Me

RACHEL KING
UNIVERSITY OF OREGON

One year I lived in Russia with a *babushka* named Margarita. Margarita switched on her radio box in the kitchen the first thing when she woke up in the morning. If the radio music of that particular morning didn't suit her tastes, she'd turn on cds from her nephew's band in the den so loudly that she could her it in the kitchen as she made my breakfast and I could hear it in my bedroom as I pulled on three layers of clothing to cope with the Russian winter. On her lips "there was singing, singing … the way people no longer sing in this machine age." I went out to the kitchen, disgruntled at the early morning noise, and she would be bustling over *kasha* or methodically slicing *kolbasa*. She never explicitly told me "If one neither cooks nor cleans how can one please?" but her actions said as much, forcing me to take large bags of food on excursions, meticulously vacuuming my room when I was at school, inviting me to have ù è or êî ëáàñà when I dropped by in the middle of the day, even though she was supposed to only make my breakfast and dinner.

My Matryona had a dozen sayings of her own. My favorite was her blessing she said to me before I went on any long journey. She forced me to sit down to the left of the hallway mirror and solemnly stood, her hand placed on my shoulder. As her voice recited the prayer, the hand on my shoulder clasp tighter and tighter until, in the last couple lines, I was aching to be out from under her clutch.

Despite this verbose blessing which I heard a half-dozen times throughout the year, Margarita did not consider herself religious. She looked at me with a suspicion bordering on disdain because I attended a Baptist church in the area. Because the Baptists didn't have a very good track record among many people in the city, I understood her hesitancy, and yet I considered it an act of triumph when I was able to coax her to church with me in the spring, even though she slipped out the side door before the sermon began. I considered getting her to visit with me less an act of proselytizing than a small dent in her unrelenting soapbox against Protestants.

Her other favorite topic of conversation was my absentmindedness. I have never considered myself absentminded, but Margarita insisted that all who study literature and other similar subjects are, by nature, forgetful and imprecise. She illustrated this claim in a number of ways, her favorite being to critique me whenever I was trying to measure ingredients in the teacups that we used in place of measuring cups. Scoffing at my method of approximating ingredients, she repeatedly told me that she was a mathematician, and this profession guaranteed that she could measure ingredients better than any language arts student. These interactions usually ended with me scowling and sullen and Margarita laughing at my momentarily lapse into adolescent communication.

But, nevertheless, I became acclimated to her ways and her quarters. "Thus Matryona got accustomed to me and I to her and we got along together. I became accustomed to the poster beauties … and

reams of other books. I got used to everything." The posters in Margarita's den were all accumulated by her grandson; most related to socialist events going on in our city, cities nearby, or even Europe. I never needed to go to a bookstore with the diverse stacks of books on her shelves; I spent a few dreary, winter afternoons trying to stumble through the opening of Dostoevsky's *The Possessed*. I never found a copy of "Matryona's House" among the books, but I hardly needed one, since I was able to observe a contemporary Matryona every day.

Like Matryona, Margarita never turned down an offer for help, and many a morning she would relay to me that she must go across town and pay a hospital visit to so and so or help so and so move or fill out paperwork. Although I knew neither her acquaintances nor where the hospitals were located, I listened with the reverence that one pays a grandmother, hoping that she was distracted enough to not notice that I hadn't finished my êàøà or touched the *kolbasa* that was neatly stacked and sliced on the tea plate.

One afternoon as I sat at a table in my room daydreaming at the window, I heard weighted-down steps coming up the concrete stairs. The locks rustled, the entryway shredded off three layers of doors, and enter Margarita, laden with a five or ten pound bag of potatoes. When I relayed her own plans of going to the market that she had narrated to me only that morning, she confessed that she "abandoned the normal course of her chores, and went out to help her neighbor." And then she dropped the bag in the corner of the small entryway and bragged about how she could carry twice as many pounds of potatoes twice as far only fifteen years ago.

Dividing seeds was work not so pleasurable to her, however. Coming in from school in the late winter, I went to the kitchen to see if I could grab up a ï å÷åíüå and I saw Margarita and her next door neighbor engaged in the monotonous task of dividing box after box of seeds into small paper packets to be sold for planting in the spring. I never understood the task entirely; I think that Margarita thought the miniscule income received from this work supplemented her meager schoolteacher pension. I wish I had the knowledge and the Russian vocabulary to tell the women that the pay for this job was far too little for the amount of hours they put in. For a time, however, I got used to the neighbors bi-weekly visits and Margarita's grumbling at the dinner table about her aching hands, and then it was spring, and the neighbor came no more.

Before I went on a trip on the Trans-Siberian railway, the temperature dropped unexpectedly. Margarita did not seem worried about the cold weather. The evening before I left, I sat at dinner, thinking about how the coldness seemed to permeate the inside of the house despite that fact that we put mattresses and blankets in-between the double-pained windows. Margarita suddenly piped up, seemingly reading my melancholy thoughts. She told me that life in Russia goes on as normal when the temperature decides to drop to abnormal proportions. Her prediction was that the weather would cause no delays or even complaints on my travels. She was right. Besides a couple extra scarves and the increase in Russian's already obsessive tea-drinking habits, I saw no visible change caused by the coldest Russian winter in forty years. Many times on my two-week trip I thought of Oregonians who send out the weather-watch newsmen at just an inch or two of snow. As my train rolled along the tracks east, I clucked in disgust at those sissies back home, and then stifled my clucks with laughter, for that noise sounded exactly like Margarita.

The Skeptic Revises Her Reading

ABIGAIL ROSEBROCK
COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

In Russian novels they always say
that after suffering some shock the damsel
"turned instantly pale;"
"She went white…lost all the color in her cheeks,"
her skin a quick barometer of misery.

And there are always moons and melodrama.

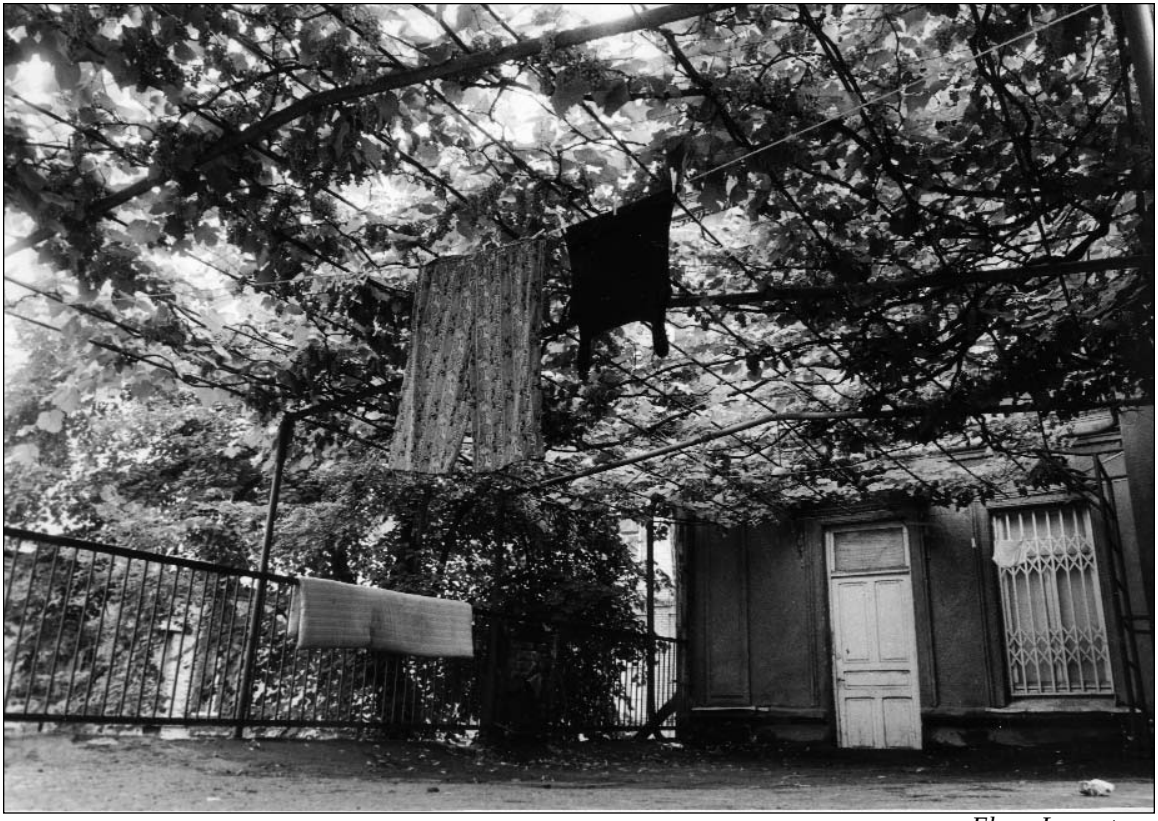
And they always say,
"he twisted up his lips"
with something akin to "disgust"
or to "sarcasm."

A tired trope, I used to think,
to dramatize the prose.

But then there was that night
when they spoke across a stretch of landscapes
into miniature telephones,
she pink-camisoled, wrapped in an heirloom afghan,
and he in his indigo going-out denim,
she in her front porch rocking chair
stirring up the balm of June with Jane Eyre as a hard-backed fan,
her eyes fixed on the silvery blurred Carolinian crescent,
he in Boston wishing early summer weeks
were not so goddamned cold and wet there.

There was the moment that night
When boldly, casually he told her,
"Well, my friend, I don't love you;"
when, color draining from her cheeks,
she dropped her book in Dostoevskian fashion
and it echoed out in spite of physics
and her shoulders, neck and breast went white
and whispering she asked him,
"What about when I sang 'Clouds' to you in bed
and fed you lemon pastry in the park?
When we read Spanish poems together in the grass?"

then, there it was:
the way he twisted up his thin, wet lips
in the most subtle and enlightened sarcasm.



Elena Lagoutova

The Foreigner

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Moscow is not a repository of memories. I must make this very clear. There are those that argue that coming back to one's birthplace is in an inherently nostalgic act, that simply being in the same administrative zone as the primitive hospital that one has not seen in seventeen years represents some sort of homecoming, like a child returning to his mother's arms after getting lost in a department store.

This seems unreasonable. It is my first time in Moscow in eighteen years. It is a city, with people and buildings and streets and rivers and parks. It is a means to an end, a check mark on the job application, a necessary evil. It holds nothing more than my original birth certificate, and thus the acquisition of a job that refuses to accept a photocopy of a photocopy, and thus it controls my future. But I have no past here—I do not cling to Moscow and Moscow does not cling to me. We live our lives separately, and this brief convergence is hardly a sea change.

I land at Sheremetyevo International Airport and am quickly reminded of the extent to which I want this job, because dealing with this crowded, smoky hellhole is testing my willpower. Without much effort, I could simply tell the right-angled German flight attendants that, I am sorry, but I cannot get off the plane for I am having a panic attack—do they have panic attacks in Munich?—and I will be happy to purchase a ticket for the return flight, and would you mind if I simply stayed right here, in this seat?—and could you go ahead and book my return flight to New York because-and you really are so kind for listening to me Ms. Speer, but after all, I am having a panic attack, and you must indulge me since I may very well consider upgrading to business class—this place is just so vile, and perhaps I do not really need that job that much, and what kind of terrible bureaucracy makes you pick up a birth certificate in person and Ms. Speer, would you kindly bring me a glass of Gewürztraminer while I wait?—I'll be happy to move when you're vacuuming and disinfecting this aircraft, but for now, I would rather rest comfortably—I don't think I'm being unreasonable…

But of course, I am too socially aware for this sort of self-absorbed American business. That I do not want to be in the worst country in the world is not representative of a panic attack, but rather, of a level-headed assessment of my circumstances and immediate surroundings. They couldn't even put some effort into the *airport*! One would think that minimizing the appearance of decrepitude is in this nation's favor, and surely the airport is just the place to start. But no.

Sheremetyevo is a cacophonous coexistence of an antiquated 1970s aesthetic—beyond which any proper totalitarian ideology seems unable to progress—and the tactless absurdity of modern capitalism, unrestrained by propriety or decorum. Before I even reach passport control, I am engulfed by the shabbiness of it all—the odd, dark salmon color of the bronze light fixtures embedded in the ceiling in boring, ordered patterns is mostly concealed by the uniform, off-putting gray that comes from the millions of cubic pounds of cigarette smoke that have lazily risen to the top of this confined space over the last thirty years. Anyway, illumination is pretty irrelevant, since it so damned dark here. In fact, the only thing at all that guides me toward the inevitable two-parts interminable wait, one-part humiliation, is the epic Marlboro ad that seems to take up half of the terminal

space. The giant cowboy watches over me, making sure that I do not clamor back into Lufthansa's warm embrace.

I walk down the stairs into the awful passport control waiting room. It is cramped and chaotic, with a general mélange of vile German businessmen and confused Central Asians, neither of whom make any effort to organize themselves into any lines. I am able to get away from the opaque cloud of cigarette smoke and the constant stream of profanity and this entire subterranean hellhole by pushing forward every few minutes, fighting for a chance to look upon the passport control booths, staffed by the most tyrannical and incompetent men and women that this country has to offer. These passport control people sit in tiny, clear boxes all day, staring at computer screens that probably list names in no particular order, but they exert more influence than most of the corrupt bureaucrats who sit in comfortable old-world offices in the Kremlin, Putin's smiling visage insistently glaring at the backs of their heads. With their cheap, quasi-military uniforms, the men and women that protect Mother Russia's borders speak in grunts and subtle movements of the head, so the sound of a visa stamp sounds downright cheerful in comparison.

When I finally leave the terminal, where "Now Boarding" can mean an escape to Dubrovnik or Dublin, but most likely Dushanbe, it is almost a relief to step outside and take in the wall of diesel exhaust that is an apt substitute for a "Welcome to Moscow" billboard. I stand with my suitcase and take a minute to look around. Aside from the hideous Novotel across the road, which combines Soviet reinforced concrete with South Beach turquoise into something that could make the greatest architects weep, there is not much to look at. It seems that Communism's great legacy is equally distributed dirtiness, as the hundreds of cars around me—Maybachs and Moskviches alike—look identical, covered as they are in layer upon layer of grime and soot.

I have three days to locate the damned birth certificate. But now, all I want is a taxi whose driver will resist the urge to play techno, who will not try to recite every single English word he knows ('Fuck' seems popular) in order to get my approval, and who will somehow weave through the ridiculous traffic that is surely sinking this city faster than erosion is sinking Venice. After the inevitable torture of a taxi ride, I want a hot shower, so that my skin does not turn gray forever, like the clouds that hang low over this endless disaster.

***

After showering and rereading some Pamuk, I decide to walk around until the evening, because I hate nothing more than letting jet lag win. I am not especially hungry, but I hope that walking will compel me to eat something. Of course, the food is awful here, but its cheapness is a fragrant flavor on its own, almost masking the ubiquitous puddles of grease and the inescapable, inedible meat products that must make heart disease a national pastime.

I feel odd stepping out as a tourist, given the enormous unlikelihood of my coming here on my own volition, but time to kill is time to kill. Fun with the birth certificate starts tomorrow, and it is still light out. To call it sunny would be a stretch, but pollution certainly enhances the sky's grandiosity. I stand on the ludicrous, gaudy pedestrian bridge that transports pedestrians over the Moskva River and look out toward the hills that face the river bend. Were it not for the fascist blotch that is Stalin's enormous Moscow State University building, the place would seem downright natural, but it is as cheapened as ever. The sky is something, though. The redness courageously pierces through the thick, heavy clouds, like a rescue worker burrowing through a collapsed mineshaft, looking for survivors. It's all for the worse, of course, as Moscow's ugliness is directly proportional to the beauty of the giant canvas above it. Hence, under an infinite roof of legitimate natural beauty, the city crumbles even more, reminding its residents that it cannot offer anything close to transcendence.

Soon after I cross the bridge, I notice a candy shop, buried in the basement of what looks like a four-story concrete bunker. It is probably an empty theater, long abandoned since the days of cultural nationalism, but until the bulldozers press forward, the little storefront seems to exist in an odd limbo, concealed from most intruders, and patiently awaiting its impending demise. Sadly, the sole employee of the shop lacks this patient, meas-

ured sense of existentialism. I enter because I have an urge to try one of the soft, nutty little tubes of chocolate that glare at me through the muddy window, but the angry, lanky man behind the counter treats the exchange like an interrogation.

"Could I have a quarter pound of *batonchiki*," I ask in Russian that I wish was far inferior than it actually is. I often long to forget the language entirely, to eliminate the most direct evidence of my link to this place, but my fluency is a result of years of placating my grandmother. I hate being a good grandson.

"Closed," responds the gruff employee, hardly bothering to lift his head or even really open his mouth, content to sit in his chair in the corner and glare at me as if I am shoplifting right in front of him.

"Well before you close, could you just measure out the candy?" I'm patient, because matching his rudeness actually entails more energy than I am willing to commit to this encounter.

"I said I'm closed. And prices are doubled for *turisty*." He articulates this last word far more energetically than anything else throughout the whole conversation. That anyone who is clean-shaven or somewhat nicely attired is automatically presumed to be a tourist should strike me as simultaneously depressing and amusing, but this man's insistence on keeping me away from mediocre candy is somewhat ridiculous.

"I'm not a tourist."

"Well I'm still closed. There are plenty of stores in Moscow that sell Häagen-Dazs." I decide not to bother explaining that I do not want Häagen-Dazs, which I can find in any Brooklyn corner store, or that if I wanted Häagen-Dazs, I would go the expensive, uncharacteristically clean supermarkets that dot Moscow's city center, or that Häagen-Dazs makes ice cream, not candy. Like so many others, I give up and head outside, not even bothering to slam the door, for any additional exertion entails his victory in this preposterous war. I leave, and I instantly push the interaction out of my head.

In Moscow, I try to strenuously avoid the acquisition of memories.



Elena Lagoutova

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I walk down a little street, where 19th century apartment buildings seem to be collapsing at their own pace, unhurried but determined, ready to allow another block to get whitewashed forever. The street is narrow, bounded by these small buildings, all varying shades of pale, sterile yellow with the occasional gray blotch where the stucco has collapsed, or where a bored kid decided to hammer out a little reminder of impermanence. Aside from the occasional car that heaves around an uphill corner and continues onwards into the center, there is not much traffic, and I am convinced that I can hear the hum of bad television from inside some open second floor windows.

As I have too much time to kill and no narrative arc to pursue for the day, I walk into a courtyard behind one of the buildings, through an enclosed alleyway whose collapse seems rather imminent. Surprisingly, the little two-story building does not crumble on top of me, and I enter a quiet, intimate space, closed off from the rest of the neighborhood. Surrounded by low buildings and the occasional patch of grass, the courtyard's uneven asphalt (oddly free of any cars at this particular moment) is punctured by so many weeds that it seems as if there is an expansive field just under the surface, eagerly waiting to inject a fragment of the countryside into this overdeveloped expanse. Some clotheslines dangle between two windows at one corner of the courtyard, and the whole place seems lived in, almost warm.

Suddenly, I think about a photograph that is somewhere in my parents' house—perhaps on the shelf at the far side of the living room away from the television. As I recall, it shows my grandma, dressed in a gray skirt and white blouse and looking rather young for her sixty years, standing next to a large tree and eagerly watching me attempt to climb atop a seesaw. I am dressed in a thick, blue jacket and a red hat and my face is hidden, but I seem determined to conquer this new challenge. I cannot help but think that the playground was in a courtyard much like this one, which my parents often took me to because I was afraid of the older neighborhood children. I commanded that playground for hours, and neither the cold nor the darkness was an obstacle, though my parents thought differently. Where was that place? For a moment, I am struck by this little fragment, which springs forth from my mind like an incoherent sentence, but I quickly realize that I am getting rather tired, and that I need to find a meal and get my papers in order for the inevitable bureaucratic jumble. I walk to a busy street, flag a car, and survive the potholes on the way to my hotel. The room service is overpriced and inedible.

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The next morning, half-asleep, I stumble onto a slow-moving bus that gruntingly hobbles from stop to stop. Brown and gray and too unadorned to be dirty, it seems like a hollowed out shell of itself. I ride forever, though it cannot be much more than a mile and a half. Like a mouse trapped in a maze whose walls keep blocking possible exits, the bus cannot move a few feet without getting cut off by arrogant, reckless Moscow drivers. The Lamborghinis are not any better behaved than the Ladas, and in this ridiculous acropolis of the wealthy, staffed by an army of the poor and the pitiful, the cars almost seem to be on equal terms. The bus lurches through the impenetrable traffic, carving out some breathing room, which gets stolen at every turn, but the driver seems entirely ignorant of this situation, seeing as she cannot take the time to turn her head when some hapless tourist has a question. Those poor fucks, they think that their geographic privilege entitles them to some modicum of respect. They are better off staying in their hotel and looking out their windows onto the inexplicable world around them.

I eventually make it to the absurdly acronymed government agency in charge of birth and death matters in a prefecture west of central Moscow. Located behind a thick wooden door, down a long flight of threatening stairs in one of the city's endless array of neo-Gothic, Stalinist monstrosities, the agency seems to be ruled by the philosophy that if you try hard enough to conceal something, then everyone will think it does not exist. Thus it is that without detailed instructions, finding this place is impossible-there is no signage of any kind, and by the time I descend into its inexplicable subbasement location, I barely have the energy to speak to the scowl-

ing employees behind the counter. The waiting room is empty, so I assume that a machine is broken, or that the boss is out sick, or that the lunch break now starts at 10 A.M., but am shocked to discover that the depopulated surroundings mean that apparently, no other people in this prefecture wish to ask the State to confirm their lives or deaths.

I get ready to painstakingly explain my situation with a comprehensive timeline with rationales for each of my parents' and my own decisions over the last twenty-four years, ready to embarrassingly plead my case and to beg for empathy, ready to offer a substantial bribe that, at this point, I am completely willing to hand out. But my hypotheses are for naught. In fact, the exchange that follows is so devoid of drama and emotion that it is not until I reach a sidewalk kiosk to buy a mid-morning beer—and check to make sure that, yes, indeed, the small bulge in my inner coat pocket is the small, red leather notebook that verifies my existence and guarantees my employment—that I take a deep breath and understand that this arduous task is shockingly simple. There is no use in regurgitating or reassessing the banal exchange, and I have no desire to do so. I have a birth certificate in my pocket and a travel writing career waiting for me at home. I wistfully imagine walking through the magazine's clinically neat headquarters on the 45th floor, my shoes barely making an imprint on the metallic carpet. I march past the cubicles and confidently stride into the editor's corner office, handing him the proof of my existence, and the key to a brilliant career. Suddenly, I have a next step, a defined objective, a future.

Unfortunately, I also have two days in Moscow. My euphoria vanishes quicker than a tourist's Rubles and for the next two days, it seems unlikely that I will get it back. There is nothing I can do to remedy this situation, and if I stay in my hotel room for the rest of this sojourn, then my first year's salary will have already been spent on dry salami sandwiches from room service. I decide that I should probably live as much of a tourist's life as possible for the next 72 hours. It is a frightening thought, but what better way to detach myself from this place than to solidify its irrelevance? I imagine wandering through the city without any existing knowledge—I walk through Red Square and approach it as an aesthetic and special wonder, looking at Lenin's Tomb as nothing other than a relic of a distant past, and seeing the Kremlin without giving a thought to the neo-tyranny that resides there—I gaze upon St. Basil's Cathedral and see a world landmark, a living postcard, and make no effort to imagine Ivan the Terrible blinding the architect who cannot look upon his own creation—I stare at the Bolshoi Theater and compare it to other great performance spaces that I have seen, like the Paris Opéra and the Colosseum and am fully unaware of Stalin's box in the middle of the theater, from which he can disapprove of something that he dislikes by executing the performer after the show—I stand in the new Victory Park, across the street from the Triumphal Arch and, along with the other tourists, pay homage to Russia's great sacrifices in the Second World War, failing to treat these sacrifices for what they largely are, acts of massive, ritual suicide enforced by brutal, lazy commanders.

On second thought, it is probably best for me to avoid tour groups.

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I walk along the New Arbat toward the Garden Ring. It is a truly phenomenal street, one marked by such a dearth of planning, forethought, or any sort of humanity that it verges on a perverse, horrible brilliance. The road is six lanes wide, though Russian drivers pay no heed to lane lines, and the center lane, no wider than a small highway shoulder, is constantly dominated by Mercedes and Audis with police sirens—I wonder what happens when they inevitably meet. The New Arbat is lined with hideous, bland Soviet skyscrapers in the shape of open books. If one were to place an actual book into this position on a desktop, the book would certainly collapse, unable to sustain its weight in such a vertical position, and I can only hope that a similar fate awaits these terrible edifices. Less in need of renovation than some sort of massive aesthetic intervention, these blue-gray edifices block both the sunlight and an impressive past. The result of 1960-era urban planners' brutal carving out of a massive portion of Moscow's small-scale, pedestrian-friendly core, the New Arbat stands like a monument to the lost art of the monolith. My instinctive reaction is to huddle in these awful skyscrapers' shad-

ows, but I am quickly blinded by the kitschy glare of huge neon signs advertising casinos, restaurants, and perfume. A pedestrian among crowds of parked and moving cars, I move without any definable logic, trapped as I am between the clouds of neon and the incessant traffic, the restlessness of heady commerce and the unstoppable river of billionaires with police sirens. I realize that my chances of ever making it back to my hotel diminish with every additional second that finds me trapped in this surreal urban wasteland. I see a stairwell behind a cell phone vendor and almost lunge toward it, eager for some respite from the dark weight of this city's recent past.

A few steps later, I find myself in the middle of Old Arbat, a pedestrian shopping street that almost seems charming compared to its dystopian neo-namesake. It is another world—calmer and more human, so I no longer feel as if I'm trapped in a black-and-white 1960s science fiction movie. There is a row of haphazardly constructed stands in the middle of the street with a wide array of tacky Soviet memorabilia, along with tacky, offensive t-shirts that seem far better suited to the debauched revelry of Cancun than the glum sobriety of mid-November Moscow. I approach anyway—despite my best efforts, my friends back home still treat this place with a measure of irony, so I might as well bring them a Stalin coffee mug, or some old Lenin pins. But when I come closer, I see the row of small models of Soviet cars, and my mission quickly changes.

I stand at a distance from the little kiosk to postpone the pushy saleswoman's inevitable harassment, but I'm close enough to make out each toy car's individual characteristics—I still remember every make and model of the police cars and big red trucks and low black limousines, though the toys have been in a box in my parents' attic for years. Admiring the little cars, still in their original boxes emblazoned with their dated logos, I think back to another November day that stood uneasily between fall and winter. I was five years old, and it was that joyful moment halfway between my birthday and New Years, when the former was not yet distant enough to make me long for the birthday ahead, but when the latter was already taking shape. It was a Friday and my



Katerina V orotova

father was home from work early, so he took me with him to run errands. But after we left the hulking state agency, he held my hand and we steadily marched away from the bus stop, but toward the epic, grandiose construction that was the Children's World Department store. This was a rarely occurring pleasure, as it was a difficult time, but he confidently made his way toward the row of *spekulyanti*, the black marketeers that huddled next to their flimsy tables in the back of the grand, first-floor arcade. We stood in front of these decaying men, their flat heads covered with frumpy gray hats and their hands as rough as sandpaper, and my father watched me as my eyes could not find a single reference point, so large was the number of toy cars.

Before I had time to settle my gaze on an orange Volga, my father uttered a gentle command that did not immediately register, so potent and wonderful was its meaning:

"Pick two, but we don't have much time, because mom will be mad if we're late for dinner." Of course, I ignored everything after "Pick two." This was not an ordinary statement, but rather, a message from some far higher realm. I stood there forever, weighing the options, assessing which two cars would complement each other, and which would most substantially improve my burgeoning collection.

I cannot even recall my ultimate decision, because the moment itself is so clear, so lovely and untarnished. But this brief glimpse into car-induced happiness is brief. I decide that I have plenty of time for souvenir shopping, and I turn away before the aggressive old woman can offer a discounted scarf or a rusty war medal. I walk back toward the hotel, leaving the past behind.

***

After another séance with Pamuk, I feel confined. I can see the river from my fourth-floor window, and the early dusk casts a quiet, subdued light onto the cars, streaming by on the embankment like animals, in eager pursuit of their prey. My window does not open all the way, so I can only hear a slightly muffled variation on the insistent traffic noise. I need to get out of my room, because the only thing left to do is pack my suitcases for a flight that is about 24 hours away from departing. But when I step outside into the parking lot (cars cram every possible surface in this city-public plazas have been transformed into repositories of anarchically positioned cars whose owners would never think to abandon such prime real estate), I feel the city looming over me, its shadows patiently huddling on rooftops and in back alleys, waiting until they can pounce. I decide that I cannot handle the jumbled, frenetic intricacy of the city center, so I head to an expansive construction site that is probably weeks away from being nicknamed 'Manhattan on the Moskva,' or something equally inspiring.

To get to the city's massive new Trade Center, I have to take the subway, a proposition that does not leave me enthused. The subway's intricate mosaic patterns, fancy gold trim, and grand chandeliers may be the only elements of Moscow's architecture that do not look defeated and worn. But this grandiosity, this notion of public transportation as high art, is shockingly at odds with the passengers themselves. Under the finely detailed images of young women in wheat fields and Lenin shaking hands with small children, the mass of people moves like a disorderly tidal wave, unrelentingly pressing forward. It looks less like a crowd, and more like a frightening anthill, and I progress through this stampede shuddering, worried that I may not make it to the platform at all.

When I finally make it to the Trade Center, or at least the shell thereof, it seems like I am stepping out of a completely different subway system. The station is sleek and modern, with polished marble and metal and recessed lighting-it reminds me of an airport terminal. I am also completely alone. It seems logical that not too many visitors venture into a future commercial district that does not yet have any actual amenities, but it is still rather shocking to be in the vicinity of Moscow and to not have anyone around. If only the city were always this empty.

Outside, it is just as solitary, but it seems infinitely quieter, as I'm surrounded by vast acres of empty construction sites. The wide road has no cars, but there is also no sidewalk, just a muddy path splotched with heavy workboot footprints, so I walk on the shoulder, unable to look inside most of the sites, hidden as they are by

temporary white walls that guard the lots' future contents with a ferocious single-mindedness. But I can still see that future, because though it is dark now, shells of enormous curved skyscrapers tower above me, as if bending against the wind. I can imagine the scene in a matter of months, all of this emptiness filled with identical glass and steel towers, designed to emulate the most boring parts of Frankfurt, Singapore, and Houston. I foresee this quiet street's darkness vanishing in a matter of months, the occupants of these office towers working through the night extorting and exporting, the light from their offices forever depriving this liminal space of its intimacy. This new New Arbat, this instant landmark, this corporate promise to the citizens of Moscow-unfinished, it seems almost human. I am convinced that monumentality is soon in coming, but for now, I am in awe of the gentleness of this construction site, so much bigger than me, but not pushing me away.

I am jarred by a loud noise that comes from somewhere behind me, and I turn around, paranoid and on edge, only to discover that it is fireworks in the distance, and not bullets close by, that are calling me to attention. The half-second of complete and total fear quickly turns into awe and wonder, which somehow seems richer and more affecting because of the preceding worry. I think about the tenth floor window of our old apartment, only a few kilometers away. When I was very little, a few times a year, my mother gently positioned me on the windowsill, so that I could have an unobstructed view of the rooftops, church spires, and illuminated windows of the city center. We both waited quietly, because I knew the reason for such an odd placement, and I trusted my mother to know exactly when to place me there. We never waited long, because just as I started to take in the cityscape, the sky exploded with fireworks that looked more like brilliant little volcanoes than anything tangible or physical. Framed by the city below, framed by the window, framed by the warmth and coziness of our cramped apartment, the fireworks were always perfect, always graceful and never long enough.

The memory is too solid and rich to compare with the sight in front of me, but I am still completely weakened, almost pummeled by the ferocious beauty of the fireworks that I observe through the scaffolding and concrete of skyscrapers, the sole witness to this awesome perspective. I hope that these buildings' future occupants approach this extraordinary display with a similar level of attentiveness, but I am no longer in a pensive mood. I stumble to the nearby pedestrian bridge, a modern-day Ponte Vecchio, but nothing registers. I look back and hope to catch one more glimpse of the fireworks, but the sky has returned to its deep sleep. Still, with a little effort, I can see the shadows of future corporate headquarters, dwarfing the little white walls that cannot do anything to hold them back. I catch a cab back to my hotel, but the dark construction site and its accompanying shower of light stay with me throughout the entire carbide. For a few hours in bed, I cannot even close my eyes.

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When I wake up in the morning, I decide to take a long walk to Victory Park, desperately trying to kill the hours before my evening flight back. As I walk, I find myself less annoyed by the honking horns of nonstop traffic, less distressed by the snowy grime that floods the sidewalks, less affected by the cold that rips through my overcoat. I can barely focus on red lights and traffic crossings, trapped as I am in familiarity.

I walk by a large Stalinist building and look past the sooty façade and the cheap perfume ad because I know that this building once housed my father's office. I remember the smell of disinfected cleanliness that pervaded the entire floor, and I can still smell the freshness of the copy machine that seemed like such a new and exciting invention at the time. I move forward and glance at a little park. The tacky magazine stand, with cheap beer and cheaper cigarettes, barely registers, because behind it is a tree that was the greatest hiding place that anyone could ever imagine. On snowy days, I happily got my mittens wet climbing under its soothing, heavy branches and imagined what it would be like to live in the tree forever and dreamt about the day when I could climb it and gaze out at Moscow's hugeness, the only child privy to such an amazing view. I keep walking and pass a subway station lodged in the middle of a brand new highway. Before the highway was ever there, my grandmother and I often stood on the platform for half an hour at a time, because if there was a slowly moving freight train making its way just past the subway tracks, my grandmother knew that I wanted to see the whole

train pass before we made our way toward the city center. I decide not to step into the station because I must keep moving forward, but the memories persist. Here is the grocery store where my mother always asked the threatening-looking butcher to slice an extra piece of salami, so that I could have a little snack before we made it home. And out in the distance is my sledding hill. I remember being jealous of kids whose sleds were sleeker and nicer than mine, but now, all I want is to leap onto that shoddy sled and ride down—I'm less afraid of crashing now than I used to be. I cannot walk anymore, and I decide that I would rather get to the airport six hours early than have to endure anymore. I hail a cab and endure the ride back to the hotel with my eyes closed, but familiar smells of leaded gasoline and fake leather overtake me. I hurriedly pack my belongings and jump back into the same cab, praying for all the cars but this one to leave the road, so that I can make it to the airport quickly.

But on the way, my mind does not obey. As we slowly make our way out of the city center, I realize that the cabbie is insistently driving me through recurrence. Lodged in my brain, embedded in my subconscious, suppressed and compartmentalized beyond recognition, the memory of our departure from this city springs forth from the driver's dirty fingernails, from the worn padding of the seats, from the windshield wipers fighting a losing battle against irregular snowflakes, from anything and everything around me. I try to look out the window or bury my head in my book, but it comes over me like a fiery explosion, obliterating everything in its past.

It was early afternoon, too, but a little earlier in November. I had not slept the night before, having been told that we were going far away, but I couldn't fathom the magnitude of such a change or the transformative power of geography, so I lightheartedly ambled around the half-empty apartment. All around me, both close and distant relatives were scrambling, placing items in bags and boxes and suitcases, shuffling papers, clinging to ashtrays and books as if they had the power to heal. I eventually found a quiet corner in the little room adjoining the living room. It was dark and damp, but I was happy to sit in a corner and wheel my toy cars around, occasionally interrupted by a kiss on the forehead and a kind word from any number of people. When the time came, we all sat in silence for a long time and my parents told me to say goodbye on to a home that I was leaving forever, but I marched forward, singing a song from a children's television show that I had heard the night before.

We crammed into my uncle's station wagon and started driving, without a word. Even as a seven-year-old, I could tell when overbearing silence needed to be broken, so I started singing my song again, which seemed to lighten the mood. I looked out the window and stared at the infinite rows of concrete apartment blocks, which had started to crumble on the day they were built. The tops of the white towers faded into the low-hanging gray clouds, a landscape that had not substantially changed in seventeen years. We drove by brand new Western gas stations and half-collapsed, rotting sheds, by new Chevrolet police cars and old women in babushkas selling cucumbers. I watched the road signs, making sure that we were en route to the airport, indicated by a white logo of an airplane. The half-empty highway seemed to widen as we went farther and farther out of the city until we suddenly turned onto an onramp and were in front of the terminal within minutes.

I cannot remember checking bags or saying goodbye to relatives. I cannot recall the inevitable humiliation at passport control, the sneers of airport employees who took personal offense at their countrymen's departure from the homeland. All I remember is sitting at the gate, staring through the glass wall out onto the tarmac. It had begun to snow quite heavily, so the snowplows were out, making sure that airplanes did not slip and fall on their way out. It was dusk, and as even the bright new snow became harder and harder to spot, the magnitude of the impending started to make sense. I was leaving everything behind, and daily familiarities were about to be replaced with the chaos of newness, the uncertainty of the future. I watched the warm glow of the cockpits and the bright twinkle of the runway lights peer at me through the unknown darkness.

I didn't want to leave.

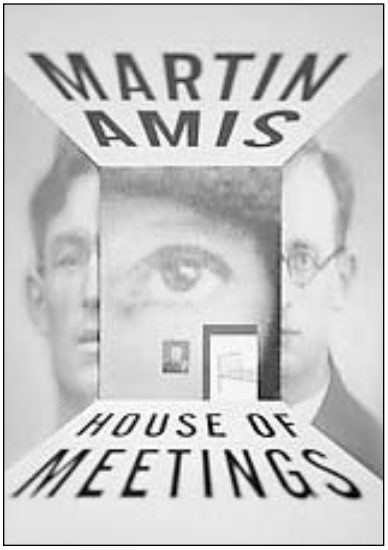
Building a Russian 'House'

Martin Amis's *House of Meetings*

ASHLEY CLEEK
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BOOK REVIEW

In his new novel, *House of Meetings*, Martin Amis expects much from his readers—he expects patience and their undivided attention. It is not through a sheer volume of pages that Amis's text challenges; rather, it is through the breadth of time that Amis's text reworks as it recounts Russian history. The effects of this trial, though, are not apparent until the novel comes to an end, when the text demands that a multitude of facts and details be remembered for the sake of even a superficial understanding.



Immediately upon finishing *House of Meetings*, I read the first three pages again. These pages were marked by the frustrated annotations of my first reading, indicating that, from the beginning, I was aware of the limits of my reading. It seems, as the novel begins with its invocation to "Venus" that is maintained throughout the novel, that Amis has placed within the text incomperhensible clues that will only become clear when it ends and the trap has been sprung. My frustration with the initial pages of the novel and my inability to comprehend them stems from these obscure hints that blindly led me through the novel to its finish. Blind as I was to what was coming, though, it was an enjoyable march.

House of Meetings is the story of two brothers who are sent to the same Gulag camp, recounting how their Gulag experiences, shared and individual, both change and dement the rest of their lives. The narrator of the novel says, "This is a love story," but what sort of love story could this be? Will the Gulag transform into something from The Hunchback of Notre Dame? The Narrator continues, "All right, Russian love. But still love." It is a Russian love story.

To those unfamilliar with Amis's work, it might seem strange, even arrogant, that a US-raised Englishman would write of Stalinist purges from a distinctly Russian narrative perspective. It is, however, a characteristic enterprise. *House of Meetings* is Amis's tenth novel, and while it bears little resemblance to his early works about love and drugs in the 1960s, his more recent work deals with simillar subject matter. In *Koba the Dread*, Amis also writes of the Stalinist terror and in *Time's Arrow*, tells, in

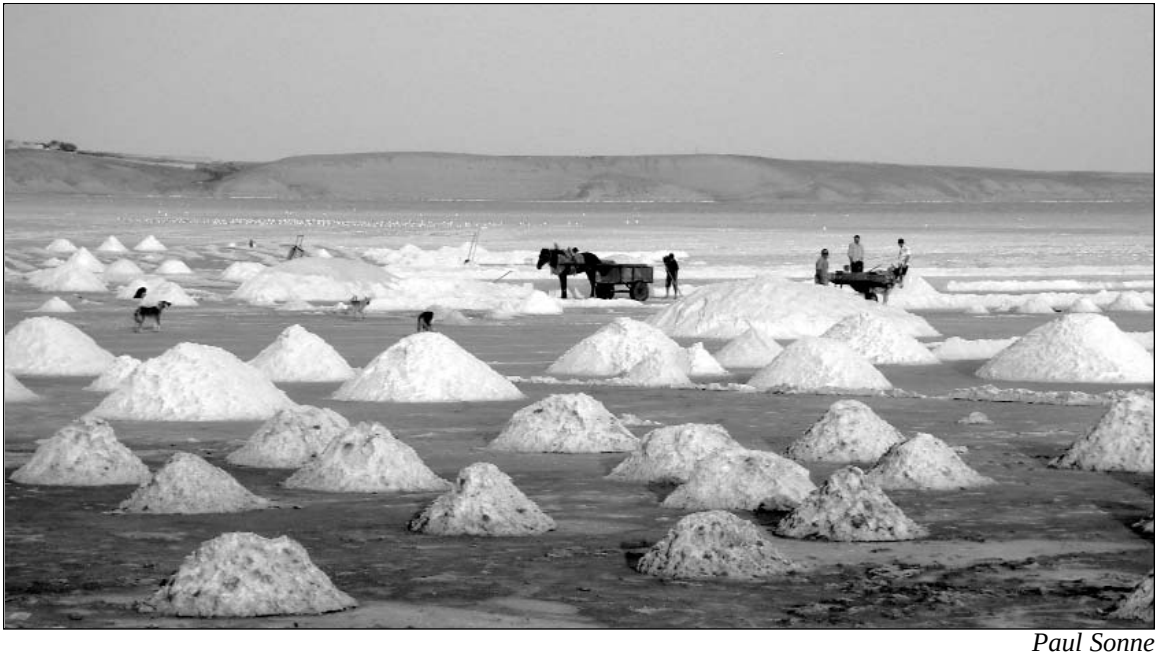
reverse—from present to past—the story of a doctor who experiments on Jews during the Holocaust, all in a first person narrative. With these two novels, Amis opened the door that would lead to *House of Meetings*.

House of Meeitngs does not only reverse time, as in *Time's Arrow*: it reinvents the clock. The very first chapter of the book is entitled "The Yensei, September 1, 2004" and begins with:

"My little brother came to camp in 1948 (I was already there)…"

Immediately, Amis puts forth two distinct and far-removed time periods. This is a familiar literary trick: it must be a flashback. In a way, it is, but Amis goes beyond that simple device. The relationship between Amis and his reader parallels the relationship between the fictive narrator and "Venus," his African-American step-daughter, in its style and tone. It is a confession. The confession, this masquerading flashback, unfolds in fits and starts. The language is biting and beautiful, and the narrator is often reminiscent of a dirty old man, part-grump, part-Humbert Humbert. He gives Venus a compact version of Russian history in fits and starts, as indicated by short paragraphs, and often goes on tangents about cruises or the definitions of boredom and hunger. These digressions are not the ramblings of old age because, like clockwork, the narrator reveals another key to his story at the end of each paragraph. In this way, *House of Meetings* seems truly Russian: the choice to place the weight—the key words—at the end of paragraphs and at the end of the book imitates Russian syntax.

While some chapters journey through multiple time periods, the plot is never dizzying or unnerving. Amis drops breadcrumbs to point the way to the climax. He also correctly predicts that once the novel ends, his reader will return to the first three pages and see that the hints are now clear, that confusion has been resolved.



Paul Sonne

Reanimation of a Symbol

Nina Iskrenko and the Russian New Wave Poets

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CRITICAL ESSAY

"We are the children of Russia's dull years", Nina Iskrenko declared, uniting herself with fellow *glasnost* era poets. This was the generation born and raised under the Soviet paradigm. By the time they were born, the rebellious voices of early Soviet writers like Daniil Harms had long been silenced. The poetic generation preceding them had fallen into two camps: yes or no. They either acquiesced and worked as semi-official poets, at least superficially accepting the ideology of the Soviet environment, or they outright rejected the rhetoric, and dissented from mainstream culture altogether.

By the late 70s and early 80s, that era had ended, and artists were now reimaginating possibilities of dissent. Fragmentation, the simultaneous authority of meaningless of language, the shaky palimpsest of history, in other words—postmodernism, loomed over this new generation of poets and demanded a reevaluation of the aesthetic of protest. Their works were disjointed, parodic and layered. Instead of responding to the regime directly, their work turned inward, turning on language itself, embracing the anti-lyrical.

The core of this "new wave" converged in Moscow, forming the club *Poeziia*, the heart of which was Nina Iskrenko. It began as a workshop under the leadership of the elder Kirill Kovaldzhi, and blossomed into its own life. From these meetings, three concurrent movements emerged: the Conceptualists, the Metamorphists and the Polystylists. Nina Iskrenko headed the Polystylism movement, thoroughly invested in the anti-lyric and attempting to create harmony from the chaos and confusion of modern society.

Conjoining a number of different registers, Iskrenko produces a heterogeneity that undermines spatial, temporal and contextual definitions. Meaning exists as a fleeting entity. Through disjunction, the anti-intuitive grafting of the new with the old, the high with the low, the esoteric with the everyday, Iskrenko questions the very process of meaning production. In her most celebrated poem, her textual manifesto, "Hymn to Polystylistics," Iskrenko unabashedly disrupts comprehension:

Polystylistics
it's when a medieval knight
in shorts
storms the wine section of grocery store no. 13
on Decembrists Street
and courteously cursing
drops on the marble floor
Quantum Mechanics by Landau and Lifshitz

Like the postmodern musical term suggests, "polystylistics" combines a number of discourses, resulting in a simultaneously harmonic and cacophonic language of the new and fragmented. The reader constantly must move between linguistic and cultural domains. Drawing from a number of insoluble image systems, Iskrenko redefines each. She asks if a medieval knight can remain simply that when wearing

shorts and excreting quantum mechanics. Each signifier is equally awkward and out of place.

Also important to Iskrenko's work is the application of theories of modern physics to social phenomona. Iskrenko's scientific background (she studied physics in college) fuels her critique of the pace and confusion of contemporary human existence. Recalling Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle, Iskrenko states that "Man's sharply increased speed of perception of a changing reality allows him to liken it to an elementary particle, one 'smeared' in space according to the principle of uncertainty." In the same way, the internal reality of Iskrenko's work remains elusive. Her characters or subjects shift within their internal world, confused through constant negation. This can be seen most concisely in her poem "Maria," which utilizes both graphic elements and parallelism to destabilize the reality of the poem. It begins:

~~Hurrah! And the woman Maria~~
~~appears on the sharp bank~~

~~No no! Look the woman Maria~~
~~suddenly appears on the sharp bank~~

~~And only the woman Maria~~
~~does not appear on the sharp bank~~

The poem breaks down before it can even begin. The emotive base, along with the conditions of relation between Maria and the bank, resist identification. All are equally possible, yet all are negated, literally crossed out. Even the consistent state of "womanness" eventually gets questioned: "are you a w o m a n Maria?" Though escaping strict negation, the word woman spreads out, "blurs" into the absence, the whiteness of the page. Identification, therefore, can never be strictly located. People and time move too quickly, leaving an infinite number of possibilities for states of existence.

Like other postmodern writers, Iskrenko clings to language as the last frontier. The very basis of Polystylism destabilizes and questions language's ability to communicate. Often, Iskrenko uses other graphic symbols to problematize her own texts, to challenge the reader's ability to produce meaning, and alter contexts. This suggests that language itself is insufficient and therefore dubious. Iskrenko interrogates the act of transmission, of communication, by graphically and contextually undermining the process. For example, in the poem "Tomorrow let's begin," she recreates conversational small talk that eventually degrades into symbols:

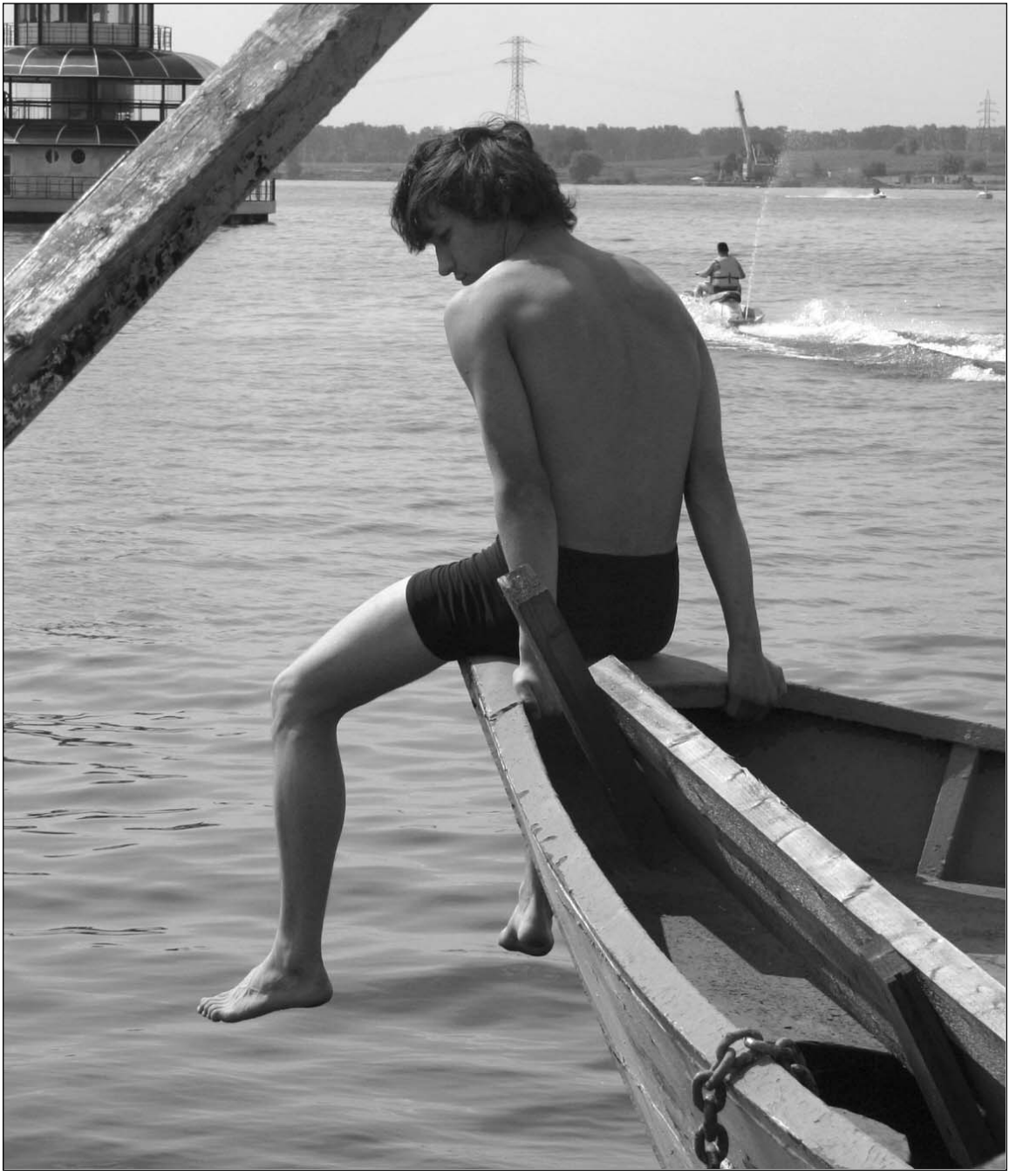
-No on thursday no way
-And why's that?
-Well I can't speak to you
!!!:$+^simpleton/,.,.,.,.,:;!:.mother!
-Okay I understand

Seeping out from beneath this harmless conversation is an emotive bank, inexpressible through language. Reproducing an oral art, Iskrenko stifles language by inserting symbols with no verbal equivalent. These symbols emit meaning, strung together to suggest frustration, or perhaps censorship, but remain byproducts of written language. Their purpose in this context shifts significantly from each's singular use. Both presenting the various possibilities of existence and scrutinizing the logic of language itself, Iskrenko utilizes strike throughs and the disintegration of words liberally in her work.

With Iskrenko's death in 1995 at the age of only 41, an era ended. Though many of her fellow poets continued to write, the force and innovation of the Moscow Poetry Club has passed. The state of contemporary Russian poetics and aesthetics has "leapt into emptiness," in the words of Patrick Henry. With the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the argument becomes muddled and shifts. There no longer exists the same dire necessity for poetic outpour. The crisis, one hopes, will lead to a new era, a new aesthetic, pioneering in its own right. Even after her death, Iskrenko's viscerally derived aesthetic has led her to be considered by some critics the "postmodern poet par excellance" on an international scale. Her work remains a signal and a warning to all falsities and contradictions of the contemporary age.



Elena Lagoutova



Katerina Vorotova

Decoding Memories

Bruno Schulz and the Reinvention of Myth

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CRITICAL ESSAY

Bruno Schulz, Polish author and artist, was a geologist of the extraordinary mined out of the ordinary. In his short life (1892-1942), Schulz produced his works with a sense of mission, tracing the threads of the tapestry of his existence, slowly and in his own quiet way; drawing them out and somehow re-weaving them anew and shockingly reconstructed. In such a way, he portrayed a world in his works that drew from his own life, yet reinvented it and entwined itself with myth.

Schulz's two surviving collections of inter-related stories, *Cinnamon Shops* and *The Sanatorium under the Sign of the Hourglass*, are filled with memories of life transformed. Schulz was particularly concerned with the symbolic make-up of childhood. Thus we find him writing that from an early age on "the action of riding in a wagon seemed to me full of weight and arcane symbolism. … That image belongs to the basic material of my imagination; it is a kid of node to many receding series. To this day I have not exhausted its metaphysical content."[1] From these primal images of childhood, Schulz invented and reinvented his world into his writing. In the story "Cinnamon Shops" from *The Street of Crocodiles*, the narrator Jozeph describes that "a few horse-drawn cabs loomed black in the street, half-broken and loose-jointed like crippled, dozing crabs or cockroaches."[2] These images of crabs and cockroaches, reinventions of the image of the carriages, become permutated in other places, like Schulz's story "Cockroaches," in which Jozeph's father seems to become progressively more insect-like.

The collection of images in Schulz's work are truly re-collections—the bringing together again of points of meaning into a narrative, a genealogy or anthology of the "nodes" in which daily life is sewn to the larger fabric of time and significance. These meanings become the make-up of the self through a constant process of finding personal images reinvented and recombined in the world. "I don't know how we manage to acquire certain images in childhood that carry decisive meanings for us," wrote Schulz, but these images become the self in his writings.[3]

Jerzy Ficowski, the heroic champion of Schulz after his untimely death at the hands of the Nazis in his hometown of Drohobycz (now Drogobych, Ukraine), recounts the epistolary nature of Schulz's stories, which found their earliest forms in letters to trusted friends and fellow writers. This transference in Schulz from childhood event to memory to letter to story—a constant process of reinvention—is indicative of the mutable nature of Schulz's private mythology. This process of "an unending exegesis" is not a rationalization or Freudian exorcism—"it is my opinion that rationalizing one's awareness of what inheres in a work of art is like unmasking actors; it means the end of enjoyment and impoverishes the problems inherent in the work."[4] Rather, Schulz's writings take on a process of "constant fer-

mentation, germination, hidden life. It [Schulz is speaking of *Cinnamon Shops*] contains no dead, hard, limiting objects. Everything diffuses beyond its borders, remains in a given shape only momentarily, leaving this shape behind at the first opportunity;" the stories Schulz left behind showcase a mutable, liminal zone in which "reality takes on certain shapes merely for the sake of appearance, as a joke or form of play."[5]

What is at stake here is the formation of a metaphysics of life in which the mythology of life, the symbolic images granted in childhood, become the epistemes. Schulz's world moves beyond this "anatomical sample" of philosophical explanation by making his mythological epistemes metamorphic—"this migration of forms is the essence of life. Thus an all-pervading aura of irony emanates from this substance."[6]

This sense of play, of change, of revolving and evolving masks over the ideal forms of life is the unique trait of Schulz's work. He shifts back and forth between sentimentalist and naïve sensibilities—he celebrates the "individual spirit" but asserts that its "roots … traced far enough down, would be lost in some matrix of myth."[7] Because his works pull the super-ordinary from the germinations of the everyday, in reading Schulz we find a storyteller like the one Walter Benjamin described, in whom is "combined the lore of faraway places, such as a much-traveled man brings home, with the lore of the past, as it best reveals itself to natives of a place."[8] The ultimate end of all the collection and recollection of imagery is the tracing towards an idealized divine: "Just as the ancients traced their ancestry from mythical unions with gods, so I undertook to establish for myself some mythical generation of forbears, a fictitious family from which I trace my true descent."[9]

Reading Bruno Schulz invites one to go backwards into one's own private metaphysics and mythology. As I think back, forever inscribed upon my memory is an image of a tiny spider hanging by a single thread from the high ceiling of the living room of the old house of my birth, hovering just before my face. I did not see this spider until it was right in front of my face, as it was the middle of the night—but it was glowing before me, backlit by an effuse light that seemed to emanate from within. Every time I see a spider I am brought back to this moment of childhood awe, that seems to have impressed upon me the idea of a supernatural power that ferments in a night which seems outwardly only unoccupied and sleeping. I do not know precisely what this totemic image means, any more than Schulz could explain the images which were indebted and indelible to him to be recreated and transformed again and again in writing and art.

Yet this image, and others, have somehow been an orienting point, something that functions "like those threads in the solution around which the significance of the world crystallizes for us. … It seems to me that all the rest of one's life is spent interpreting these insights, breaking them down to the last fragment of meaning we can master, testing them against the broadest intellectual spectrum we can manage. … They [artists] do not discover anything new after that, they only learn how to understand better and better the secret entrusted to them at the outset."[10]

Notes

1. Schulz, Bruno. "An Essay for S.I. Witkiewicz." From *Four Decades of Polish Essays*. Ed. by Jan Kott. (Evanston, IL: Northwest UP, 1990), 106.
2. Schulz, Bruno. *The Street of Crocodiles*. Trans. by Celina Wieniewska of Sklepy Cynamonowe. (NY: Penguin, 1977), 95.
3. "An Essay for S.I. Witkiewicz," 106
4. *ibid*., (107-108)
5. *ibid*, (108)
6. *ibid*, (108)
7. *ibid*, (109)
8. Benjamin, Walter. "The Storyteller." From *Illuminations*. Ed. by Hannah Arendt, trans. by Harry Zohn. (NY: Schocken, 1968), 85.
9. "An Essay for S.I. Witkiewicz.," 109
10. *ibid*, 106-107



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Cold Postmodernism

Vladimir Sorokin's *Ice*

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BOOK REVIEW

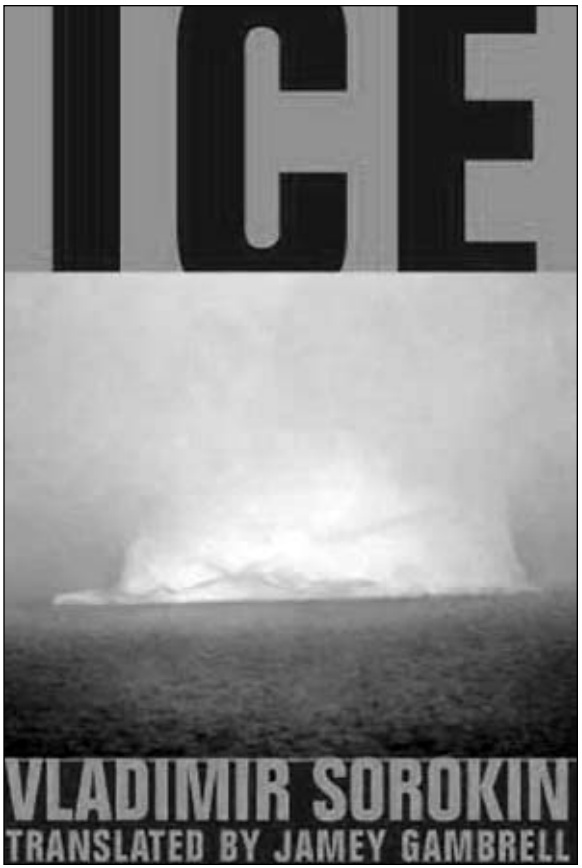
Sorokin's *Ice* is brutal in more than one sense of the word. There is enough genuine, physical brutality in it for anyone, and Sorokin's prose is spare, unblinking, and meticulous in its portrayal of the human body under stress. It is difficult to think of another writer in whose work one one come across such quantities of blood, vomit, semen, urine, and feces.

The novel opens with a sickeningly violent scene in which a seemingly random collection of variously sordid and pathetic Muscovites—a prostitute, a teenager, and a wealthy, cynical businessman—are tied and beaten in the chest with hammers made of ice in with the goal of "awakening" them. The kidnapped victims either die from their injuries or "speak with their hearts," revealing themselves to be not ordinary humans, but reincarnated beings with heart-names in addition to their ordinary human ones and the ability to speak the "language of the heart" with their fellows. As the new additions to this mysterious society are brought to an elaborate compound and initiated into their new identities, it is revealed that these beings do not have sex, but rather have "conversations of the heart" by pressing their chests together, usually in the nude.

The first part of the novel follows the three new brothers and sisters after they attempt to reject the brotherhood and go about their lives in Moscow. In a comically cynical move, each is given money, but in a form and amount appropriate to him or her. The teenager is given a wad of cash that he promptly spends on drugs and booze, for example, while the businessman gets an exclusive credit card with a PIN written in the corner. There is a variety of similar touches in the book. One cannot help but smirk, for example, when it is revealed that one of the brotherhood's bases is a tacky nouveau-riche mansion, complete with a southeast Asian servant, located in a super-affluent Moscow suburb.

The novel's second part is an alternate history that details the brotherhood's infiltration of the highest ranks of the Communist party, then of the energy business in post-Soviet Russia and its successful pursuit of its interests. Here, the founding myth of the brotherhood is revealed. It is a cleverly bland, vaguely eastern-flavored story in which it is revealed that the brotherhood has 23,000 members, that they originated as beings of light, and that they created several dead worlds before they made the mistake of creating Earth. They then became trapped in earthly bodies, and are constantly reincarnated, passing through every evolutionary stage before reaching its presumed pinnacle as humans. The ice in question fell to Earth on the meteor that landed in Siberia in 1908. It came from one of the lifeless worlds created by the brotherhood and has a special ability to release the dormant members.

As the novel spirals back to the story's real beginning, it is revealed that not only are all these chosen people blond and blue-eyed, but that the movement's current leader was "awakened" by Nazis who plucked her and a few other, less fortunate blondes from a concentration camp during World War II.



At that point, the novel becomes a brutal satire. The reader is slowly introduced to the central tension in the novel: that between the spiritual, asexual, vegetarian (limited to raw food, in fact) character of this brotherhood and the constant, nauseating awareness of the human body's various weaknesses. The account of the brotherhood's methods and the allusions to the Soviet purges and to the Nazis' racial ideology turns the novel into a sometimes sickeningly funny (and sometimes just sickening) satire of power, its self-mythologizing nature, and its willingness to sacrifice the lives of thousands of "meat machines" for its own ends. The brotherhood easily collaborates with the totalitarian systems to which it acts as a parasite. They seem to find common ground in their disdain human life—or, at least, the lives of those who are not among the chosen. When attached to the Nazi regime in Germany, the brotherhood uses the concentration camps to gather possible new members. In Stalin's Russia, they harness Soviet forced-labor camps in Siberia to harvest their cosmic ice, and "sharashkas," or laboratories where imprisoned scientists were forced to work for the state, to manufacture the ice hammers. Soviet labor camp authorities unquestioningly isolate blond and blue-eyed people and, after those who can "speak with the heart" are isolated, shoot the "empties" without the smallest hesitation.

By the novel's end, the brotherhood's quest to gather all 23,000 members together at once (so that they may escape Earth and become the creatures of light they truly are) takes a turn that appears surprising, but is actually frighteningly logical.

Vladimir Sorokin seems quite conscious of his role as Russia's preeminent postmodernist writer. His technique of reimagining history, used in many of his works, including his novel *Norma* and his screenplay for the movie *Kopeika* (Kopeck), signals the breadth of his vision. He is a razor-sharp satirist and master of the grotesque. Sorokin's works have been denounced as pornographic by a variety of self-appointed stewards of contemporary Russian morality, including the nationalist youth group Iduschie Vmeste (Moving Together), ironically nicknamed the Putinjugend (Putin Youth). It is the moral arrogance and ultimate hypocrisy of these very people, of course, that he is satirizing in *Ice*.

The Painful Border of Memory

Hoffman, Nabokov, and Rushdie Attempt Recollection

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CRITICAL ESSAY

In "Imaginary Homelands," Salmon Rushdie speaks of the border between the past and the present— a border of memory. For Rushdie, this boundary, the ever advancing frontier of the past, effectively seals off the present, leaving memory as the linkage, the fractured tie, incomplete, suspect and fallible. Eva Hoffman expounds on the issues of reconciliation of past to present by using the Polish word *tesknota*, "a word that adds to nostalgia the tonalities of sadness and longing," and divides her novel, *Lost in Translation: A Life in a New Language*, into three parts, "Paradise," "Exile," and "The New World" (Hoffman, 4). For Hoffman, this nostalgia takes on more medical overtones and becomes an emotion akin to illness. Language barriers disallow the roots of her imperfect memories to sprout in the fertile soil of her new land.

Vladimir Nabokov's character of Professor Timofey Pnin experiences this same fragmentation in his attacks of heartache. Manifested symptoms of no identifiable physiological cause, these attacks spin Pnin into a world of memories, dislocate him from his present and fill him with pain. The intricacy of the attempt to unite the past and the present and create a unified identity in the new country is a powerful theme addressed in these three works. Rushdie's complication of memory, Hoffman's search for articulation, and Nabokov's Pnin, the medically unidentifiable heartache of loss, all combine to form a powerful insight into the complex process by which the immigrant addresses the borders of memory, language and loyalty to the homeland, in relation to the ever continuing present.

In the first part of her autobiography, Hoffman evokes her Polish childhood with memories of transition and language accumulation. She intones, "All we have to draw on is that first potent furnace, the uncomparing, ignorant love, the original heat and hunger for the forms of the world, for the here and now" (75). In titling this first section "Paradise," Hoffman is speaking from a certain kind of memory, the lucid frame of a child's reality. This reality is yet uncomplicated by the boundaries of transitions that follow; it is ripe with expectations. This childhood reality is then, for Hoffman, the basis of all that is to come; the uncomplicated past of childhood is the Eden from which we are exiled, looking back with the difficulties and journeys of lives led. Evoking Rushdie's imagery of, "broken mirrors, some of whose fragments have been irretrievably lost" she views childhood as the fragile whole, and life and time as the complicated cracks which splinter our views of ourselves, our reality, and the ever expanding, and thus ever less manageable past (Rushdie, 11). A migration to a new land can be seen as a final rendering of the cracks into many splinters of memory, a shattering of a secure world and the identity held in that world.

In Rushdie's compelling mirror analogy, the pieces of cracked lens through which the world is viewed can be seen lying in shards on the Earth. Each time one of

these fragments is shifted, no matter how minute, the reflection seen in the others invariably changes. Hoffman speaks of this shattering in part two of her autobiography, "From now on I'll be made, like a mosaic, of fragments—and my consciousness of them" (164). The "Exile" portion of her life is an exile from not only her native Poland, but from the united consciousness of the Canadian and later American people she is to live amongst. She does not speak their language, does not naturally carry their mannerisms, and does not share their apparently common history; the pieces of her memory are not aligned to reproduce her reflection in this new state. This lack of alignment between memory and the present is thus the cause of her ailment, *tesknota*, which is seen to lead to feelings of discomfiting distance. Hoffman declares, "I have been dislocated from my own center of the world, and that world has been shifted away from center. There is no longer a straight axis anchoring my imagination; it begins to oscillate, and I rotate around it unsteadily" (Hoffman, 132). To realign herself, she must then reconcile the childhood and memories of her past to the perspective, language, and realities of the present.

This reconciliation, however, is neither a self evident nor easy process. The difficulties of crossing the border of the past on the faulty bridge of memory to reach the advancing present are beautifully illustrated in Nabokov's *Pnin*. His heart condition, with no recognizable diagnosis, can be read as the squeezing pressure of his own *tesknota*. Pnin views his heart as "the repulsive automaton he lodged [which] had developed a consciousness of its own and not only was grossly alive but was causing him pain and panic" (Nabokov, 21). The turmoil and dread of his memory manifests itself in Pnin's subconscious through shimmering episodes of intense aching recollection. It can be argued that Nabokov's Pnin is in fact a representation of this condition; terms such as "Pnian" and "Pninizing" create a state of being characterized by this eccentric émigré. Rushdie also points to the difficulties involved, "Sometimes we feel that we straddle two cultures; at other times, that we fall between two stools" (Rushdie, 15). The ephemeral quality of this border of memory makes it difficult to grasp and Hoffman professes admiration for Nabokov in her autobiography for this very evocation he produces by the minute details of his character's being.

Echoing Nabokov in part three of her work, entitled "The New World," Hoffman expresses an "internal exile," or the inability to both situate oneself within the society at large, and the inability to acknowledge one's memory within the framework of the current. For Hoffman, the settling of memory within her reality is done through the articulation of her memories through the new language, English. She states, "I want a language that will express what the face knows, a calm and simple language that will subsume the clangor of specialized jargons and of partial visions, a language old enough to plow under the superficial differences between signs, to the deeper strata of significance" (Hoffman, 212). A simplification, or categorization, through a vocalization of the past in the terms of the present births her new reality. As Rushdie opines that, "to conquer English may be to complete the process of making ourselves free," Hoffmann reaffirms the power of control over language, and thus intrinsically over representation, to bind the gaps in the dislocation of immigrating peoples (Rushdie, 17).

Reconciliation between the memory of the past and the present is needed. For Pnin, his inability to articulate the gaps and torments of his memory manifests itself physically, the pain seeking an escape out of his subconscious. For Hoffman, intense reflection, categorization, and the use of the English language to articulate her memories creates a new present which grasps a tenuous position on the border of her memories and future. Rushdie's concern over the fallibility of memory and its hold on nostalgia is also evident in each piece. Each author speaks to a continuously changing border, one that must be acknowledged and kept up with in order to carve a position for the immigrant within the present.

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Biopower and the Nomad

Complicating Foucault's Thesis in the World of Tolstoy

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CRITICAL ESSAY

In *The History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault presents his theory of biopower, which argues that as nation-states began to measure their power by population, they became increasingly aware of the sexuality of their subjects. To ensure a sizable labor force and maintain social relations as they stood, Foucault argues that nation-states imposed more conservative regulations surrounding gender and sexuality. More specifically, they recalibrated social norms so as to ensure that every sexual union could potentially produce offspring, making heterosexuality necessary and categories of male and female strictly defined. In his introduction to Herculine Barbin's *Memoirs of a 19th Century Hermaphrodite*, Foucault notes that hermaphrodites now had to choose "one true sex," whereas they previously had the right to identify as both male and female simultaneously.

Foucault's thesis, however, seems to operate within the confines of fixed geographical centers and very much takes it for granted that the problem the state faces is how to populate these "areas," and thus, Foucault's thesis seems to identify state control of population primarily through control over sexual relations. However, there are other lifestyles, beyond sexual, that threaten biopower, and one wonders how Foucault's theory becomes complicated by an examination of how the state handles these lifestyle choices alongside those surrounding sexual relations. More specifically, one wonders how Foucault's thesis becomes complicated when populations are dispersed and can be included in several different populations simultaneously, as is the case with the refugee, the exile, the expatriate, or the nomad. Using Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (1865-1869) as a test case, this essay will highlight instances in which Tolstoy grafts gender-bending onto nomadic communities as a means to critique their poly-populationist lifestyle.

War and Peace is a novel that, as the title sets one up for, is dedicated to blurring binary oppositions, and does so largely by highlighting the warlike brutality of everyday social relations. However, when it comes to gender, the novel "blurs" the boundary between masculine and feminine in a more conservative fashion. Tolstoy most definitely believes that men are inherently warlike and women, inherently peaceful creatures more suited for family life. Blurring these boundaries for Tolstoy is a question of men assuming elements of the feminine in order to understand that war is not always a solution. However, categories of gender remain fixed throughout this entire development. That is what makes the appearance of gender-bending in the novel all the more surprising and all the more difficult to unpack and examine in relation to the novel as the whole.

One moment occurs in Book 7 of the novel, when Nicholas, Petya, Natasha, and Sonya are visited by a group of mummers who dress the boys as girls and dress Natasha and Sonya as "hussar" and "Circassian" respectively. The mummers, a nomadic group, dressed half of the group in gender-bending costume and the others in the attire of vague ethnic groups (Tolstoy,

463). One of the girls is dressed as a hussar, a general term meaning "cavalry" that has been used with respect to dozens of nations. Another girl is dressed as a Circassian, a vague reference to anyone who comes from the Caucasus region.

The second moment occurs in Book 5, when Prince Andrew introduces Pierre to his sister Mary's "Gods folk," a group of Eastern Orthodox wanderers. Pierre accidentally calls one of the folk "Ivanushka," assuming he was speaking with a man only to be chided by Andrew and Mary for failing to recognize that it was a woman. It becomes clear that the gender of each of the "God's folk" is not easily discernible and these confusions occur frequently (Tolstoy, 341-342).

What unites these two moments in the novel is that gender-bending is associated with nomadic tribes. A tenable relationship with any fixed place is associated with a similarly tenable relationship to any fixed gender, to any "one true sex." All the more interesting is that *War and Peace* was written in the 1860s, the same time period chronicled in Herculine Barbin's *Memoirs of a 19th Century Hermaphrodite*, a period that, according to Foucault, showed a marked shift in attitudes towards gender and sexuality (Foucault, xi). It was during this period that the practices of biopower as outlined above began to take shape and affect social thought in earnest. The question then becomes: how can Foucault's theory of biopower shed light on these moments in *War and Peace*? How can it help to unpack these complicated scenarios, which are made all the more complicated given Tolstoy's extreme social conservatism and firm belief in the family as the ideal framework for society?

To answer this question, it is necessary to further examine just how the relationship between gender-bending and nomadicism form and interrelate. In the first moment, this encounter with the mummers and the fun they all have cross-dressing puts Nicholas into such a state of euphoria that he inwardly decides that he wants to marry Sonya. This is a decision that had hitherto caused him much trepidation as Sonya is an orphan and has generally played the role of servant within his family, albeit a servant on slightly more intimate terms with the family. This marriage, however, does not come to fruition. Nicholas eventually will marry Princess Mary, a marriage heavily chronicled in the epilogue of the novel. The epilogue is a depiction of life in Russia after the war, when peace has been restored, and focuses largely on depictions wedded bliss.

Thus, the alliance of Mary and Nicholas is to a certain extent associated with a return to peace and the victory of the Russian nation. Furthermore, it is the alliance of two families of the landed gentry, and Tolstoy himself believed very much that the family estates of Russia served as models for the country as a whole to follow. Thus, Nicholas's possible decision to marry Sonya would have prevented his union with Mary, a union intertwined with patriotism and familial piety, which Tolstoy perhaps would argue falls under patriotism. Thus, the visit of the wandering mummers can be seen as a force that would have deterred Nicholas from marrying Mary, and also from carrying out a life that would serve as an example to all of Russia of the stability and morality of the Russian family estate. Thus, the wandering mummers were arguably undermining the basis of Russian society itself. In its detachment from any set population, the nomadic mummers are contrasted with Russian family values and stability of Russia itself as a nation. The gender-bending features can be seen as markers of deviance, as a means to identify them as peoples uncommitted to the protection and preservation of any one nation-state.

The situation is similar in the second moment highlighted in the novel, when the "Gods folk" visit Princess Mary and her family. Whereas Sonya was what risked Nicholas' deviation from conservative Russian values, the God's folk served a similar purpose for Princess Mary. Devoutly religious, Princess Mary had long thought that her calling might be that of a religious wanderer, one of the most pious means to show one's faith in the Eastern Orthodox tradition. Mary turns her back on such a life when she meets Nicholas and decides that a life as wife and mother is what she really wants. This moment is more complicated to unpack than the previous one. Since Tolstoy himself was deeply religious, it is hard to imagine that these "God's folk" were deviant figures in his world. However, they are not positively depicted in the text;

they look haggard, and are slightly mentally incapacitated. It appears that Tolstoy was not convinced of the supremacy of this lifestyle, something perhaps most strongly marked by their gender-bending appearances. Given Tolstoy's conservatism regarding gender, the ambiguity in regards to sex could be seen as a marker of his disapproval, disapproval rooted in the difficulties that the life of a nomad would pose for anyone trying to raise a large a family and its total incompatibility with estate lifestyle. It is family life and estate living that Mary eventually chooses over the life of a wanderer, a life, as previously stated, that is associated with peace and the preservation of the Russian nation.

Thus, Tolstoy's *War and Peace* complicates Foucault's thesis in that it shows when society's regulation of bio-power not only targeted homosexuals and hermaphrodites, but also perhaps directly targeted groups that--for other reasons--did not fit neatly into the social norms of population. In *War and Peace*, nomadicism is the target of Tolstoy's Russian nationalist critique, and their inability to commit to one place and thus be subsumed by a single population is deemed threatening and marked by gender ambiguity, a designator of the inability to contribute to population, to biopower. *War and Peace* tells us that the state insures its biopower not solely through controlling sexuality, but through controlling the movement of peoples. Thus, homosexuals, hermaphrodites, exiles, refugees, expatriates, and nomads cannot be looked at separately, but must all be seen as part of the same group that threatens the state's power to control the movements of its population.

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Elena Lagoutova

New War, No Peace

Glas's New Collection of Short Stories

DOROTHY PINKNEY
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BOOK REVIEW

War & Peace: Contemporary Russian Prose is the latest work published by Glas, a small Russian publishing house with an ambitious repertoire (one hundred writers in English translation) but a constant struggle for recognition—in Moscow, sales of Glas's books average only 200 a year, despite a large expatriate community. But Glas's new anthology of short stories proves that Russia harbors young talent that deserves to be taken seriously, even if the market for it is not yet sizable.

The short story form offers readers unfamiliar with the writing of post-Soviet Russia an accessible showcase of some of the best new voices in literature. Stories thematically linked by love, longing and suffering display the writers' strong, original narrative voices. The collection is divided into two distinct parts—'War' and 'Peace,' the latter of which is ironically named, as its stories deal with domestic violence and other forces that can impose in a time of peace; it is a society that is far from harmony and tranquility.

The stories of war are concentrated on the war in Chechnya. In Arkady Babchenko's "Argun," which opens the collection, the army as an institution is torn apart; Babchenko writes that, "This is not an army but a herd drawn from the dregs of the criminal masses, lawless apart from the dictate of jackals that run it." Such an overt political statement is rare in the sensitive political climate that surrounds the Chechen war, and this honesty and openness adds to the seminal importance of Babchenko's work. However, forthrightness is not the story's only defining characteristic, as the writing is carefully structured and emotionally understated, yet moving. Having served as a conscript in Chechnya, Babchenko is accustomed to the gritty realities of war, and it is the combined impact of tonal normality combined with harsh realism that amplifies the impact of details—the result is disturbing and powerful.

Having been exposed to the harrowing images of Babchenko's story, the reader sympathizes with the main character of Denis Butov's "How Dreams Don't Come True," an ex-convict who faces rejection and misunderstanding within an ostensibly free society. The narrative style is proud and resolute and demands no pity, which differs from Dmitry Bykov's approach in "Christ's Coming." In that story, Bykov uses digressions and parentheses to portray the psychological instability of his hero.

By contrast, Julia Latynina's story "Nyazbek" is a political thriller. It lacks the intensity of the first-person narrative, and the short story's tightly packed action comes at the expense of character development and suspense. That said, it still offers a compelling snapshot of the complexity of Chechen regional politics and blood feuds.

The 'War' stories depict the tragedy of innately peaceful and sympathetic characters turned into sav-

age and violent sub-beings by the harsh environment of war. The stories are hard-hitting and adopt different structures and styles to convey the bitterness, regret, or instability of their characters. Stories under the heading 'Peace' are lighter, more lucid, and lyrical, but are also tinged with loneliness and longing for something intangible and unattainable.

Maria Rybakova's "A Sting in the Flesh" is a cleverly crafted tale of age, time and consciousness, and it is reminiscent of Virginia Woolf in its exploration of the inner world of a dying woman trapped in the helplessness of her aging body. Rybakova's preoccupation with death and religion demonstrates that themes of classical literary themes still wield an influence on modern writing.

The old woman in Rybakova's story and Mouse, the central character of Olga Slavnikova's "The Secret of the Unread Note," deal with a longing for love and the eventual surrender to the emptiness of life. Mouse is a vibrant and charming character, comparable to a Russian Bridget Jones but with more spark and wit.

Glas prides itself on quality of translation, which is often neglected in today's market. Literature in translation suffers from seasonal trends and fads in the consumer market, and it seems that post-soviet Russia has been sorely overlooked. Russian language and syntax have evolved in isolation, and the meaning of modern writing can often be lost in translation. Such a gap is especially apparent in the war stories, where colloquialisms and army speech is impossible to translate literally. Glas's editors, Natasha Perova and Joanne Turnbull, edit the publications themselves, a process which has become rare in large publishing houses, where precision of translation is considered a time-consuming and expensive superfluous task.

The combination of talented young writers, excellent translators and scrupulous editing has produced a fine example of modern Russian writing. The duality of the collection allows for variation and comparison, and it highlights the underlying message-that soldiers need to find their inner peace after war and that conflict is still rampant in "Peacetime." *War & Peace* presents a group of young writers who are building on their strong literary heritage, and they prove to be beacons of light, illuminating sources of social malaise and showing the way forward for modern Russian literature.



Elena Lagoutova

Politics Across Borders

Keith Gessen and Gary Shteyngart on the Intersection of Politics and Literature, Then and Now

Interview by
MARK KROTOV
COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

Gary Shteyngart is an acclaimed writer who has published two novels, 2002's The Russian Debutante's Handbook *and 2006's* Absurdistan, *which has just been published in paperback. Shteyngart has also recently been selected as one of* Granta*'s Best Young American Novelists. Keith Gessen is the cofounder and coeditor of the literary journal* n+1 *and his criticism has appeared in* Slate, The New York Review of Books, *and* New York, *among many other publications. He also won the National Book Critics Circle Award for his translation of* Voices From Chernobyl. *Mark Krotov spoke to Shteyngart and Gessen at a Korean restaurant over pigs feet and pitchers of beer.*

Mark Krotov: I'd like to ask you about your approach to the high and low in your novels. You manage to reference both Dostoevsky and Detroit rap. Is there a model that you follow, or do you throw it all in?

Gary Shteyngart: I don't think of myself as a working intellectual. I'm an entertainer, like Eddie Murphy, or Condoleeza Rice. I say things that make people laugh. I wanted to entertain the audience, and that's how I started writing myself. When I was in Jewish school, my first friends were made because I wrote a takeoff of the torah called the Gnorah. The aim is to be as entertaining as possible, and I think that my readership is really smart. They're pretty good at getting contemporary references. They're ready for hip-hop and Dostoevsky-a lot of them are graduate students listening to hip-hop while reading Dostoevsky.

MK: When you write, is it a conscious thing for you to, for example, make an allusion to rap lyrics?

GS: It's so organic. I do my calisthenics, which is listening to rap for awhile, and then I lay in bed, and it just comes to me—it just comes pouring out. And then, the problem is that a lot of it just doesn't make any sense. By the end we're left with a fairly readable product, an FRP© in the industry.

MK: In your review of Vladimir Voinovich's *Monumental Propaganda* in the *New York Review of Books*, you discuss Soviet propaganda as an anti-language. Do you get inspiration from contemporary American rhetoric these days, like terror alerts?

GS: I do, except they're so much in the public domain that everyone is writing about them. We're

all up on Gitmo and stuff like that. When I was growing up in Russia, the first thing I remember growing up are Brezhnev jokes—that's how it started.

MK: Were you really deprived of American culture until you were fourteen?

GS: Yeah, so I'm not a blathering idiot.
I don't think my parents liked American culture. They liked everything else about America, but they thought it was vulgarity.

MK: You've written about how the Soviet Union held a very strong grip over your imagination. When you came to the States, did that continue? Or was it a function of being an immigrant surrounded by immigrants and Russian culture?

GS: When I came to the states I swam away from anything Russian as fast as I could. It was so bad that in Hebrew school I had to pretend that I was born in East Berlin. Can you imagine that being German was considered cooler than being Russian?
I always felt I was losing something in not knowing my heritage, unlike some of the Israeli kids, who knew their heritage pretty well.
I went to Stuyvesant, which was a very multi-cultural high school, and being surrounded by people who were all mongrels and were all from different races, different places [was a great change]. And that's the first place where I felt really at ease. I knew that my whole life's goal was to move to Manhattan as quickly as possible.
But then I went to Oberlin, which was kind of like Manhattan in ten acres in Ohio, and that's when I wrote must of Russian Debutante's Handjob. I came back and my identity was pretty much set by that point.

MK: In another interview, you talked about how ending *Absurdistan* on September 10th was a very conscious choice to avoid the political implications of everything that came afterwards, but it is certainly a book about America's interactions with that part of the world after 9/11 anyway, so I was curious about that particular choice.

GS: After 9/11, my friends from that part of the world were emailing me saying "our hearts are with America," "our sympathies are with you and your city." And then, as it wore on, the idea was that these people had been living in Ground Zero all their lives in all of these republics, and nobody gives a shit. People are dying left and right and nobody cares—there's one attack in the middle of Manhattan and now you get to invade half the world—you get to clobber Iraq and all these other countries

MK: That's exactly why I was curious that you would end on September 10th because it seemed that the book was so much about America's influence there, about "Golly Burton" and all this stuff.

GS: We're all tied in together these days. Cheney went to Kazakhstan last year, and he went to Nazarbayev and said "Wow, you've really got a great system here. I really admire your economic and political system."
Some of the reviewers noted that Absurdistan is here—that it's not far—and immediately I started pricing Vancouver real estate after Bush won his 2nd term. Good prices.

MK: Is it a problem of modern fiction that these issues are not being addressed in a forceful enough way? Benjamin Kunkel's book treats 9/11 so differently [from Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything is Illuminated*, which Gessen reviewed in the *New York Review of Books*], as well as the idea of everything being a non-event up until that point and there being a seminal trigger. Do you think that there is a writer, or a series of writers, doing that? Or do you think that it's not acknowledged? Do most people play it safe?

KG: I think there's a problem with everyone saying "America was outside of history." The point of [Gessen's review of Foer's books] was that if you read the literature of the 1990s, there's a sense that America's not historical, so you have all of these historical novels about periods that are historical, like

the Holocaust. Or the Gulag. Or Ian McEwan, who wrote *Atonement* about World War II, whereas, in fact, I feel like we live in a historical time. History is happening. Even right here. Clearly.
And politically it's regressive, and it's a real problem to say that in the past, things were happening and now we're in the aftermath.

MK: Do you think that previous generations of writers have stepped up to the plate? Was it better addressed than writers are doing now?

KG: The books that come down to us are the ones that are about contemporary moments—Saul Bellow, *Invisible Man*.
GS: Let's say I want to read about the Paris Commune of 1848. Am I gonna go to Wikipedia, or am I gonna pick up Flaubert's *Sentimental Education*? I say *Sentimental Education*.

MK: Even when you were discussing Voinovich, about satire coming so easily because essentially the government is doing all the work for you (through propaganda, etc.), and all you have to do is satirize that directly, I feel like what's harder about America is that it is harder to access. There are so many problems, and I think it's that much harder for a novelist to approach it.

GS: I am doing what a lot of novelists have done, including Voinovich in *Moscow 2042*—I am placing it a little bit in the future. *Absurdistan* was a very valiant effort on my part to keep up with current events. I was aiming three years down the line, and by the time it came out I was a couple of months behind, but pretty much there. All that shit actually did happen in Iraq—the marble outhouses—that all took place.
With the new book, I'm aiming a little longer and I hope to really hit it. I'm having a lot of fun with it.

KG: You know what Shteyngart does is that it's hard to write about the contemporary seriously. The natural mode is satire, and so what we get is a lot of satire that is not only satirical but it's trapped in its own time and place. So you're like, why am I even reading about these people? Shteyngart sends them abroad. They're satirized but they get to go to other places, so you see that they're historical actors, even if they're fools.

GARY SHTEYNGART



Emily Lowry

GS: The problem is that you have too many hooks. You open up *Slate* or you open up any other magazines. There's so many people working on these problems that it's very difficult to come up with any sort of original thought at this point. There are a lot of very good minds trying to tackle the problem, but just like in Soviet times, we're completely disempowered.
It's not like anything you write is ever gonna change the direction of Guantanamo Bay.

KG: I spent all this time writing about Alexander Herzen [for the *New Yorker*]. He went to London, and then he started publishing a magazine that he sent back into Russia, and it upset the public. Public opinion does exist. If people had stood up to Bush in the year after September 11th, I don't know…

GS: If people had stood up to Bush, then what? We stood up! But I'm an entertainer.
But I have to say, a certain publication asked me to write what I thought would happen with the war one

week after it started. I started to write it and they saw it and they said "we can't publish this—it'll jeopardize our connections with certain elements of the White House."

MK: In "Teen Spirit," your *New Yorker* article on youth culture in Russia, you quote Vladimir Sorokin, who says of the Soviets, "they killed people, but they treated literature well." Do you think there's something to that?

GS: Books meant something in the Soviet Union, and they have absolutely no value in Russia. Russia's like China or India—a society in acceleration and freefall at the same time. There's a part of society that's going nowhere and a part of society that's enriching itself beyond its wildest dreams, but introspection, literature, figures very little for either society. Russia's become quite acultural, quite aliteral. People of my parents' generation—not even the intelligentsia, but engineers, music teachers—to them, literature mattered, classical music, opera mattered. The Hermitage mattered. It all mattered.
All that is gone now, because when you're earning 150 rubles, the same as the woman who cleans some house's floors, it's all gone.

KG: A friend of mine—a poet—went to protest a play of Brecht's that was being put on in Moscow. It was very interesting. He made a little placard that said "Bourgeois theater puts on the play of a proletarian writer" and the theater was like, "what are you doing here?" And then he said, "I have a right to be here because it's a public space, and I don't need permission to be here," and the guard said OK, and then he punched him in the face.
And then the guard was very upset and kept saying "why is he getting in the way of business?" And it wasn't like he's disrupting the state, but he's disrupting our business, and maybe people won't come to our play and make money, but it's still hard to imagine going to an American theater, putting up a placard, and someone punching you in the face.

GS: It's hard to imagine people building a giant toilet outside the Bolshoi and flushing all of Sorokin's work, but just the fact that it happens doesn't mean it's good.

KG: It's always been bad.

GS: It's always been bad but there was the myth, and the myth was: there's a cruel heartless society but if you went into a nice Leningrad communal flat, or in the provinces, or in Moscow, you'd find people with good hearts, huddled together, discussing *samizdat* and *Lolita*, and it was really a different thing. We were too young to know whether the myth was real or not, but that's the idea. Now it's young men like myself sitting around listening to DJ Assault while drinking contraband wine from Crimea.

MK: Can you elaborate on the notion of using Russia as a means to critique this country?

KG: In Russia, it's the same stuff but they're not hiding it, and you just see it, and it's a smaller country in terms of the elite. The elite is pretty small, so these connections are easier to put together. Also, in a way, if you're from Moscow—in a way, I'm closer to the Russian elite. I could make five phone calls and if everybody forwarded my phone calls, it would reach the Administration. More so than here, there's a high turn over. And at the same time, there isn't. There are all these people who are entrenched in power. I'll probably never know anybody in the Administration.

GS: Well, it depends on how this election will turn out.

KG: But even then, those people are in a different world.

GS: It's true. In Russia, especially if you're hybridized like us, you seem to get results.

KG: It's a smaller world, whereas here, you have to be in political science in order to get into that world.

GS: It's two countries that feel they have a historical role to play. Sometimes, it works out, but these days it's a disaster for both nations—Russia is trying to reclaim its sphere of power and America is trying to educate on the problems of the world while there is corruption at its heart.

KG: You go to Holland and the Dutch aren't like "What would the Dutch do for world civilization?" They're like, "How will the Dutch keep their country looking really nice, and everybody fed?" They're not worried about these things.

GS: In Russia, they absolutely think they're part of a great country even though they may be in trouble right now. And they want to be a great country at any expense. It really does see America as a competitor. They have nothing in common these days, except for the fact that they have political leaderships which are absolutely overbearing and trying to make sure that they can consolidate as much power as possible.

MK: Do you do any translation?

GS: No.

MK: Is *Absurdistan* published in Russia?

GS: It's about to be.

MK: Can you talk about the translation?

GS: I have nothing to do with it. They didn't ask me, and even if they did, I would've said no.

MK: Why not?

GS: The problem is that when I do readings, I feel like I'm kind of a jackass. My mind is so not on this stuff—I finish a book and I'm on the next one. I can't go back.

MK: Would you consider translating another Russian writer's work, or an American writer's work into Russian?

GS: I'm a real working writer, in the sense that this is the only thing that pays my bills. I'm also obsessive, and I need to get it all right, or I'll kill myself. I would take the task as seriously as I would writing a book.
Also, I'm not sure that my skills run toward that.

KG: I'm not sure mine do either.

MK: Can you talk about how you got involved with the translation of *Voices From Chernobyl*?

KG: They asked me to edit it, and then I started editing, and I found that I kept having to go back to Russian and re-translate stuff, and I was like, why don't I just translate it?

MK: Do you feel like your Russian is good enough that you don't worry about translation?

KG: Well when I don't understand, I ask my father or my ex-wife, but that book was pretty easy. The Petrushevskaya—the book I'm doing now—there's stuff that I don't understand where I ask. It's actually a bit of a handicap because I feel like I know Russian better than most people who translate, so I know what it's like in Russian, and I know how good it is in Russian, and then I do it in English and I know it's not as good.

MK: Did you read Russian all your life?

KG: I went to Russia when I was 20 and stayed there for awhile. I'm still a much slower reader in Russian. I didn't read from the age of 6 to the age of 20—I hardly read anything in Russian. And in college, when I was assigned books in Russian, I just didn't have time to read them in Russian. But now I'm at the point that I'm so annoyed by translation that even though I'm still slower at reading in Russian, I'll read it in Russian because the translations are so bothersome.

Seeking a Dialogue

Albert Fayngold Discusses His Art, and the Difficulty of Navigating the Ukrainian and American Art Scenes

Interview by
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Last March, Albert Fayngold had an exhibition of recent work at the CUNY Graduate Center, where he is currently working towards his Ph.D. in comparative literature. The show was full of paintings that stood out from the body of inconsistent art one tends to find in Chelsea. Fayngold's paintings express a kind of charged nostalgia—familiar places given a visceral unfamiliarity with a thick, bold swath of paint or a quiet sfumato ground, into which all forms dissolve. The work is deeply personal, but not just for Fayngold himself. In it, there is a universal expression of home, or a longing for home, to which as a viewer one cannot help but connect. Three weeks ago, Merrell Hambleton sat down with Fayngold to discuss his work and the narrative that has generated it over his years as a painter.

Merrell Hambleton: Right now, you're getting your PhD in Comp Lit, and you got your undergraduate degree in English after coming to the US. Previously, in Kiev, you were exclusively a student of art. How did your move to the United States motivate this shift in your studies?

Albert Fayngold: This was my neurotic solution. I did not ask to come to the United States, I simply followed my family … they decided to go, and I wasn't ready to stay on my own there. But I had no desire to come here, okay? It was just one of the things to do. But when I did wind up here, I found that I couldn't keep doing what I was doing, painting, the way I was doing it. The [art] scene here was so incongruous to the scene that I came from. There's no dialogue. Realism never really died there. Here it died, and was resurgent … but there it never really died, it continued underneath all these other things … not underneath, but parallel to all these modern and post-modern developments. I wasn't ready, emotionally, for that environment of anything goes. And the entire attitude to the artist in society is also very different.
And so, I think, there is another analytical mode with me which had always been complimented, I mean it had been there, you know, complimentary to the visual mode. But which I never wanted to give vent while there, whereas here I found that [in the U.S.] that was, in fact, the way to go, for me. In other words, I could root myself in language, and there was a kind of neutrality in that, there was a kind of *welcome* neutrality. I felt free in language, but I didn't feel free in the country, I felt

very constricted. So in immersing myself in the study of literature, especially of English literature—I mean I would never dream of studying Russian literature here—there was this saving neutrality.

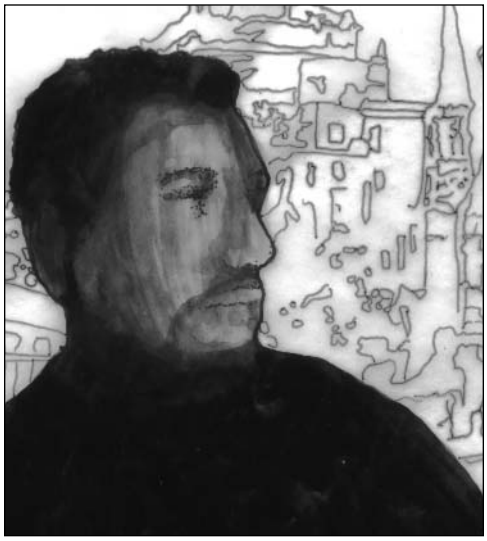
MH: So, to pursue literature academically doesn't signal to you a turn away from your art?

AF: It's what some people call complimentary metabolism. In other words, it's not turning away, it is a redefinition—a reconsolidation—by finding that alternative space. I mean it's sort of a gambit, but it's by no means turning away. In fact, the only way that I could continue doing this [my art] was under these conditions.

MH: Given the climate of the New York art scene versus that in Kiev, did you deliberately choose not to get involved?

AF: It's the absence of dialogue that kept me from getting involved—the criteria is so different. What I'm saying about the scene in Kiev is not that new, it's not that different from the scene in Amsterdam or anywhere in Europe. It's actually closer to the scene in places like Amsterdam than, for example, the scene in Moscow and St. Petersberg, which is like another New York City in some sense. It's not the fact that there is more of a human environment, that you could in fact actually have a human interaction with a gallery—in other words you could walk into a gallery and speak, and they would look at your things, whereas here…—but, it's not that, it's the fact that *once* they look at it, we can't connect, unless I go to, as I said, venues which I know share my values. I'm not a conceptualist and I have a beef with conceptualism, okay? So, you have to look for that niche for yourself. The niche that I, so far, have found was that I—and yes, I am associated with a small gallery in Brooklyn—I call this gallery object-image because I still believe in *object* and in *image* … and then of course there is this show that I am doing through the academy, interestingly enough. I feel more fulfilled with them, again, and this is another paradox of the scene—I feel much more at home with writers commenting and discussing, and academics and scholars, than with painters, curators, dealers, gallery owners, critics—especially critics.

ALBERT FAYNGOLD



Emily Lowry

MH: Because of the values that influence their opinions?

AF: Because art criticism here exists in its own world, its own vacuum. Writers and scholars come from a more broad humanistic, ecumenical background. They don't speak academese, okay? They are used to looking at paintings, commenting on them and they are interested also in the narrative, okay, but unlike the conceptualist narrative, its always the narrative that influences the art. What you encounter here for the most part in art the art scene is that it's narrative for the sake of the narrative. It's not the thing, it's what you can say about the thing. And I am very inimical to that. So I don't know if you would call this old fashioned or essentialist or whatever that term is, but the scene is very… the critics by no means represent any opinion of the public, you know, the "American" public. Theyre the ones who've decided to define the term, and since they define the term, then by their term you always

lose. So in other words, it's the dialogue that doesn't happen and I believe in dialogue. I believe in art, that if you exhibit it needs to be able to speak to the audience, and not to the critics.

MH: It's interesting that you say that. It seems like artists these days tend to get very wrapped up in a certain language. More often than not I find that there's no connection between what I read on the page—the artist's conception of his work—and what I see on the walls.

AF: Exactly. And that's not an accident, that's part of the deal. In other words, the object is irrelevant, it's what you can say about it that becomes the object. To me it's insidious, but to them it's the way to go. Now, of course, I am sort of making this collective enemy, but I need to describe the concept.

MH : What critics do you admire?

AF: There's Lee Siegel. He understands Russia and his background is in art and he, so far as I can tell of the American critics, has been the most receptive—just receptive—to the ideas as they came from that cultural context. And also to the aesthetic.
As I follow the critics who covered the Russia show [Russia! at the Guggenheim], I was incensed because…who was it, Hal Foster…what I read was, again, the extreme politicizing of the show was what he was interested in.

MH: Which, in a way, is the most obvious angle.

AF: It is predictable. And what he doesn't understand is that he thinks it's interesting and new and controversial when in fact, it's become so mainstream. What you just said—it's the most obvious choice.

MH: What are the origins of your interest in art and your own aesthetic? Where did it begin and how did it ultimately lead to you wanting to make art?

AF: It didn't begin—it never began, it's just been there. I don't think I ever doubted that I would be an artist. When I was six, I was brought to a local art studio because the apartment was crammed up with stuff, sculpture, and my parents were getting, you know, "we need to get him somewhere." At twelve or thirteen, I had to decide whether I was going to be a professional artist, and it was an interesting choice because I had been at the studio for seven years, from six to thirteen, and this man [who ran the studio] was on a mission. He was an assimilated Jew and he was also a connoisseur-type, and a communist—of course, everything was cold war politics. And he had an interesting motto for his students: "first you have to be a human being, and then you have to be an artist." And this irritated me so much that by the time I graduated, I came out and I said, "No, first I want to be an artist and then I want to be a human being." Part of it was adolescent rebellion, but in some sense I think part of my commitment and my decisions—I said, no, now I want to go to actual art school, and then all the way to the academy. I think this happened at that time. And from then on I was immersed in academic training—obviously, not for its own sake.

MH: Would you say there's some sort of Russian aesthetic that comes through in your work? Is that something you consciously aim to produce?

AF: It comes through. Just as your accent comes through when you speak. You don't *aim* to produce an accent. By the same token, that sensibility, that native sensibility, is bound to come through. When you catch it coming through, when you catch yourself doing that, and then readapting it to the here and now—to this adopted homeland—and then you get a very interesting mix.

Lost in Staten Island

Lara Vapnyar Discusses the Loneliness of the Immigrant Experience and Writing as a Cure

Interview by
YELENA SHUSTER
COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

In 1994, when she was 23, Lara Vapnyar emigrated from Moscow to Staten Island with a degree in Russian Language and Literature, a husband, and soon-to-be-born child. Thirteen years later, she is a published author of a collection of short stories, There are Jews in My House*, and a recent novel,* Memoirs of a Muse*. Now, she treads the shaky ground of a so-called assimilated American: she writes in Russian only in e-mails to friends, she feels no divide with her two kids who speak to her in English, and she takes Bush's American policy personally and never remembers feeling so depressed as when he was elected a second time. Yelena Shuster spoke to Vapnyar near her home in Staten Island.*

Yelena Shuster: Why write about the Russian émigré Jewish experience?

Lara Vapnyar: I don't know about anything else. I can't write about something I don't know. I tried to write a love story where both characters are Americans. I showed it to my American friends, and they said something was off about the story—Americans don't talk like that. I don't know what to do about that. My American characters spoke and thought and acted with Russian accents. I don't know. Maybe with time it will pass and I'll be able to write genuine American characters.

YS: How autobiographical is your work?

LV: When I write, it feels like I base everything on my personal experiences. Sometimes it's a very mindful image from my childhood or some memory. Sometimes it could be a story somebody else told me, "There are Jews in My House" and "Mistress" for example.

YS: Do you ever feel pressure to convey strict reality?

LV: You can actually get truer truth if you don't follow events exactly like they happened. Sometimes I write a real piece of memoir, and it would only be 20 percent autobiographical. I make up a lot of things. I think I make up more in non-fiction than in fiction.

YS: Why do you think you make up a lot of things in your non-fiction?

LV: It's very strange. Sometimes when I write, I don't realize I'm not making something up. Sometimes I would write something about our life back in Russia and show it to my mother who would

tell me it never happened. I would then look at what I wrote and realize yes, she's right, it never happened.

YS: In "A Question for Vera," a preschool girls finds out she is a "Jewess," as another girl accuses her of having too big eyes, too skinny legs, and a noise pointed in the wrong direction. Is this based on a true story?

LARA VAPNYAR



Emily Lowry

LV: Yes, it absolutely came from a true story, word by word. It's how I discovered I was Jewish. I thought of it as this huge handicap. I felt as though I had some kind of disease or something like that or maybe I was missing a leg or an arm and nobody told me. And then suddenly I found out. It was a very painful discovery and I don't remember how much time it took me to get over it. But it wasn't just one episode. After I knew that I was Jewish, I started discovering other ways that Jews were treated everywhere and how life is just more difficult for them. For example, we couldn't get into the best schools. If you were Jewish, unless you have very high connections, you couldn't get into the best college. I felt foreign and exotic—and not in a good way. The girl in the story was mean-spirited, but sometimes even worse would be to hear something from nice people. They would say something like "you're Jewish but you're nice."

YS: Is that why you immigrated?

LV: I think it was a very common situation. We had close relatives in the US and we were Jews so it was possible for us to immigrate easily. I think everyone who had this opportunity did it. There was a joke at the time. There were brave Jews and very brave Jews. Brave Jews would go to America or Israel and very brave Jews stayed. We thought it was dangerous at the time to stay. We didn't want to risk it.

YS: When did this feeling of having a handicap leave you?

LV: I think it's still there, but now it's mostly about being Russian and speaking with an accent.

YS: In *Memoirs of a Muse*, you've depicted immigrating to America as horribly alienating and isolating. Where does this stem from?

LV: When I arrived, I couldn't speak of any sort of success. Here I couldn't find any kind of job. I felt completely useless. I felt like a huge failure. Everybody in my family of Russian immigrants who came who were my age found jobs, so I felt awful. Maybe this is also the reason I was so lonely, because I didn't want to talk to people, to my parents or my relatives, because I was so ashamed. I actually lied to my relatives and told them that I worked as a computer programmer. My biggest worry was, why wasn't I happy? What was wrong with me? I had a very nice husband and a wonderful child—why couldn't I be happy? And I just hated myself for that.

YS: Do you think that now you could answer why you were so unhappy?

LV: It just wasn't enough for me, having a family and a child and not doing anything else.

YS: Many of the characters' mothers in your stories are writers, scholars, or at least engrossed in a book. Are all of these characters based on your mother?

LV: Yes, my mother was a professor of math education. She also wrote many many books on the subject and many textbooks for Soviet school children. Her books sold millions and millions of copies. I will never get there. I always wanted to do something like my mother did, to write school books and I always wanted to teach and I always thought I'd be great at it. But I never imagined myself writing.

YS: What led you to writing?

LV: I was so lonely and desperate. I couldn't find anything else for me to do. I failed at everything I tried here. I even tried to learn computer programming, but I couldn't. I just wanted to talk to somebody and I had no one to talk to. Whatever I just wanted to stay I said in my writing. So I started writing in English. I've never written anything in Russian.

YS: Why write in English when Russian is your better language?

LV: First of all, I read a lot in English. I wasn't doing much else, I was reading and reading. And I decided not to read in Russian unless it was some of my very favorite books, like Chekhov. And when you read a lot in one language, you start writing in this language, which is what I did, even though my Russian is better. When I thought about literature, I thought in English. And another reason is that I had a couple of friends here and they were Americans or native English speakers. And when I started writing, I was mentally talking to them—I was trying to tell them my story.

YS: You are clearly outspoken about your disappointment with Bush. Could you explain the absence of politics in your writing.

LV: I write about what's close to me. I just don't think politics are important enough to write about. There's this awful self-importance to politics. I don't want to give them more importance by writing about them. I have to be fascinated by something when I write. Politics doesn't do it for me. Love is definitely a more interesting topic for me.

YS: In "Lydia's Grove," the main character gets yelled at for talking too much. Do you worry that you talk too much?

LV Only about my personal life. For example, I have two uncles. In my novel, I chose the worse of each of them. I don't want them to read it. I hope that when they see it, each will think it's the other uncle. My mother has always been very supportive but I don't think the rest of my family understands what it means to be a writer, the importance of it. They think it's a job like any other job, maybe even less of a job. They're not really impressed.

YS: Did you receive any backlash from relatives?

LV: In "Mistress," there's a scene with an old meat grinder. My aunt called me very upset, asking why did I make fun of her for using this meat grinder? I had no idea she was even using a meat grinder.

YS: Do you ever feel the nagging voice of the Russian émigré in the back of your mind?

LV: I have no nagging voice in my head but I have the nagging voice in Russian blogs. And they criticize me for representing Russians in a bad way not because my characters are bad, but because my writing is not good enough.

YS: Does that deter you?

LV: For a couple of minutes, yes.

YS: What keeps you going?

LV: I want to prove to them that I'm good.



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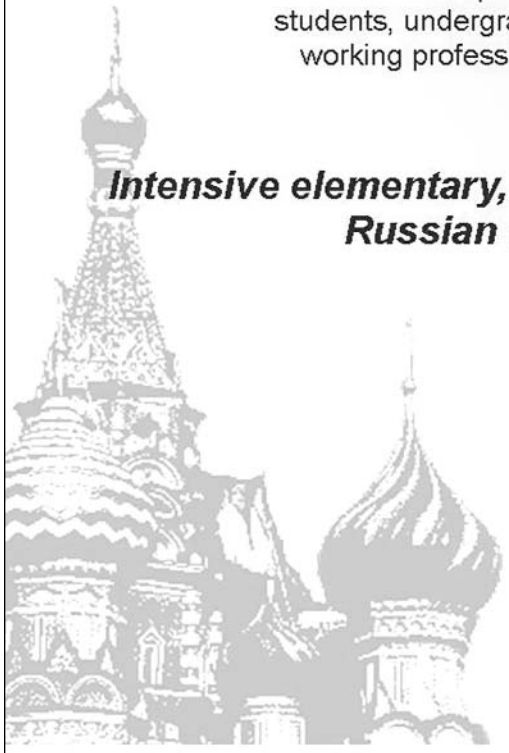
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