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CONTENTS

Prose

Interview

Poetry

The Art of Translation

Prose

One on One

An Excerpt from *Descendant of Bathsheba*

Vladimir Batshev

Translated from the Russian

by Will Firth

My parents had eight sons.

Father was a staid and respected man, and he was considered one of the most dignified men in the district. He treated us children equally, without distinction – boys and girls alike.

My sisters are wonderful, but my elder brothers are about the biggest bastards you can find. Why they turned out that way, I have no idea.

Our upbringing was identical, but look at the results: my brothers are crude, rude squabblers. They didn't want to learn a trade. They only worked if it was a piece of cake. They despised me. All the housework was heaped on me, the youngest. Cleaning up the courtyard, feeding the livestock, and of course tending the sheep out in the desert, were my chores for as long as I can remember. And always they were needling and teasing me, "Come on, Junior, fetch another bottle, you've got the longest legs." Or, "Come on, Davy, it's changing of the guard – your turn to watch the flock." "But I was on watch just now!" "Then you'll do it some more. You're the youngest, so it's good for you. You can chase after wolves and scare the lions away, you're our lion specialist, aren't you Davy?" They turned green with envy when I killed a lion that attacked our sheep. My brothers ran away, and I killed it. True, it gave me a mauling, the beast…

But why am I telling you? You saw them when they came to our wedding. Remember, you asked why I had them seated not by my side, but at a distant table?

And then there was the war.

My brothers rejoiced and enlisted as volunteers. But Father wouldn't let me go: who'll stay at home, who'll mind the animals if you all join up? Father was getting on. Who had to stay? Me.

"We'll teach those Philistines a lesson," my brothers ranted. "We'll bring back booty, we're gonna be rich, we'll get the goods, we're the badass crew, yeah."

Typical: fight instead of work. Rob people and fill your pockets – any fool understands that.

And David rose early in the morning and left the sheep with a keeper and took the provisions and went, as Jesse had commanded him. And he came to the encampment as the host was going out to the battle line, shouting the war cry.

That day, I went in the morning while the dew was still fresh.

When I finally arrived and looked around, I realized straightaway that it wasn't a good time. My eldest brother, Eliab, was with some girl in the tent. He had kicked out my two other brothers, who now sat in the shade playing cards, giving him manly advice, and laughing loudly. He replied during pauses.

And now I turned up.

"What the hell are you doing here?" my brother Shammah snarled.

"Father sent me to bring cheese to your captain," I answered calmly.

Shammah in reply: "And what's for us?"

"Here – bread and sunflower seeds. You love sunflower seeds, brother," I said.

"I do. But why have you come, David? You must have a good reason," Shammah answered.

"Yes, Father sends you bread and sunflower seeds."

"Who called for you, David?" my second brother, Abinadab, now joined in. "I certainly didn't. I didn't ask for any sunflower seeds. Maybe Shammah did, but I don't need any. They give me food here, it's enough for me, and if it's not I'll take it from the Philistines! Why are you sneaking up to our booty, David? You think I don't know why you're hanging around like a bad smell? We're gonna kill the Philistines tomorrow and take the spoils – and here you are. We're fighters, and it seems you want to cash in on our victory. It's sickening just to see you, you're too smart for your own good, I'd say!"

"We're no fools," Shammah echoed him. "They're all next door, meaning in the next tent. Ha ha ha! We know why people flock here from the rear, they want a share of the spoils. We spill blood, we're the badass crew, and he turns up and wants to buy into it with bread and sunflower seeds. So you brought cheese for the captain – well, well – so he'll be free to plunder. We know your sort, don't we Abinadab?

Eliab in the tent heard our brothers blathering and realized I'd come.

"Make the varmint bolt!" he yelled.

I was stunned. Father had sent me with the cheese to spare my brothers in the scorching heat, and they…

Oh, it would have been better if I'd kept tending the sheep. I felt so much like socking them both in the face for their impudence, but they were my brothers. I spat and steamed off.

I had to carry out Father's errand and take the cheese to the captain.
And then Goliath appeared on the other slope and started shouting.

Our men were arrayed on the sunny side of the mountain, and the Philistines opposite. A valley lay in the middle; it was beautiful and pleasant to think back to, with a stand of young oaks. At least until we went down into it. After all that happened in the valley, nothing was left. Only blood. And sweat. Because it was hot.

Now Goliath came forth. With a whopping great spear and a sword dangling at his side. Armored all over, he was a real tank – with a helmet, mesh at his neck, greaves, armguards, leather gaiters, and also a shield.

I even whistled when I saw him. A burly, arrogant ogre, a real basketballer type. And in armor. That was more the worry. Only his face was open. Alright, I thought, I'll have to bust him in the snoot. He made his way toward me, clanking in his brass armor. His spear was enormous and its weight visible from a distance. But above all – he was huge! Six cubits and a span tall.

His coat of mail weighed 175 pounds. The head of his spear twenty pounds. We weighed them later and were astonished.

I was astonished too. Why? Because I dispatched him with the very first stone. I'm a good shot with a sling, everyone will tell you, but I didn't expect to take him out straightaway. I thought with the fifth or sixth shot maybe.

Ha! You know, it was terribly hot, like in the desert. But I was accustomed to it. To be honest, I grazed our sheep in the desert from when I was small, so I was used to it.

Don't think the desert is just sand and the odd hardy shrub – baked earth and a few gnarled growths. No, there are also grasses, and bushes, and springs, and you can find shade. You're right there with the desert, next-door neighbor to an enemy. He's next to you and you're next to him. He studies you, and you study him. Whoever learns more about the other wins. And therefore the sun can't shock me. If it's going to burn down, just let it. That's what the sun's about. Real, torrid heat. Not like in Crimea, in Koktebel or Yalta. But in the war. War is hard. Not because you can get killed – I knew I wouldn't – but simply because it's an uncomfortable business: it's hot, you're thirsty, there's nowhere to lie down, during a siege they can drop a brick on your noggin… It's godawful.

That day was a scorcher. Whoever was able to took refuge in tents, others improvised and rigged up whatever shelter they could with canopies and cloaks. But it didn't bother me – dashed if I know why. Strange that it turned out like that. It seemed I'd lost my blanket. My headband was my only protection. Would anyone help me shelter from the sun? Talk about false expectations…

My brothers, like I say, are real bastards. In hot weather like that you just want to find some shade. But we don't get to choose our relatives, I don't need to tell you that. We're only free to renounce them, as jokers rightly say. "Whaddaya want, kid? It's crowded here enough without you. "Bug out!" they shouted. But I'm no fool, I

understood what was going on, I'm not an idiot…

It was all about the booty. They feared there wouldn't be enough to go around. They'd slaughter the Philistines without my help. We outnumbered them and were better armed. It was to do with the booty, and my brothers got jealous.

While Goliath was yelling and screaming, our men got into formation and ready for battle, despite the heat. To tell you the truth: no one intended to fight that day. Not the Philistines, and our men even less!

It was so hot.

The next morning – yes. That would be a different matter. In the cool of the morning, when the sun was only just rising, before the dew dried… But in the heat would be stupid, nothing good would come of it.

Goliath, by the way, had a sword-bearer. He was blind in one eye. A big fellow, but not as tall as Goliath. Of normal height. Also with a helmet and chainmail. Later I even winced when I imagined what it must have been like to wear.

The Philistines presented their spears, rattled their brass, made faces, and yelled. But Goliath was the loudest of all.

"I fuck you all in the mouth, in the ass, in the hair, in every hole. You're not soldiers but slaves of your King Saul, nothing more. Come on, who can fight me? Weaklings! Are you shitting yourselves, you cut dicks? Ha ha ha! That's it, ha ha ha! I'll kill you all!"

Our men were confused and embarrassed by Goliath's insolent performance. But then I saw he was weak in the knees. He had nothing but his foul mouth and that coat of mail.

"Come on! Come out! Who's got the guts?" he shouted. "If you beat me, we'll be your slaves. And if I cut your throat, you'll all be ours. Well? Come on, who dares?"

The front rank of our men wavered.

They love to recollect today: We stood unflinchingly… Actually we were trembling, and how! Why were we trembling? Our people, as you know, are God-fearing, although they're beloved of God. We'd rather chop off our own hand than say anything to offend our Lord. And then some fool reviles the lambs of God – it's almost like insulting the Lord himself. That's all it takes! So that's why our men were so perturbed, that's why they trembled. I'd even say: shuddered. The company commander next to me shut his eyes in fear.

"Do you see that man?" he whispered to me, squinting with his left eye and with the right eye shut.

"Sure," I said.

"Do you hear him reviling Israel?" and he shut his other eye. It was as if fear or indignation had made him blind.

"Sure," I replied.

"If someone killed him, the king would gift that man with great riches," he said and opened one eye.

"Yeah?" I asked him skeptically, without letting Goliath out of my sight. He was two hundred yards away and brandishing his spear.

"And he'd give his daughter in marriage and relieve his father's house of taxes."

I'd heard a lot of things about our King Saul from Father, neighbors, and acquaintances. I doubted he was so generous that he'd gift me with great riches. But that's how it turned out! And he'd give away his daughter (there was no way out; he had nothing but girls, and all of them to be married off, so there was no getting out of it).

"It can't be. Really?" I smiled.

"Yes, yes!" the company commander shouted and opened both eyes.

The soldiers had gathered round and listened to our conversation.

"You think you're going to fight, lad? Are you off your rocker? Don't you understand the situation? Then we'll explain…" Fear made them irritable, and they were ready to vent their anger on me.

But I was no kid like they thought me, I knew how to talk with people.

"Stop, men," I spoke. "Don't get excited. You should rather take it out on that uncircumcised lout who reviles the army of the living God! All against one, that's the logical thing to do."

"What sort of smart aleck are you?" they cried.

"No dumber than you," I answered.

"If you're so clever, why don't you go out and fight the Philistine yourself?"

"I would – ," I replied calmly and spat on the ground between my own feet so as not to offend anyone, "if the king gave his word."

"Gave his word? Whaddaya mean, laddie?"

I raised my hand and declared with authority:

"His word that he will not forget my services."

Then they broke into a racket.

"You can rely on the king. He'll cut off half the realm for you, yes. And he'll chuck in one of his daughters to boot!"

I nodded, listened, and agreed. It's good to ensure people's support and not appear an upstart. And all the while I kept one eye on Goliath, I looked at him closely and realized that it had to be the forehead – I could only bring him down if I hit him there.

Then brother Eliab heard me talking with the men and became jealous.

"What are you gabbling about?" he began to yell. "Your place is with the sheep! What are you? A shepherd, so go and tend your animals. We're men of war. Are you gonna teach us how to fight? You twerp, you came here to watch the warriors! Like to fight yourself, would you?"

I didn't want to have a shouting match with him. What can you do with a man who was behind the tent when God was handing out brains? I stayed calm.

"What have I done wrong, Eliab? Yes, I tended the animals, but so did you. As did our brothers. You went to war, and I came after you."

"Get the hell out of here!" he screamed, almost foaming at the mouth.

"Why should I?" I replied and barely restrained myself from whacking him in the honker. "I didn't run away when the bear attacked our flock. It was you who fled, brother Eliab. I didn't run away when the lion attacked the flock. It was you and the other brothers who did. I killed the bear and the lion, as you well remember, Eliab."

He nearly choked with anger, but there was nothing he could he say.

The soldiers all looked at him.

"Is your brother here telling the truth? Answer us! Was it like he says?"

Eliab fell into brooding and shook his head.

"Well?" the soldiers demanded.

"Yes," he hung his head.

"Did a bear attack the flock, and did David kill the bear?"

"He did," Eliab sighed.

"And the lion?"

"A lion attacked the flock, and David chased it away," my eldest brother exhaled. "It came back, and then David killed it."

The soldiers began to yell. They took me to the king and told him all they'd heard.

"You can fight… *that*?" Saul just nodded toward the Philistines.

I know how to speak to a king. I bowed and answered.

"Your servant will go out and fight."

"But you're still a youth, David, and you're not a soldier."

"I'm not a soldier. But when I used to tend the sheep and a bear or lion attacked the flock, I'd drive it away. And if one of them carried off a sheep from the flock, I'd chase after it and tear the prey from its jaws. And if it wasn't afraid to attack me after that, I wasn't afraid of it either – I seized it by the mane and killed it."

"Yes, yes!" the soldiers shouted.

"David, you say a lion and a bear…"

"… are no more terrible than that Philistine. I will slay him and avenge the vilification of Israel."

"You'll slay him?"

"Yes, I will."

The king perked up, smiled, and embraced me.

"David, are you *certain* you can defeat him?" he asked all the same.

"If the Lord saved me from the lion and the bear, He will also save me from the hand of Goliath," I said with confidence.

The soldiers all around cheered and offered me their advice.

"Give it to him, David!"

"Go round the side, the side where the sun is!"

"Hit him between the eyes, the reptile!"

"Remember, beanpole, you're no Lilliputian, you've got those long legs!"

"Don't run from him straightaway. Harry him a bit!"

"Don't be scared, kid, that's the main thing!"

Others were already placing bets.

"What are the odds that the Philistine will take out our guy with his javelin?"

"Nah, I bet David will knock him down!"

"I stake one silver shekel!"

"I bet two!"

"Oh, you moron, he's as good as won…"

"I've got a handful of copper coins. I wager my coppers against two silver shekels!"

"David, resolve our bet, we're staking on you."

"Don't lose courage, Davy. He may look ferocious, but he's rotten inside, you can see it from a mile away."

"Why be afraid? He's all armor, he can hardly move…"

"I see that."

"Wow, whaddid I say? He can see it himself! Exactly, he'll flatten that Philistine!"

"The king is calling for him again!"

I was brought before Saul once more.

"Try on my armor," the king commanded.

I don't like chainmail, but I wasn't one to contradict the king. So I was clad and shod, I tried on one helmet, a second, a fifth… I hung a sword from my side, started to walk – and I couldn't. It felt cumbersome. Strange. And hot. You're safer in a coat of mail, of course, but if they really want to kill you they'll get through any armor. I tried crouching. I tried jumping, and it didn't work so well. Plus I almost twisted my foot.

"Forgive me, my King, but I do not feel comfortable in the armor," I said.

I took it off. I sighed with relief, and spoke to Saul again with a bow.

"Thank you for your concern, but I'd rather do without the armor."

Saul was upset.

"How can you possibly… Who fights without armor? At least take the helmet, David!"

"No, thank you. I'm lighter without it all."

He looked at me intently and sighed.

"You know best."

I'm always been suspicious of royal gifts. Have you noticed that I never give gifts?

Only to ambassadors and their wives.

And do you know why?

So no one suspects me of treachery.

What is a royal gift? Either an allusion or a death sentence.

Remember the Cossack chieftain Yermak Timofeyevich? Tsar Ivan the Terrible gifted him a coat of armor. He donned it – and drowned. "A royal gift is a heavy burden," I think Ryleyev wrote in his poem about him.

Or take Vasily Chapayev, the hero of the Russian Civil War. The commissar gave him a pair of chrome-tanned calfskin boots with heelplates, and they dragged him to the bottom of the Ural River.

Sorry, you're right, of course, they *almost* dragged him down.

Chapayev threw off the boots in the middle of the Ural River and swam to the far bank. And what was the upshot of the episode with the boots? The Whites caught him barefoot and in his wet underwear, in other words in his underpants, and hung him there on the riverbank for the edification of posterity. Chapayev dangled there in his long johns, rocking in the wind, and posterity stood below and studied the history of the civil wars in Russia.

So I don't believe in royal gifts, and I don't want to betray anyone. *That's the kind of man I am*, as the hero of a once popular movie said.

I washed my face in the creek, my feet too, and moistened my hands. I selected some smooth stones and let them dry in the sun, and then replaced a few because they needed to be all the same weight and size – I was no novice! With the stones now in my bag, I said goodbye to the soldiers and went down the slope. The company commander, the one who had been afraid to open his eyes, accompanied me.

"Do you want to leave your staff?" he asked.

I considered, but then decided I could always throw it aside later, and it might come in handy.

"No, I'll need it."

The company commander nodded, sighed, and squatted down in the bushes.

Like in a latrine.

He observed me as if from a VIP loge.

Alright, I thought, just watch me, you cowards. You won't see anything like this again, I thought. I tore some tender leaves off a branch, bit into them, and chewed. Then I spat them out and reflected.

Were they really cowards? No, they were normal men. No one wants to die for no reason. Off you go and deal with that ogre, whatever it takes. The others don't want to put their lives on the line in vain. Very understandable. I'm different – it would be in vain *not* to put my head on the line.

I sighed, cleared my nose, and went out to meet the enemy.

The first I saw was the sword-bearer.

You know, there really are mean faces.

His was one of them. When you look at a face like that, you can say without knowing any more about the man that he's vile.

He hasn't done anything to harm you yet, but you sense a nasty trick in the offing.

Then again, he wasn't anything out of the ordinary: a slobbery schnoz, missing teeth, a moustache, a small beard, locks of unkempt hair dangled from his helmet, but sturdy to look at. His arms were powerful – you could tell from the way he held his spear.

"Hey, dandy, does no one else in your rabble want to fight my master?"

I stopped, leaned on my stick, and looked at him.

"Your master?"

"My master! The great warrior Goliath!"

Then *he* himself approached. He looked at me with contempt.

"Have you come to fight, boy, or are you out for a stroll? People go with sticks against dogs, but not to single combat."

I bristled.

"You're worse than a dog," I sneered.

"Oh, you little – ," he answered, and then he began to abuse me.

"I'll rub your face in the dirt.

"And fuck you bloody.

"Your mother, too.

"And your father.

"And your king.

"And your army.

"All of you.

"Here and now.

"Every single one of you.

"And all together."

As he was hurling his foul curses, his sword-bearer, the swine, came stealing up from the side.

I wheeled and swung my staff with all my strength.

He didn't expect this, took a blow on the head, and fell sprawling.

Goliath roared and lunged at me with his sword. They had evidently agreed beforehand how to get the better of me: one would do all the talking and distract me, while the other came at me from behind. But I'm no idiot, I understood.

I ran back a few steps.

"You may have sword and spear, but I have the word of the God on my side," I shouted to him.

He flung his spear in response.

I ducked, it missed me, and I ran back a few steps again. He was in armor, and it was hard for him to follow me. He may have been strapping and tall, but armor is armor.

We're talking about 175 pounds – we weighed it later, as I told you. Try running with a weight like that on!

I threw aside my staff and started to browse the stones in my bag. I chose one, while still looking at Goliath and vexing him. I kept moving.

"Come here, you lummox!" I cried. "I'll cut your ears off! And that dangly thing between your legs!"

He bellowed and charged at me.

I fitted a stone to the sling.

"I'll rip your…"

But he never finished the sentence.

The hefty pebble flew straight to his forehead and sank in.

He crashed to the ground. All that moved then was a cloud of dust.

I ran up to him immediately, but he was motionless. Out like a light. The stone had hit him very hard. Satisfaction welled up inside me – straight in the forehead! Smack bang where I was aiming. I'm a good shot.

What happened after that is not so interesting. I raised his sword and cut off his head. There was a noise at the side. The sword-bearer was coming to. I grabbed his spear, crouched down, and thrust its point at him. He even hung on it – and it went right into his belly, under the armor.

I got up. Perspiration was streaming down my face, my legs were shaking and my heart pounding. ("A storm of adrenaline rages through my blood," as my favorite writer would say.)

I returned to our men, and a roaring crowd rolled down the mountainside like water brimming from a weir.

I sat down on the grass and tried to catch my breath.

I barely could, on my word.

And the giant head rocked there beneath my legs…

I'm not good at telling stories, I know. I'm no storyteller, honey, and this episode isn't the most exciting in our life together.

Hello, Cat

Alex Couprin

Translated from the Russian

by Yura Dashevsky

His yellow eyes emit the purest feline disapproval: a human has got to sleep at night, not stomp around the house, touching his neck, feeling his pulse… One heartbeat skipped, now two, now another. Out of the bedroom into the hallway, then to the study, then back to the bedroom, and maybe to the kitchen, where the floor is cold. And then one day the human dies: he freezes, shudders, falls back onto the shaggy rug, his arms held wide as if he were da Vinci's Vitruvian Man. One leg is visible, the other folded under his body – that's the only difference.

What about the cat, you may ask.

The cat, of course, is taken to the animal shelter. But here's the problem: nobody wants him. He's a bit on the wild side. I found him in the park. He doesn't purr, doesn't like to be petted, so the two vital skills that could move a feline up in the world of humans are missing. If I were alive, I'd let everyone know how refined he can be, how he can greet you by touching your leg under the knee with his forehead, how proud and independent he is – these things matter, after all. But I'm not there now, and nobody wants him.

Thirty days have gone by, and it's time to put him to "sleep" (as if he might wake up).

But they can't bring themselves to empty their syringes into such a young and handsome cat, they give him ten more days. The kindhearted volunteers, all ladies, dress the poor thing in a brightly colored vest with Velcro straps, which has two words on it: "*ADOPT ME*." They take him to a shopping mall teeming with people. And then something amazing happens. A little girl wearing glasses hugs him, whispers in his ear, and he doesn't even try to get away. But no, it's not to be: he shivers, jumps, scratches the kid with the claws of his strong hind legs. Tears. Bandages. Ruckus.

… and so, in just forty days, I see my old friend again. His yellow eyes are like the headlights of an ambulance speeding through the fog. He's got a limp, now,

and, from time to time, licks his side – the spot where they injected him with the stuff that paralyzed his innocent feline heart.

Any minute now, he'll come right up and touch my leg under the knee with his forehead.

Hello, cat.

Bears Came to Town

Yelena Lembersky

1.

The year is 1987. Aeroflot flight Leningrad to Vienna. A two-month stopover in Rome.

Pan Am flight Rome–New York–Detroit.

On an early Sunday morning the Detroit airport is desolate. Mama and I walk quietly along the jetway toward the gate. And there is Grandma waiting. She sees me and turns away. Then looks again, as if I am a gift that came in the wrong size and too late for the holidays.

"Don't hug me, Alëna," she says, "I'm all damp."

Oh, it's hot in here.

Years ago, she dyed her hair with henna – a soft shade of cinnamon and rust. Now it's jet black. That is new. She used to wear no makeup except a touch of lipstick. Now, black mascara and liner. I remember her gait of dancer, brisk and upright. Now her back is curved. Lucia. Grandma. Bábushka. What seven years apart have done…

She wears a two-piece suit made of blue crimplene – '70s style, bought secondhand in the '80s. Her wrist is bandaged with a fabric to match her suit.

"What's wrong with your wrist?" Mama asks.

"Nothing, Galya, it's just a sprain from a while ago, old people heal slowly," she says and hugs Mama silently. Then smiles to everyone, showing a row of flawless white teeth. They are also new.

We are here at last.

Nina and Lara, Mama's childhood friends, are here too. They look dignified and prim in combed-cotton dresses in the earthy hues of a color "umber" and in leather shoes for the middle-aged. And here is my mama in a checkered baby-blue getup we bought a week ago at a flea market in Rome. Blue as the Mediterranean sky and sea foam. Blue eye shadow to match, and black eyeliner with wings she put on hastily as the plane was descending. It would have looked right in Rome. Out of place in Detroit.

"Hobos dress like that," Nina chuckles.

"We'll buy everything new for you at Jacobson's," Lara consoles.

Who are hobos? What is Jacobson's?

Route 94 to Ann Arbor. Lara's white Buick takes up the entire width of the freeway lane. Billboards… Billboards… With burgers and skinny women in swimsuits. A giant toy on top of a pole. Big Boy – the totem pole of all-you-can-eat largesse. Shapeless wild greenery on both sides of the freeway with no scent or gaps for light. It reminds me of *zelénka*, Brilliant Green, the disinfectant that nurses pour on the scratched knees of children in Soviet clinics. Beyond the thicket, flat farm fields stretch out in monotonous quadrilaterals. The asphalt ahead is as smooth as rolled-out dough, lines and shapes quiver over its heat.

"A tornado is coming," Grandma tells me. "Don't stand by the windows at home."

What is a tornado?

Ann Arbor. Ann Arbor. Ann Arbor. Ann Arbor.

It used to come to me in dreams when I lived in Leningrad. Ann Arbor was the night, with inky sky and stars as glittery as mica on the boulders on top of a mountain. There were skyscrapers, slender and knotted as tree trunks, with lights flickering in their windows like fireflies. Ann Arbor was near, a stone's throw away, on the other side of a snowed-in lot. Just walk across it, and there is my bábushka Lucia, writing a letter to me.

"You won't take root there," a customs official sneered as he pawed through our luggage at Leningrad's Pulkovo airport. "You'll beg to come back." Russia's parting gift.

"Son of a bitch," Mama said under her breath.

We will take root in there, Mama.

Now we are in Ann Arbor and everything is a little off from what I imagined. A supermarket called Showerman's, a funny name – Man-Shower. The pharmacy with the initials CVS that make no sense sells everything except for *zelénka*. Squat houses with asphalt roof shingles that all look the same. A pond with a fountain that reminds me of a horse's tail."One-story America," Mama says.

We come to the elderly housing building. Its front door opens suddenly, hitting me with eager hospitality; air conditioning adds a punch. I look for something to remind me of home –perhaps a dimly lit stairwell with blunt concrete and cigarette ashes as in my apartment high-rise in Leningrad. I find none. Here are bright hallways with wall-to-wall carpets smelling of shampoo, cushioned sofas, pictures of kittens and fabric flowers, and, anticipating the interests of the retirees, robustly used *TV Guides, Soap Opera* digests, *Seventeen*, and *The Star*. I think I could spend all day here. But these cozy shared living areas of the senior citizens' home are empty. They feel like stage sets after the end of a play.

Grandma takes out her keys and pauses. Then flings open the door to her apartment, and in we walk. I suddenly see a piece of my childhood. My grandfather' paintings… Finally. I almost forgot how they look. They are everywhere, taking over the flat like mischievous children or tipsy guests at a house party. They

lean against walls, a couch, an armchair, and a laminate dinner table with one sturdy leg. They gather in the corridor and peek out of a coat closet, elbowing one another and whatever hangs there. There is a roll of unstretched canvas wrapped in a sheet and propped up in a corner. Folders with works on paper are stacked under the bed. Their edges are crumpled where Grandma's groggy toe fumbles for a slipper in the mornings. She moves the paintings from place to place when she needs to pass through, or sit down, or get her coat, or angle the TV toward her seat. When she wants to see her late husband, she turns his Self-Portrait toward the room. When she has had enough, she turns him back to the wall.

Some of the oils have cracks and detaching paint from months of travel in the unheated hold of a cargo ship when years ago Grandma took them out of Leningrad.

"We should start restoring them right away," Mama says to Lucia.

"We should," Grandma nods.

"Let's move them into your bedroom, out of the way, and you can sleep in the living room."

"No," Grandma says, "Let them stay as they are."

2.

There's a knock on the door. A sprightly gray-haired woman walks in. She lives in a flat next to Grandma's. "Welcome, welcome," she says. "Lucia missed you so much…"

"I know," Mama says.

A plump neighbor walks in without knocking. She has brought a plate of homemade stuffed carp and her teenage granddaughter. The girl is my age, seventeen, and speaks both English and Russian at once, English verbs with Russian conjugation. She tells me that she is bilingual and has no accent because she came here when she was young. She is sorry for me because I came too late to speak like a native.

Another neighbor comes by with her two adult daughters. She is a retired doctor, weighty and taciturn. She sits on the couch, her daughters the talking.

"Start looking for an engineering job," they say to Mama. "Don't wait… You will have lots of trouble… A recession, everyone is getting laid off in Detroit."

"Why do you think that I want to be an engineer?" Mama asks.

"What else can you do?"

"Write poetry."

"Baloney," the retired doctor weighs in from the couch. "Remember how much Lucia suffered here alone."

"I'm an independent perrrrson," Grandma protest in English.

Another senior citizen marches in. She is an American, and wears shorts. Eunice. She has a vertical pink scar down her chest, which she calls a "zipper." She

hugs Mama and me for a long time. "Welcome, welcome."

She tells us she is a retired Marine and Lucy's dance partner. They put on a show at the housing parties, she as a gentleman in a top hat, Lucy as a princess in a long white dress and a mask.

"And why does Lucy always wear a mask?" she laughs.

"And where have you seen a wrinkly princess?" Grandma chimes back.

Another knock and a wiry oldster sprints in, pushing his bicycle. His trousers are secured with rubber bands around his ankles. He is a Polish man.

"Eduárdik," Grandma calls him tenderly.

Eduárdik paces up and down the room, wrinkles his freckled forehead looking for Russian words. He rubs his temples, and sighs, "*Tyázhela zhizn* (Life is hard)!"

"These people brighten my life," Grandma says when everyone leaves.

There is an awkward moment when we are alone. Where to begin?

"You must watch *Dynasty*," Grandma says. "It's addictive!"

She walks off into her bedroom and comes back with a pair of black shoes. "I got these for you, Alënusha, five dollars on sale, good enough for a movie star! Insane America!"

She goes off to the kitchen and takes out a cardboard box.

"You have to try cold cereal," she says to me. "It's the breakfast of gods!"

I do not want black shoes or cold cereal. I want the buckwheat porridge with milk and sugar that she used to make when I was little.

"Do you have buckwheat, Grandma?"

"No, they don't sell it at Showerman's."

Grandma does not cook any more. No porridge or wild mushroom soup, or meat jellies, or lazy cheese dumplings, or zucchini latkes, or stuffed cabbage, or homemade farmer's cheese. For seven years she has lived alone in America. Now she eats yogurt from disposable plastic cups, leaning over the kitchen sink. No spills or dishes to wash. Then she chases it down with chocolates that she keeps in the freezer, bought by the pound on sale the day after Halloween. Cheap sweets in gilt wrappers. Baby Ruths and Hershey's Kisses. Sweet America.

I try the breakfast of gods. It tastes like the cardboard box it came from.

"Thank you, Bábushka, very tasty." I don't want to disappoint her any more than I have.

3.

On Saturday we go to Temple Beth Israel. It is bright and cozy, with soft seats and fresh flowers. It looks nothing like the stark and solemn places of worship I remember from my childhood. A man in a pinstripe suit at the podium does not match the image of a Hasidic rabbi in a long black frock I remember from the synagogue in Leningrad. Someone hands me a book and shows me a spot in the

Hebrew text that I cannot read. I feel that I am a part of a joke. The rabbi begins to speak in English, and Mama whispers to me, "Translate!"

I know I should, I know. I learned English at school. But I don't understand it… Not a word. Not this man, not anyone else. They sound like they are gargling with seltzer. American English. A waterfall of Rs.

"Get up, get up," Grandma says to Mama and me. "They are introducing you now!" We rise. The rabbi speaks to the congregation and points to us with both hands. Everyone turns.

"What is this show?" Mama asks under her breath.

"The circus bears come to town," I whisper. They applaud. Lucy's children, the *refuseniks*, finally got out of Russia.

People stream toward us after the service. "Welcome, welcome! We love Lucy!"

"This synagogue is my home," Grandma says solemnly. Then brightly to everyone, "Lucy. My name is Lucy, *I Love Lucy* – America's favorite show! And *I* love America."

She flashes her infectious movie-star smile. A smile that lifts your spirit. That flawless smile full of smooth, sparkling, white new teeth. Welcome to America, welcome!

4.

RRRu-usha… Ruuu – sh-sh-sha… Who came up with that silly name? How did the graceful name *Rossíyah* turn into infantile toy-word "Russia"?

Ruth visit us on behalf of the synagogue's *Chesed* (benevolence) committee, the temple's charitable works. She is an American, but tells me she is a Russian too because her grandfather came from Ukraine. I want to say that Ukraine is not Russia, but I don't. Ruth says that her parents spoke with an accent, like mine, that she loves borscht and blintzes, and the Russian dancer Mikhail Baryshnikov. She says *oy vey* and *chachkas*, Yiddish words I never heard at my home. She tells me that we are one family, we have the same roots. She takes out a mottled black-and-white photo of her grandfather on Ellis Island. He ran away from the Cossacks and pogroms.

"Do you know who the Cossacks are, Alóna?"

I do, they are brave cavalrymen of the Russian revolution, we learned that at school in Leningrad. It is also a game of tag, the Cossacks and the Bandits. Ruth tells me that the Cossacks killed her family in Ukraine. Her grandfather fled to America and came here with nothing, a penny in his pocket and the wind in his ear.

"Americans fought for you, Alóna, so you can come here."

"Thank you, Ruth."

"Do you know Ellis Island, Alóna?"

I do not, I have a lot to learn.

She calls me Alóna with an *o*, as in "alone." It's not my name. She has brought a bag of used clothes and spreads them out lovingly on the table.

"These are my daughter's, Alóna. They should fit you, she is your size."

"Thank you, Ruth."

The clothes are clean and neatly folded, pretty things and almost new. I appreciate her kindness, I do, but I don't want these clothes. I have my own.

"Our temple will help you," Ruth says. "We will help you feel home in America. Do you understand this, Alóna? Please translate this for your mother."

Ruth speaks English slowly and uses simple words. I can understand her, and I am grateful to her for this more than anything else. I feel human talking to her.

Thank you, Ruth, for your many acts of kindness. It will mean the world to me in the years to come. And you, Howard, for donating a tree to be planted near the Sea of Galilee in honor of Soviet *refuseniks*, which means in my honor too. And Lesley, for wearing a bracelet with the name of a Soviet *refusenik* girl on the day of your Bat Mitzvah. Sharon, for going to protests in support of the rights of Soviet Jews in your seaside Long Island town. I wish I had known you then. Or where Long Island was on a map.

Now we are here – the *refuseniks*, the refugees, the Russians. And I can see you expected so much more of us. Or much less. Perhaps you imagined us scrawny and tough, like your great-great-grandparents carrying burlap sacks in the old photos from Ellis Island. We never went through Ellis Island; it was a museum by the time we arrived. Or maybe we should have been more like you, your second and third cousins separated by chance and geopolitical blunders. We should have been more confident, sharp-tongued, quick-witted, gregarious, upbeat, and optimistic – as you are, our American extended family.

Here we are. With so much to learn.

I will need to remember to change clothes every day. And to floss.

And not to mend socks but buy new ones.

Not to repair holes in blue denim trousers, they are more chic with those holes.

Not to say *trousers*. This word is quaint. Say jeans, slacks, or tights, or pants, or chinos, or khakis, whatever they are.

"I've got it" is not bad grammar. And "Would you like to do this?" is a request and not a question.

Rudeness should not be countered with rudeness but with humor or dignified silence. It is called "taking the high road."

I won't need to run after a bus and elbow my way onto it. No, the bus driver will wait, and I can "take my time" and "take it easy."

I can return the tabouli to the store simply because I didn't care for the taste. The salesperson will say "I'm sorry" instead of "Who do you think you are, missy?"

And what is tabouli anyway?

I should learn not to stare at people; it is bad manners. And when looking at someone, I should smile.

To the question "How are things?" I should reply "Fine," and "Thank you." Again, it is not a question, but a greeting.

I am not to wear natural fur because it is cruel to animals and synthetic substitutes are just fine for American winters.

I must learn to say most things with three words – do, get, and set. But "do away with" is not quite the same as "do him in."

I will have to accept that men do not pay for their date's dinner. Such gallantry is obsolete, along with kissing her hand and helping her with her coat. They will split the bill evenly, calling it "going Dutch." The girl will insist on it because she does not go around for a glass of Merlot.

And never call her a "girl"; it is demeaning. Use "woman," even if sounds heavy-handed. I will have to get used to it.

I must remember that the word "Negro" is insulting, while "black" is not even though in the Russian language it is the exact opposite.

One cannot take cheat sheets to exams in America. Here cheating is not a clever game but grounds for expulsion. And while reporting someone to the authorities is the worst moral failing in Russia – to snitch, to squeal, to rat, to betray – here in America it is known as "whistle-blowing," setting matters straight, a mark of courage. This one is hard. But I will get it in the end.

I will be disappointed to discover that the Russian folk craft of *Khokhlomá*, the colorful wooden spoons and bowls so coveted by Western tourists in Leningrad, is not, as it turns out, in high demand in America. The objects do not fly off the shelves at Ten Thousand Villages and local artisan shops. Russian immigrants have brought them here to give as gifts to clerks at state agencies. But it's against the law here to give them gifts. These lovely artifacts will beautify our own homes – a tribute to our cluelessness about America.

So much to learn.

I will find out that Father Frost does not exist. There is a Santa Claus who comes to some but not all children. Here the great Fir Tree that stands tall, dressed in ornaments and sparkling rain in Soviet homes on New Year's Eve, is a Christmas tree that Jews cannot put up because doing so is a bigger sin than eating ham on Yom Kippur.

I will learn that small talk is not vanity but a form of art. That having fun is not self-indulgence but life's mission. That self-indulgence is not a moral failing but, when paired up with disposable income, an economic engine.

I will need to stop apologizing for my bad English. I should walk upright, instead of stooping over with my face down toward the sidewalk. Because in America I is capitalized and that is the hardest lesson of all.

On the other hand, I will never get used to men smelling of perfumed toiletries instead of male pheromones and sweat. And after thirty years of living here, I'll still be asked, Where is your accent from, do you like borscht and vodka, did you study ballet? No, I did not study ballet in Russia, but took it as an easy elective at college in Michigan.

I did not grow up in a house with a covered porch and hanging plants. Children in big Soviet cities did not live in houses, although some had dachas – similar to American houses, but smaller and without running water. I grew up in a high-rise, a *mnógo-etázhka*. There were many types within its class. One was called *korobka* (box), because of its bare functionalism. Another was named *korábl* (ocean liner) as a joke. Still another was known as *khrushchëba*, rhyming with trushchyóba (slums), the housing stock built during the Khrushchev administration, the most humble subcategory of multistory panel construction, made hastily and en masse. You will say to me that those buildings are UGLY. But no! *Mnógo-etázhka* is not UGLY. Not faceless. It does not breed tuberculosis and crime. It does have a soul. It is a minimalist vertical village, the dream child of French architect Le Corbusier – a machine for living. And also the dream of the Soviet citizens who grew up in communal flats.

I am here in Ann Arbor, but it still comes to me in my dreams – the dreamed up Ann Arbor on the other side of a snowed-in lot. Sometimes I dream that I am back in Leningrad, riding a subway. It is dark on the subway and I cannot breathe, or scream, or run. Then I wake up.

Felix Lembersky. Untitled, Railway Pointer series. Leningrad, ca. 1959-63. Pencil on paper. © Y. Lembersky

The Old Railway Carriage

Anatoly Movshevich

Translated from the Russian

by Nicolas Pasternak Slater

The evening snow glimmered outside the carriage window. Not flying, not falling, not spinning.

The train was travelling through a motionless snowfall. I pressed a heavy, awkward knob, and the back of my seat sank down while the trees outside leaned over sideways. How long was it since I had last ridden in a carriage like this? That had been a different world, a different age. Back then, in fact, I'd had my own time. My own days and evenings. Somewhere alongside me, everybody's time ran on too, and sometimes the minutes of that great time got into my own days, sometimes reminding me of narrow grey windows, sometimes of chinks of sunlight. But my time remained my own. And later, imperceptibly, those universal years became covered with an invisible pall. One day it occurred to me – that time wasn't everybody's time, it was nobody's time, nobody's years. No one is going to set off in search of the vanished days, and there will be no one to remember them. Meanwhile I had my own evenings, where the trees and stars often changed places. I was fourteen years old – perhaps even younger? I was sitting in just such a seat, reading a book about the seven wonders of the world, and picturing to myself the hanging gardens of Semiramis. Another thing that impressed me was that Artemisia was both the wife and sister of Mausolus. And it occurred to me that grown-ups are constantly preoccupied with everyday things, but get particularly carried away by things they can't do anything about. And the ideas that stick in their memory are the ones that have no practical use.

In the summer of 1978 I was in Stary Krym in the Crimea. I visited the house of Alexander Grin, where I talked with the widow of the poet Petnikov. Among other matters, she recalled Burliuk, who had emigrated to America, but in the 1960s had returned to his homeland, and she and her husband had met him. [1]Bur-

[1] Alexander Grin (born Alexander Stepanovich Grinevsky, 1880-1932) was a Russian author famed for his stories of fantasy and adventure, most notably the novel *Scarlet Sails* (1923); he lived in Crimea from 1924 to 1929. Grigory Nikolayevich Petnikov (1894-1971) was a poet and translator who, at the

liuk told them that for him, Futurism had become more ancient than Ancient Greece. I remembered having read this phrase of Burliuk's in the well-known memoir of a certain distinguished author: evidently it was something Burliuk often repeated. At the time it struck me as a pose, but now I understand that he was right, and had been speaking with perfect sincerity.

The train was travelling through a motionless snowfall.

Trees, dreams, lights, miraculously preserved leaves, a distant voice that smelt of August, rooms with big windows looking out onto a cool, pale-grey sea. And again the motionless snowfall. Somewhere out there, the boring, mundane glow of a town. And among the ruins, a little house with vines and pear trees growing. And a thousand miles away from the smoldering buildings, invisible smoke drifts through chance conversations. A secretary brings a pile of papers into the study, and instinctively flicks invisible ash off them. The air, smelling of burning, hangs motionless in the pauses between indolent talk and abrupt replies. A waiter walks through the room, stops unexpectedly and looks down at the glistening floor. And a woman rests her elbows on a little table and gazes at the gleaming wineglasses while her companion studies the menu.

Suddenly I saw motionless, triumphant faces. Standing around a patch of waste ground in the center of Moscow were a variety of people. Of course, all people vary, but people's differences, like their common features, can sometimes be very strange. Women in rustic dresses, and a scholar who had written a study of early Byzantine art. Although the words "early" and "late" sound strange in this context. Who is there among the living that can know that? There was the sound of ordinary, boring talk, but he was gazing at the waste ground with a rapt smile. Invisible ash merged with the slowly falling snow. From time to time the scholar brushed it off his coat sleeve.

And again, that same window. I looked out at the snow-covered trees, and suddenly had the feeling that someone else, too, was looking at those thickets. I had a passing glimpse of airy foliage outside the thick window glass, and of a woman sitting in a tall old-fashioned armchair.

Falling snow alters one's sense of time. The slow, drawn-out minutes are like wax. Flakes of fluff can become embedded there, or a big butterfly with a dark blue pattern on its wings, and cherry-red specks frozen in a purple-and-green half-oval. But where could a butterfly have sprung from, in a winter railway carriage?

I stood up and went to find the buffet, to get myself some mineral water or just to stroll through the carriages.

I passed through two center-aisle carriages and one with compartments. A man in the corridor was relating something to his companion.

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start of his career, belonged to the Russian Futurist movement; he lived in Crimea from 1958 to 1971. The Ukrainian-born poet and visual artist David Davidovich Burliuk (1882-1967) was one of the leading figures of Russian Futurism; in 1922, he and his wife Marussia immigrated to the United States, where for many years they published the bilingual journal *Color and Rhyme*; he visited the USSR twice – in 1956 and 1965.

"… there are fish swimming there that are three meters long, and someone had seen a two-headed woodpecker, but I think people have got used to that too…"

I walked through another carriage with seats, entered a further one, and suddenly saw a heavy wooden door with a big brass doorknob. I stood there for a while and stared at this strange door. Then I turned the brass knob and entered a soft darkness. My eyes took a long time adjusting. Then I saw glittering, flickering lights. Sometimes they were very close to me, then suddenly turned out to be far away.

This was a different, many-layered darkness, and behind the outlines of objects there were other, unknown things hiding. Gradually my eyes became accustomed to this new darkness, and I saw the corridor of a spacious carriage. As far as I could see, the compartments were much larger than today's ones. A few steps away from me was a half-open door. I moved cautiously towards it. A draught blew in through an unseen window, and I felt an unexpected breath of fresh air. For an instant I was surrounded by a dense, ancient forest. The branches of tall trees swayed above my head, and vanished.

I went up to the half-open door, through which I could hear voices. One man was recounting something in an animated voice, while another man just kept agreeing with him – unwillingly, it seemed to me. I stood there for a minute or two. Everything around me was so strange that I had lost the capacity to be surprised.

At last I cautiously grasped the massive doorknob and opened the door. I had meant to utter an apology, but not a word came out. The two men sitting in the compartment paid me not the slightest attention. The oil lamp on the table made the darkness even softer and rounder. This world, clearly, did not yet possess electric light. That struck me as unthinkable, but suddenly I thought that my grandfather, Mother's father, born in 1887, had spent his youth in a world very like this.

Once I felt more at home, I sat down on a wide sofa. I found myself in the corner of a compartment. The rainy forest light shone through the window. The man opposite me was talking, but he didn't seem to be conversing with some fellow traveler encountered by chance; rather he seemed to be making a speech, or acting out a scene for invisible spectators. Who knows – perhaps he spends his whole life surrounded by these unseen people, who stand apart and listen to what he is saying. He stopped for a moment, then flung up his hands (literally), as if to shake off a wave of brittle, shimmering light that had broken over him, and carried on his monologue:

"Everything in this act of suicide – both outside it and within it – is a riddle. And of course I tried, as human nature demands, to find a solution to the riddle, to reach a conclusion and find some peace of mind. The suicide herself was a young girl, the daughter of an all too well-known Russian émigré …" – He stopped, and then, in a strange sing-song voice, repeated those very ordinary words several times over – "… all too well-known, all too well-known Russian émigré …" He stopped again, then continued in a monotonous, official-sounding tone: "The

newspapers had printed some vague references to her, some time ago…" Then he returned abruptly to the "all too well-known émigré." And suddenly changed the subject completely and began talking – quickly, hurriedly, feverishly – about the war in the East, and what they were doing to little children out there, before their mothers' very eyes. Then he suddenly remembered the girl, and announced, gazing indifferently out of the window, "She soaked some cotton wool in chloroform, wrapped it round her face, and lay down on her bed…" – and suddenly he returned to the East, to Byzantium and its magnificent mosaics. His companion evidently concluded that the previous topic had at last been exhausted, and they could return to discussing world problems; but his opposite number unexpectedly livened up and started talking about the Petersburg seamstress who had thrown herself from a fourth-floor window "because she had entirely failed to find work to keep herself alive." The newspaper added that when she threw herself out and hit the ground, she was holding an icon in her hands. (Here the speaker launched into a long, detailed description of the icon, half-intoning the words in a variety of different keys). "That icon in her hands – that's something strange and hitherto unheard-of in a suicide! A sort of meek, humble act of self-destruction…"

His companion timidly objected that the girl had simply had nothing to eat… and that this was a social problem, and consequently society ought to do something. But at this point the other seemed to explode, and yelled in a shrill falsetto "Society, society, social, the community! She came down head-first from the fourth floor… and during those few seconds while she was falling face foremost onto the tarmac, what was happening during that dense, compressed instant of time… and you go on about society, and the social situation…" Suddenly he stopped, and then said something quietly to his companion. I couldn't hear any of it, because just then a loud rumbling noise broke out. Perhaps the train was crossing a bridge, or something had happened… and in the darkness, sharp hard angles appeared, as though delineated in Indian ink. I felt that it was time for me to leave, although I did want to ask the man opposite me a question; but instead of words, I somehow seemed to be seeing little houses and dusty window-panes on a military base. I had heard from my classmates what sometimes went on in those places. It seemed unthinkable that that sort of thing could happen right near us, and apparently grown-ups knew all about it, but they had all conspired to pretend that it wasn't so. I wanted to say something, but the darkness had become impenetrably thick and viscous, and I was scared that I wouldn't find my way back. As I passed into the corridor, I caught a fragment of a loud statement: "The main point is that, once again, it's nobody's fault."

Hurriedly I left the carriage, and stepped onto the heavy, seemingly motionless platform between it and the next carriage. Suddenly I was showered as though with confetti by the echoing glimmer of the winter sun, hiding within it a multitude of shades and colors. Cold purple, morning green, evening blue, dense and matt, with scarlet flecks within it, drifting specks in a white space, conjuring up

the sound of an ancient instrument which, as you listen to it, involuntarily evokes the days of your life that never happened. And I wanted to tell that man about this, but the viscous darkness was behind me, while in front of me a gleaming carriage opened out. I seemed to have been transported to the youthful days of those people whom I myself, as a child or adolescent, had known as venerable elderly people. As if I were moving about in an ancient photograph. In the center of the carriage stood an elegant man in a well-cut suit. This was my grandfather's elder brother, "Uncle Yuzia" as my father called him. He had recently married, but was only able to meet his young wife in the afternoons. She was allowed to live outside the Pale of Settlement, but he was not. Every evening a policeman would come to their house to remind them of the regulations. Towards dusk Yuzia would set out for the railway station and get on a train, so that by the time night fell he would be past the demarcation line. He would get off at the first station and board another train so as to reach his work on time, and then in the evening spend some hours with his young wife. When I reached him, he looked at me and smiled. I wanted to ask him about something, but someone called out to him from inside a compartment. He gave me a nod for some reason, and went off to join the people there, who were laughing light-heartedly.

I walked through the brittle frosty colors of winter holidays. When I reached the platform at the end of the carriage, I felt scared. Supposing I couldn't find my way back? Although actually, what was it that attracted me back to my own carriage, and to the time that for some reason we call ours? Why not stay here, in this time of other people's youth, these years that were so appealing?

Opening the end door, I froze… I remember how, even as a child, I used to be frightened by this place, the coupling between two carriages. The clanking, the screeching, and the booming, the booming… "Hurry along," my father called out to me. I remember my stylish polished shoes and narrow trousers.

I halted before the door into the carriage. Whom would I see? Perhaps my young parents, and myself at the age of fourteen, reading about the hanging gardens of Semiramis?

I pulled at the doorknob, but it did not give way.

Four Short Stories

Sławomir Mrożek

Translated from the Polish by Kevin Windle

Fellow-Feeling

Following a run of ill luck I sank into a state of depression.

Then my eye was caught by an advertisement in the newspaper: "Feeling sad and out of luck? Life dealt you a bad hand? Visit No. 13, Pensioners' Relief Street; office on the right."

There was quite a crowd at that address. First you had to buy a ticket at the ticket office, then wait. They were only letting people in ten at a time.

When it was our turn, a caretaker ushered in our group of ten. It was a single ugly room. On a threadbare couch some children were writhing in convulsions. There were signs on the wall saying, "Please smoke and spit – it won't make any difference," and "Don't shut the door – what's the point?"

A man with one leg and hollow cheeks was seated at a desk. When we had all taken our seats in this shabby venue, he looked up at the electric clock, cleared his throat noisily and started telling us the story of his life.

"Please forgive my wife's absence," he began. "She's in hospital. Let me tell you briefly about my situation."

As he spoke my mood lifted, because compared to his life my misfortunes must have seemed trifling. It was an unending litany of failures and illness. As he related how he had become an orphan, his clients' faces brightened somewhat, and when he got to his first bout of tuberculosis they were visibly jollier. From time to time he would utter cries of pain, and towards his conclusion he was softly weeping. When he finished he cast his eyes over our radiant faces and confessed that he was also an alcoholic and for an additional fee was prepared to demonstrate it there and then, which would add to his woes. Some in the audience took him up on this.

I left the premises in much better spirits.

Some time later, on my way home one evening, I met the same man on a bridge. He was looking down at the slow-moving river and appeared dejected.

I went up to him. "Some new trouble?" I asked. "Food poisoning? Eczema? Or – Heaven forbid – syphilis?"

"No, nothing like that," he sighed heavily. "And let's not talk shop. I just feel a bit down."

He gazed into the water so sadly that I couldn't bear it. "Do you know what?" I said. "I don't know what it is, but for some time I've had this pain in my side."

"Oh, really?" he brightened.

"Yes, and when I was in the country last summer this bolt of lightning struck."

He cheered up so much that I even felt slightly offended, so I added, "But it missed."

His face clouded. "Didn't it hurt?" he asked hopefully.

There was such a pleading tone in his voice that I readily replied, "It certainly did."

"Well, must be getting along," he said almost happily. "It'll all come right in the end, eh?"

And he walked away whistling. Since then he's given me a discount.

To Humans, from Flies

Late October

You see? There are hardly any of us left. That's just what you lot wanted. And how long have we had to listen to you swearing at us! And you there, huge and clumsy in the depths of that room of yours; remember how you grumbled all summer long? "Not one of God's best ideas – putting wings on worms!"

I repeat: we've gone, and you can all lie in bed in peace in the mornings, dozing with your mouths open, bare arms flung over the blanket. For us, gone are the days of perching pleasantly on your noses, executing delicate loops round your ears, which is perhaps even more enjoyable than a direct frontal entry, with loud buzzing, into your nostrils.

Today, however, now that it's all in the past, we can state calmly who we are, and where we are. So, there are hardly any of us left, in accordance with the wishes you kept uttering in tones of fury several times a day for six months. But what good has it done you? And what price have you had to pay? We've gone, but so have the long days, the beach, the warm evenings, and with them all hope. The last pitiful shreds of leaves are just a sorry parody of the past, preserved only to make your humiliation the more complete. It's over, all over… And as I write these lines I admit to a certain grim satisfaction that along with me, a "worm with wings," as you were pleased to put it, your splendid exalted hopes are also breathing their last.

There are three of us here between these panes. All the chinks are tightly sealed and carefully papered over. On one side I can see the gloom of your room and the pale blotch of your face; on the other the open sky. On this side one of my friends is still buzzing. The other is lying motionless at the bottom, with all six little feet in the air. "Winged worms" we may be, but in death we still look better than any of you.

Here it's quiet and white, and very light.

I won't be helping myself to even the tiniest scrap of your cheese at breakfast any more. Nor will I perch on your bare shoulder while you're shaving, screwing up your face in that funny way, like a dog performing some absorbing and amusing task. But when you in your woolly jumper look at me now, you will know that my little dried-up death, black on your white windowsill, is really – whether you like it or not – filled with splendor and majesty, like everything you were expecting at the beginning of May.

You remember – don't you? – everything you were looking forward to at the beginning of a perilous summer, and how as the summer took hold you thought you'd be able to cope. And what a sight you were later, sealing up the chinks round your window again, as you had so many times before. Defeated. My little corpse is

all that's left. Was it really worth all that cursing last July when I wanted to take a little stroll along your leg?

Farewell, my great big friend in demeaning flannel! Happy Christmas and New Year! Now we can see which is better: to die with the Great Unattained only a little out of reach, or faint-heartedly forget, and surrender to ear-muffs and galoshes.

I have the dying light of the setting sun. You have a sixty-watt bulb.

Guilt and Punishment

A peaceful lilac-colored child's bedroom. In it lay a little boy, sweetly falling sound asleep without saying his evening prayers. Nearby stood his despairing guardian angel, humiliated and flushed with shame, his face buried in his hands.

All day the boy had been misbehaving yet again. He had been eating jam by the spoonful, slouching, being disobedient and running. In vain had his angel tried to enfold him in protective wings, while whispering in his ear advice about the pure and righteous path. The little scamp had gone on slouching, not stopped running, and progressed from a grazed knee to torn clothes. Nothing could stop him: a reminder that his daddy did not behave like that was of no avail, nor was mention of his angelic little neighbor, nor soft singing of calming songs, not even the fact that a local hunchback had been thrown off a cliff, which might have removed a bad example.

The guardian angel felt powerless. He had exhausted all possible avenues open to guardian angels: sweetness, kindness, gentle persuasion and soothing silence… All in vain. And there the boy lay sunk in his sins and conceit, his prayers unsaid, deaf to the voice of goodness, no doubt thinking as sleep came over him how he'd run about and slouch the next day.

A sudden bitterness welled up in the angel. Could it really be that Divine Law in all its gentle majesty was as nothing when faced with one young lad's self-will? A rising wave of love for the Law was accompanied by one of revulsion for Evil. The moment had come when the small heart of a servant of the Cause beat more strongly than the great heart of the Cause itself. In the name of Divine Law it was necessary to overstep the bounds of that Law in an act of boundless self-sacrifice.

He removed his hand from his brow, stepped silently up to the boy's bed and dealt him a resounding box on the ear.

The boy sprang up in fright, then – reminded by the blow – hurriedly recited his evening prayers, lay down muttering indistinctly and fell asleep.

The angel stood motionless for a long time, trembling with delight, gazing into the night.

Morning came cool and bracing. The boy's memory retained nothing of the previous evening. When breakfast was served, he would not drink his milk, as usual. It made him feel sick. At that point he felt a sharp kick. He realized what it was and drank up his milk in silence.

Saying goodbye to his mother, he set off for school. He took care crossing the street. He watched where he was going and didn't stop. He was alert. But he still was not sure. Finding himself in a deserted alley, he looked about him and immediately hunched his shoulders. A smart whack on the forehead instantly called him to order. There could be no doubt: his guardian angel was hitting him.

The good angel took a liking to this new method. The ease with which it

achieved the previously unattainable, in spite of a large measure of good will and patience, was stunning. He soon discovered that the method could be significantly refined: he could apply variable force and technique, and derive from it a pleasure similar to that experienced by a devout organist when he deftly strikes the right keys. So, for not finishing dinner he could administer an uppercut; for slouching, a whack on the forehead; for not saying his prayers, a cuff; for running and perspiring, a right hook; for walking through puddles, a left hook; for making a noise while Father was working, a jab, and so on.

It was plain that the method produced splendid results. The guardian angel was no longer reduced by humiliation to skulking in corners in the evenings and hiding his face in his hands. On the contrary: comfortably seated, he massaged his right hand or drummed with his fingers on the table while supervising with some satisfaction the fluent and obedient saying of prayers. Occasionally he would grow bored and watch the boy with redoubled vigilance, gripped by a desire to remind him of the superiority of Good over Evil with a single well-aimed jab.

There were even some occasions when the boy felt a stinging clip without doing anything to deserve it. The angel was hitting him for practice, and to be on the safe side.

The boy changed greatly for the better. He no longer ran or slouched or made any noise; he said his prayers and finished his meals. As a result of this, and of gulping down all his milk, he grew very fat and pale, because his parents supposed that he had become very fond of milk and kept pouring him more. Having put all his childhood misdeeds behind him, he had plenty of spare time and learned to direct his efforts to his inner life. He became very serious. He began observing his environment. Then he developed an interest in chemistry.

Sometimes he would sit on a park bench, placid, overweight and quietly self-absorbed, not even trying to run because he knew that a swingeing blow would immediately follow. Other children chased one another on the grass while he sat hunched over a textbook, studying the secret world of molecules, a persistent and deeply-hidden thought furrowing his childish brow.

His parents thought him a wonderful child and everybody was delighted. For his part he went on working steadily. His father fitted out a little laboratory for him and provided a small amount of money.

Time passed. One night a huge column of flame rose over the town and a loud blast shook the neighborhood. The home of the lad's parents was blown to pieces, shattered by a mine fashioned with admirable though untrained skill from homemade trinitrotoluene. The boy made off across the fields, carrying a rucksack prepared in advance with a small supply of food and a ticket for a ship departing for South America.

His guardian angel came running after him over the ploughed fields, hand raised to strike.

I climbed into the carriage and found my compartment. Seated in it were an artillery officer, a young lady, a man with a beard – by the look of him a merchant, a monk, an elderly man with aristocratic features, a gnome-like hunchback, and in the corner a man of modest and sickly appearance.

When the train began to move the young lady, really only a child, clapped her hands and bounced on the seat, exclaiming with naïve delight, "We're off! We're off!" and her pigtails flew up and down with her.

The monk crossed himself. His broad brown sleeve fell back, revealing a sun-tanned forearm and part of a tattoo.

As it gathered speed, the train ran onto an iron bridge and made an unpleasant clatter. A river glittered below.

"When I was boy I was balancing on a chair and leaned too far back," the hunchback explained. His eagerness to explain seemed to me out of place.

Then my eyes met the gaze of the sickly-looking passenger with the tired, wan face. He did not take his eyes off the others, and fear showed in his eyes.

"Everything is in God's hands," sighed the monk. "Chairs, armchairs, bookcases, even the smallest shelf."

The bearded man – undoubtedly a prosperous merchant – rested his hands on his stout thighs. It was clear that he was of a broad, jolly nature and didn't care for sad or serious talk.

"How about a song?" he asked in his rolling bass voice. "Down our way, in Hedgehog Meadows, we always sing when we're travelling."

He shook his thick, black hair. He had a good-natured face, though with a hint of cunning about it.

"A song! A song!" The young lady clapped her hands again.

"We really only sing on the march," said the military man. "As an officer I can tell you that."

Here the old man chimed in: "Singing is the privilege of youth." He looked very aristocratic with his hands resting on the head of his old-fashioned walking stick. "Only debauched young people avoid singing, just as criminals avoid well-lit and open places, preferring the edge of the forest."

The old man's mild words and unusual manner had an unexpected effect on the silent passenger. He shrank further into his corner and his eyes widened.

"'The Big Bronze Bell'," suggested the merchant. "Do you know that one?"

"The bell!" clapped the young lady.

I felt a hard, sharp-edged object pressing into my side each time she bounced.

"The big bronze bell began to swing," sang the merchant.

"Bells should be melted down for cannon," declared the officer.

The merchant sang in his smooth bass, which, however, did not sound entirely natural. Suddenly something alarming happened to his throat. His bass singing

stopped and the next note came in a pure resonant soprano. Not noticing anything, he sang on for a short while, quite carried away, until he did notice. Then he stopped.

He coughed. "Always happens when the weather changes. Drought and a new moon," he said, attempting at the same time to fix his false beard, which had started to detach itself.

"I wouldn't mind a game of whist," the officer exclaimed, apparently trying to ease an awkward situation. "It's our regimental game!"

"We haven't got anything to play on," observed the old man.

"You can play on my back," said the hunchback. "I'll stand in the middle and you can deal the cards onto me. I can stand quite still."

Again I had the feeling that he was exaggerating this point.

"I haven't got my cards," said the officer, rummaging in the pockets of his greatcoat. "I left them at the front."

There was definitely something odd about their behavior.

Then all of a sudden we were plunged into total darkness. The train had entered a tunnel, producing a distorted rumbling. I lost my sense of direction.

A hand was feeling for my shoulder. I found it and pressed it slightly.

"For God's sake, let's get out of here," came a whisper. I stood up, not knowing where I was. I could only tell that somebody was leading me, and that we had opened a door and closed it behind us. We must have gone out into the corridor.

"Who are you?!"

"Quiet! They're professionals. Do you think that officer is really an officer, or that hunchback a hunchback? They're all play-acting! I've been with them since we all got on."

"Why are they play-acting?"

"They're all trying to fool one another. They're all intelligence and counter-intelligence operatives and secret service agents."

"All of them?"

"Every last one. Time was, of course, when we all pretended a bit, but nothing like this. Never. Lately it's run riot. Primitive man never pretended to be anything he wasn't."

"All right." I was struck by a sudden thought, and asked, "What about us?"

We were now in the light again, standing face to face. The train was slowing down.

"Us?"

"Yes, you and me. Us two."

We stood for a moment longer, then somehow sidled apart, turned as if nothing had happened, and walked away to opposite ends of the corridor.

The train had halted at a tiny station, really just a shed on the open plain. I thought it best to get out on the opposite side from the platform. As I climbed

down from the high step onto the gravel, I saw out of the corner of my eye that the other passenger was doing the same at the other end of the carriage.

Then we both pulled our hat brims down over our eyes, hunched our shoulders and hastened away into the open fields in opposite directions, away from the train and each other.

Tendernob

Sergei Skarupo

To N.V.

1.

I had lived in San Francisco in a small studio downtown for about ten months. The reason I ended up there was probably an accident. When I moved to this city – or the City, with a respectful upper case – I first stayed with my old friend and his wife for about a month somewhere near Noe Valley, on the couch in their small sunny apartment. I wanted to change my life once again, change the weather and the scenery, like so many others. My friend was interested in film, music, and smoked pot almost every night. He liked to go camping and sometimes dragged me along. The views were amazing. Once at breakfast I told a joke that made his wife almost choke with laughter, and he performed the Heimlich Maneuver. The buildings in that neighborhood were perched on a steep slope, but the bus seemed to climb up and down the narrow streets with ease. My friends went for a short vacation and let me borrow their little hatchback, and I almost burnt the clutch on climbing up the hill. They came back from vacation, and when I told them the story about the clutch incident, I suddenly realized that I was overstaying my welcome. I found a new place in one or two days.

At first, there was something appealing about the studio I had found. It was dark inside, but for several hours in the early afternoon the courtyard and an avocado tree standing there with a single, unreachable fruit became lit by the sun. At night you could see an old hotel with its bright lights across the street, which made my room feel a little like a film noir still. It was pretty noisy, and every weekend there was always something going on. Once someone sang "Banging in the nails" by the Tiger Lilies at two in the morning. Another time I heard two shots outside at about three in the morning. Two blocks away there was a fire station. A few months after moving in, whenever I woke up in the middle of the night to the screaming sirens, or was startled by them during the day, I thought that it might be better to die once in a fire than to have to listen these sounds all the time. I was not happy. But maybe I would feel better later.

On my block there was a nursing home, a parking lot, a book store, the hotel, and three mediocre restaurants, in order of distance: American, which belonged

to the hotel, Chinese, whose name I can't recall, and Mexican, called El Super Burrito. I decorated my apartment with some odds and ends I bought in the shops nearby, including one that was appropriately called "Odds and Ends."

All of the apartments in the building were small. For some reason, different people kept moving in and out of the place next door to the left. At that time, a shifty-eyed part-time drug dealer and his wife or girlfriend lived there. She always looked worried. He greeted me with a friendly but insincere smile. Other people I met there were more or less permanent: the super on the ground floor with a big family; a retired court recorder on my right, who had lived there for many years, his wife and their little daughter; a cranky old man somewhere upstairs, who once suddenly told me that my actions were being reported, I'm not sure to whom. The neighbor on the right played the trumpet with a mute as a consideration for the neighbors, and sometimes he would come for tea with his daughter. She looked at my books and pictures and tried to play my guitar, which I had bought at a pawnshop a few blocks away.

My building was on Sutter and Hyde, almost Jekyll and Hyde. The building was right in the middle of Tendernob, that is, with the Tenderloin below and Nob Hill above. The further up you went on Nob hill, the more boutiques and cafes and restaurants there were, and the cleaner they got, while down in Tenderloin there were massage parlors, more bars, people shooting up in the dark alleys, a famous music hall, a famous strip club, and in the morning people seemed to be especially miserable, and there was filth everywhere. In Tendernob these worlds overlapped.

2.

The nursing home was getting ready for Halloween. The windows were decorated with ghosts and corpses, an irony that was either lost on the administration or intended as a morbid joke. It was sunny, and half the day was gone. The cranky old man from my building was very slowly carrying down the steep road his packages from the supermarket, and suddenly he dropped them, something spilled, and the pigeons began having a feast. I took a bus to Land's End. The bus stop was clearly in the Tenderloin territory. It was the month of Fucktober, according to the marquee sign above a sex shop. A man walked out the door, looking nonchalant and carrying a large package under his arm. The bus came and set off into the afternoon traffic, leaving the man and the dingy old building behind. It drove by furniture stores, ethnic groceries, temples, churches and cathedrals of various denominations (a giant constructivist square, an onion dome), gift shops, houses, houses, more houses. Then the city unwound itself. I went down from Land's End to Ocean Beach and took a walk by the ocean. A few bicycles chirred by, some surfer was putting on his wetsuit. Starlings, ravens, and seagulls replaced pigeons.

On the beach I saw a pale young man, dressed in a black cape, who stood on a small mound of sand with his eyes half-closed, meditating or silently praying to Satan. He was short and skinny. Next to him there lay a crudely-made black kite.

A cute little girl ran up to the kite and picked it up.

"Get away, you bitch!" he screamed. She froze.

The girl's father pulled her away and returned the kite, as the demonic man continued to shout his grown-up insults. Not knowing how to react, I looked at the father and smiled a wide, stupid smile, as if to invite him to laugh together at the situation. The little girl seemed more puzzled than scared. I kept thinking about what I should have done or said, angrily replaying the scene in my mind, but the moment was lost.

Other children were running by the water back and forth and trying not to get wet, shrieking with excitement when they missed a wave. Dogs retrieved tennis balls from the ocean. The moon came up from the east, it was the color of silver covered by patina stains. The sun was coming down in the west, and people were taking their requisite snapshots. I sat down on the thick grass and sand and sat there for hours looking at the ocean until the sun went down. Children and adults, dogs and their owners went home. The waves were light and there was almost no wind. The tide was out, and the little sandpipers appeared on the wet sand, picking up their invisible prey.

3.

There was a bar I around my neighborhood, one of several I had found, and it was a good night to have a drink. Instead of the deafening music usually coming from the stereo, tonight there was a live DJ. He had a huge stack of vinyl records, which seemed to contain mostly obscure country music, at least obscure to me, and he didn't wear any pants, just a G String. He called himself the G String Rider. His girlfriend was the bartender. I seemed to be the only sober person there at this time of night. I'd met her before and she recognized me and offered me a free drink she'd just invented, containing three parts Vodka and one part sugar. It was called Sugar Pony and promised to cause a serious hangover. I had another drink, switching to cognac. A couple next to me drank two shots of tequila, following the ritual of licking the salt first and finishing with slices of lime. I stepped outside to smoke. Outside there were several people hanging out, as usual. I got a light from one of them and moved further away. I had a pleasant buzz and stood there watching random people walk by. Then a girl who stood outside with the others came up to me and kissed me, sliding her tongue into my mouth, all without saying a word. She was petite, and although it was dark outside, you could tell that she was very pretty. I returned her kiss, and I don't know whether it took a minute or an hour, as they say. Well, definitely not an hour, of course, and maybe not even a minute, but it was long. Then she calmly walked away, joined her friends and they were gone. I didn't try to run after her. I went back inside and sat down by the bar counter again. Was she on E, was it a dare? Maybe both. The G String Rider played a song with the refrain "Honey, take a whiff on me." On the way out, I asked the G

String Rider who sang the song about cocaine. It was Merle Travis, he said. Then I went home.

It was late, El Super Burrito was already closed, and I didn't feel like going up several long blocks to the place that was still open. A police cruiser drove by slowly and a street walker hid behind a parked car. "What am I doing here," I addressed the hotel across the street. "What will I do with these random memories?"

There was a little bag of coke I got from my neighbor a few days ago. The ear worm I picked up at the bar was crawling somewhere in my mind: "Sends you in the air like you're ridin' on a kite with just a little whiff of my China white."

I wanted to borrow some happiness from my future self, why not? Somebody initiated me into the ritual a couple of years before. Cut the lines on a glass surface and snort the shiny white powder with a rolled-up hundred-dollar bill. Then magic happens. Your throat and your lips go numb. You float on air, loving everyone and yourself, especially yourself, suddenly noticing and understanding almost everything. You should swallow the inside of your mouth and wallow in the depth of your thoughts. I didn't have a hundred-dollar bill or a suitable glass surface, so a shiny plastic stand from a Gillette razor and a twenty had to do. It was disappointing. The first line tasted like rat poison mixed with baking soda, but I didn't give up. I tried to remember exactly how it was supposed to feel, but my memory was not reliable enough, and there were too many variables, too many differences. I did another line, which made me a little shaky, jittery, but the floating feeling didn't come. I did two more lines and got a little scared. This went on for a while, and I just wanted to undo everything, but the only way to do or undo anything was to try a little more and leave the state I was in.

I lay down on a used couch, shaking and trying to stay conscious. Quietly, just in case, I made a solemn promise to God that I would never, ever take this stuff again, even if it were straight from Columbia. I didn't think of making any other promises. An hour or two or a minute later, I saw a pigeon trying to get in through the window, although it was night and the pigeons should have been asleep somewhere. It was scary and disgusting. Then I finally passed out.

The next morning I woke up with only a slight headache and walked out into the sunny Fucktober afternoon for breakfast.

Interview

Venedikt Yerofeyev
A Recovered Interview with Daphne Skillen

Transcribed, introduced and annotated

by Ilya Simanovsky and Svetlana Shnitman-McMillin

Translated from the Russian

by Seth Graham

In 1969-1970, life in the Soviet Union was going through a period, later described as "stagnation." In real terms, it was rapid deterioration. The economy was in decline. My family lived in Murmansk, the biggest fishing port in the north of the Soviet Union, where no more fresh fish was sold in the shops. A variety of four cheeses was reduced to one, and the same cheese, something similar to Gouda, was renamed several times, acquiring ever fancier names, with a simultaneous increase in price. People had to queue long hours to buy basic goods. The official ideology was like glass, cracked all over the surface: it may be that the millions of people did not know of an alternative, but nobody really believed anymore in the stale dull language of communist propaganda.

As young intellectuals, we were extremely sceptical of communist discourse, mocking and despising its slogans and telling anti-Soviet jokes, but our perception of this whole Soviet system was deep repulsion combined with certain recognition of its, as it seemed, strength and durability.

At the beginning of 1970, a manuscript called "Moscow-Petushki" began to circulate in Moscow samizdat (underground circulation). The name of an author – Venedikt Yerofeyev was completely unknown to any readership. The book describes the train journey of an alcoholic Venichka Yerofeyev – the hero's name replicates that of his author – from Moscow towards the small town of Petushki. The consumption of alcohol on the way takes Rabelaisian proportions. The journey plays out on two levels: physical, from a morning hangover to delirium tremens, and metaphysical, from a dubious resurrection to a horrifying vision of mystical crucifixion. The book is hilariously funny, and one cannot stop laughing until the last stage when the narrative, moving at huge speed, derails into horrendous

nightmares and a terrifying ending. The rich tapestry of the text is weaved with direct and indirect quotations, allusions, parodies, travesty, references to world cultural heritage and as well as brilliant mockery of Soviet slogans and cliché. The mastery of the Russian language was breath-taking. This book not only contributed to a complete destruction of the Soviet myth in our minds: it liberated our language or as Josef Brodsky, last Russian Nobel prize laureate said about Yerofeyev: "He released voice."

In 1988-1989, the manuscript of *Moskva-Petushki* was published for the first time in the USSR by the journal *Sobriety and Culture* – under the unlikely pretext of warning Russian alcoholics against the excesses of heavy drinking. This and the next publications in 1989-1990 made Venedikt Yerofeyev an instant classic, the most loved and admired author of his time and generation. But for him, fame was short lived.

His death from throat cancer in 1990 strangely and disturbingly mirrored the last nightmare of his hero, death at the end of his journey by four apocalyptic assassins: "They stuck their awl deep into my throat. I did not know pain like that was possible in the world... And since then I have not regained consciousness, and never will." Yerofeyev lost his voice after the operation in 1985 and spoke during his last years with the help of a Western European-made mechanical device. Those who met him before his terrible illness always remembered his voice as uniquely beautiful. There exists one recording of his reading of Moskva-Petushki and some of his other oeuvres. But such a reading does not fully account for a voice with its individual manner of speech, unique intonations, lively vibrations and humorous tone. With his death in 1990, it seemed that Venedikt Yerofeyev's voice was lost forever.

How the Tape Was Discovered

ILYA SIMANOVSKY: Working in collaboration with O. Lekmanov and M. Sverdlov on a second expanded edition of the biography *Venedikt Yerofeyev: Outsider,*[1] I noticed that in one of his diary notes Yerofeyev mentions "a taped interview" which in summer 1982 he gave to an acquaintance whom he called "the British woman Daphne." But I knew nothing of such a journalist or her interview – clearly, if this interview survived it had never been published. The thought of seeking the cassette excited me, especially because there was the possibility that it could be digitalized, preserving the real voice of the writer, recordings of which there remained virtually none. I called it "real" not by chance. Proposals for interviews showered on Yerofeyev only in the last two years of his life, when, sick with throat cancer, he had already lost the baritone voice that had charmed his contemporaries. Thus, if the cassette had been preserved after almost forty years, it

1 O. Lekmanov, M. Sverdlov, and I. Simanovsky, Venedikt Erofeev: postoronnii (Moscow: AST, 2018).

was priceless. But what interested me no less was how could I find the owner of the cassette? In our age of the internet, it turned out to be very simple, thanks to the diary of Yerofeyev I found the real name of the "British woman Daphne": Daphne Skillen. I found her e-mail address and immediately sent her a letter. Slightly embarrassed by my sincerely emotional tone, I wrote that if the cassette of the interview had been preserved, by publishing it Daphne would be performing a great service to the huge culture of Russia, and that I should very much like to make an interview with her for our book about Yerofeyev's biography. The reply came quickly and Daphne gladly agreed to speak with me and we soon arranged a time for a meeting on skype. Daphne promised to look for the cassette. And now the story's action moves to London.

SVETLANA SHNITMAN-McMILLIN: I made the acquaintance of Daphne Skillen in autumn 1983 when Arnold McMillin my (then, future) husband, the Professor of Russian Literature in London University, offered to introduce me to his postgraduate Daphne Skillen who had met Venedikt Yerofeyev. At that time, I had only recently begun work on a dissertation which later became a monograph *Venedikt Erofeev "Moskva-Petushki" or "The rest is silence."*[2] We met in a London pub "The Lamb", loved and attended by Charles Dickens. I immediately liked Daphne who was full of life, humor and interesting stories. Over a gin and tonic, she told me about her acquaintance with Venedikt Yerofeyev in 1981-1982 and some of her stories I included in my book. Then we did not see each other for many years, but more recently met at some lectures in the university and other establishments.

On May 29, 2019 I received a letter from Daphne in which she asked me to return the interview which she had given me thirty-six years before in "The Lamb" pub. Completely astonished, I replied that not only had I not received a tape from her, but that I did not even suspect of its existence. I was amazed and begged her to look for it in her archives, as the importance of such an interview could not be exaggerated. Spending the next day in a state of great anxiety, I finally saw in my post a letter: Daphne had found the cassette at home! It turned out that after our first acquaintance, she had intended to give me the interview, but in her busy life this intention somehow had turned into conviction that she had given me the recording. In great joy and excitement, I immediately told Daphne that it must be published. She quickly agreed, understanding the importance of the interview for the writer's literary heritage. But first she wanted to listen to it, although she no longer possessed a cassette player. We agreed that a few days later Daphne would come to the university where I was organizing a roundtable dedicated to the fiftieth anniversary of the writing of *Moskva-Petushki*, and would give me the cassette, which we could listen to together on our ancient cassette player. She asked

2 Svetlana Geisser–Schnitmann, *Venedikt Erofeev "Moskva-Petushki" ili "The rest is silence,"* Slavica Helvetica no. 30 (Bern: Peter Lang, 1989)

me not to listen to the recording before she came to our home. We were all very worried that the cassette could be damaged. Before Daphne's arrival I twice tested the player. It worked. But when, after a convivial lunch, we sat on the couch and I put in the cassette the player gave up the ghost. Arnold and Daphne took this with British stoicism. My disappointment was unlimited. Quickly taking my laptop, I ordered on the internet a new cassette player that was delivered to me at 10.20 in the evening of the next day. I switched it on, put in the cassette and a few seconds later there rang out in the room the amazingly beautiful baritone voice and sweet laughter of Venedikt Yerofeyev. Not letting go of the recorder and without a break I listened to the interview twice with the feeling that in the London night I was experiencing a real miracle. That same night I wrote two letters: to Daphne to tell her the happy news of the tape's survival. And to Ilya Simanovsky, with the same news, asking him to take part in the publication of this interview. This phenomenal document came to the surface thanks to his indefatigable work on Venedikt Yerofeyev's legacy. And, of course, I understood how his profound knowledge of the biography of Yerofeyev would be of inestimable value for the writing of notes and commentaries to this publication. I was very pleased that Ilya Simanovsky immediately agreed.

In the university media-center I asked our technicians to digitize the cassette. Two days later I received the sound file with the recording we are now putting before the reader. The full transcript of this extraordinary recording with our introduction and comments was published in the October issue of the journal *Znamya* in 2019.[3]

And I would like to say some words about remarkable journalist who took the initiative to conduct this interview.

Daphne Skillen was born in Shanghai. Her mother came from a Russian-Ukrainian family of Russian émigrés, coming from Vladivostok. Her Greek father came in search of a new life in the most dynamic and quickly developing city of the Far East. The family spoke English, and Daphne attended an American school.

In 1949 the People's Liberation Army led by Mao Zedong was advancing towards Shanghai, and foreigners and rich Chinese were leaving in a hurry. Daphne's parents hesitated until the very last moment but finally decided to emigrate. But by that time, passenger air traffic had been suspended. But her father persuaded the pilot of a British cargo plane flying to Australia to let the family on board. The pilot unloaded a splendid grand piano and put in the plane the parents, two daughters and their Russian *Babushka*.

Daphne graduated from the University of Sidney with a degree in Politics, Psychology and Philosophy. Later, she received a second degree in Russian lan-

3 The text is available online: http://znamlit.ru/publication.php?id=7406
And the recording itself is also available: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GT95C2J19Qs / https://imwerden.de/publ-8781.html

guage and literature at SSEES, London University, having spent a year in the USA at the University of Boulder, Colorado, where she wrote her master's dissertation on the work of Andrei Siniavsky.

By 1985 Daphne had completed her PhD on "Concepts of myth and utopia in Russian revolutionary literature" at SSEES, London.

Earlier in 1981-1982, having come to Moscow for a language course, she began to work at the Novosti Press Agency, editing translations of Soviet colleagues into English. During this period, she became friendly with representatives of various intellectual circles, dissidents, artists and writers.

In 1984, Daphne working for several British TV companies, was announced to be persona non grata, and for the next four years her applications for a visa were rejected. Only in 1988, she could go to Moscow again, filming documentaries for British TV. In the 1990s and in the first years of twenty-first century Daphne was living in Moscow, working as a consultant for various international projects in the area of mass media and international help to Russia and former Soviet republics as well as countries of South-East Asia.

In 2017, she published a book *Freedom of Speech in Russia. Politics and Media from Gorbachev to Putin*.[4] Daphne Skillen lives in London and continues with her research, and is currently writing a new book about Russia.

Having made Venedikt Yerofeyev's acquaintance in 1981, and visiting him in Abramtsevo and in Moscow, Daphne Skillen as a professional journalist conducted this interview with the writer.

A few preliminary remarks. It is well known that Venedikt Yerofeyev often added lines and colors to his own apocrypha. Among favorite myths, which he spread was, for instance, that of his uninterrupted childhood in the North. In such cases we usually produce only one source of credible information. The interview was conducted in a very relaxed way, and Yerofeyev did not know the questions in advance and so did not prepare his replies. It took place in the evening of a tiring day and in his replies there are occasional grammatical inconsistencies and slightly broken syntax, as are found in spontaneous speech. But these moments also convey a feeling of his living language in personal communication, and for that reason we decided to print the interview with absolutely minimal editorial changes. On the tape there are breaks and omissions, and Daphne no longer remembers their cause.

We should like to express our delight to Daphne Skillen who made such an interview. From those known to this day, this is the earliest made with Venedikt Yerofeyev, and the only one in which may be heard his living voice, later lost as the result of a terrible disease. We wish to thank Daphne cordially for her trust and her permission to publish this recording.

4 Daphne Skillen, *Politics and Media from Gorbachev to Putin* (London and New York: Routledge, 2017).

This publication in its current form would not be possible without the help of Anna Avdieva, Mark Grinberg, Alexander Dymich, Galina A. Yerofeyeva, Aleksander Lavrin, Oleg Lekmanov and Evgeny Shtal, to all of whom we both but Ilya especially would like to express our sincere gratitude.

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The interview was conducted on July 12, 1982 in the apartment of Galina and Venedikt Yerofeyev, 17/1 Flotskaia St., no. 78, Moscow. It began at approximately 7pm.

DAPHNE SKILLEN: Where were you born?

VENEDIKT YEROFEYEV: Go ahead, ask away. Where was I born? In 1938, in the Arctic, on the Kola Peninsula. In the Murmansk Region.

SKILLEN: And where did you go to school?

YEROFEYEV: I spent all ten years, from first to tenth grade, in the comprehensive school in the town of Kirovsk, Murmansk Region. That's in the Khibin mountains. Have you heard of them?

SKILLEN: No, I haven't.

YEROFEYEV: Well, there are such mountains on the Kola Peninsula. From first grade to tenth. It wasn't until I was in tenth grade, seventeen years old, that I crossed the Arctic Circle for the first time, from north to south.

SKILLEN: Why?

YEROFEYEV: Well, I never had an occasion to, because [laughs]… I was born there, and never travelled anywhere else.[5] The first time in my life that I went anywhere was after I finished school with my useless gold medal…

SKILLEN: You graduated with a medal?

YEROFEYEV: Yes. And then I went to study at Moscow State University (MSU), which had just opened its new high-rise main building.[6] That was the first

5 Before moving to Moscow, Yerofeyev had actually crossed the Arctic Circle several times with his family and in summer camp. O. Lekmanov, M. Sverdlov, and I. Simanovsky, *Venedikt Erofeev: Postoronnii [Venedikt Yerofeyev: Outsider.]* 3rd ed. (Moscow: AST, 2020), pp. 36-39, 48, 61.

6 The high-rise main building of Moscow State University (Moskovskii gosudarstvennyi universitet) was opened in 1953, but the Philology Department, where Yerofeyev studied, was located at 9-11

time I crossed the Arctic Circle, and the first time I saw a real live cow and all the other exotica of central Russia. There were no entry exams then. I just passed an interview and enrolled in the Philology Department. But I only studied for a year and a half. I was eighteen years old, so naturally I made a mess of things. And I was overcome by all sorts of crises, too, from the highest sort to the lowest [laughs].[7]

SKILLEN: What kind of crises?

YEROFEYEV: It doesn't really matter now. That's a topic for a special something… They were very well described in an extravagant style in my "Notes of a Psychopath," which covered the years 1956-1958. An acquaintance of mine had that manuscript for a long time.[8] But then he gave it to a friend of his, and it disappeared without a trace when that guy moved to a new flat. They probably threw away any old papers they didn't need, including my text. I saw it for the last time in 1960 and haven't set eyes on it since. Quite a big loss, actually…[9] The writing was highly immature, but I could've reworked it completely, into something really interesting. Especially since I wrote most of it when I was eighteen years old. And after that — this is all mostly accurate[10] — I worked in construction. They were building the Cheremushki district in Moscow. Then I worked as a stoker, also in Moscow. In 1958 I said to hell with the capital and went to Ukraine to work in a geological exploration party.[11]

SKILLEN: I didn't know you were such a fit guy.

YEROFEYEV: [laughs] A geological exploration party, I think that's what it

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Mokhovoi St.

7 Yerofeyev studied at MSU from September 1955 to January 1957. See: Lekmanov, Sverdlov, and Simanovsky, *op. cit.*, pp. 68, 74-82, 89; V. Kataev, *Kak doekhat' do Petushkov? Vremia, ostavsheesia s nami. Filologicheskii fakul'tet v 1955-1960 gg. Vospominaniia vypusknikov [How Do You Get to Petushki?: The Times that Stayed with Us. The Philology Department 1955-1960. Graduates Reminisce]* (Moscow: Maks Press, 2006), p. 168

8 Yerofeyev misspoke here. The title of the work was not "Notes of a Psychopath" ["Zametki psikhopata"] but "Diary of a Psychopath" ["Zapiski psikhopata"]. The manuscript was kept by Vladimir Muravyov and published after Yerofeyev's death. *V. Erofeev, Moi ochen' zhiznennyi put'* (Moscow: Vagrius, 2003), pp. 491, 576.

9 This line is from Vladimir Mayakovsky's poem "Tamara and the Demon," in his *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1957), vol. 6, p. 74. For an English translation, see Vladimir Mayakovsky, *Selected Poems*, trans. by James H. McGavran III (Northwestern UP, 1979), p. 101: "So this is the Terek / that has poets / in hysterics. / And I hadn't seen it. / Big loss, I'm sure."

10 Daphne doesn't recall what Yerofeyev meant by this, but it could be that she had brought him a copy of a foreign publication with biographical information about him.

11 According to other sources, the dates and places in this list of jobs is not completely accurate. There is no mention of many of these jobs in Yerofeyev's official work documents. V. Erofeev, *op. cit*., p. 7; I. Avdiev, "Erinii i dokumenty," *Index on Censorship* 4-5, 1998, pp. 238-42; Lekmanov, Sverdlov, and Simanovsky, *op. cit.*, pp. 106-7.

was called. Then I went back… No, wait, there was another one before I left Moscow: in 1958-59 I worked in a bottle-return point in central Moscow.

SKILLEN: What's that, a factory?

YEROFEYEV: No, it's a special center where they take empty bottles. You've never seen one?

SKILLEN: No…

YEROFEYEV: People would drag whole sackfuls of empty booze bottles there and get 9 kopecks for a small one and 12 kopecks…

SKILLEN: Yes, yes, of course. I see.

YEROFEYEV: Now all the prices are standardized and you get 20 kopecks for any bottle, but back then…. I collected loads of writing material. I've never had a job that gave me as much interesting material as that one, my four-month stint at the bottle-return center.

SKILLEN: Why?

YEROFEYEV: Oh, it was very interesting, very interesting indeed. And after that what did I do… In 1959 or late 1958 I said to hell with the capital and went to Ukraine to join the geological exploration party. I worked there in 1959. In 1960 I said to hell with Ukraine and got a job in a police station in the town of Orekhovo-Zuevo. Then they kicked me out of Orekhovo-Zuevo[12] and I went to Vladimir, *nach Osten* [laughs]. In Vladimir I worked as a librarian[13], and later as a road worker on the Moscow-Beijing highway, which was being built at the time. It went right through Vladimir. So I built that road. Remember that line by Nekrasov? "Daddy! Who built this road?" "Count Petr Andreich Kleinmichel, sweetheart." And then I enrolled at the Vladimir Pedagogical Institute. They threw me out six months later…

SKILLEN: Why?

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12 From September 1959 to October 1960 Yerofeyev was a student in the Philology Department of Orekhovo-Zuevo Pedagogical Institute. He was expelled "for academic delinquency and systematic violation of working discipline." See: "Vypiski iz prikaza No. 415 po Orekhovo-Zuevskomu pedagigicheskomu institutu ot 18 octiabria 1960 f.", *Arkhiv Gosudarstvennogo gumanitarno-tekhnicheckogo universiteta (GGTU) goroda Orekhovo-Zuevo*, delo No. 13, "Venedikt Vasilevich Erofeev" ["Excerpts from Order no. 415, Orekhovo-Zuevo Pedagogical Institute, 18 October 1960," *Archives of the Orekhovo-Zuevo State Humanities-Technology University (GGGU)*, case no. 13, "Venedikt Vasilevich Erofeev"]

13 In the "Brief Autobiography" (p. 7) and in the interview with I. Bolychev (p. 518) in V. Erofeev, op.cit., Yerofeyev mentions Bryansk as the city in which he worked as a librarian.

YEROFEYEV: The expulsion order read as follows: "For the ideological, disciplinary, and moral corruption of the student body of the institute." Even though I didn't get a single B and was the only one there who got the top scholarship. It was called the Lenin Scholarship by then, not the Stalin Scholarship, or Prize,… or the Lebedev-Polianskii Scholarship,[14] something like that. But they asked me to leave, even though I got all top marks the first term. Moreover, the law-enforcement agencies demanded that I leave the city of Vladimir and the Vladimir Region within forty-eight hours and never come back. I really don't know what my crimes were… All I did, it seems to me, was lounge around swilling vodka from the bottle [both laugh], and surround myself with a group of people who were doing approximately the same thing, and reading poetry and maybe also the Gospels.[15]

SKILLEN: Were you writing then?

YEROFEYEV: That was when I wrote… Oh wait, no, after getting kicked out of Vladimir Pedagogical Institute I worked as a porter, and briefly as a stoker, in Vladimir. And after I got kicked out, in 1961… or actually, in 1962, after getting kicked out of Vladimir, I moved to Pavlovo-Posad. I got a job there on the production line in a brick factory. And then, let's see, let's see… I worked as a porter in a meat factory in Kolomna, also in the Moscow region. [16] That was when I wrote *Good Tidings*, which is also lost now. [17] It was popular among the Vladimir youth. They would copy it by hand, and I even knew some enthusiasts who learned it by heart, even though it was pretty long…

SKILLEN: And you didn't think to keep your work?

YEROFEYEV: Someone kept it. I gave it to my friend Tsedrinsky. [18] Tsedrin-

14 The Lebedev-Polianskii Scholarship was established at the Vladimir Pedagogical Institute in 1948 in memory of the literary scholar P. I. Lebedev-Polianskii (1882-1948), whose name it bore until 2008.

15 Yerofeyev enrolled at Vladimir Pedagogical Institute in 1961 and was expelled in January 1962. In addition to questions of academic discipline, the Institute's leadership was concerned by his "moral profile," and by the fact that he held Bible readings and distributed Bibles among the students. V. Erofeev, *op. cit.*, p. 512; E. Shtal, "Moskva-Vladimir-Petushki: Universitety Venedikta Erofeeva," Nezavisimaia gazeta, 12 Aug. 2004; Lekmanov, Sverdlov, and Simanovsky, *op. cit.*, pp. 133-38.

16 Yerofeyev studied at the Kolomna Pedagogical Institute in 1962-63. According to Kolomna legend, Yerofeyev had a side job as a porter in the Ogonek grocery store, in the former building of which is now housed a museum called "ArtCommunalApartment: Erofeev and Others." Lekmanov, Sverdlov, and Simanovsky, *op. cit.*, pp. 159-61.

17 Several chapters of this work (in a different version titled *Gospel*) were discovered when Yerofeyev was still living. Good Tidings, compiled from several different sources, including reminiscences by Yerofeyev's friends, was published after his death, by various publishers. V. Erofeev, Short Prose (Moscow: Zakharov, 2005), pp. 25-37; V. Erofeev, *Maloe sobranie sochinenii* (St. Petersburg: Azbuka, 2019), pp. 239-54.

18 Vladislav Tsedrinsky (1940-2010) was a friend of Yerofeyev who is mentioned in *Moscow-Petushki*

sky gave it to some other friends to read. One of his friends gave it to an auntie of his, and God only knows what the auntie did with it, or where it is now. I haven't seen it since 1962. But then, in 1963, I got lucky and found a steady job in the "Cable…" what did they call it? Whatever it was called, we built and installed telephone cable lines. We covered the whole of Russia with phone lines. I spent exactly ten years doing that, from 1963 to 1973, or even a bit more than ten.[19] I worked all over the place, in different regions: Moscow, Vladimir, Ivanovo, Gorky, Tambov, Lipetsk, Smolensk, Chernigov, Gomel, Mogilev, Tula, Bryansk, and even in Lithuania…

SKILLEN: And how did you feel about the journey?

YEROFEYEV: What journey?

SKILLEN: This "going to the people…" [20]

YEROFEYEV: This "going"? Well, it didn't do me much good, but given my situation – I didn't have a passport, or a residence permit, or a permanent roof over my head [21] – at least while working on the road we always lived in trailers. You know those little trailers where builders are squashed together?

SKILLEN: Yes.

YEROFEYEV: We hooked all those trailers together and trundled around in them, the way old-time circus folk used to take their caravans from place to place. It was easy for Théophile Gautier to write *Captain Fracasse* – everything seems so enticing in that book, but in our case there was nothing like that. Just filth and more filth… In a word, nothing but spitting everywhere.

SKILLEN: You couldn't stay in hotels?

YEROFEYEV: What hotels? We were working in field conditions, out in the fields… It was great for my notebooks, though. I filled notebooks to the brim. During those trips I wrote a few poems for… My son was born in 1966.[22] I would

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in the chapter "Orekhovo-Zuevo – Krutoe."

19 The exact dates of this employment were May 1963 to January 1973. I. Avdiev, *op. cit.*, p. 239

20 "Going to the people" *(khozhdenie v narod)* refers to a practice that arose in the 1870s in which socialist members of the urban intelligentsia relocated to Russian villages to live with the peasants and encourage them to revolt against the Tsarist government. The movement was unsuccessful, and harshly repressed by the government.

21 Lekmanov, Sverdlov, and Simanovsky, *op. cit.*, pp. 85; V. Berlin, "Venedikt Erofeev i 'Voprosy Leninizma,'" *Novaia gazeta*, 20 October 2010.

22 Yerofeyev's son, Venedikt, was born on January 3, 1966.

read them for him…

SKILLEN: Tell me about it, it's interesting.

YEROFEYEV: I wrote all sorts of poetry in the early 70s, in different genres. From Catullan verse, or imitations… through the Sapphic stanza and all the way up to contemporary *vers libre*. All the genres.

SKILLEN: Are they preserved?

YEROFEYEV: Some are, but my mother-in-law, my first wife's mother, used some of them to light her oven.[23] I stored everything in the Petushki District, where my son was living at the time. I used to visit him every month.

SKILLEN: When did you first go to Petushki?

YEROFEYEV: To Petushki… I took a girl with me when I left the Vladimir Pedagogical Institute, and in 1966 we had a son together. I had to marry her quickly, because you have to give a baby a patronymic and a surname within a month of the birth. We got married on the very last day before the month was up. After she graduated from the pedagogical institute, my wife was assigned to work in the Petushki District, in the village of Karavaevo, a bus ride to the north from Petushki. So no matter where in Rus' I was trundling around, every month or so I had to go to Petushki to see my son and bring him presents…

SKILLEN: How long did you live in Petushki?

YEROFEYEV: I didn't really live there, I just visited. I'd go see my son for three or four days and then disappear for another month. I did that until 1973.

SKILLEN: And when did you write "Notes of a Psychopath?"

YEROFEYEV: Like I said, I wrote "Notes of a Psychopath" when I was in my first year at MSU, and a bit after they kicked me out and I had started working as a builder in Moscow.

SKILLEN: So you didn't go back to MSU…

23 Yerofeyev's first wife was Valentina Vasilevna Zimakova (1942-2000; she used the surname Yerofeyeva during the marriage).

YEROFEYEV: No, and I never intended to.[24] In 1972, two years after *Moscow-Petushki*, I had nearly finished writing *Dmitri Shostakovich*, which was about the same size, or a bit longer.[25] But I lost it. Someone swiped it.

SKILLEN: What does that mean?[26]

YEROFEYEV: What does it mean? [both laugh loudly] Good question! I was on the train one night with a huge hangover. In my net bag I had two bottles of wine that were sticking right out of the bag. Next to them was a packet with my notebooks, including all the drafts of *Dmitri Shostakovich*. I just needed to sit down and make a clean copy of it.

SKILLEN: Was it a novel? Or a novella?

YEROFEYEV: Well, I don't know… I'm not good at naming genres. Call it whatever you want. I can't stand all those labels: "narrative poem," "novella," "novel," or… Essentially, what's the difference? It was just called *Dmitri Shostakovich*. Although it hardly mentioned Dmitri Shostakovich at all. There were probably about three pages where his name appeared. He didn't matter at all to the plot, or the setting, or the time.

SKILLEN: Then why did you call it *Dmitri Shostakovich*?

YEROFEYEV: Because there were scenes in it that were not exactly suitable for print. So instead of describing things that were too obscene to write down, I started to talk about Shostakovich. About how Shostakovich was a prize-winning blah-blah-blah, honorary commander of the Legion of Honor, honorary member of the Italian Academy of St. Cecilia, and so on. I would just talk about Shostakovich until the indecent scene ended. As soon as it ended, the narrative continued. It was a very funny narrative. But when it came around again to scenes that were not appropriate for a refined ear, and even less so for the Soviet ear, although that was not the target audience, I had to resort to talking about Shostakovich again, but this time about his symphonies, one after another [both laugh]… It was a fun piece. With a sad ending. When I lost it, I just… It was stolen along with the bag. I had fallen asleep on the train. It was a Sunday night, when everyone is dying for a drink but it's too late to get anything, because all the shops close by eight at the

24 According to V. Kataev, Yerofeyev unsuccessfully tried to re-enroll at MSU in the early 1970s. Kataev, *op. cit.*, pp. 169-70.

25 The manuscript has not been found, and some friends and researchers of Yerofeyev doubt that it ever existed.

26 The interviewer does not immediately understand the slang term Yerofeyev has used for "[someone] swiped it" *(svistnuli)*

latest. And I was on the train after eight, in an almost empty car. When I woke up, someone had been tempted by that bag. They didn't need all those manuscripts and drafts, they didn't need *Shostakovich*, so they threw them out the train window. [27] All they needed were those two bottles of wine… If I had wrapped them up well in paper, it wouldn't have happened.

SKILLEN: What a pity…

YEROFEYEV: That was 1972. When I got off the train and saw what I'd lost, I fell onto the grass and wept like Pechorin after he said farewell to Princess Vera or whoever it was, I don't remember… [28]

SKILLEN: How awful…

YEROFEYEV: Yeah. Later I tried to recreate it, since I really did like it a lot. I made a few valiant attempts to recreate the story, but it wasn't the same… It was uninspired, flat. So I decided to give it up. A lot of eminent people tried to convince me not to, but I gave it up. For a long time I gave up writing in general. If I did write something, it was just a tiny story or an essay about someone, or a short article on commission about early-twentieth-century Russian poets.

SKILLEN: Were they published?

YEROFEYEV: No, they weren't. I gave them all to whoever commissioned them. And they just pasted them into their albums. I only wrote those kind of small, made-to-order pieces. Someone would ask me to write, say, three pages on Sasha Chorny.[29] So I write the three pages and he gives me a book that I've longed to read. He doesn't ask me to pay for the book, or to swap it for one of mine. He just asks me to write something. All that writing is still in the albums of the people who asked me to do it. Other than that, I didn't write anything serious. I've been incubating a piece called "Jewish Melodies" for a few years now. But I still haven't found, as the shashlik sellers say, a skewer to put it on… I have pages and pages of material. I have so much material that I'll have to cut about 90% of it, and keep only the best stuff, the funniest stuff and, on the contrary, the darkest. I also want to carve out a play from it, where everyone dies, like in Shakespeare.[30] But it's ba-

27 "Sunday night" does not correspond to the date of the theft of the manuscript indicated by Yerofeyev in a notebook entry clearly written soon after: July 19, 1972 was a Wednesday.

28 The word "Princess" here is clearly a reference to Lermontov's Princess Mary. M. Lermontov, Sobranie sochinenii (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1957-58), vol. 4, p. 142.

29 Yerofeyev gave his 1982 essay about Sasha Chorny to Anatoly Ivanov, who was researching the poet's work. V. Erofeev, *Maloe sobranie sochinenii* (St. Petersburg: Azbuka, 2019), pp. 390-91.

30 Along with the finished play *Val'purgieva noch', ili Shagi komandora [Walpurgis Night, or the Steps of the Commander]* (1985), Yerofeyev was working on a play called *Fanny Kaplan*. See Lekmanov, Sverdlov, and Simanovsky, *op. cit.*, pp. 411-13.

sically about Jews exclusively. Just like Petushki was exclusively about alcohol, and seemingly nothing else, this is exclusively about Jews.

SKILLEN: What's it called?

YEROFEYEV: "Jewish Melodies." [31]

SKILLEN: Someone told me it was called "Seven and a Half Jews."

YEROFEYEV: No, that's nonsense. I did have a plan to write something called "My Seven Jews" for the journal *Bronze Age*,[32] at their request. Short biographical sketches of the seven Jews who have influenced me the most. Or have shaken me a bit. The most memorable ones.

SKILLEN: Venia, what books have had the biggest influence on you?

YEROFEYEV: That depends on when… One of the earliest ones… In my youth, it was *Crime and Punishment*, which I read when I was sixteen years old. When I was eighteen, Knut Hamsun's *Hunger* and *Mysteries* made a strong impression on me. For a few weeks after reading him, or even longer, I walked around in a complete daze and couldn't read anything else. Then, when I was nineteen or twenty, my Ibsen period started. Especially *Brand and Peer Gynt*, but also his later plays. Basically, I read all of Ibsen from beginning to end. Later, let's see, which writers… there wasn't anything stronger than Ibsen. Ah! Then there was Sterne, of course.[33] But that was when I was already 22 or so. Then Thomas Mann fell on me with his heavy, learned, […] mass. Thomas Mann crushed me for about three years. I was already 25-28 years old by then.

SKILLEN: That's all foreign literature, except for Dostoevsky…

YEROFEYEV: Yes, other than Dostoevsky it was all foreign. Russian authors never had a lasting influence on me, I guess. I also read poetry, of course, mainly Russian poets. And some overseas poets in good Russian translations. I probably read more poetry than prose. Pretty much everything from the syllabic verse poetry of the seventeenth century to Nikolai Zabolotsky, that's more or less it.

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31 "Inserts for 'Jewish Melodies'" is the title of one of Yerofeyev's notebooks. The title "Jewish Melodies" is most likely taken from George Gordon Byron ("Hebrew Melodies," 1813), although it is also possibly a reference to Dmitri Shostakovich's song cycle *From Jewish Folk Poetry* (1948). V. Erofeev, *Zapisnye knizhki* (Moscow: Vagrius, 2008), vol. 2, pp. 385-390.

32 Bronze Age was the unofficial name used by members of the intelligentsia for the journal «*Neue Russische Literatur*» (NRL), ed. V. Len, G. Mayer, R. Ziegler, Universität Salzburg, Salzburg, 1978–1982.

33 On Sterne's influence, see V. Erofeev, *Moskva-Petushki*, with commentary by Eduard Vlasov (Moscow: Vagrius, 2000), p. 123.

SKILLEN: When did you write Moscow-Petushki?

YEROFEYEV: It was in the autumn of 1969, when I was travelling around in my trailer. [34] We were laying telephone lines from Lobnia station towards Sheremetyevo Airport via Dolgoprudnaia. It was a totally chaotic time…

SKILLEN: But how could you write, living out in the fields in trailers?

YEROFEYEV: It wasn't easy, in a trailer out in the fields. There were eight of us mugs in one tiny trailer. And it was impossible to write when they were there, since all of the residents of the trailer would constantly kibitz [butt in]: "What're you scribbling over there?" So I had to scribble at night. And even then, they would say, "Isn't it time to turn out the light?" or "Are you studying for entry exams or something? You won't get into any colleges anyway. The only way to get in nowadays is if you have connections." They would go on and on with poppycock like that and I had to listen to it…

But what could I do? By then it had already overpowered me, completely taken me over, so I kept going. It didn't take much of my time, about two months, even though I was writing in spurts, at night. And fast. I had to write *Dmitri Shostakovich* while working as a warehouse guard outside of Moscow. I was guarding all of that cable and equipment, with rats practically running all over me [laughs]. I had a shed, which was about as long as I am tall, and as wide as I am wide. Just big enough for a cot, and nothing else. There was a tiny little bench next to it, which was my writing desk, [laughs] let's call it my *secretaire*… And now, for my sins, since settling in Moscow in 1974, with a residence permit since 1977 and all the necessary comforts and conditions for writing, it is more difficult to write. The devil knows why. I mean, there's no pressure, I'm in no hurry. "I have nowhere to hurry to," as the great Azeri poet Samed Vurgun wrote. He was a Soviet poet, by the way. [35] But we'll see. I hope that my trip to the north will shake me a bit out of this routine… [36]

SKILLEN: And then you're going to work on a play?

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34 In a letter to Svetlana Gaiser-Shnitman (Shnitman-McMillin), Yerofeyev gives the following dates for the writing of *Moscow-Petushki*: 18 January – 7 March 1970. See S. Gaiser-Shnitman, *op. cit.*, p. 21. However, Igor Avdiev claims that he read a portion of the book in November 1969. See I. Avdiev, "Neskol'ko monologov o Venedikte Erofeeve" ["Some Monologues about Venedikt Yerofeyev"], *Teatr 9*, 1991, pp. 107, 109.

35 S. Vurgun, "I'm in no hurry…", translated by K. Simonov. See K. Simonov, *Sobranie sochinenii v 6 tomakh* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1966), vol. 1, p. 535.

36 In July 1982, Yerofeyev took a boat trip down the Northern Dvina river from Veliky Ustyug to Arkhangelsk with Nikolai Boldyrev, his sister Tatiana Boldyreva, and Vladimir Krivtsun. See Lekmanov, Sverdlov, and Simanovsky, *op. cit.*, pp. 347-48.

YEROFEYEV: I want to carve out some of the "Jewish Melodies" into a play. A tragedy, of course. In three acts, all of them set at a bottle-return center. [37]

SKILLEN: Did you like talking to the working-class guys…

YEROFEYEV: Not really, no. I mostly avoided that crowd. Or not exactly avoided, I just didn't really fraternize with them.

SKILLEN: But did you drink with them?

YEROFEYEV: Oh hell yes! And how! And how! We drank everything from triple-strength cologne to anti-dandruff lotion. [38]

SKILLEN: You actually experienced all that?

YEROFEYEV: Of course, and sometimes I even set the tone. I broadened the horizons of many unenlightened people in this respect.[39]

SKILLEN: Were you bored with them?

YEROFEYEV: No, not exactly bored… Of all the workmates I ever drank with, probably five or six thousand people – I consider someone an acquaintance if I've drunk with them at least once – and that's about five or six thousand. Out of all of them I only found five or six examples of good people. Or if not exactly good, at least more or less solid. But they're mostly… Talking with them did nothing at all for me. Occasionally some of their random hints or little stupidities… give me an inspiration for some whimsical turn of phrase or silly thought… But otherwise there is no point spending time with them. This isn't the nineteenth century, when people studied the Russian speech of the peasants and so on. But now…

SKILLEN: Although in your writing you can sense a lot of sympathy for the common people.

YEROFEYEV: Well, how could you not have sympathy for them, the poor wretches, my God! Who else is going to sympathize with them? God has abandoned them, and the government has too, in fact, so…

SKILLEN: Have you ever tried to publish your work officially?

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37 The unfinished play *Fanny Kaplan* was set at a bottle-return centre. See Lekmanov, Sverdlov, and Simanovsky, *op. cit.*, p. 412.

38 See Lekmanov, Sverdlov, and Simanovsky, *op. cit.*, pp. 229-30.

39 This is a self-citation from *Moscow-Petushki*. See V. Erofeev, *Moi ochen' zhiznennyi put'*, p. 138.

YEROFEYEV: No, never. Not for a single second of my life has the idea of publishing something here ever entered my mind. Not once. In this respect, I am…

SKILLEN: Is that just because you knew it was hopeless?

YEROFEYEV: Not exactly hopeless. I never wanted to. In this regard I'm a completely sterile being. Not for a second have I ever thought of getting published. It's too ridiculous to even consider…

SKILLEN: Did you write Moscow-Petushki only for your friends?

YEROFEYEV: My target audience was around a dozen people. And I never imagined that, within eight years, it wouldn't be a dozen people reading it, but a dozen countries publishing it[40] [both laugh]… Speaking of mysterious ways…

SKILLEN: Venia, when did you start drinking?

YEROFEYEV: Drinking? Well, my mum carefully kept me away from all that until my last year in school, since my late dad was the most famous alcoholic in town.[41] He was never home. He just went from boozer to boozer… He only earned money by having no possessions… He had just come back from the Gulag, where he did seven years for who knows what.[42]

SKILLEN: Was he a broken man?

YEROFEYEV: Not really. He was also known for his voice. He would wander around the town, always half-drunk, even though he had no money… singing something, like "I bless you, forests, vales, cornfields, mountains, and waters…// Tam-pram-pam-pam.//And the lonely little path…" [43] Or something from "Faust":

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40 By this time, Moscow-Petushki had been published in Israel (in Russian) and in six European countries (in translations).

41 All of Yerofeyev's comments about his father, including his employment and his song repertoire, should be taken with caution: according to Yerofeyev's sisters, Nina Frolova and Tamara Gushchina, their brother's claims about their father's alcoholism are greatly exaggerated. They remember Vasily Vasilyevich Yerofeyev, before his sentence in the Gulag, as a man who was full of life, loved to sing optimistic Soviet songs, was always tidy, and behaved in a dignified manner. He received several awards and promotions for good work in his job as a railroad worker. O. Lekmanov, M. Sverdlov, I. Simanovsky, *op. cit.*, pp. 28-29.

42 Vasily Yerofeyev was convicted of violating Article 58.10 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Republic of the Soviet Union in 1945 and imprisoned until 1950. A year later he was convicted a second time, but exempted for health reasons. E. Shtal, *Venedikt Erofeev v Kirovske* (in press); Lekmanov, Sverdlov, and Simanovsky, *op. cit.*, pp. 40-42.

43 A romance composed by P. I. Tchaikovsky to a poem by A. K. Tolstoy.

"All hail, thou dwelling pure and lowly,//Home of an angel fair and holy." That was his repertoire. I wasn't allowed any contact with him… If I ran into him on my way to school, for instance, even when I was already grown-up, in the ninth or tenth grade, I wasn't allowed to say hello or to shake his hand if he offered it. Mum wasn't afraid of his influence on me, she was afraid of simple heredity. So the first time I ever took a swig of vodka, or any alcohol at all, was at our tenth-grade leavers' [graduation] party.

SKILLEN: How old were you?

YEROFEYEV: I was sixteen, going on seventeen. Five of us sneaked off into the bushes and illegally shared a whole bottle of vodka! And I felt like a brave hussar, such audacity! But later, at MSU, because of some troubles… including some troubles with women, but that's more or less clear… One time I was in a very dark mood, and I just went and on my own initiative bought a "little quarter," thank God they had those… "Little quarters" – you know, those small, quarter-liter bottles?

SKILLEN: Of vodka?

YEROFEYEV: Yes, of vodka. I just took it, locked myself in an empty classroom one evening, and drank it all straight from the bottle. And then two weeks later, another bottle. Later on, after I had been kicked out of MSU… I wasn't kicked out for that, of course. But when I began working as a builder and a stoker and so on, I started drinking every day.

SKILLEN: Did it start when you began spending time with working class people?

YEROFEYEV: Not at all. They had nothing to do with it. On the contrary, I had to lead too many young working-class guys astray, and even not so young, older than me. My drinking started with an urge inside myself, completely from within. By God's will…

SKILLEN: And you've been drinking ever since?

YEROFEYEV: Yes, I drink, well, it depends how you look at it… Sometimes I take breaks, ranging from a few hours to a few months. And it's okay. Actually, in 1982 I've drunk less than ever,[44] I haven't had as little to drink as I have this year

44 Yerofeyev's extended sobriety in 1982 was largely the result of his stays at P.P. Kashchenko Hospital No. 1 in Moscow, where he was admitted for alcoholism. Lekmanov, Sverdlov, and Simanovsky, *op. cit.*, pp. 345-46.

since I turned eighteen.

SKILLEN: And how do you feel?

YEROFEYEV: I feel fine, except for the occasional morning after having drunk the night before. Who knows what will happen next. Maybe I'll go on another drinking spree. Or maybe… Recently I've had to talk about this so much with my psychiatrist friends, who are too "ready for anything," as the Mayor says to his daughter in Gogol's play.[45]

SKILLEN: Sinyavsky said somewhere that people drink for their souls.

YEROFEYEV: What souls? That Sinyavsky of yours is full of nonsense. I really didn't like his book Voice from the Chorus. Not at all.

SKILLEN: Why not?

YEROFEYEV: I don't know, it has a kind of bombastic style. That can be forgiven, since it is addressed to his wife, and from a prison camp and so on. But I don't know what he wrote the thing for. Except for a couple of short lines that he heard in the camps. And Sinyavsky himself… *Strolls with Pushkin* is absolutely charming, of course. I read it in one sitting, or rather in two sittings, since I reread it immediately. But when Sinyavsky talks about that side of life, about Russian drinking, he's just a dilettante. Even though he was close to them, living in the camps, in my opinion he still doesn't understand much about it. He shouldn't have stuck his nose in…

SKILLEN: Do you like music?

YEROFEYEV: Music? Oh, yes. Probably even more than Russian poetry.

SKILLEN: Do you play the piano?

YEROFEYEV: No, I don't play any instruments. When I was younger, I tried to, but I could tell that I was shit at it, so I quit.

SKILLEN: You have a piano here…

YEROFEYEV: Because I have too many friends who are pianists. Every third person who comes through my door plays. So it's almost never quiet, that piano.

45 From a letter written by Khlestakov, the main character of Gogol's play *The Government Inspector*. N. Gogol, *Sobranie sochinenii* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1962), vol. 2, p. 87.

Let people enjoy themselves.

[Pause in recording. The next question is missing from the tape.]

YEROFEYEV: It was written with inspiration, to use an old-fashioned term. I had already reached Orekhovo-Zuevo, halfway through the book, and I still didn't know if I would actually get to Petushki. I didn't know what was going to happen to me at the next station. To use Konstantin Fedin's term, I had absolutely no overarching plan at all, no forethought from start to finish. Everything came naturally. And it was written in a single draft.

SKILLEN: Really? In one draft, just like that?!

YEROFEYEV: No rough drafts at all.

SKILLEN: And you didn't have any books with you, in the conditions you were living in…

YEROFEYEV: What books could I have had out there? During the day, when I was digging in the ground and laying that cable, I would form a rough idea for a chapter, and then in the evening back in the trailer I'd put it down in the notebook right away, almost without lifting the pen from the page.

SKILLEN: When you were writing Moscow-Petushki, did you read it to the workers you drank with?

YEROFEYEV: Oh no, God forbid! They wouldn't have understood any of it. Not a word.

SKILLEN: You called it a "poema." Is that from Gogol?

YEROFEYEV: No! I have no idea who got it into their head to call it a "poema," a word that I never used. As I say, I'm completely indifferent to genre distinctions. You can call it whatever you like… Or even better, don't call it anything at all, since some say it doesn't fit into any category or genre.

SKILLEN: How do you know the Russian common folk's language so well?

YEROFEYEV: Well, you get to know it without even trying…

SKILLEN: Blat and mat [foul language] and all that…

YEROFEYEV: Well, blat and mat, that was easy… [laughs] too easy, it was always close to hand, or not close to hand, but close to ear. And all the rest, well, I've been writing since childhood, thank God. I wrote my first thing when I was five years old. It was only two pages, written in childish handwriting. That was two years before I even started school. I myself don't remember it, but my late mother told me, the last time she visited, that my first work was written at the age of five and was called "Diary of a Madman." I don't know now what it was about…

SKILLEN: Do you know the Bible well?

YEROFEYEV: Well, not word for word, but I think I do know it… I think I do.

SKILLEN: Are you a religious person?

YEROFEYEV: Not really. I have the deepest respect for religion. In general I think… [long pause] I mean, my God, if not the Gospels, well, you know, really… it seems to me that no other salvation is possible. It's not that I'm completely devoted to the Gospels themselves, but more to their ethical principles…

SKILLEN: Venia, you really like to listen to the radio and follow the news…

YEROFEYEV: Oh yes, definitely! I speak to people who also listen to the radio every day, but for them it just serves as background noise. I just got back from the hospital where I visited my friend. She also listens to the radio, since they always have it turned on. She asked me "So what's going on in El Salvador?" I explained that some Honduran units have crossed the border into El Salvador.[46] And how the King of Spain embraced President Pertini on the field after the third Italian goal and so on.[47] About what's happening on the Hanoi-Beijing front.[48] About everything, basically…

SKILLEN: What do you think about what's happening in the Falklands …?[49]

YEROFEYEV: I was very, very happy for Margaret Thatcher. I applauded every one of her speeches, and even every bodily movement she made.

SKILLEN: But why?

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46 Units of the Honduran army occasionally took part in the Salvadoran Civil War (1979-1992).

47 The 1982 soccer World Cup was held in Spain. Italy beat West Germany 3-1 in the final.

48 There were military conflicts between China and Vietnam from 1979 to 1990.

49 Great Britain and Argentina were at war from April 2 to June 14, 1982, after Argentina occupied the British-owned Falkland Islands. It ended with a British victory. Port Stanley (called Puerto Argentino by the Argentinians) is the capital of the Falklands.

YEROFEYEV: Because I can't stand the Argentinian regime and its hooliganism. That's what it really is, petty hooliganism, to approve the seizure of islands that don't belong to them. I'm firmly convinced that the British had to defend the Falkland Islands. And not only because if they hadn't, it would have piqued the appetites of those who have their eye on Hong Kong, Gibraltar,[50] and so on…

SKILLEN: You've said that Galtieri repressed someone that you were very fond of, and repressed a political party.

YEROFEYEV: Yes, he repressed absolutely everyone. He wasn't the first. The two generals that came before him did the same thing. I followed the news from the Falklands very closely. Especially when the fleet was approaching the islands; I was counting the days until my beloved British fleet [both laugh] reached those vile Argentinians. Every day I would rage: why are they so slow?! Why haven't they started attacking Port Stanley, Puerto Argentino? Why did they have so many setbacks at the beginning? My darling Israelis have already stormed into Beirut, their tanks are already under the windows of the Lebanese president, Sarkis,[51] but the Brits were still messing about four kilometers outside Port Stanley. I was closely following both of my favorites at the same time, my beloved Tel Aviv and the British fleet.

SKILLEN: Would you say that you like England?

YEROFEYEV: I like England very much. I even like its geographic shape on the map [both laugh]. There's just something about it! Compare it to the ridiculous shape of Iran, for example. Or even Belgium… There's a kind of awkwardness in the very configuration of the country. Britain's very close to my heart, and the Brits generally… The British have had almost too much influence on all of us, if we leave aside the sphere of music. Who is indifferent to the British?

[Side two of the cassette.]

YEROFEYEV: Music's had an even bigger influence on me than poetry or prose. For some reason, many people have seen in this traces of… But not music like it was in the eighteenth century. I don't share the universal obsession with the vivaldis, bachs, handels, albinonis, cimarosas, monteverdis, palestrinas. I only

50 These are former British colonies. Hong Kong was returned to China upon the expiration of its special status in 1997. Gibraltar remains a British territory, in accordance with the wishes of its inhabitants. British sovereignty over Gibraltar is disputed by Spain.

51 In 1982, Israel launched a military operation on Lebanese territory, with the goal of destroying bases held by the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO). The siege of Beirut was a decisive moment in the operation, and forced the PLO to leave the country. Elias Sarkis was president of Lebanon from 1976 to 1982.

start to get interested from late Beethoven on, and then Chopin, Schumann, Mendelsohn…

SKILLEN: What about Bach?

YEROFEYEV: I'm completely indifferent to Bach. Not one line by Bach has ever touched me, not a single one. If I had to name my favorites, it would be Gustav Mahler, Jean Sibelius, to some extent Bruckner, Dmitri Shostakovich… Of the Soviet composers, when I'm in the right mood, I like Prokofiev, and sometimes even Kabalevsky.

SKILLEN: And Stravinsky?

YEROFEYEV: Igor Stravinsky, definitely. But Igor Stravinsky doesn't really enter into the picture, since I'm more partial to the kind of heartfelt music that for some reason is considered banal these days. But I don't give a damn about what people think, and I'm not afraid to be old-fashioned. The most important thing is that the music is emotionally engaging. That's why I don't understand the couperins or the rameaus… I only understand music from early Romanticism on.

SKILLEN: Do you only like classical music?

YEROFEYEV: Yes. And that's why I only listen to contemporary music if I detect even the slightest influence of one of my favorites. Russian composers like Boris Chaikovsky or Alfred Schnittke. Among Western composers, I used to really like Milhaud, especially his early work. Arthur Honegger not so much, but Darius Milhaud, yeah, I was very taken by him… I especially admired "Le boeuf sur le toit," with lyrics by Jean Cocteau and music by Milhaud,[52] and Poulenc… Oh, and Carl Orff, how could I forget Carl Orff? Shame on me for forgetting someone like him…

SKILLEN: And what do you think about Vysotsky, Okudzhava…

YEROFEYEV: Vysotsky and Okudzhava, oh yes. I have such an intimate, everyday love for them, it's something you don't even talk about. It's a love that's so familiar, like you have for your family and your friends you can't live without. You wouldn't declare your love for Vysotsky or Okudzhava, because you don't need to, just like you don't need to with the most indispensable people in your life… I'm really glad that Russians love them. Some love them for different reasons, but they love them all the same. It makes me so happy when there are still glimmers of hope

52 The libretto of Darius Milhaud's ballet *Bull on the Roof* was written by Jean Cocteau in 1919. It premiered in 1920.

even in the grimmest flats. Like when you hear Vysotsky's gravelly voice coming from an open window… It warms the heart to know that Russians aren't all that bad, that there is something more to them.

SKILLEN: Have you read folklore?

YEROFEYEV: Which folklore?

SKILLEN: Russian, or…

YEROFEYEV: Russian folklore itself, the fairy-tales and the legends… I can't stand, especially those silly epics. But the Russian song made a stronger impression on me than almost anything else, stronger than Sterne, Rabelais, Gogol, or musical influences like Mahler… Russian songs even had a stronger effect on me than poets like Tsvetaeva, Fet, and Tyutchev. They are by far my biggest influence. "It hurts to talk about," as Thomas Mann said [both laugh].[53] The Russian song is profound, fundamental, and it doesn't have any of those whimsical additions and other things that changed it at the end of the last century, and even more so nowadays.

SKILLEN: I'm not sure what you mean by "Russian song." Do you mean folk songs?

YEROFEYEV: Yes, the Russian folk song… All of them, from "The Ancient Linden Tree" onwards…

SKILLEN: And Russian romances?

YEROFEYEV: Yes, those too, but romances… I don't understand the songs of, say, Medtner or Cherepnin, or Katuar, or Grechaninov. With some small exceptions for Grechaninov. I like art songs in direct proportion to how close they are to real Russian songs. What do you call that, profoundly Russian… The Spanish have a good term for it, from some de Falla, or maybe it was Albéniz, they call it *cante jondo*…[54]

SKILLEN: What about gypsy songs?

YEROFEYEV: Oh, to hell with gypsy music! As soon as I hear the slightest trace of a goddamned gypsy theme, I just can't stand it. That's why I'm crazy about

53 "Thomas Mann, 1942: 'It's such a simple truth that it hurts to talk about it.'" V. Erofeev, *Notebooks from the 1960s* (Moscow: Zakharov, 2005), p. 604.
54 Literally, "deep singing" (Spanish).

the romances of Gurilev, for example, which are essentially Russian folk songs, but I can't stand that contemporary of his, Dubuque, whose songs are like "Kiss me to death, for a death from you is dear" or "Oh why am I not a block of wood" and so on [both laugh]…

Poetry

Elf

Konstantin Balmont

Translated from the Russian by Simon Nicholls

First, fairies in a moonlit dance you'd see.
The manly sharps and soft flats feminine,
They acted out a kiss, an aching pain.
The right hand purled their tiny courtoisies.

Enchanter-sounds then broke through in the left,
The will, a cry of wills entwined, sang out.
The king of harmonies, the radiant elf,
Was carving subtle cameos from sounds.

His stream of sound set faces all awhirl –
They radiated light, now gold, now steel,
Expressed both joy and sorrow interfurled.

And thunder sang, and crowds were on the march,
And man and god as equals were arrayed…
All this is what I saw when Scriabin played.

1917

Listen!

Vladimir Mayakovsky

Translated from the Russian
by Yulia Kartalova O Doherty

Hey listen,
If somebody lights the stars,
Surely someone must need them?
Surely someone must want them there?
Surely someone must call these little splotches of spit "pearls"?
Breathless
In the whirlwinds of afternoon dust,
Somebody breaks through to God,
Fearful that he might be too late,
Weeps,
Kisses God's rugged hand,
Begs
Him to make sure that there will definitely be a star,
Swears
That he won't be able to survive this starless torture…
And later,
Anxious inside
But outwardly calm,
He asks someone:
"Are you alright now?
Not afraid anymore,
are you?"
Hey listen,
If somebody lights the stars,
Surely someone must need them?
Surely it's a matter of life and death
That every night
Above the rooftops
There must be at least one star?!

1914

American Russians

Vladimir Mayakovsky

Translated from the Russian by Veniamin Gushchin

Kaplan
caught
Petrov by the button.
His pants
    patched
        as a map of the Balkans.
"Sir,
    I schedule you
            an apoyman.
I think
    you saw
        my apartman?"
First you go four
bloks
then
    here you make a hook.
You take
    the underground tren
if streetkar
            is full.
Take
            a tiket.
Make sure
to transfer,
and you ride calmly
            like in wegon.
Get off on korner
        at the drogs liket.
I'll have
    a peent
        from boutleger.
At seven oklok's

our meeting.
Let's talk about
New Yorker
news
and have a Moscow
evening.
We're all friends here:
my wife and boarder.
And if you're stuck at jawb at all
or if you change your mind
then
definitely
give me call.
I'll be
in office!
Gud bai!"
Around, the neighborhood pressed
into
the whistling wind's release.
Mister Petrov
went vest.
Mister Kaplan
went eest.
Here, if you will, they have "jawbs"
at home
we're stuck with acronyms.
Witness here
our language's
corruption
and soon
the well-read
Frenchie is
the only one
who understands
a little Russian.
In this
here America
the rabid crowd
bawls
its hundred tongues
silly.
Well, if Odessa is

the mother town,
then New York's
the father city.

1925

Two Poems

Anna Prismanova

Translated from the Russian

by Nora Moseman

The Shellfish

for Vadim Andreev

Year after year, surging, we subtract
not a step from time's stairway,
yet a leap into the depths,
not the heights, is the human destiny.

Only thinking without stop of the seabed
of the universal spiritual confluence,
at the lowest underwater depth
we see pearls of highest radiance.

The pearl shines between two bent halves
of a southern deep-sea shellfish.
Built of heart and bones,
the sickly study it:

it congealed as lime,
it guards the hum of the abyss
and is full of a fertile emptiness –
a musician's skull before death.

Letter

The typewriter is steel,
but I tell it: breathe.
Thank you for becoming
food for its soul.

I write to you. I'm not Tatiana,
and you, I know, are not Onegin.
But every structure has a defect
and every head a heart.

By night your shadow
is before me; it leads me to the place
where beneath a rising moon
sheep stir.

The sheep there seem a wave,
the shepherd dives among them.
There sages heal wounds,
take others' pain upon themselves.

I see rosy mountains,
azure of a Persian turquoise
and a shimmering pearl,
incarnation of tears.

The oyster's life is in a salt solution,
its color is that of humility.
But the pearl, shine
of hidden pain, will long remain.

It will outlive the shell's lime,
and the egg's phosphorus,
and the bones of those as dear
to me as this pearl is to the merchant.

Three Poems

Viktor Shirali

Translated from the Russian

by J. Kates

The Garden

1.

I live in a garden
In the middle of a garden
As spacious as absolute freedom
And even if there is a boundary somewhere
I swear
    I swear!
I will not seek it out.

2.

My soul was sleeping still
When I slipped out of the hut
Into a garden lit by the moon at night
The close-set trees rising high
My arms spread apart and up
On the silhouettes resembling trees…

. . . How much it meant to spread my arms
How deeply I felt I needed to bloom
Flowers opened in my hands
Whiter than faces blanched with fear
And the moment of flowering so short
That their scent shriller than a scream
I bloomed…
But I felt the fruits distantly
Bound to me at my fingertips.

… Here I recalled I could not live this way
Another path was meant for me . .
Hacking out a path through the trees
My eyes covered so I would not lose
My breath held so I would not sigh
Purpose forgotten so I would not turn back
I did not so much walk but fell…
head forward
Splitting the garden the blooming ford
And choked on morning dew
I did not get out but fell into the roadway…

There was no boundary
The road flowed along the garden…
On the opposite side
The garden went on and on…

There was no boundary
That meant there no freedom for me

And I returned with the speed of sunrise
I moved back into the middle of the garden
My soul was sleeping still
At the bottom of a green tent of night
The sun crept between its branches
It dreamed something smiling
It lived far from the garden
But with a half-eaten apple in its hand.

3.

I was living in the village of Milutino,
In the Plyus district
I lived
I woke up quite early
With wet eyes in the morning dew
I climbed into the garden of the collective
And in that garden grew
Apples and pears
And along with these trees
Unfettered horses emerged
Nobody fed them

Or hobbled their legs at night
Because
There was as yet no work for them.

1968

[untitled]

All day long I looked for harmony
In the clanging of the tram
In the silence of the park
I waited
For someone to learn
The melody of my soul
For example
I went up to a policeman
Asked simply and politely:
"Be so kind as to whistle."
And he whistled with talent and sweetness
For the sake of art
And not for law and order
He whistled until dawn
His whistling left an aftertaste
Of undissolvable "t-r-rill"
I left the city
Understood precisely
The sound streaming into the milk-pail
Where the pool of milk
Muffled the song
That rang out
From the beginning.

1967

To Viktor Krivulin

When it's given to the soul to live
In iambic tetrameter,
I sit down
in the Vitebsk station in one of the trains
Bound for Tsarskoye Selo.
I sit down.
I look out the window, my forehead against the glass.
The rain continues.
Autumn thrives behind the glass.
The city carries the new neighborhoods
to the iron track.

I try to understand their meaning. Their music.
Yes, this is music.
However dry, as if traveling through
a typewriter
But this is music.
And people live by it.
And, more than that, sometimes they dance.
And, more than that
I am a foster child of the baroque –
I dance to music composed by the twentieth century.

Besides,
if we're talking about architecture,
Then I think that when an architect
can organize
Space into architecture
With the same arbitrariness by which I
I organize language into poetry
When he,
Unhappy in love, like Apollinaire,
Will say:
– I have forgotten the classic laws of architecture,
I simply love –
Then most likely
His art will be called baroque
Although, for sure, it will cease
To be called architecture.

To you, Krivulin, I say that you should not
electroplate
Canonical forms of versification
For they are all one
They stink.
We must first obliterate
And then inculcate
The craftmanship acquired before us.
Create our own
On the spot.

We have not seen you at the Saigon for a long time!
Are you still alive?

Two Poems

Alexander Veytsman

Piet Mondrian

With the stream of consciousness populating the paint,
he wondered if there was any space for himself,
whiplashed against the radiant square
from the dwelling across that of his own,
with three, four colors at most
forming the exterior.

The trolleys were running as if time
ceased to matter, freezing hands
and elevating legs to the sounds of
the national anthem, performed by
a famous pianist.

The pedestrians were tired, appearing
bored, but boredom was just the fatigue
in diagonal. Pressed for original thoughts,
they repeated newspaper headlines
in oversized font.

He wondered about the font, but largely
ignored it, opting for lines and shapes.

Looking Up

The road went down an unspecified bridge,
while he looked up from hell,
calling his own name, trying
to hear distinctly the vowels
that his friends have already forgotten.

It was nine o'clock. The weather was calm.
No owls in the vicinity; no cats.
The books he had read in the past
were now rewritten,
while the symphonies in A minor
reduced solely to the first part.

The road went down – but he thought
that until further written notice
the roads were closed, while plastic
orange cones were temporarily
put in place.

The Art of Translation

"If Only You Could Hear the Music!" Translating Pushkin and Tsvetaeva with Rhyme and Meter

Randi Anderson

I had always assumed it an impossible task to translate a poem's rhyme and meter. In fact, the first Russian poem I ever attempted to render in English – an autumn poem by Apollon Maikov – appeared on my blog as a rather prosaic, functional set of "verses" that prompted me to remark, "If only you could hear the music of it!"

The sacrifice seemed inevitable: to preserve the lofty thoughts, you had to give up the magic of the sound – a magic that, for me, might be a poem's primary charm. Often I would reread a poem merely to relish its sound, and I wanted to share that delight with others who could not access the language.

Years later, I sat in on a literature course on Pushkin where all the readings were in Russian. During one lesson, we studied a collection of multilingual translations of his famous poem "Я вас любил," all of which experimented with translating not just the sense but also the form of the original. The project had been spearheaded by Douglas Hofstadter, who had also translated *Eugene Onegin* in rhyme and meter. I was amazed at the spirit of fun and creativity that pervaded the collection – as well as Hofstadter's rendition of *Onegin* – and wondered if I, too, could translate a poem and preserve some of the "music" I loved so much… without, of course, making a mere joke of things.

So, I decided to run my first experiment. The guinea pig was naturally a Pushkin poem, one of my favorites featured in a children's book I had picked up in Russia: "Осень (отрывок)." To be more precise, I zeroed in on the most famous octave, which begins: "Унылая пора! Очей очарованье! / Приятна мне твоя прощальная краса –"

The objectives of the experiment were to recreate the meter and mimic the rhyme scheme as closely as possible, while also carrying over the imagery and meaning that make Pushkin's ode to autumn so memorable. It seemed a tall order, but I was excited to begin.

The first step was scansion. Fortunately, Pushkin had made it easy on me by writing in iambs, probably the most familiar metric foot for an English speaker. I

counted six of them and committed to writing my translation in iambic hexameter.

After pausing to wipe the sweat off my brow, I moved on to the tricky part: the rhyme. In the octaves, Pushkin follows a rhyme scheme of AbAbAbCC, where capital letters are feminine rhymes (ending on an unstressed syllable), and lowercase letters are masculine rhymes (ending on a stressed syllable). Early on, I made the executive decision to cut myself a break and omit feminine rhymes. Such rhymes, while not impossible, are difficult to pull off in English without sounding heavy-handed, unless they are slant, as in Emily Dickinson's poetry. I also decided not to attempt recreating any other subtleties of sound, as it seemed challenging enough to achieve what I'd already set before me.

Once I'd written a literal translation for reference, I started playing with more musical possibilities. Rather than start from the beginning, I would choose a line I felt attracted to, render it in a way that sounded pleasing, and then move on to whichever line was supposed to rhyme with it. I mixed and matched and tinkered and rearranged. I tried everything, even very idiotic-sounding phrases, and collected every discarded variant into a list of reserve ideas, just in case.

Purists may want to slap my hand for this, but I even made use of an online rhyming dictionary to brainstorm both perfect and near rhymes. The context-less options in the dictionary would suggest to me alternative angles and creative ways of interpreting an image or rendering the meaning of a line, some silly and some quite interesting. As many writers use dice, cards, and other creativity prompts to generate ideas, I found the dictionary to be a useful, even indispensable "spark."

Ultimately the translation took me about a week of consistent work. The first four lines came together quickly enough, especially the phrase "parting grace" for "прощальная краса," but the last four gave me endless trouble. In fact, the "final" version I posted to my blog is still different from the one appearing in this journal, proving that there will always be room for adjustment and improvement. But once it was done, the result wowed readers, drew blog traffic, and prompted several requests for the *whole* poem, not just this one octave.

Empowered by that success, I went on to experiment with a poem by Afanasy Fet in anapestic trimeter, another Pushkin poem in iambs (this time the infamously translation-resistant "Ты и вы"), and a few others that didn't quite see the light of day. But the one other translation that really challenged me – and provoked mixed reactions – was a laconic, mysterious little poem by Marina Tsvetaeva, "Красною кистью."

I'd discovered the poem in a small selection of Tsvetaeva's work, which a dear friend had given me when I was living in Novosibirsk. I fell in love with "Красною кистью" at once, for its simplicity and for its central image of the mountain ash, or rowan, which is one tree, along with the birch, that I cannot help but associate with Russia. Much later, in the throes of nostalgia, I shared an image of the poem on social media, and one of my English-speaking friends requested a translation

so that she could share my "joy." How could anyone say no to that? (After all, isn't that the ultimate point of any literary translation: to share the nuggets of beauty and truth we've found with those who don't have the language to access it?)

One of the interesting problems posed by this poem lay in its scansion. Tsvetaeva's rhyme scheme is a fairly simple AbAb CdCd EfEf, where, again, the capital letters are feminine and the lowercase are masculine. But the meter – an adonic line followed by a choriamb – runs like this: "Carrots and apples, / Peaches and plums." Or, otherwise put, DA-da-da DA-da, DA-da-da DA. It comes off as folkloric, part playful and part somber. There was no way I could honestly render the lyric without preserving that meter, at least.

As for the rhyme, I decided to prioritize the masculine rhymes and let the feminine rhymes either vanish or turn into slant rhymes. As I put it in my blog, "Since Tsvetaeva took the liberty of some near-rhymes and variations in meter, I decided I could let my hair down a little, too." It also helped that I had just been reading Dickinson's poems.

Here again, I started with individual lines and experimented with a range of possibilities until I had something that sounded "right," or at least didn't make me cringe. The process produced some real clunkers – I mean, there was a *geese* and *feast* pairing, figure that one out – but it was necessary to generate as many ideas as possible, no matter how risky or ridiculous, to get at something that would truly work.

Along the way, I did end up taking liberties that made me uncertain whether I was being "faithful" to the original. For example, Tsvetaeva's line "День был субботний" literally refers to the fact that she was born on a Saturday. However, I was having difficulty rendering that in a way that fit the rhyme and meter *and* suited the spirit of the poem, so I decided to re-interpret "субботний" (with a root as "Sabbath") as a solemn religious day, in keeping with the next line referring to its being the Orthodox feast of the repose of St. John the Theologian.

Once posted to the blog, the final translation received mixed reactions. Many were amazed; one commenter who had attempted the poem herself was thrilled to see a rendition she liked even better, particularly in the final stanza. Still, there was some pushback. I had provided an "ugly literal translation" for reference, and one commenter asserted that the "literal translation [was] in every way superior to the second" and reflected the "Russian soul" of the poem much more effectively. In her opinion, my version, with its "forced rhyming," "diminishe[d] the poem, its seriousness and severity."

It was a discouraging comment, to say the least. "Forced rhyming" is not an impression you want to leave, even when you love traditional forms. As I meditated further, however, it seemed that the negative pushback reflected a larger English-centric attitude toward rhyme and meter in verse. In modern English-language poetry, we are highly suspicious of more noticeably systematic and "rigid" forms of sound, preferring to hide our rhymes and vary our meters. Yet in Russian,

traditional forms are still preferred. More importantly, they are intended. Can we in English get over our modernist and postmodernist aversion to old forms in order to appreciate their music? Can we allow the more regular rhythms and sounds still prized in Russian poetry to clothe themselves in contemporary English garb (against all the current fashion trends, so to speak), or will they always be considered "forced" and clumsy?

When I fall in love with a poem, especially in a foreign language, I fall in love not only with the images and tone and meaning, but also with the rhythms and sounds that repeat in the mind like a chant. Oftentimes – at the best of times – form is also part of the meaning. So why is it considered dispensable? Why do we give up on translating the music before we even start?

It is not impossible. It does not mean the "meaning" must be sacrificed. It does not even mean a translator must be a slave to the exact form of the original. It does mean the translator must take all the facets of form and content into account, balance them, prioritize them, and remain flexible about adapting or even simply dropping them. We need to know what we are willing to keep, what we are willing to cut, and why. We need to keep sight of the goal of rendering to our audience the strongest and most vital impressions of the poem – and since any poem could be read and translated in countless ways, the final result will likely reflect the impressions that have kindled our love the most.

Love, after all, is the prerequisite for a poetic translation of this sort. A translator needs to deeply appreciate the poem as a whole, music and all, with the wonder of a child in order to have the creative energy to risk and experiment. (No wonder my first experiment came from a children's book!) So fall in love. Be a child. Then, perhaps, it will no longer be necessary add such woeful translator's commentary as "If only you could hear the music!"

*

Alexander Pushkin

Autumn (excerpt)

A dreary time! And yet – enchantment for the eyes!
How dear to me your parting grace, your farewell gifts –
I love the rich decay of leaf and countryside,
The forests all decked out in gold and crimson tints.
Within their halls a fresh wind stirs about and sighs,
The heavens cloak themselves in rolling folds of mist;

First hints of frost, with here and there a ray
Of brilliant sun, and winter's threats still far away.

*

Marina Tsvetaeva

Rowan Berries

Bright rowan berries
lit up the tree.
Leaves fell in flurries,
I came to be.

Hundreds of church bells
clamored at dawn.
That day was solemn:
the feast of St. John.

Even to this hour
I long to chew
the hot rowan's cluster
of bitter red fruit.

Aligning with Eccentrics
Alexander Vertinsky and Novella Matveyeva

James Manteith

At first glance, Alexander Vertinsky (1889-1957) and Novella Matveyeva (1934-2016) might appear to have little in common. Yes, the reputations of both rest largely on their contributions to Russian-language songcraft. Yet a half-century or so separates each's birth, as well as each's discovery by audiences – Vertinsky's initial ascent as a songwriter and performer having preceded the Revolution of 1917, and Matveyeva composing song-poems starting in the late 50s, with her first album released in 1966. More importantly, Vertinsky's and Matveyeva's personalities, with consequences for their composing and performance styles, contrast starkly.

Vertinsky, a showman, generally wrote and performed in a flamboyant, theatrical, sophisticated manner, with arrangements tending toward a cabaret style; even in interpretations of others' compositions or lyrics, his distinctively emotive mannerism readily made his material his own. Matveyeva, an introvert, frequently wrote, and always sang and played, in a nominally naive, provincial manner, her thin voice somewhere between a child's and an old woman's from the time of her debut, in her mid-thirties, and her acoustic guitar blithely uncouth and abrasive, with both melodies and accompaniment frequently inflected by a charming sort of tunelessness and rhythmic irregularity; despite various creative collaborations throughout her career, she seems unsuited for the type of troupe-based musicality at which Vertinsky excelled.

Still, many similarities may link the two poet-songwriters' sensibilities. Both have a penchant for indulging in what the more utilitarian-minded cultural camps of their day would brand as escapism. Vertinsky and Matveyeva use their creative gifts to conjure up hypnotic visions of alternative realities, whether in exotic locales or in hidden pockets within Russians' indigenous surroundings. Against these backdrops, both tend to spotlight misfits, in songs serving as character studies for marginal, hapless and diversely grotesque individuals who must struggle for ostensible self-validation on their own terms: baring their souls, whether in chronic apathy or agony, as relief and penance before successfully conforming social strata, or unapologetically, unadaptably continuing along their unconventional paths. Both imbue their songs with a tragicomic, ironic atmosphere. Both

often maintain a perspective of willful infantilism, sometimes exaggerated to what might almost seem a perverse, decadent degree. Vertinsky embodies traits of the aesthete Silver Age, incrementally outmoded yet incorrigibly his milieu; Matveyeva inherits and adopts values from that era, in her own lingerly provincial way.

The extraordinary power of Vertinsky's and Matveyeva's songs might be said to stem from inner tensions: between actual and imagined life, between semi-acceptability, if not respectability, and a less-confined freedom. In different but converging ways, their songs and performance styles issue a polarizing challenge to the listener. For this reason, both have achieved lasting popularity as cult figures. Others have covered their songs in ways more appealing for mass audiences than the original versions. Yet the net effect of their contribution to Russian songwriting traditions has been to introduce a greater scope of permissiveness, a broader field for the registry of an oddness that may in fact be an ineluctable aspect of human nature. In each case, the characters in Vertinsky's and Matveyeva's songs may be masks or projections of the authors, sending personal ambassadors and apostles for their convictions, proclivities, biographies and states of being in the world. Both became beloved figures for the Soviet counterculture, while providing a leaven for society as a whole. Both occupied positions, with respect to the public and officialdom, ranging from precariousness to no more than conditional security. Both lived as perennial exiles – internally and externally, relative to prevailing norms and modernity. Vertinsky represents an extreme case of globe-encircling wandering and migration, followed by a self-immolating repatriation. Matveyeva, in her reclusiveness yet comparable ultimate solidarity with her native cultural sphere, has just as dramatic a fate of inconvenient but quietly triumphant loyalty to her own muse, to a barely sublimated eccentricity.

In translating Vertinsky's "Magnolia: A Tango" and Matveyeva's "Moldovan Gypsy Girl," I marveled more and more at the authors' slyly off-the-cuff poetic precision, magical use of language, and exquisite taste. In both songs, the authors work within genres – Vertinsky's with Argentinean antecedents, Matveyeva's with Romani – appended to the tradition of Russian romances. Yet both assimilate these lineages in compellingly subversive, individualistic ways. Each song contains touches of parody, and yet each is deadly serious, imbued with the residue of genuine suffering and hardship, and free of affectation. Neither Vertinsky nor Matveyeva resorts to humor cheaply. That both are willing to go over the top, in style and passion, only testifies to the depths they have direct knowledge of.

These translations, in the authors' wake, likewise intentionally go over the top as a matter of necessity. The English texts demanded saturation with an assonance and alliteration that would enhance, not distract from, the songs' core narratives. It felt essential that the translations be performable, communicable, with as much persuasiveness as the authors themselves had been able to invest in every turn of phrase. The translations had to offer constant clues of intelligent subtexts.

To this end, I worked without a sense of hurry, letting each English line ges-

tate on its way to a "eureka" moment. Words and phrases changed over a period of years.

I had first heard both Vertinsky's and Matveyeva's compositions not through recordings or formal performances, but as sung by a St. Petersburg native in the course of day-to-day activities. Taking a cue from this, I warbled my translations to myself, from time to time, while out on walks or during daily chores specific to the habitat I was in. Somehow the crystallization of the translation of "Magnolia" is indelibly associated for me with watering flowers; the translation of "Gypsy Girl" with rambling by a mountain river and lake, with a Boston terrier in the role of the young Moldovan's bear cub accomplice.

As concerns over globalism, technocracy and humanity's future ripple time and again through the world, Vertinsky and Matveyeva, as both outliers and arks for their cultures, have critically central messages to convey. With the auras of their elusive lives and works, they strengthen our sanctuaries for strangeness and estrangement. Their anthems are portable islands, quarantine shelters, for recovery from dislocation, from evisceration, from ideologies of one-dimensional reason, priorities and progress.

*

Alexander Vertinsky

Magnolia: A Tango

In lemoned and bananaed Singapore, it's pouring,
The stormy ocean warbles while it weeps
And agitates a blindingly cerulean
Far caravan of parakeets…
In lemoned and bananaed Singapore, it's pouring,
You find your heart is sunk, without a sound,
You find your dark blue eyebrows knit in frowning,
You pine away, alone.

And tenderly your mind eyes
Another May, another sky,
My words and my caresses and myself.
You're teary-eyed, Yvetta,
Because we're done dueting,
And no heart can be lit
Without a flame of love.

Deliciously delirious

With cacklings of parrots,
Like a wild magnolia in bloom,
You're teary-eyed, Yvetta,
About our doomed dueting
About a summer – somewhere –
Like a dream that flew!

In opalesque, moon-shadowed Singapore, it's pouring,
Banana trees are snapping in the wind,
You dream all night upon some yellow beast's skin
As apes screech overhead.
In lemoned and bananed Singapore, it's pouring,
And jangling with your bangles and your rings,
Magnolia of tropical cerulean,
You live such love for me.

*

Novella Matveyeva

The Moldovan Gypsy Girl

Once a band of jolly gypsies
Rambled all around Moldova,
When they pillaged a rich village,
Stole away a jet-black pony
And amid their other thieving
Stole away a young Moldovan
To a meadow into mystery,
Brought her up to be a gypsy.

So forever she has vanished
Inside a suntanned skin!
A guitar is grasped in her hands,
A guitar, a guitar is!
All that's been, she has forgotten,
And she doesn't think she's lost much.
(O come back, come back, come back!
Ah well, at least just give us one look!)

Rinsed her bare feet in a river,
Dusty tambourine a-jingle.

Once she crawled into a bear den,
Tugged a cub out in a tangle
To a meadow into mystery,
Brought him up to be a gypsy:
Taught him how to fool around and
Pick toys out of pockets slyly.

Since that time, the little bear cub's
Forgot mommy and daddy –
With a paw upon his heart he
Panhandles for money,
Holds a hat out sadly empty…
So they live, one happy family,
Like the friendliest of neighbors,
People and ponies paired with bears.

On the road, they have forgotten
Just who stole and who was stolen.
And a single dust-coat covers
Both the pony and the rustler.
Not a one of them knows worry
Over bad luck, over ailing…
Every night, singing and whirling,
Feeding campfires with kindling.

And the runaway tells fortunes
To gentle
Folk passing:
What has been and what will happen,
As surely
As she can…

What's the tiny drifter been through?
What's the tiny gypsy's future?
All that's been, she has forgotten.
Future things she won't remember.
(La la la…)

1961

Thriving by Thirsty Grasp
Oleg Woolf's "Nightingale"

James Manteith

Finding resonance with Oleg Woolf, as with any poet, depends on a bond with his voice. Fortunately for appreciation of Woolf, the writer's own musical settings can intensify this bond. Irina Mashinski, the muse of Woolf's "Nightingale, and not a lark, you sing," has established an audio archive of rare documents of these settings, preserved in live and home recordings of Woolf's own rough renderings, in his own raspy timbre, with his own raw guitar accompaniment. The recordings in the archive include songs Woolf based on both his own poems and Mashinski's. These resources, while unpolished and fragmentary, provide an invaluable reference point for approaching Woolf. Full of urgency and immediacy, they communicate how he lives his poetry.

"Nightingale" might seem to be finding its wings, as a song, for the first time namely as Woolf performs it. This conjectural, jittery quality perfectly complements Woolf's poetic ethos. Far from tentative, the song in fact proceeds with an undercurrent of utter assurance. Drawing on properties intrinsic to the poem, the song emerges as an idiosyncratic ballad. The song conveys a state of being where the poem may abide, beyond the abstract potential energy of a printed page. The song allows even the poem's margins to teem with revelations of a certain tone of endurance. From the opening notes of its instrumental introduction, the song suggests a creed for what will follow: an anchoring in a minor key, persistence through cyclical invocations of fluttering strings, and a dogged pursuit of truth and authenticity, with access to music's innate abundance tempered by a ruminative, ascetic reticence, informed by the wisdom of wounds and their glorification.

As a song, "Nightingale" circulates the air within Woolf's poem's vast yet hermetic "box of oxygen." The poem appeals to a cosmos of creation in nature, culture, emotion, *logos*, and reasonably might not feel claustrophobic. Yet its imagistic and phonetic repetitions and manipulations among finite sets can evoke a sense of terseness and stricture, leading inexorably to the denouement in "axe blocks or heaps of cinders." The song reveals the poem's space as wholly habitable, throughout its expanse and even beyond, in interpolary digressions. Woolf's poem's spasmodic, halting rhythms, determined by its content, coordinated amid the frictions of unseen psychic chemistries, find resolution relative to a compassionate

musical pulse. In the song, even the poem's unsettling enjambment across stanzas, "from root through // groan," meshed with Woolf's image of the felling of a pine, is musically wedded to a toppling motif that, while posing a threat to the song's momentum, in effect grants the poem's pressing intimations of mortality a soft landing and a new point of departure, an enigmatic new lease on life just past the sixteen lines' halfway mark.

Music and breath, lyricism's birthrights of lyre and vocal inflection, provide courage to enter and pass through the poem's dark night, its purgative crucible. Music lends a light to lever the poem's word lengths emphatically open. Music gives this poem of exile a home.

In the poem's concluding stanza and the song's closing verse, Woolf seems to take a nihilistic turn, refuting the relevance, for him, of the redemptiveness he has grasped his muse as embodying. Yet in the song, even after the last syllable is sung, the music continues. Not at length, but just long enough to provide a final cadence of transmutation. After this, for the hearer, as perhaps for the singer, the song's music continues to echo. The verses attain metaphysical equity, fold back on themselves and form a new whole, a single bird in which the muse and poet both, indeed, take flight on wings for which the song's course proved a testing ground.

Poetry traditionally invites participation through declamation and memorization, as extensions of the act of engaged reading. Woolf's "Nightingale" may inspire communion in further rewarding dimensions. His melody, like that of his other songs, has a memorable integrity, with both unity and variety throughout. His tunes may be followed, learned, dueted with, replicated at will. His chords and picking patterns may be contemplated and similarly emulated or adapted.

For translating "Nightingale," a practice of playing and singing along with Woolf proved essential, creating a charged field in which different phonemes could rise to the occasion of his verbal alchemy.

As discussed in relation to my translations of Vertinsky and Matveyeva, also featured in this issue, music- and environment-based incubation can exert a crucial influence amid the ephemeralities of a work in one language flowing into another. On the continent where Woolf founded *Cardinal Points*, immersion in mountains, replete with birdsong, starlight, forests and chores including vintnery and firewood splitting, gave this translation effort a further bridge of palpable kinship with the realities his poem invokes. While the translation remained in a draft state, travels from that rustic zone to urban Russia, on errands of cultural continuity and healing of past ruptures, made carrying "Nightingale" into English and a next era an all the more multifaceted task. Thinking of Woolf's spirit, of his communities, provided a higher impetus for this translation, eclipsing purely technical concerns.

Irina Mashinski and Boris Dralyuk provided helpful elucidations and recommendations as to word choice and syntax, accounting for Woolf's logic and lexicon. Such collaboration, in counterpoint with dialog with the song-poem itself, in

both Russian and incipient English, yielded a deepening awareness of the sensitivity and mastery of Woolf's musical delivery, working in tandem with his maturing poetic gifts. As does his poetry, his songs refreshingly balance intellectual and experiential complexity with a quirkily dignified humility and freedom from artifice or commercial banality. In any quantity, the authoring and curation of such songs by Woolf and Mashinski represents a major accomplishment, demanding, for translation, an aesthetics of acknowledgement and tribute.

*

For Irina Mashinski

Nightingale, and not a lark, you sing.
In the midnight hour, when the rubble scatters,
starry rubble litters the Urals' Dipper,
but keep listening, and there's trills and twitters.

Trills and twitters through a thin slot, a gap,
point of passage, rust-coated, postal, olden
box of oxygen. Thriving by thirsty grasp,
pines bolt down into life there, from root through

groan, until the hatchet has notched the log.
Past the noontime, light levers word lengths open,
casts not darkness, shadowing, creates its own
sunlit twitters, choral in singing solo.

But as for me, a man who has gone outside
bordered places to pages, where things are simpler,
who returns to seek snow, wine and finches' flight,
I find either axe blocks or heaps of cinders.

The Total Effect of Valery Bryusov

Kevin Windle

Valery Bryusov (1873-1924), a follower of the French poets Verlaine, Mallarmé and Baudelaire, was the founder of the Symbolist movement in Russian poetry and is regarded as one of the great poets of the Russian Silver Age. A distinguished translator, he was also responsible for a fine rendering of Oscar Wilde's "Ballad of Reading Gaol."[1] All his original work, including the two short poems above, deserves to be better known in English than is the case at present.

Both poems, but more particularly "At Home," lend themselves to translation by voicing sentiments which can be universally understood. They are not abstruse, and the translator is not faced by difficult problems of cultural transfer.

"The Stonemason" takes the form of a dialogue between a builder working on the site of a future prison and a liberal member of the middle classes, who enquires about the purpose of the edifice. The stonemason is fully aware of the ironies of his situation but feels powerless to change it, and does not take kindly to the intellectual's appeals to his conscience. One of the challenges of translation is to maintain the distinct voices of the two speakers.

"The Stonemason" follows a strict metrical pattern of dactyls in alternating lines of eleven and seven syllables, and a rhyme scheme of *abab*, a prosodic form as widely used in the English verse tradition as in Russian. By a happy chance, the English title and key term *stOnemason* lays the ground for the same dactylic meter as the original *kAmenshchik*.

"At Home" is compact in the sense that much is distilled into its twenty lines. In classical iambic tetrameter and *abab* rhyme, it expresses, first, the feeling of returning home after long absence; then, in a possibly unexpected turn, the poet states a wish to put his past behind him, and not indulge in any nostalgia. He views his earlier self with wry detachment (the striking simile of a snake viewing its sloughed skin), and does not intend to stay long in the home he has returned to. Instead he is lured on by new opportunities and the promise of an exciting new world. A collection of old love letters, "a cold and lifeless heap," cannot hold him back. He is impatient to move on, and to do so alone – a theme which appears only at the very close of the poem and derives special emphasis from its position.[2]

1 https://www.libfox.ru/186791-oskar-uayld-ballada-redingskoy-tyurmy.html (retrieved 13 January 2020

2 For a concise study of this poem, see "Analiz stikhotvoreniya Bryusova 'U sebya,'" https://ege-essay.ru/analiz-stixotvoreniya-bryusova-u-sebya/ (retrieved 3 January 2020).

The principle underlying these translations is that enunciated in the 1970s by Walter Arndt in the often acrimonious discussion of aims and methods of Englishing Pushkin: the translator should aim to convey the "total effect," which comprises both the "import" and the "impact" of the original.[3] When much of the impact derives from formal or "poetic" features such as rhyme and regular meter, blank verse or a prose rendering is unlikely to prove a fully satisfactory match. Bryusov's own translation practice shows that, like most Russian translators, he considered this principle fundamental.

The English versions of both poems aim to produce a comparable effect, by observing the meter and scansion – dactylic in "The Stonemason," iambic in "At Home" – as far as possible, keeping irregularities to an unobtrusive minimum. The translator of Russian verse into English always confronts the statistical fact that rhymes are less plentiful in English than in Russian and some other languages, owing in part to the relative scarcity of grammatical rhymes.[4] The versions above attempt to replicate the male /b/ rhymes, as these are more strongly felt than the female /a/ rhymes.

*

The Stonemason

"Stonemason, stonemason, in your white apron,
What are you building, for whom?"

"Out of the way there, you see we're too busy.
This is a prison. Make room."

"Stonemason, stonemason, with your true shovel,
Who in its dungeons will pine?"

"You won't be in 'em, with your kind of money.
Rich people don't turn to crime."

"Stonemason, stonemason, who will spend in them
Long sleepless nights without end?"

"Maybe my son, like his father a worker.
Fortune to us is no friend."

3 Walter Arndt, *Pushkin Threefold* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1972), pp. xiv-xv. On the task of the verse translator, see also Anthony Burgess, You've Had your Time (London: Heinemann, 1990), p. 125. For more recent discussion of the dilemma, see Francis Jones, 'The Translation of Poetry', in Kirsten Malmkjær and Kevin Windle, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Translation Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 169-182, esp. pp. 173-174.

4 See Jiří Levý, *Umění překladu* (Prague: State Publishing House, 1963), pp. 285ff.

"Stonemason, stonemason, won't he remember
The builders who carried the hods?"

"Back from the scaffolding! Mind where you're treading.
Don't tell us! We know the odds."

1901

*

At Home

Around me all is as I knew it,
My eye is used to all the nooks;
My home is here, I'm not mistaken:
Flowered wallpaper and ranks of books.

I won't disturb the ancient ashes,
The flames which burned lie in the past.
My previous self I now consider
As snakes regard the skins they've cast.

With many songs unsung remaining,
And untried pleasures still in store,
I sense a brighter world which beckons,
With promise never known before.

I'm called away to unknown summits
By songs of spring from mountains steep.
And here, meanwhile, some old love letters
Remain, a cold and lifeless heap.

Bright eyes of dewdrops blaze about me,
The ground with silver thickly sown…
Beside the door my staff awaits me,
I'm on my way, and all alone!

1901

The translator is grateful to Robert Chandler and Boris Dralyuk for their helpful advice and suggestions.

Marina Tsvetaeva's Last Poem

Ilya Kutik and Reginald Gibbons

October, 1940

Dear cmrd [comrade] T.,

> […] Your translation is very charming. What are you capable of – by *yourself*? Because for another person you can do – *everything*. Seek (fall in love with) – words will find you.
>
> Soon I will invite you – some evening – to listen to poems (mine) from a future book. For this – give me your exact address so that my invitation won't wander around – or remain motionless – like this letter.
>
> I ask you strongly not to show this little letter to anybody: I live a solitary life and if I write – to you – why would you need to show anyone else (other hands and eyes)? – and don't tell anybody that one of these days you are going to hear my poems – soon I'll have an open reading, and then… everybody will come. But now – I'm inviting only you, in a friendly way.
>
> All manuscripts – vulnerable. I am entirely – such a manuscript.
>
> M.Ts.

This letter, Marina Tsvetaeva drafted in her notebook… and never sent. Her daughter Ariadna made a copy of it and gave it – much later – to Tsvetaeva's "dear cmrd T." – the poet Arseny Tarkovsky.

In the West, Arseny Tarkovsky isn't nearly as well-known as his son Andrey, the great film director. In Andrey's film *Mirror*, some people may remember an off-camera voice, with tragic trembling, reciting poetry as if from behind the screen. But probably only a few persons outside of Russia ever guessed that the role the *poet* Arseny Tarkovsky played in the history of twentieth-century Russian poetry may have had the same greatness and significance as his son's in the cinematic realm.

Despite Ilya Kutik's more than a decade of very close relations with Arseny Tarkovsky (when he treated Kutik as both a "young poet" and "somewhat a grandson"), Kutik never heard Arseny say a word about his relationship with Tsvetaeva except that the two of them "were friends." Tarkovsky was very secretive about anything concerning himself and Tsvetaeva; asking him for what he didn't want to

reveal would have been simply rude.

Moreover, at the end of the 1970s, Tsvetaeva's last poem, directly addressed to Tarkovsky, had not even been published yet; nor had her draft of her letter to him (above). Tarkovsky himself didn't know that she had written this last poem addressed to him. About Tarkovsky and Tsvetaeva there existed only rumors and gossip – especially after Tarkovsky's poems to Tsvetaeva, written after her tragic death – were at last published in the 1970s. (Before the 1960s, Tsvetaeva's name was taboo in the Soviet Union).

When her husband, Sergey Efron, returned to the Soviet Union, he was arrested and, in 1941, executed. After that, Tsvetaeva had almost no one on whom to rely. Only Boris Pasternak had tried to help her, but he couldn't get for her anything more than a little translation work for *Goslitizdat*, the State Literary Publishing House. And unlike Pasternak, who, in order to live, translated about two hundred lines of poetry every day, Tsvetaeva did not have even the physical strength for translating at such a pace, in order to support herself and her son. She managed to translate only a dozen or so lines in a day. She was miserable but she bore her unhappiness somewhat stoically. She still hoped things could change. But was such a hope realistic? She was almost completely ostracized by Soviet literati, who understood that welcoming her would endanger their own lives. There was too much against her, because she had emigrated out of the Soviet Union, then she had returned as, in a way, an immigrant, since she had been the wife of a man who was labeled an "enemy of the people." (Efron had fought in the White Army against the Red Army, yet after he escaped to France, he was recruited by the Soviet secret police, the N.K.V.D.) In Tarkovsky, Tsvetaeva found someone who was unconcerned about the hostile air that surrounded her. This was no surprise, for he was a fellow poet who deified her works.

Many people knew or guessed the relationship between Tsvetaeva and Tarkovsky. Tarkovsky's friend, the translator Nina Yakovleva, in whose room in a communal apartment the poets first met, in 1940, later recalled: "I remember that day very well. For some reason I left the room. When I returned, they were sitting on the couch, side by side. From their faces I understood: this was something I had already seen happen, once before – with [Isadora] Duncan and [Sergei] Yesenin. They met. They soared."

Tarkovsky's friend Arkady Steinberg (1907–84), a poet and great translator of world poetry, and the best of all translators of Milton's *Paradise Lost*), recalled:

> I saw Tsvetaeva only once. It happened just before the war [World War II]. I was in a long line at *Goslitizdat*, with lots of other people, to get my honorarium. Someone suddenly prodded me: "Look! Tsvetaeva!" What I saw was an old and unkempt woman [Tsvetaeva was in her forties], who had evidently completely given up on herself. She looked somewhat alienated from everyone around her at that moment. Then suddenly she changed, she

began to reach toward someone who was just entering the building. I looked where she was looking and I saw Tarkovsky… It was the same thing I once witnessed in the ballet "Giselle" – with [Galina] Ulanova. She sees the prince and walks towards him. She simply walks across the entire stage, yet it was astounding. Giselle changed: now she was the Woman, the Love and the Expectation, and all these three together were walking towards her one man.

Marina Tsvetaeva's last poem, which she dated March 6, 1941, is written in an openly epistolary, lyric-first-person way (her usual manner), and is directly addressed to Arseny Tarkovsky. But how we should regard it now remains an open question. Was it another (but the very last) of Tsvetaeva's love poems, and thus comparable in some way to her other love poems, of which there are many? Or is it a unique human and poetic document of her relationship with Tarkovsky?

Although this poem by Tsvetaeva is superb and reads as a great love poem no matter to whom it is addressed, and although it has Tsvetaeva's unmistakable lyric energy, to many readers – perhaps to most – it is most interesting because it was her *last*. It is a singular (biographical) artifact of Tsvetaeva's "last love," in the light (or darkness) of her coming end: her suicide in Yelabuga. Of course many readers are fascinated by, and even hunger for, tragedies in poets' lives, but we forget that the darkness of a tragedy's fifth act grows out of the previous four acts – in which the light may have been plentiful, and even dazzling. Perhaps Tarkovsky brought such light to Tsvetaeva before act five.

In this last poem, Tsvetaeva's passionate anger and grief and pain is one side of a dialogue, but not so much with the absent Arseny Tarkovsky as with the words of his poem, which Tsvetaeva reads against what they really say. (Both poems follow this introduction, below.) In Tarkovsky's poem – "The table is set for six…" – he identifies his five guests (himself being the sixth person at the table) in a completely unequivocal way. His first two guests are the folkloric figures Grief and Gloom, which in that era of Stalin's ruthless rule were more expected and appropriate at Tarkovsky's (or anyone's!) table than in Russian folklore. These two guests frequently visited the houses of innumerable families. Two other guests are Tarkovsky's late father Alexander Karlovich (who himself, a prodigious historical figure, deserves an essay) and Tarkovsky's late brother Valya, whom he loved dearly. (Kutik remembers how difficult it was for Tarkovsky to hold back his tears whenever he spoke of Valya.) The fifth guest is running late, and does not appear till the third stanza. This guest is a woman, Tarkovsky's first great love, and had long been dead by the time Tarkovsky wrote his poem.

Thus there's not a single word or hint in Tarkovsky's poem that could have been offensive to Tsvetaeva. And as none of these guests are in fact present at the imagined supper table, Tarkovsky's poem is one primarily of absence, mourning, and loneliness. Nevertheless, Tsvetaeva's last poem alters the first verse of Tarkovsky's poem, and uses it against Tarkovsky, as the epigraph of *her* version of

that haunted dinner scene. Thus her poem becomes a confession – albeit stoic – of jealousy. She was convinced that the dinner that she discerned in Tarkovsky's poem (not the dinner he described) had been inevitable in its having excluded *her*. That is, either she somehow did not understand that all the guests at Tarkovsky's imagined supper were dead or were imagined folk figures, or she simply didn't want to know this, and saw them all as real and living, and saw herself as the living person who should have been included. Tsvetaeva also evidently imagines that Tarkovsky's wife was at the table – even though his wife had already died by the time he wrote the poem, and Tarkovsky does not even mention his wife as one of the invisible guests. But Tsvetaeva seems to believe that she was excluded *because* of Tarkovsky's wife, and that the family she wants so desperately to be a part of has failed to acknowledge her.

Tsvetaeva wrote this poem during her evacuation, with Writers' Union members, during World War II, from Moscow to the city of Chistopol. At that time, she hoped that Tarkovsky, who earlier had brought his own family to Chistopol, would be there still. But she and he never saw each other there: by the time Tsvetaeva arrived, Tarkovsky was already back in Moscow. Having volunteered for the Red Army, he was awaiting his orders to go to the front. And we don't know how she happened to read Tarkovsky's poem, which at that time existed only in manuscript.

Tsvetaeva was then evacuated again, this time to Yelabuga. While still in Moscow, Tarkovsky learned of her suicide. In his later poems, he continuously blames himself for not having been at her side, believing that he could have been, if only he had known how desperate her mental state had become. Perhaps he might even have talked her out of the tragic step she was to take.

Only in 1982 was Tsvetaeva's last poem made public. After it was published, Tarkovsky was asked many times about his relationship with her. Ultimately, he gave this account in an interview:

> I first met Marina in 1939 when she had just returned [from her "émigré" years in France] to her motherland. At that time, a book of my translations from the Turkmen poet [Mämmetweli] Kemine – nineteenth century – had just been published, and I gave it to Tsvetaeva as a present. In return, she sent me a letter with many good words about my translations. As for the story of Marina's poem dedicated to me, it's the following: Marina took the first line of one of my poems – "The table is set for six" – for her own poem, in which she berated me for forgetting her, the seventh.
>
> Marina Ivanovna [Tsvetaeva's patronymic] returned to the Soviet Union in bad shape, and she was sure that her son would be killed here [in the war], and later, this was exactly what happened to him. I loved her, though she was very difficult to be with. She was exceedingly forthright and acerbic, always edgy.… Together we often took walks through the alleys around the

museum founded by her father [Ivan Tsvetaev founded the museum now called The Pushkin Art Museum]. Once, she visited Akhmatova. As a gift, Anna Andreevna [Akhmatova's patronymic] gave her a ring, and Marina gave her [Akhmatova] a necklace with green beads. They talked for a long while. When Marina was about to leave, she suddenly stopped in the doorway and said: "In spite of everything, Anna Andreevna, you are a very ordinary woman." And then she left.

She was deeply unhappy, and many people were afraid of her. Including myself – but only a little. And why not, when she herself was a bit of a black magician, a sorceress?

She called me one time – it could have been at 4 a.m. – in an extremely agitated state, to say: "You know, I've just found your handkerchief at my place!" – "Why do you think it's mine? It has been a long time since I owned monogrammed handkerchiefs." – "No, no, it's yours, there's a monogram, 'A.T.,' on it. I must return it to you right now!" – "But Marina Ivanovna, it's four o'clock in the morning!" – "So what? I'll be at your place shortly." And there she was, having brought me the handkerchief. Indeed, on it was the monogram "A.T."

Tsvetaeva's last poem – "You set the table for six…" – was written as a reply to my poem, but I didn't know of its existence. It was published many years after her death in the literary magazine Neva, if I'm not mistaken. For me, it was like her voice coming from beyond the grave.

[see http://tsvetaeva.lit-info.ru/tsvetaeva/vospominaniya/tarkovskij-punktir.htm for the original Russian text of this interview.]

*

Arseny Tarkovsky

The table has been set for six.
Six place-settings, roses in bloom,
Crystal glasses. Two guests
Already here are grief and gloom.

But with me, here, are
My father and my brother, too.
A full hour goes by.
Then – a knock at the door.

Just as twenty years ago,

Her fingers are cold – or even colder.
And her silks – old-fashioned –
Are still rustling, still blue.

In the dark, it's the red wine
That chimes when the glasses touch…
All three of us loved you so much –
So far, far back in time.

I'm given a smile by Father and
Brother pours me more wine.
She lays her fingers – now without
Any rings – in my open hand.

"Dust has dulled my lightfoot high heels,
The luster has gone from my braids,
And our voices – we last three guests –
Come to you from under our grave grass."

*

Marina Tsvetaeva

"I can't stop repeating that very first verse –"

"I set the table for six…"

I can't stop repeating that very first verse –
Can't stop altering the words
To say "I set the table for six." No!
You *omitted* the seventh – me!

You're not looking happy – the six of you.
Down your faces falls a pouring rain.
At such a table, how could you fail
The *seventh* – the *uneventh* – one? Me!

You're looking sad, unhappy.

In your lethargic crystal, the liquid is idle.
Everyone at the table is sad – *you* are sad –
But saddest of all is the one *not* invited – me!

No light and no laughter. So! –
You won't drink, you won't eat?
The number – how *could* you mistake the total?
Wrongly subtracting one from it?

How could you *not* understand that *six*
(Your two brothers, mother and father, plus
Yourself and your wife) are not six
But really are *seven* – because *I* exist?

You set the table for six… But the world
Has not extincted every mastodon except you six!
I, a walking scarecrow among the living, *earned*
My place – the walk-in ghost among your guests.

(My guests…)
Light as a thief – not
Touching even one soul – I seat
Myself at *my* place – the absent plate:
Uneven and *un*invited.

Crash! – It's I who knock over someone's glass!
And everything that wanted to be spilled – salt
From the eyes and red from wounds, now flows
Over the edge of the tablecloth and onto the floor.

Crash! – And from now on, there's no departing or death!
The table is *un*bewitched, the house comes back to life.
Unlike death (…the plague at the wedding feast…),
I am *life* that comes to your supper *last!*

Brother, husband, son, serf – you're none of these.
Nor soulmate… – yet it's *you* I berate: "How could you –
Who set the table for six – six *souls*! – not keep for *me*
At least a corner? Not even the one furthest from you?"

1941

Marina Tsvetaeva's Farewell Letter

Olga Zaslavsky

The text below is Marina Tsvetaeva's final letter to Anna Tesková, her Czech friend, a champion of her work, and the addressee of 140 letters Tsvetaeva wrote during her long European sojourn, which lasted from 1922 to 1939.

*

[A letter written on a postcard and
mailed from Le Havre–Gare at 16:30 on June 12, 1939][1]

June 12, 1939, on the still-standing train

Dear Anna Antonovna!

(I am writing on the palm of my hand; thus, my child-like handwriting.) Currently, at the enormous train-station, with green-shaded windows; a scary garden, overgrown with greenery – all sorts of sprawl there! – For our farewell, Mur and I had sat a little, as the old custom goes, crossed ourselves at the hollow space left by the removed icon[2] (placed in good hands; it had lived and traveled by my side from <the year> 1918 – well, some day one must part with it all: *entirely*! And this is – practice, so that, eventually – no fear or strangeness, even – will remain…). A life of 17 years has ended. How happy I used to be then! But the happiest period of my life – remember this! – was Mokropsy and Všenory, and also – mine, that mostly beloved mountain. It's bizarre – yesterday I ran into its hero,[3] wh<om> I haven't seen – in years; he had jumped at us from the back, and, without an explanation, had placed his arms under Mur's and mine, and proceeded walking in the middle – as if nothing had happened. And also ran into – in the same mi-

1 A letter started at the Paris-Saint-Lazare station and mailed from the Le Havre station. About this letter, see Gleb Struve, "Marina Tsvetaeva: ee poslednee pis'mo iz Frantsii," *Russkaja mysl'*, 17 April 1969.

2 This icon was placed in the care of Ariadna Berg with the help of Margarita Lebedev. From a letter, addressed to A. Berg: "I am leaving my icon with M.N. L <ebede>va […]. We are leaving without the send-off […]. It was not allowed to us, but my closest friends are in the know – and they are sending us off *within* their thoughts. I am convinced that you, too, will be invisibly present at the pier."

3 K.B. Rodzevich, who had recently returned from Spain.

raculous way – an old mad poet[4] and his wife – at a friends' place he hasn't visited for *a whole year*. As if everyone had – a feeling. Kept running into – everyone. (Right now, I am listening to the hollow and stern announcement, "Express de Vienne…"[5], and remembering its towers and bridges th<at> I will never get to see). The screams – En voiture, *Madame*! [6] – as if meant *personally for me*, displacing me from all the previous places of my life. But screaming is useless – I know that very well. Mur has stocked up (at the *mention* of this, the train has moved) on newspapers. – We are currently approaching Rouen, where, at some point, the virtue of its inhabitants had led Joan of Arc to the stake. (500 years later English *women* set up a monument to her in that very place). – Passed by Rouen – come in, please![7] – I will wait for the news about all of you, please give my warmest greetings to the entire family; I wish all of you much health, strength, and a long life. I dream of our meeting at Mur's birthplace, wh<ich> is more of a home to me than my own. I turn my head at the sound of its name, as if it were mine. Remember, I had a friend named Sonechka, so, with me, everyone used to refer to her as "Your Sonechka." – Leaving currently with *your* necklace on, wearing a coat with *your* buttons and a belt with *your* buckle. (Everything here, from the modest to the most madly loved, I will take to my grave, or will burn with it.). Farewell! Right now, it's no longer hard; now – it's fate. I embrace you and all of yours, each one individually and all together. Love and admiration. I believe in you as in myself.

M.

4 A reference to K.D. Balmont and E.K. Tsvetkovskaya.
5 Vienna Express (French).
6 *To your car, Madame* (French).
7 Come in, please! (tr. from Czech).

Authors

AUTHORS

Randi Anderson is a novelist, poet, and artist who currently teaches writing at Pennsylvania State University. Her own poetry has appeared in the literary magazines *Strange Horizons* and *Quantum Fairy Tales*, and she has recently published *A Great Siberian Silence*, a chapbook of poems written during her experience teaching abroad in Russia.

Konstantin Balmont (1867–1942) was a leading and prolific poet and translator of the Symbolist era. In his verse, which is generally elated in mood, the music of the language is paramount. This quality led to a friendship between Balmont and Alexander Scriabin, which was formed in 1913 and cut short by the composer's death in 1915.

Vladimir Batshev was born in Moscow in 1947. He is a prose author, poet, and editor. In 1965-66 he co-founded the S.M.O.G. circle of poets and was active in the dissident literary scene. In Germany since 1995, he publishes the journals *Литературный европеец* and *Мосты*.

Valery Bryusov (1873-1924) was a leading poet of the Silver Age, and the founder of the Symbolist movement in Russian poetry. He is also known for his translations of Verlaine, Mallarmé, and Poe.

Alexander Couprin is a writer who lives on a yacht in Los Angeles. A former Soviet police captain, he defected to the West hours after his arrival in Rome, Italy, on December 25, 1988, where he was to serve as the head of a Soviet tourist group.

Yura Dashevsky is a screenwriter and a translator residing in Brooklyn, New York.

Will Firth was born in 1965 in Australia. He studied German and Slavic languages in Canberra, Zagreb, and Moscow. He lives in Berlin and works as a translator of literature and the humanities – from Russian, Serbo-Croatian, and Macedonian. See www.willfirth.de.

Reginald Gibbons is the author of eleven books of poems, a novel, short fiction, many essays and reviews, and translations of poems from Spanish, French, and Italian. He is also the translator of Sophocles, *Selected Poems: Odes and Fragments* (Princeton UP), and co-translator, with the late Charles Segal, of *Antigone*

and of *Bakkhai* (both Oxford UP). For many years, Gibbons and Ilya Kutik have been co-translating poems of Boris Pasternak, Marina Tsvetaeva, Arseny Tarkovsky, and other Russian poets. These will be published in several distinct volumes.

Seth Graham is Associate Professor of Russian at University College London, where he teaches courses on Russian and Soviet culture, as well as translation. He has published widely on twentieth- and twenty-first-century cinema, literature, and popular culture, including the 2009 book *Resonant Dissonance: The Russo-Soviet Joke in Cultural Context* (Northwestern University Press).

Veniamin Gushchin is a PhD candidate at Columbia University. His translations of Vladimir Mayakovsky have won the Columbia University Slavic Department Pushkin Prize. Blockade Swallow, his translations of selected poems by Olga Berggolts, is forthcoming from Smokestack Books in spring 2022.

Yulia Kartalova O Doherty was born in Moscow in 1967. She studied English and French in Russia, the United States and France, and social research in Dublin, Ireland. She is now based in London, where she is a freelance translator, tutor, and social researcher. Yulia has translated poems by Mayakovsky, Tsvetaeva, and Slutsky. She is currently translating a book about Russian poetry from Derzhavin to Slutsky, written by the late Russian poet Vladimir Kornilov.

J. Kates is a poet and literary translator who lives in Fitzwilliam, New Hampshire.

Ilya Kutik is a founder of Russian metarealism and has been translated into nineteen languages. He has published seven collections of poetry in Russian, most recently Epos (Russkij Gulliver, 2011).

Yelena Lembersky emigrated from Leningrad to Ann Arbor, Michigan, in 1987. "Bears Came to Town" is excerpted from her unpublished memoir, "Like a Drop of Ink in a Downpour," which chronicles her childhood, her family's refusenik years, and her mother's incarceration in Leningrad in the early 1980s. Lembersky co-authored *Felix Lembersky: Paintings and Drawings* (Moscow: Galart, 2009; in English and Russian), the first comprehensive catalogue of the prominent Soviet-era artist, who was her grandfather. She holds a BA from the University of Michigan and a Masters of Architecture from MIT, and maintains a small design practice in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

James Manteith is a translator, writer, and musician. He serves as contributing translation editor for *Apraksin Blues* and as editorial advisor for Mundus Artium Press. His mentorship with Tatyana Apraksina has informed his transla-

tion of her *California Psalms* (Radiolarian), as well as his other interdisciplinary explorations.

Novella Matveyeva (1934-2016) became best known as part of the wave of bards who emerged in the Soviet Union in the 1960s. Born in the Leningrad suburb of Pushkin (formerly Tsarskoye Selo), she lived in Moscow and worked in many literary genres throughout her life.

Vladimir Mayakovsky (1893-1930) was one of the founders of the Russian Futurist movement and one of the most innovative poets of the Silver Age. He embraced the Bolshevik revolution and became the most important poetic voice of the early Soviet period. Disillusioned by unrequited love, as well as creative and political frustrations, Mayakovsky shot himself in April 1930.

Nora Moseman is a writer, translator, and bookstore clerk who was shortlisted for the Compass Translation Award in 2012. She fell in love with the poetry of Anna Prismanova after a chance encounter in an anthology.

Anatoly Movshevich was born in 1955. He is a poet and writer who lives in Dzerzhinsk, Russia. Anatoly is the author of four books of poetry and prose and two collections of essays. His short stories and poems have been translated into English and Dutch and published in various magazines in Russia, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands.

Sławomir Mrożek (1930-2013) was a Polish dramatist, journalist, writer, satirist, cartoonist, and leading exponent of the theater of the absurd. His best-known works include the plays *Tango, The Ambassador,* and *Vatzlav*.

Simon Nicholls is a pianist, teacher, and independent researcher who has made a lifetime's study of the Russian composer Alexander Scriabin. With Michael Pushkin he translated the notebooks of Scriabin for Oxford University Press, and has annotated them. He is an Honorary Fellow of Royal Birmingham Conservatoire.

Nicolas Pasternak Slater was born in Oxford, England, to a British father and a Russian mother, the sister of Boris Pasternak. Brought up bilingual, he qualified as a simultaneous Russian/English interpreter during military service, and graduated from Oxford University in Russian and German literature. On retirement from a professional career as a hospital doctor, he took up translating from Russian. He has published translations of Lermontov, Tolstoy, Chekhov, as well as Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* and most recently Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago*.

Anna Prismanova (1892-1960) was born and raised in what is now Latvia, and lived briefly in St. Petersburg before fleeing to Paris, via Berlin, in 1921. She published four books of poems. Her verse is remarkable for its intricate web of repeated images and its obsessive yet playful interrogation of self, muse, and nature.

Alexander Pushkin (1799-1837) is widely regarded as Russia's greatest poet and as one of the most influential prose authors of his time.

Viktor Shirali, a poet and novelist, was born in Leningrad in 1945 and died in St. Petersburg in 2018. He was among the well known figures of the unofficial Leningrad culture associated with the Café Saigon. Widely appearing first in samizdat and then in Russian literary journals, he published more than a dozen books, and a collected edition of his poems appeared in 2018.

Svetlana Schnitman–McMillin, Principal Teaching Fellow in Russian at University College London (SSEES), graduated from the University of St. Petersburg and the University of Basel, Switzerland, and holds a PhD in Russian Literature from the University of Lausanne. She is the author of the monograph *Venedikt Erofeev "Moskva-Petushki" ili "The rest is silence"* (Peter Lang, 1989).

Ilya Simanovsky graduated from the National Research Nuclear University (Moscow) with a PhD in laser physics. He is a researcher of Venedikt Yerofeyev's life and writing, and the co-author, with Oleg Lekmanov and Mikhail Sverdlov, of the biography *Venedikt Yerofeyev: Outsider* (AST, 2020).

Sergei Skarupo was born in Kiev and lives in Berkeley. At various points of his career he was a construction worker, electronics repairman, singer, translator, computer engineer, inventor, and flâneur. His poems have appeared in *Storony sveta, Cardinal Points*' sister journal, and other Russian-language publications. In collaboration with the artist Asya Livshits he is working on an illustrated book of poetry and is trying to finish a novella, which is growing in size while steadily remaining halfway done. He would like to thank Jennifer Mackenzie for her help with editing "Tendernob."

Daphne Skillen was born in China and lived in Shanghai until she was twelve, at which point her family moved to Sydney, Australia, where she lived for thirteen years. She has lived and worked in Moscow and travelled extensively through Russia, but is currently based in London. In 1999 she was awarded a medal for services to the cause of Russian journalism by the Russian Union of Journalists. From 1988 to 1993 she was a visiting research fellow at the School of Slavonic and East Euro-

pean Studies, University College London. She is the author of *Freedom of Speech in Russia: Politics and Media from Gorbachev to Putin* (Routledge, 2017).

Marina Tsvetaeva (1892-1941) was one of the major Russian poets of the 20th century. She was born and raised in Moscow, and emigrated in 1922 (Berlin, Prague, Paris). She returned to Russia in 1939 to join husband and daughter, both of whom were arrested soon after her return. She died by suicide in Yelabuga.

Alexander Vertinsky (1889-1957) lived a tumultuous life as a singer-songwriter and actor. After leaving Russia during the Civil War, he spent more than twenty years in exile, performing his way around the world before returning to the wartime Soviet Union by way of China.

Alexander Veytsman writes poetry and prose in English and Russian. His original poems, translations, short stories, and essays have been published in several books and have appeared in numerous publications around the world. A graduate of Harvard and Yale universities, he lives in New York City.

Kevin Windle is an Emeritus Professor at the Australian National University. His major publications include *The Oxford Handbook of Translation Studies* (co-edited with Kirsten Malmkjær) and a biography of Alexander Zuzenko. For his translations from various languages he has received international awards.

Oleg Woolf (1954-2011), together with poet Irina Mashinski, founded *Cardinal Points*, the Russian-language journal *Storony sveta*, and the associated StoSvet literary project. His works in English translation include the short story collection *Bessarabian Stamps* (Phoneme Media, 2015; translated by Boris Dralyuk).

Venedikt Yerofeyev (1938-1990) was a Russian writer best known, and beloved, for his 1969 "poem in prose" *Moscow-Petushki*. He is also the author of the satirical chrestomathy *My Little Leniniana* (1988) and the play *Walpurgisnacht, or the Steps of the Commander*, which was finished shortly before his death of throat cancer.

Olga Zaslavsky is a literary scholar and translator, who was born in St. Petersburg. She holds a PhD in Russian Literature from the University of Pennsylvania. She is the author, most recently, of the monograph *Poets on Poets: The Epistolary and Poetic Communication of Tsvetaeva, Pasternak, and Rilke* (Peter Lang, 2017).

PRE-SUBMISSION GUIDELINES FOR TRANSLATED POETRY

Boris Dralyuk

Before sending poetic translations to Cardinal Points, think about your audience. Our intended reader is a person sensitive to English as it is spoken, susceptible to the effects of verse, and at least somewhat familiar with the Anglophone poetic tradition. These are the people who browse through the poetry shelves at the local bookstore, who open literary journals and flip to the poetry section, who see a box of text with an unjustified right margin in their newspaper and consider giving it a read. In other words, any poetic translation you choose to send out into the world must be good English – and good English verse, at that.

Things to avoid:

1. Unnatural phrasing. If one can't imagine a native English-speaker saying a certain phrase to another native English-speaker, then the phrase must go.

2. Poetic inversions (at least when translating most post-18th C. poetry).

3. Padding to fill out metrical lines.

4. Forced rhymes.

Many translators of Russian poetry believe it their duty to hew closely to a poem's original form. It serves to remember that, to today's Anglophone reader (and not just today's, really), the persistent use of exact rhyme produces a comic effect, especially when coupled with a clangorous short-lined meter like the trochaic tetrameter. If you want your translations to appeal to Anglophone readers, consider loosening the metrical grip – which doesn't necessarily mean abandoning meter, just playing closer attention to rhythm, diversifying the lines, leaving some ictuses unfilled. The original meters are often a trap: they don't mean the same thing for an Anglophone reader as they do for a Russian, with the trochaic tetrameter being a case in point. If you find that you need to add words in order "to fill out" a line, then your line is too long. And don't contort natural syntax in order to fit a rhyme scheme.

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