

Dmitry Kuzmin

* * *

Our hairdresser friend
clipped your hair above the forehead
just the way the rave kids wear it,
you immediately started whining –
no clothes to match this haircut,
a full closet of shirts but nothing one could wear to work
and the skin on the face is no longer
the way it should be to match such a haircut
silly to show up at work with such a haircut
a haircut like this should go off club hopping
and it's too late for us, the clubs,
these idiot DJs make us puke
and so do the kids who fashion their lives after Araki's and Van Sant's characters,
sorry for them all but what's the use,
some overdose and croak at abandoned construction sites, others go into business,
you can't be of any help to either the former or the latter,
and we are home together every evening
each doing his thing
looking at each other from time to time, compassionate
I master the basics of web design,
you put photos into albums,
you still have long hair there,
perhaps right there one doesn't notice
dryness of skin, wrinkles, shadows under the eyes,
but then, during this vacation, you didn't get up early,
half a year passed, it seems more than that,
one can't understand, time seems to fly
just yesterday we met in the subway, and now it's our seventh year together,
and the certainty about tomorrow, and the day after tomorrow,
if, of course, this obscene country doesn't blow up in a big way,
if the police doesn't fuck us over the residence permits,
if they don't move from looks to something menacing,
the imbeciles in leather jackets that hang out in our stairway,
and I too now have bad skin under my eyes,
but to hell with it, this isn't the meaning of life,
by the summer, if you want, you can let you hair grow,
they promise new arrivals at the vintage store,
show me, a professor asks, a happy gay person,
this, the professor says, tougher to find than a cheerful corpse,
corpses are not our business, so what shall we tell him?
a) here we are, open your eyes, you fucked-up idiot!
b) show us a happy person period.

Translated by Vitaly Chernetsky

From the “Warsaw series”

Mr Zemovit Yankevitch, doctor of philosophy,

Shyly presents his business card:

“It is my first one.”

Crossing his legs in the Turkish style on a taupe carpet,

One of those which cover the floors of the post-graduate hostel in Belvedere street,

Mr Zemovit hands over the marijuana tip

To another specialist on Wittgenstein

Who looks like a night motorcyclist.

Is one morally justified

To use public conveyance without paying the fare? –

The argument between the professionals

Becomes more and more heated,

While the sun

Slowly hides himself

Behind the somber buildings of Russian embassy,

Going farther

To the West.

* * *

God grant happiness, Lord, god grant happiness.

Stanislav Lvovsky

Have been living together for five years, no children.

Were given a dog.

Started going visiting with the dog

(lay quietly in a corner),

straight across the park, an hour’s walk.

In spring he passed a big contract on local networks,

bought a pair of bikes.

Started riding the bikes visiting

(take them up to the balcony).

Through the park a fifteen minutes’ ride, but a bit dirty,

Half an hour’s by-pass.

Can’t take it on a leash:

might suddenly tug.

And without the leash – crossroads, traffic.

Basically, at home it can be looked after.

Yet under thirty,

Everything might happen yet.

He is elder, but both are under thirty.

* * *

to Faina Grimberg

Thou did not have the time to warm thy seat
 within the span of two short stops. Thou hidest
 a reference-book on Microsoft Excel
 in thy streamlined briefcase of exquisite beauty;
 Sun of the Sleepless - melancholy star –
 Can neither shoulders nor your thighs obscure,
 Just slightly touch's your temples and your eyes.
 Once it occurred to me: I could
 Buy a cheap Dictaphone,
 And in the span of two short stops I would have time
 To ask each one of you: since when
 You automatically, without thinking
 Bend down your head when going out of the carriage,
 And how Socrates
 First realized
 That the form of the dialogue makes
 his disciple
 follow all the way of his thought
 together with him
 to the end.
 Now it's a long span,
 With a bridge and a view of buildings half asleep;
 Finger-tips stroking
 The brown leatherette¹.

* * *

The daughter of a famous woman-writer is a novelist.
 Presents her novels in huge empty halls;
 Speaks of the writer's mission, the traditions of realism;
 She is a beauty, with black nail polish
 (not in the least like her mother: a heavy smoker
 with mad slanting eyes amidst massive wrinkles).
 By her side sits the sleek commercially successful publisher.
 Green cloth on the table,
 Green upholstery on the chairs.
 One of the chairs is broken
 (one can see round smacks of chewing gum
 stuck to the plank under the seat).
 On the next seat there sits the publisher's son,
 Incredibly thin, about fifteen,
 Wearing a somewhat short sweater
 (from time to time his t-shirt shows underneath),
 with long scratches on his cheek and wrist.

* * *

¹ The seats in the trains of Moscow metro are made of this material.

Symbols don't burn.

Olga Zondberg

Von Gloeden's boys
That did not come back after the first world war

The guys from "Beefcake"
This one
Frowning
With the big "Joe" tattooed on his shoulder
And the one
In leopard swimming mini-trunks
Upraising his hands with immense biceps
To the bleak sky against the background of sparse pine-trees –
They end their lives in hospices
For the aged with Alzheimer syndrome

The deep, as though cut with a razor,
Wrinkles of Jagger

What would the shaggy chappie from Forman's film
Say now

* * *

in a TV report
about the victims of the war in Chechnya
there are shots from a hospital
a boy of about thirteen
his legs have been torn up the knees
the grey tousled mother
throws the blanket aside
before the cameras
stumps are too short
one sees the lower part of his chest
with a shred of bandage
thrown between his thighs
all on one side
this is not the first team shooting
the camera slides up the body
the boy stares perplexed
past the spectator
past me

● * *

to Vasily Chepelev

I missed a lot of things as a child. I had no one
 To play hospital with. I've never
 Held a stethoscope;
 Strange, isn't it –
 To hold with one's warm hands
 A cold metallic thing
 Applying it to someone else's warm skin:
 Both of you are warm, but there is the cold
 Of metal between you. Just once,
 In a posh polyclinic, where I was taken
 Through good connections by a boy of mine,
 Had I seen them first being warmed up –
 Stethoscope, and throat spoon
 (turned out they had a special hot plate for it).
 Not so now: it is now easier for me
 To touch your warm skin with my fingers,
 Cold though they are;
 Then slide lower.
 We don't need any mediatory objects, -
 Yet young, already naked.
 But before, before – when I dared touch
 Nobody but myself – one could do it with a stethoscope
 But couldn't with a hand.
 I missed that as a child.

* * *

to Slavik

I failed to take you, though you wanted it so much,
 Begged for it, with your strong fingers
 Pulled your buttocks apart,
 So that it'd be easier for me to enter;
 And I couldn't get hard any more – because of exhaustion and not enough sleep.
 Because of the fear that it would hurt, your first time,
 Because for the two nights and the day between them
 We've been making –

– took a room

on your ID (its triple price for Russian residents);
 I had the idea to pull the mattresses from both beds
 Down to the floor – a king size hand-made –
 So that you didn't have to, being about six feet tall,
 Bend your legs during short spans of sleep;
 You had the idea to put the squalid table lamp
 Behind the blinds, so that with the soft
 Reddish light –

– with annoyance I pulled off

the useless condom, sticky with camomile hand cream,
 kept saying “sorry, it’s my fault, just can’t, too tired”;
 you smiled once again: “Now you have the reason
 to come again.” – and I leant back,
 so that, while giving in, I could see your face:
 eyes squinted tensely,
 sharp cheek-bone line with three-day bristle,
 lips brokenly griped a second before the last hoarse –

– nine p.m.

was the check-out time, I set the alarm
 in my cell-phone but couldn’t fall asleep,
 while you curled up,
 pressing your head to my chest;
 we dozed off by turns,
 and once, when you thought I was asleep,
 you whispered: “I don’t want to part with you” –

– midnight in Bryansk,

the Russian border, passport control, and for some reason
 there is music at the station, the trackman’s crow-bar clinks
 shunting the switch, a lantern from the platform
 gives light to the guy on the lower berth who is finishing his Perumov² ;
 across the aisle a plain cadet is undressing,
 the pattern of his chest-hair repeating yours;
 oh now I would —

* * *

M. P.

Took the subway to the railway station.
 You kept saying you liked the subway so much.
 A drop of your saliva
 Fell on my lip –
 A cold dot
 (how could it get cold on the way?)
 This is all that I got from you.

* * *

Have you got anybody to crash with for the night,
 Only just a piece of soap
 To stiffen your disheveled mohock.

And your feet: on the spot all day long
 In those crappy sneakers –
 Why, you’ll ruin your feet, won’t be able to walk, Sashka!

Borrowed a hundred bucks, no money to pay back;

² An author of many fantasy novels of Russian origin, for instance, a sequel of Tolkien’s “Lord of the Rings”.

Doesn't mean we cannot do as before:
First a photo session, then a groupy.

* * *

just gone to bed – now have to get up again
sort of just now
just before cleaning teeth
had pissed to my heart's content
it flashed across the mind as being somewhat pinkish
what a bullshit
NB: change the lamp in the john
Just gone to bed
Oh well, not turning the light on
Barefoot
Jerking the shin back from the cold pan
And nothing
Something gripes inside and
However I strain doesn't come
Remembered in horror M.P. telling how adenoma
reach it with a cutter through the urethra
good gracious
to the bathroom not feeling the pain
hit the toes against the threshold
okay okay
here's a tooth-brash with aero-
dynamic handle
squatting
push it furiously into the rear
up and down
read somewhere prostate massage helps
and when already unbearable
above the sink
in a thin squirt
thank you god
thank you god
tiptoeing back
the sleeping-room is stuffy
and the boy hasn't waken up

* * *

to Linor

A good boy waters all the flowers every morning, stands on a chair to reach the pots on the upper shelf, in his socks, mind you, leaving his slippers on the floor under the chair. A bad boy puts on a fresh t-shirt every morning leaving the last night's one somewhere on the floor under the bed. The good boy checks what's missing in the fridge before going to work and buys exactly this on his way back. The bad boy brings some special sweet cottage cheese once in a blue moon and then rummages in the fridge for a long time studying the inscriptions on packages and laying contemptuously aside everything that is overdue. The good boy goes wherever you want to go with you, gradually learning to take interest in it. The bad boy giggles: why, is this what you're wasting

you lifetime for. In the evening, when you are sitting before the computer monitor, the good boy perches at your feet on the floor and lays his head on your thigh. The bad boy appears in the doorway the moment you sit down to write an article and demands that you let him check if he's got any new mail. The good boy gasps on your having leant over him: you are so beautiful! The bad boy in the heat of erotic play grabs you by your fatty sides: what's this, eh? One evening the good boy climbs on your lap and says: you see, I love you, but... The bad boy wanders around looking haggard all through the evening, cooks a loathsome fish and cauliflower soup for the first time in his life, and at night snuggles up to you desperately and sobs instead of you.

* * *

dark stains remained
in the hall
from his lace boots

As a Declaration of one's Ideological and Political Identification

1

in a pedestrian subway, which was reduced to ashes
god knows how many years ago
by an explosion supposedly organized by Chechen terrorists,
a girl rushes up to me with an artificial smile,
dressed in red light-reflecting uniform (the kind that road workers wear)
and asks me for the Gallup poll:
Is Russia a great country?
A woman whom a short-term lover of mine knew
Worked in a cheap bijouterie stall
In this subway.
Once we were walking here with him,
And he stopped to chat with her
About the new trinkets lain out for sale,
Methods of dieting, Mom's health.
I didn't remember her face,
Nor her name.
Sasha had left me, put up weight, got married;
And I'd want to know
If she had survived
The explosion.

2

In the tunnel in Sadovoe Ring, where at the very beginning
Of the present epoch
A Jewish boy, who wrote bad verse,
Got drawn under tank tracks³,
My companion – a golden girl of glossy magazines –
Sitting on the back seat of a "Volga" cab stinking of cheap tobacco
Tells me that Barbie manufacturers,

³ In 1991, in the course of the uproar attempted at Gorbachev's overthrow, three people perished in street fights in Moscow.

Who have been guarding family values for forty years,
 Have at last to launch a new collection
 Openly erotic by the looks.
 After reading her short prose,
 Which appears occasionally in the Internet,
 Once or twice
 I had the wish to give up all I was doing and instead to meet
 My beloved with a hot supper every evening after work,
 Because he is going to die some time.
 Right-wing press considers her
 Together with two or three poets, our mutual fiends,
 The ones that corrupt the advanced youth with the contagion of liberalism.

3

The owners of a youth café belonging to a fashionable chain
 Have recently got fucked up with money,
 So that they've had to open
 A new spot without finishing the design work;
 Many customers think it was the designers' intention.
 There is nearly no cell connection there
 And one has to dart out of the basement to the entrance
 Now and then to check if the babe has sent an SMS.
 I don't drink beer,
 So I'm not very comfortable here;
 But I've sat opposite the stairs
 And observe two girls and a guy with dreads
 Running out occasionally in the same way.
 If you fall out of love with me, my red boy,
 I won't die. No, I will,
 But not from this and not at once.
 For the time being, however, I'm just one of those
 Who have the reason to get from the underground
 Under the low sky of approaching winter.

* * *

K.K.

We're walking, arms around each other
 You're a bit taller it's inconvenient
 But you lay your head
 On my shoulder all the same
 The approaching car
 Has nearly crushed into the street-lights
 The astounded driver
 has twisted his neck
 we take a trolleybus
 an aged Georgian
 goes up to the window from the doors
 then walks along the compartment
 to take a good look

if it's two guys indeed
easy, dear compatriots,
don't hide your eyes
you will have to
get used to us

* * *

The Jewish New Year
Coincided with the boy's birthday
But the Jewish guests
Made their excuses
Tired, could not come
And for oneself
One didn't feel like making
Apples with honey
What would you do
With all those candles
Screw the date
In your passport
We'll be celebrating
Your coming of age
Here, take it
Your first razor
For how long are you
Going to use mine
Another piece of cake
And then to bed
Tomorrow there's an important class
Tooth-brash in your mouth
You repeat a complicated step
In the coming year
Everything will come true
A beautiful affair
A gifted new group
A masterclass in Dublin
Your stepfather won't bother you
With drunken phone-calls
In the coming year
All our folk will meet
In Jerusalem
In Amsterdam
In Xanadupore
Time to sleep boy
Enough of snuggling
Here let me take off
Your glasses
Has buried his nose
In my armpit
Shaggy-haired
Unshaven for a week
Flighty

Twenty-eight-years old
 Irish dance teacher
 My son

Last Year's Photos from Seliger

The lake has retreated, but the boats stayed on the leash.
 Long sharp grass spreads around.
 In the photo you sit on a flat-boat's board
 Bathing your legs in grassy waves,
 Smudgy after a night at the fire, wearing a bright yellow anorak.
 Ostashkov highway rustles its cars
 And gives an occasional roar with its trucks behind me,
 Out of the shot. Across the road
 There is an abandoned garage yard
 With rusty skeletons of ZIL-trucks;
 The faded blue of the cabs still fades in bad print.
 The sky above the pines is of the same color;
 A woodpecker was tapping on the top
 Twinkling his red hood, but on the photo it would be too small.
 Further on there is a wide sandy country-load
 Called the Communards' Avenue;
 You've been photographed with your back to the camera,
 Walking towards the radiant future.
 At the corner there is a wooden Pioneer's Club
 With two funny stone crocodiles lying at the door;
 Someone has managed to knock off the tale from one of them.
 The pale-pink station is locked with a huge barn lock;
 You've dozed off on the bench at the entrance;
 In the background an enormous cock is seen walking.
 The next shot is already from Velikie Luky;
 I'm washing my head under a water heater against a redbrick five-storey,
 Like in a Wash & Go commercial.
 This summer I was in Germany, you in Anapa.

* * *

A view from the twelfth floor:
 The grass is green,
 And the spinney's of bright,
 Of canary-yellow color,
 Like your anorak;
 Only the very tops of trees
 Are slightly reddened.
 A black dog
 dodges in the birches.
 The construction across the street
 Ends.
 Some redundant metallic thing
 Is being thrown into an iron container.
 A truck gives a honk

In a gentle husky tenor.
 Nearby
 A cell phone is ringing
 With a bagpipe melody.
 In awe
 I step back behind the French window.
 Life is so beautiful
 That one seems
 To be able to fly.

* * *

She is good-looking, plump, with not a single
 Sign of ageing, with thick odour
 Of deodorant, drunk and
 Tipsy; she leans against the door-post
 Of my hotel room dawdling with a long exhausted
 Intellectual conversation issue
 Floundering a little from cocktails and excitement;
 Licks her lips, perspires and then cannot help it any more,
 Utters “just a minute”
 And runs heavily to the ladies’ downstairs.
 Taking the opportunity I hurry to my room,
 Lock the door, undress, dive
 Under the rough hotel blanket
 And fall asleep straight away. I don’t hear
 The footsteps in the corridor, fast at first, then slow.
 She won’t forgive. Will never forgive.

* * *

M.

The day after
 The nation had elected
 Its representatives
 In the Parliament
 It snowed
 Fine wet far thicker
 Than the television snow⁴
 No matter if it’s rugged asphalt
 Or frozen dirt
 Or bits of not yet shriveled grass

Public utility service
 Didn’t make it out of their coma
 The route taxis got stuck crawled through
 The dusk giving out
 Bricks of dull light
 Scant as blockade ration

⁴ In Russian the adjacent channel interference on TV is literally called “television snow”.

The nightclub I wanted to get to
 Was closed for disinfecting
 The election center
 Situated upstairs
 Places should be thoroughly disinfected
 After mass attendance of citizens

We stayed in an empty café
 The only customers in the entire hall
 In the far corner
 A sleepy waitress brought us
 Cocoa tasteless as in a kindergarten
 And you had not
 Taken your head
 Off my shoulder
 Nor your hand
 Off my thigh

Following her with your eyes
 You said:
 One stops being afraid
 When one realizes that no one
 Gives a damn about anyone
 No my little brother
 One stops being afraid
 When one is sure in one's right

We left in the dead of night
 The starry sky above us
 Didn't shed a single light
 Through the snowy shroud
 And that which was inside us
 We were carrying holding hands
 Each in oneself

* * *

Had a dream about two lovers' letters:
 The last grade, the middle of the eighties;
 Identical round handwriting (did one of them make a copy? For me?)
 Winter and spring letters written because of the feelings too strong
 Summer ones – separated during the vacations
 The last letter is from her, explaining the cause of breakup
...always about yourself, about what excites you;
you had once wrote you liked Estonian jazzmen –
I subscribed to “Estonia Today” for three months to learn something about them
 (such an edition could hardly exist, and what would it feature about jazz anyway?),
you wrote about your devotion to trams and trolleys,
and I could do nothing about it...
 She should have taken the epigraph to this letter:
 I wish that you were cold or hot.

I wish I received letters about trams and Estonian jazzmen.
Self-excuses of the one who leaves – the one who’s already made the decision –
Are always somewhat useless.
I’m reading it all in a train, in an empty carriage, and miss my stop;
The knapsack gets stuck in the luggage box, there is no emergency brake to be seen,
A yellow inexpressive landscape is speeding in the window.
It’s somewhere here that I was to meet you;
The picture disintegrates, the wave sways away, leaves, one can’t adjust the verniers,
Time to get up; “Sesame Street” on TV next door,
My neck and chest ache (it’s either yesterday’s hickeys or the beginning of flu);
Never, never again I am going to be seventeen.

* * *

In a crowded carriage
Their backs to each other
Stand a tall strong guy
In tight jeans
And a teenage girl
With peroxide curls
When the carriage rocks
Her shoulders
Ideally matched
The bend of his waist.

(you and I
match each other so well,
only we’re looking
in opposite directions.
It wouldn’t matter so much
Were it not for the difference of stature.)

Translated by Yulia Idlis