

**“HALF A BREATH:
A BRIEF ANTHOLOGY OF YOUNG
UKRAINIAN WRITERS”**

**“ЛИШАЄТЬСЯ ПІВПОДИХУ:
КОРОТКИЙ АЛЬМАНАХ МОЛОДИХ
УКРАЇНСЬКИХ ПИСЬМЕННИКІВ”**

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Збірка виходить у світ завдяки спільним зусиллям Британської Ради в Україні та Львівського Міжнародного Літературного Фестивалю.

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FORWARD


One of the youngest European literatures – Ukrainian – is also the most surprising. The writers in their 20s and 30s have already managed to conquer the attention of Polish and German readers and one novel by Lviv's author Natalja Snjadanko made it to the TOP-10 in Poland.

The literary process in Ukraine has its own peculiarities. You can often see young novelists and poets performing on concert and club stages together with Ukrainian rock- and jazz- musicians. Every year more and more literary festivals are organized by enthusiasts in the remotest towns and big cities of Ukraine. Texts that outrage representatives of older literary generation have young readers and listeners shouting for more. Sergiy Zhadan, Irena Karpa and Ljubko Deresh in spite of their youth are already cult figures in the new literature and are now known outside Ukraine, while other young Ukrainian literary stars are actually living and writing abroad, namely Katherina Khinkulova and Svitlana Pyrkalo, who live in London. Ukrainian young literature has crossed the borders in all senses. You can find works by new Ukrainian authors in translations into many languages, but their further success and actual presence in contemporary world literature depends also on YOU, on YOUR curiosity! Please, be curious and I guarantee you will be surprised, entertained and provoked into thought by everything that you will find in NEW UKRAINIAN LITERATURE.

Andrey Kurkov

He marks the wonder woven through
...not half a breath but still withdraws...
Her eyes confiding, wide, and blue
...and he, with half a step to cross...

Hryhoriy Chubai

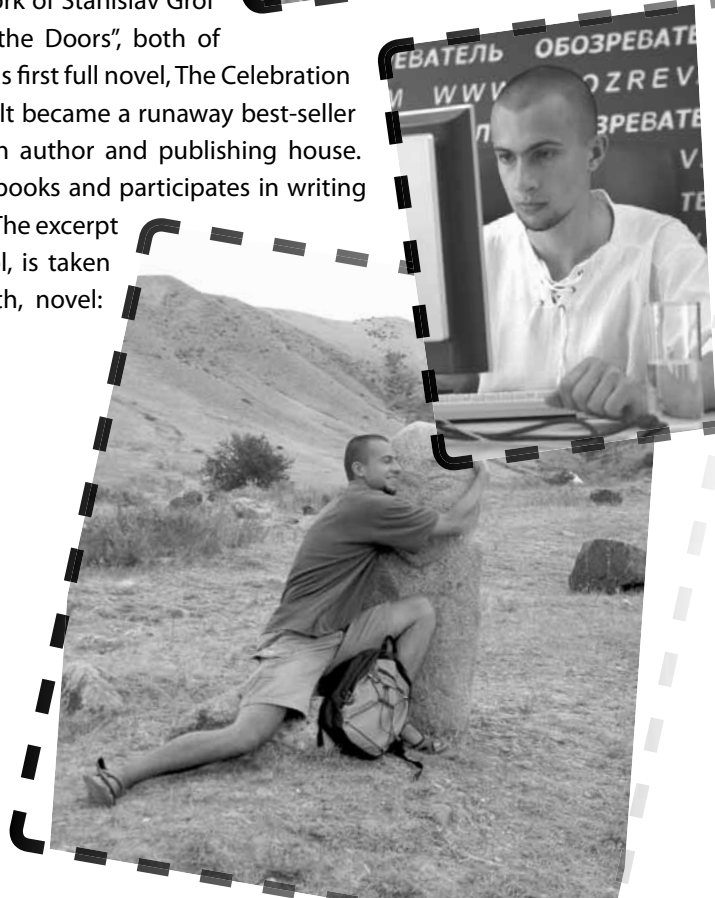


Зіниці твої виткані із подиву,
В очах у тебе синьо і широко,
Але до губ твоїх лишається півподиху,
До губ твоїх лишається півкроку.

Григорій Чубай

LJUBKO DERESH

Ljubko was born in 1984 in Lviv, Ukraine into a family of physicians, which spawned in him an early interest in chemistry, biology, surgery, psychiatry, and oddly, the saxophone. His experiences as a student of the economic faculty at Lviv National University seem to have had no ill effect on either Ljubko's love for the work of Stanislav Grof or his fascination with the music of "the Doors", both of which flavor his writing. He produced his first full novel, *The Celebration of the Lizard*, at 15. At 16, his novel *Cult* became a runaway best-seller in Ukraine; a pleasant surprise to both author and publishing house. Ljubko has also written two children's books and participates in writing projects for the visual and graphic arts. The excerpt included here, *Manchester et Liverpool*, is taken from the author's current, and seventh, novel: *How to Become God Without Crying*.





LJUBKO DERESH

MANCHESTER ET LIVERPOOL

from the novel, **How to Become God Without Crying**

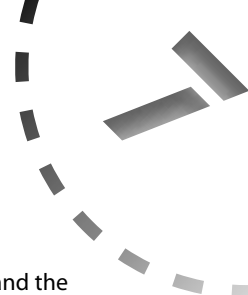
“Go with the flow.” This was her motto, her talisman. She had fashioned it during her struggle to become the person she was.

At school, back in Lugansk, Maia had been the hardest working student. Not one of – the hardest working.

Her mother had the kind of personality you couldn’t disobey. Until she turned fifteen, everything Maia had done had been at her mother’s initiative. It was her mother forcing her, age six, into flute lessons at music school. With that out of the way, folk dancing followed closely by English. Then, at seventeen, something happened that radically changed her view of the world. She began to see that she could live this life, her life, her way.

As she saw it, seventeen surrounded her with a weirdness from which nobody was immune. Everybody was getting into trouble. Her girlfriend Sveta, not picky about whom she slept with, got pregnant and delivered a kid. The father: who knew? Natasha, a friend from music school who played the violin – more fitting than the flute for a girl to play to her way of thinking – fell in love with the lead singer of a death metal band. He was a junkie. Natasha quickly got hooked on pain killers.

Maia – “May” in Russian – whose friends, seeing her coming, would tease her with “Look! It’s May Day!” “No, not quite, but May’s definitely on its way!” – really only had one close friend, Lera. Lera was a real space cadet. She dressed in her grandmother’s clothes. She called it “her retro look”, accessorizing it with clunky, hand-made jewelry and that oh-so-casual approach to life of hers: drinking, and apparently enjoying, hearty burgundy; smoking cigarettes; and, from time to time before bed “to help her sleep”, marijuana. Maia, on whom pot had no discernable effect, struggled to imagine how much you’d have to inhale to get the double benefit that Lera reaped from the magical weed. Lera suffered from hypoperistalsis and swore that “a little pot gets me off the pot!” In school, Lera often also gave Maia “lessons”; bringing her esoteric literature and



involving her in discussions about eternity, all while demonstrating her own facility for the enigmatic and the unknown. After absorbing each new recondite text, Lera, with a gift for exaggeration, (or so Maia thought), insisted that they had just read over what had been pretty much a description of her previous week.

At university, the girls both signed up for journalism. Somewhere during their sophomore year Lera's life-plan shifted. She quit drinking, smoking, and eating meat. She started working out – yoga – what else? thought Maia – though the reason for this shift soon became clear.

One night Lera dragged Maia to some place she kept calling lila. Serhiy Romasenko, known in esoteric circles as Iskirams and, later, Master Vishnu, was coming to Lugansk. By this time he'd already stopped being Romasenko but hadn't yet settled on Vishnu. Lera wouldn't explain where the girls were headed; she warned only that they'd have to stay overnight. "Lila's a night thing," Lera had said. Maia, living in the dorms and with her virginity intact under mom's watchful eye, went along.

Lila would take place at a kindergarten on the outskirts of the city. The street was littered with the anonymous and taciturn who, confronted by the girls' question "where's the kindergarten?" silently pointed the way. It was close on midnight and they all seemed to be in on it.

All except Maia who, once they had finally found the place, wondered why "Modern Talking" dance music would be blaring in a building that was supposed to be hosting a spiritual gathering. As they climbed the stairs – top floor? – Lera cautioned her not to be surprised by anything, but to go with the flow of experience. That sounded good to Maia: go with the flow.

The room was draped in pink fabric and the floor covered in mattresses. Strings of Christmas tree lights and the trace of Indian incense completed the ensemble. Attendees occupied mattresses in the corners of the room. Girls in silver and gold leotards sat on stools. Lera explained that silver and gold help "keep the space" better. "For whom?" Maia wondered. Lera nodded at a young man wearing a loose, red shirt and black leather pants and sitting near the loudspeakers and a floral bouquet. His eyes closely followed two of the girls in leotards who were now dancing on the mattresses. There was something wavelike, aquatic in their movements that didn't quite fit with Dieter Bohlen's recorded voice.

Maia couldn't find words for what happened next: Iskirams started to dance. Was that the Argentinean porteño? Maia regretted, again, her folk dance classes. But the dancing wasn't the issue, really. It was this indescribable feeling that things were getting real, gaining substance, getting all mixed up with the silver and golden dancing girls. Suddenly Iskirams announced that the time had come to summon the presence of the inhabitants of the Pleiades and whoever felt ready should join in. Somebody switched the



music to the Soviet pop sounds of “Sweet May.” Things could not have been more absurd. This was no longer anything resembling a kindergarten; the rigid boundaries of reality had softened. Everyone, hesitantly at first, steadily joined in the fluid movements of the dancers, embracing and exchanging light, lingering caresses. Maia couldn’t watch. She was mortified when Lera silently took off her shoes and joined in the mattress dance. The place was turning into brothel. Maia wanted to run, but stopped herself. She asked herself: why? What’s so shameful? Who made you so uptight? She thought about her mother who fucked her father so timidly that Maia could hear his dissatisfaction through their apartment walls. Her mother; who viewed every boy who showed up at their door as a threat to her daughter’s virtue.

Maia was filled by the rush and the heat of knowing that she was about to cut her mother’s apron strings. She took off her shoes and started to dance.

She closed her eyes and began moving in time to the music. At first she was embarrassed by all the hands lightly touching her, but this faded fast and she felt she could join in the touching. She opened her eyes momentarily and panic set in. Her conscious mind was screaming, “What the hell?” She was surrounded: smiling women in their fifties, regressing into their childhood, their flabby forms stuffed into ridiculous-looking silver leotards; cavorting, effeminate men twisting their features and swaying awkwardly in response to the music; teenage boys moving confidently, presumptuously. Maia wanted to run from lila and erase from memory what was happening to her in the kindergarten: this was simply degrading. Instead, she ignored the urge, closed her eyes and kept dancing, her unease slowly ebbing.

Iskrirams, dissatisfied, turned off the music. He admonished them all: this was no disco. If you wanted that, then find one somewhere else. Here – in this place – it’s about “creating space.” “Generating the essence of flight!” Maia was clueless, understanding nothing, wondering if anyone did. Little matter as the music came on again and the dancing continued. At some point Maia was enveloped by a sense of peace and calm that she’d not known previously. She saw herself as a toddler, fearing nothing, trusting everyone and everything. She felt like crying. It was heartbreaking to realize how little she trusted the world, how closed she was to new experience, and how hostile to others. Overwhelmed by shame and regret, she lost control and burst out crying. She wept like she had never done, even in childhood. Regret washed over her: for loving herself so little; for obeying so blindly everything her mother told her to do; for suppressing so completely all her own desires. She met full on the fact, the pain, that not only didn’t her mother like her, she had never really seen her as human. Maia’s anguish was so deep she thought she might never stop sobbing. She stood up quickly and went over to Iskrirams.

"I hate my mother," she said, looking into his eyes.

"Then repeat this: 'Lord Vishnu, reveal yourself in my mother,'" he answered her.

Maia sat in a corner, chanting the line over and over, her resentment slowly lifting. She continued to sob off and on for a bit, but soon knew only an unusual sense of tranquility. Her inclination to argue boiled up and she began to dispute what she was feeling, had felt, in much the same way she would dispute with her mother. "Nothing but a crazy, hypnotic, sect," or something like that, went racing through her head. The strength and desire to merge into a single organism with the dancing room had been flushed away. Maia coiled up on a mattress and went to sleep.

She woke pre-dawn, frozen and badly needing to pee. Everyone was asleep on the mattresses, covered in wool blankets from the kindergarten storeroom. Lera and Maia were sharing a child-sized blanket that was ridiculously small for the two of them.

"Where are you going," Lera asked, awake now.

"Home."

2.

Two days later while walking around town, Maia came across an announcement for qigong classes. They were being held right near her apartment. Maia decided to go with the flow. She started attending, three times a week, instruction in an obscure Chinese system of healing. Interestingly, a man she had noticed at lila was also in her qigong group.

After the second class, the man approached her and introduced himself. His name was Anatoly, he was thirty-five, and he worked as a security guard in a supermarket chain. He was unhappy with his life and spent most of his time spiritually searching. He had received enlightenment from the guru Sant Baljit Singh and dreamed of joining the Sevadar Sikhs. He sincerely hoped to join the spiritual community and devote his life to God. Maia and Anatoliy spent the whole evening walking around the neighborhood, chatting. They met twice more and then a third time when, in his apartment, she lost her virginity.

His apartment was empty save a mattress and a few books by guru Sant Kirpal Singh lying nearby. Maia concluded she had nothing to fear from a man with three kinds of herbal tea in the cupboard and only vegetables and milk in the fridge. In addition, Anatoly, antithetical to her mother's claims – undoubtedly the result of his rigorous spiritual discipline – was fastidious in both appearance and habit. He was also kind with her, childlike. So different from how he had appeared to her at the first qigong session where he had



seemed so hard, unreachable. By their second meeting he had already begun to behave as if they were the same age.

Maia sensed that over the course of their three meetings he had transformed himself into her slave and that by offering him her body, she only increased her authority over him. Her stubbornness ground away at her: the man was so damn nice that she wanted to be nice back. On the other hand, she understood it wasn't obligatory to be kind; with Anatoly she could do as she pleased.

Maia said nothing to her mother and, locking in on a successful personal relationship, moved into Anatoly's apartment. Though the sex wasn't great, (she'd read somewhere that only women who give birth can achieve orgasm and that was persuasive enough for her), her emotional maturity had clearly been bumped up a notch. She felt what it was like to dominate somebody else's feelings.

It wouldn't be accurate to say Maia had chosen this road. She preferred to think that things had happened on their own. She felt a kind of general, non-descript, yet protective good will toward her friend, though she hardly reckoned what they had as a deep, meaningful relationship. In fact, she rarely showed Anatoly her good will in any way that he could comprehend. On the contrary, whenever his mood was clearly inspired by her closeness or her beauty, she would act almost completely indifferently toward him. She recognized well enough the hell he was going through and she reveled in it; melding her pity for him with her power over him into that sweet elixir of supple, facile control of an inferior.

The more she toyed with him, the more convinced he grew that his karma was impure, in need of redoubled spiritual exercise. The more he meditated, the more vulnerable he grew to her manipulations, the more painful her presence became. There was nothing to be done; she was utterly obsessed with the game. She would come home from the Institute, wait until Anatoly had come out of his afternoon meditation – he worked only once every three days – and then begin talking to him about their relationship. Anatoly would wax poetic about his love for her. Maia would respond – relishing every ironic moment, every cruel word – by demonstrating with cold precision the real distance that lay between them.

He labored to melt her icy heart and she began to wonder what the point was in torturing a near-saint with childish pranks. In her contrite moments, she felt something like pure love for the man. He was, truly, an exceptionally bright and spiritual creature. That's when the tears came to her. Anatoly would calm her, caress her and, inevitably, bed her. To Maia the sex felt like riding in a broken elevator; an experience to enjoy even if you didn't fully grasp where it was headed. Other times the monotony of the act irritated her and Maia just endured, and waited for him to come, at which point she would slip away, and up, off the floor, running to



the bathroom. This nearly drove him to tears every time. She could barely contain herself: the chance to play her favorite game twice in the space of a few thoroughly-tolerable minutes.

During their two months together, Anatoly had visibly begun to waste away and now matter how ponderous the bags under his eyes grew, he never failed to assure Maia that she was, to him, the personification of beauty and his ideal woman. The sex suffered. Just her being around negatively impacted his meditation. Anatoly grew sadder and more frustrated, yet never raised his voice to Maia knowing that the payback, the knife to the heart, would come.

With greater frequency he began to recall, if almost in passing, the times when he had been able to meditate for four or five hours a day. His gloominess upset Maia and, in those moments, she would sit on his lap and hug him tightly, to lift his spirits. She herself wavered between free-floating anxiety and self-pity as it registered that her man was becoming semi-resistant to her attempts to comfort him. He had begun to remind her of an abused mutt that will shrink from a stranger's hand even though it holds a treat. He talked too often about "straying from the spiritual path" only to do an about-face and reach the well-worn conclusion that he would, in the end, devote himself to the full and worthwhile pursuit of life in the community. Maia caught on that his desire for her was waning, a thought that never failed to reduce her to tears. Nor did it fail to elicit affirmations from Anatoly that he loved her with every fiber of his being and would never leave.

Still, shortly after yet another extremely unpleasant episode that Maia was loathe even to recall, Anatoly came home one day holding some papers. He needed her passport, he said, because he wanted to put his apartment in her name. He was putting it in her name, he went on, because he had decided to rededicate himself fully to his secular/spiritual path. Maia didn't believe a word of it and made a scene after which they both neither slept, nor attempted any step toward reconciliation.

Maia held on to her passport, resistant to what she knew were just his empty words and childish impetuosity at work.

Two days later, coming home a bit earlier from the institute, she met Anatoly in the doorway with his carry-all packed. Seeing her, he quickly turned to the kitchen where he grabbed his goodbye letter off the fridge.

"You're really leaving?" she asked.

"Yes."

Maia was speechless. A sense of guilt – from where? – assaulted her. Anatoly was only doing what he'd planned on doing the whole time. What was there to feel guilty about? From her side, nothing, she rationalized.



“Well, see you, I guess,” is what she said. What he said, though he had no strength to debase himself further by waiting for an answer from her, was “I love you.” And then he left.

Maia wanted to shout after him, at him, something, anything. She never saw and never heard from, or about, him again.

3.

For the next several weeks, Maia wallowed in and out of depression, one part of her reliving scenes of Anatoly’s tender sincerity juxtaposed against her own monstrous behavior, while the other part conversely, soberly, dismissed any such sentimentality. There was no reason for guilt, she justified. We are what we are and nobody owes anybody a damn thing.

However, when an opportunity presents itself, be ready; and so she took advantage of Anatoly’s good will and moved into his apartment. When she went to collect her things from home she told her mother that she’d moved in with a friend. She distanced herself from Lera. Later she learned that Lera had joined Iskiram’s commune, becoming one of the girls in the golden leotards. Maia was largely alone now. She never went out, and after class she came straight home and sat in her kitchen, reading mostly. She attended qigong three times a week and, when that wasn’t enough, took up yoga. She liked to fantasize about sex while drifting off to sleep or soaking in the bath, but neither the gentle rocking of the elevator nor the shower nozzle, her faithful, usually dependable companions in sexual release, were enough. She’d had better sex at 15 and now just craved a warm body.

Maia yielded to, even cultivated, her dark side, jettisoning the artsy lit and tabloid esoterics that she’d pick up from Lera in favor of Kierkegaard and Heidegger. She met a guy, sparks flew, they grew close. The subsequent sex with him in Anatoly’s apartment made her feel emptier than ever however. Satisfied, lying near her, the young man asked: “You couldn’t wait for it to end could you...do I disgust you?” Maia couldn’t answer, though further intimacies with him were out.

Lera called once. She’d just gotten back to Lugansk from a summertime trip around the country with the other Iskiramists and wanted to meet. She suggested a Saturday night at a drum’n’bass club and Maia said “ok.”

That night at the club she met Edik, a nice, shallow guy who didn’t quite get why Maia wasn’t into him, nor why she didn’t seem to be particularly happy. They spent a sexless first night together at her apartment. Drunken flirtation had led to arousal, and Maia had tried, but when he touched her to take off her panties, she choked. Hot tears.



Edik was either slow, stubborn, (not mutually exclusive), or both. He called her on Tuesday, confessed he'd never met a more beautiful girl, and asked to see her again. He suggested a club where said he liked to hang out with friends who called him "Ed." Edik met her at the door and led her to his friends: five, seven guys and two or three girls sitting in a chill-out room, smoking a hookah and trying to outdo each other in conversation. He sat her down on plush pillows near him, put his arm around her, holding her hand and not letting go all evening. Maia offered nothing, only smiled, and no one, except "Ed" who pulled himself away from the lively banter to check on her from time to time, asked her anything. Maia nodded that she was fine, really. Edik asked whether she wanted some juice, to which she nodded a second time, to which he ordered it for her. She sat that way all night; reclining on pillows, sipping juice, taking pulls off a hookah that some other young guy kept handing to her and asking if she was ok. Ed had stirred something up in her, a feeling that only heightened on the ride home.

All day Wednesday Maia expected Ed to call and kept glancing at her cell phone. He called Thursday. He told her that there would be an open-air party outside the city on Saturday and if she wasn't busy they could go. She just needed to get her hands on some tie-dyed, fluorescent clothing, got it? She got it. He told her she was the hottest girl he'd ever seen and was glad she'd agreed to go with him.

Edik was going to pick her up on Saturday afternoon, so on Friday Maia went to an army surplus store that was backed by one of those places that sells psychedelic accessories; badges, one-hit hookahs, bongos, t-shirts, and pastel nighties. Maia picked a loose, floor-length, long-sleeved, low-cut, "ethno" black dress. It was covered with covered with psychedelic swirls that shined under the black-light in the store.

Maia tried it on at home and decided that in that dress she'd look even better if she went braless.

The party was set for the woods near Sviash, a village just outside Lugansk. Some of the people had organized a bus to take them, the rest making their way by mini-bus or car.

It was the end of July and the weather was warm. Ed suggested she bring a sleeping pad and bag because they might end up spending the night there. They drove to the village and parked the car there, then walked another hour-and-a-half, not having figured out beforehand where they were going. The whole way there Ed jabbered on about himself, his friends, how they chilled in the clubs and what raves he'd been to. Maia endured the monologue with neither comment nor any discernible irritation. It helped that they weren't alone. A procession of oddly dressed young men and women like a parade of wizards stretched out along the road from the village. T-shirts and hooded-Ts stained with the likenesses of violet mushrooms or green



aliens lighting a joint and flipping the world the bird, and a myriad of similarly-themed graphics surrounded her. From time to time Ed would sneak a peek at her dress, really her tits, as if he couldn't decide whether to say something. Maia asked him what was up and he, embarrassed, managed that he thought her dress was too revealing, and really provocative, and he wouldn't want his girlfriend wearing something like that in public because people might get the wrong idea and...

"...am I your girlfriend?" she asked icily, though somewhere inside she had understood exactly what he'd meant.

They eventually arrived at a large clearing festooned with outlandish baubles in day-glow colors. The music was on already though Ed explained that this was just the warm-up; the best trance music got going only after midnight. Ed pulled her close to him and kissed her hungrily, frenching her, fondling her breasts. Maia was aroused and for half an hour they necked, hugging and groping at each other. Stopping, Maia now felt closer to Ed. He took her hand and they walked this way into the meadow meeting friends here and there, exchanging a word or two. As it grew darker, Maia said she wanted to dance, which likely frustrated Ed as she elected to dance by herself rather than with him, or even near him. A familiar tension began squeezing her heart. Her snake needed to strike again.

Not that she would show it to Ed. She wanted him to think she was a nice girl and so just kept dancing. She let her body go, her intoxicating thighs now snakelike, now wavelike. Ed moved closer. Lively and carefree, he'd likely taken some speed. He pulled her aside nearly dragging her to the trees, squeezed her breast, shoved his hand into her panties. Maia twisted away: "No."

"Bizarre. Your dancing screams 'yes,'" he added tactlessly.

She escaped back to the music, honestly mystified why her dancing got guys so hot. She personally felt nothing erotic while dancing. Nothing at all, really.

She grew tired and the evening dark and she wandered around looking for Ed. Occasionally she caught some guy staring openly at her and it embarrassed her. And then there was Ed, looking right at home. He led her away, just a bit, where the music wasn't so loud, near a campfire, his friends and their dates. "Here," he said, handing her a small paper tab, "suck on this and swallow it. We couldn't get any 'shrooms. This is acid."

Maia accepted the drug and sat down on her sleeping pad near the fire. A desire to ruin the party for Ed and his friends started up and wouldn't go away. Ed sat close and tried to put his arms around her. She pushed him away and sat without speaking, staring at the fire. She heard them all talking, asking Ed something, probably about her, and she heard him explaining "the thing about Maia," making crude jokes.



Something unpleasant in her chest, cutting, swelling. She had every reason to be in a funk: sitting alone in the dark, in the forest, in a dress that made her look like a slut, having swallowed a tab of acid.

The pain – not pain exactly but she wanted to know what – in her chest wouldn't go away. After a few minutes she was beginning to grasp her feelings like never before. Why now? Christ, this ache begged for her attention every day and every day she responded by simply burying it deeper. The raw thread of it coursed through her life and she coddled and fed it, her baby. No. No baby; some scuttling, monstrous beetle-like thing fattening itself on her energy, sucking all the love out of her and any time she even attempted to show love it vomited its vile poison. Maia felt like puking herself. She leaned over, tried, failed. Nausea in waves.

"Something's inside me," she whimpered. "Something's totally got me!" She looked around. Everybody was by the fire and involved in lively conversation; nobody was paying her the least attention.

She felt the bug in her gut move again and tried breathing deeper to lessen the nausea. The spasm started at her belly button, rolled upward and – thwack – whatever had been squirming inside her flopped out. She screamed when she saw it and stamped on it, squashing the nastiness under foot.

Relief, like a bracing wind, flowed into her chest.

In that place where the worm – MY worm, she thought – had lodged earlier, somewhere under her heart, she could feel light penetrating, spreading, making its way outward. Something similar had happened, she recalled, at lila with Iskrirams.


With that recollection came other, fresher memories. A flood of bitter tears, held back so long like a river behind locks, boiled out of her. She was hysterical, crushed by regret for those she had hurt, especially Anatoly. Christ! How she had abused him! From this point on, without fail, she would be the girl known for her ability to love.

"Everyone. Always. Only love. Only..." she repeated to herself, lamenting how niggardly she'd always been with her love.

"Mommy! I love you, mommy! Can you forgive me? Can you?" she whispered, continuing to cry, unable to loosen the tortured knot that bound her to her mother.

Someone was tugging at her sleeve. She turned, the world awash in minute, colorful patterns, a living, breathing Alex Grey painting and she in the middle of it. The patterned shades wove in and out as on a giant quilt.

It was Ed – "let's dance!" – pulling her. Was she okay? She nodded and started apologizing for being such a shit – to him, to everyone – for having so much darkness inside, so much evil...she faltered.



“Shut up! You’re gorgeous,” Ed said, likely having understood nothing.

The music was loud, but enticing. She began to move, matching its rhythm, when a new round of agony returned. Aching, she spun around and around, trying to dance away the pain. It tore at her but she danced on, her arms now pressed tightly to her body. She slithered, a snake emerging from its breathless lair, all hunching shoulders and controlled breathing. Pain and hatred bubbled up equaling the fear and spite she felt for the world. She vomited poison and pus, guts and slime oozed from her. Finally, emptied of toxins, her paroxysms having subsided, Maia felt light struggling to break through that place where there had previously been only so much darkness. She danced wildly, screaming, convinced that everyone around her, everyone in the clearing, everyone in the village maybe, was screaming with her. Exhausted, limber to the point of bonelessness, translucent as the sun-filled woods and, most importantly, freed, she collapsed in a heap on the ground.

Eyes shut, but at long last, opened, she whispered: “Show me, Lord, what am I, really? Show me how I should live.”

Again her mother appeared to her. Why couldn’t she rid herself of that image? Her mother wanted a boy, she saw - a boy that she could love more than she had loved dad.

“A little boy...that’s all she wanted,” Maia kept repeating, oddly, suddenly realizing she was speaking Ukrainian. A new kind of clarity had come to her. Her parents were country people, both of them, who had come to the city and put aside their “country accents” and were ashamed all of their lives because of it. Maia looked into her family tree and saw that her heritage was almost exclusively Cossack, peasant, and Ukrainian. Her parents had – in her view, rashly – severed themselves from their past, their roots, and the succor they offer. Here, in the forest near an old Cossack village, Maia indulged her innate feel for the melody of Ukrainian, her ancestral tongue. She reflected on her parents’ decision and resolved from now on to speak only Ukrainian, preserving her heritage on both sides. She understood how a person, sustained by his kin, could powerfully affect his own fate. She wondered what would come next; images of her future were popping into and out of her head.

What she saw frightened her. “Don’t show me this, Lord,” she whispered, “it’s too much, too awful. Too awful.” Great love and greater difficulty appeared in front of her and she was certain that if she saw the difficulties through that she would...would...she lacked words for it, but she would know surpassing, lasting love with one man, and in that one man the opportunity to renew her bloodline would come. She also clearly saw, with perfect understanding, that for this very reason Anatoly had left to join the Sevdar.



This singular, clear sense of possibility, that her life was marked by the potential – the chance – for something almost biblically profound, something genuine, matchless, divine, and so marked by grace that one would be humbled as in the presence of the apostles and the prophets. Nothing is more real than that which is concealed behind the curtain of possibility. She wanted to kneel, to pray, to thank God for what had come to pass. That’s really all she wanted, to say thanks, for mercy, forgiveness, and a chance.

4.

That night many things changed for Maia.

It started with Ukrainian, which she now spoke exclusively, impressed with how well it suited her. She visited her mother and spoke to her in Ukrainian to which – surprisingly and somewhat haltingly – her mother responded, in Ukrainian.

She returned to taking care of herself and her appearance. She smiled more as a rule. Maia hadn’t liked her smile before. She thought her mouth was oddly shaped, too wide, and only looked worse with a grin planted there. But now some transcendent peace, a shining, star-like translucence, rarely seen in people her age, showed itself when she smiled.

Her perception of others grew more acute, and she discovered too often that she could read their emotions like an open book.

The purpose of both yoga and qigong became clear to her. Of the two, she preferred yoga, and having dedicated herself to it over the past six months she came to appreciate its restorative powers. A slipped disc, (the scourge of inexperienced yogi), slowed her down a bit, but Maia found a therapist who specialized in yoga injuries. He informed her that “advanced amateurs” often also often blow out their kneecaps. Thank God for a simple slipped disc, thought Maia.

Maia found a job. More precisely, it found her. While walking down the street one day she was asked to screen test at the Lugansk Television Studio. When they heard her speaking Ukrainian they immediately offered her a position as the weather girl. The salary wasn’t anything to write home about, but it was a job, and her first. A jackpot compared to her student stipend.

Maia also contacted Ed and thanked him for the night filled with acid, which she would never forget, nor regret. There was nothing between them anymore, no romance, not even kissing, but that didn’t stop Ed from telling her, again, that though she was weird, she was really beautiful, especially when she spoke Ukrainian. (Which he said in Russian, of course.)



Maia worked hard at maintaining a good mood all the time. She was committed to the power of positive thinking; convinced that nothing truly awful can happen in a world which is, after all, only a vivid dream, a faithful delusion, the hallucinogenic vision of an alien who'd lost his way and, wandering near our little planet, figured he'd try out being human for a bit, only later to give up the ghost and fly off again.

Finally, Maia read everything she could lay her hands on about LSD and experience-altering drugs. She started off with Timothy Leary and Albert Hofmann, moved on to Stanislav Grof and finished with works, in English, by Shulgin. Her love of reading, fostered during her period of solitude, eventually led her to discover transpersonal discourse. She started buying books on the theory of systems, studied Fritjof Capra, and struggled with Arnold Mindell whose works had been translated so poorly by his devotees. These experiences helped her discover Kyiv's own mystic "Number Twenty" and his outstanding translations of these authors on the internet. She continued reading: ranting and raving about Garry Hunt's translations; lingering over Nalimov; weeping over Charles Tart; beating her head against the wall with Whitehead; and attempting to take it all through the filter of Ken Wilber. She hoped that Wilber would carry her to enlightenment and an eventual understanding of Jung, Maslow, Aurobindo and the rest and not leave her hopelessly lost inside the enigma of the holarchy of existence. In the end – serendipitously or miraculously, you choose – she had fashioned a well-ordered structure for herself and so became an ardent admirer of integral psychology. She downloaded Wilber's lectures from YouTube and read his daily blog, occasionally leaving a comment in English, which she had studied five years earlier at a time of seemingly infinite lack of faith in the future.

5.

Such an intensive pace wouldn't last long. Within two months Maia was back to feeling her old self and that the stream of consciousness in which she'd been bathing all this time was beginning to dry up. The free ride was over. She'd have to find ways to get the boost she needed on her own. It was then that Maia brought an idea about a public interest program to her producer. No one had done it before in Lugansk and something run-of-the-mill would keep her from falling back into her Mindel and Wilber fixation. Her idea catalyzed everyone around her into action. Her producer gave the go ahead, a chain of nightclubs signed up as a general sponsor for the program and Maia, unexpectedly, became a bit of a local celebrity. People recognized her on the street. Her irony-laden and controversial opinion pieces got published in a regional newspaper. Her salary doubled. Predictably, it wasn't long before Maia's hometown started to get a little too



snug to her liking. One ingenious idea after another spilled from her brainpan but she didn't dare attempt to realize the larger part of them. She found herself in Kyiv more often where the director of a chain of nightclubs offered to bankroll a related series of her programs for a small Kyiv TV channel.

Maia waited to do anything until her diploma was in hand and then, having finished her studies she – illegally – rented out Anatoly's apartment and – perfectly legally – moved to the nation's capital. There she began to actively search for a way to open the "Salon of Eccentricities" of her dreams. After rethinking the concept, she took the idea to a bank, got a loan and opened her own "psychodesign" bureau. Although she had no drawing ability, she had little trouble finding two sharp, young, female artists who, following her instructions, produced creative sketches of everything from hairdos and makeup to interior design. It wasn't long before she had hired a hairdresser, makeup artist, and had moved into a new apartment closer to the center of town. A yoga studio, near the salon, followed. She staffed it with two good-looking trainers from a gym in the suburbs. She had, as they say, jumped in with both feet.

And what a jump it was. Her expected clientele of enlightened, progressive businessmen never materialized. In their place came younger-than-their-years thirtyish women who felt stifled in their sinfully pricey downtown apartments and wanted to drop four pounds or were looking for an unconventional makeover before being seen at the opening of a new club. Word of mouth among the "kept women circuit" worked better than Maia could have dreamed. Ambitious, young TV personalities, local pop stars, mistresses of the upper middle class, and dime-a-dozen club-hopping sluts rounded out a very happening enterprise.

Maia had four lovers during her time in Kyiv; all of whom were passionate, each of whom soon bored her. The longest she dated anyone exclusively was the year she met twice weekly with one of her good-looking yoga instructors. He ended it saying he couldn't stand her "tricks" any longer.

6.

It's not that Maia was still terrorizing her lovers, she wasn't. She had just never figured out how to control her tendency to, at the worst possible moment, glaciare over a relationship that was actually working out pretty well for her.

Men often complimented her. She got plenty of semi-lecherous looks on the street, though no man seemed to be able to keep his eyes on her for long.



When she turned 28, Maia decided that she must be a lesbian and, with the help of an internet hookup, “experimented” once. In the end, she concluded that this, too, wasn’t for her.

She tried smoking a little marijuana on occasion because it helped perk up her masturbating. It also gave her some insight into her old, ex-friend Lera who had said that pot helped her crap. Sometimes Maia bought Salvia Divinorum on the net to help clear out the cobwebs and get herself more fully “into the now.”

She took a job designing a chill-out room for a recording studio but quickly discovered she’d grown tired even of the idea of psychodesign. Feeling a depression coming on and wanting to disappear from Kyiv, she decided that she’d close the bureau; the studio job would be her last.

She told herself that after things got wrapped up at the bureau she’d move to Lviv, and though she had no idea what she’d do there, she’d always had a yen to try it in that city for a bit. One song – “All Roads Lead to Ancient Lviv” - by the men’s vocal ensemble “Pikkardiyska Tertsia,” brought tears to her eyes, like the memory of a forgotten promise.

7.

While overseeing the studio job, she noticed a tall, impeccably dressed man with a pockmarked face and concluded that she could think of nothing worse than to fall for a guy with such horrible skin. However, on the way to the studio the next morning, she couldn’t get her mind off him. His reptilian skin cheated him of a certain smooth attractiveness but it also gave him a kind of poetic quality.

All day long she searched for an excuse to bump into him. It was only toward evening as the studio crowd was making its way out that he chanced by the chill-out room to grab a coffee.

They exchanged some small talk. The fop was, it seems, a composer/musician who was only working temporarily as an audio engineer at the studio. His name was Yakiv – Yakiv Gorakh-Yevlambia – and he was from Lviv.

He asked what she’d been doing before this.

“I was the lead weather forecaster at a TV channel,” Maia answered and felt like crying.

Yakiv sat at the piano and played a melody that put a lump in her throat.

“Do you know it...?” he asked not stopping his playing. “The harmonica comes in here....”

She nodded, working not to cry: “Sure, it’s the song from the weather forecast that followed the evening news. Music from my childhood.”



“Exactly,” he said. “It’s called ‘Manchester et Liverpool.’ Marie Laforêt sang it.”

Maia tried to recall the French lyrics, but all she could bring up was the refrain: “Je t’aime, je t’aime....”

She downloaded the song that evening and listened to it, crying for no reason, all night.

10.

By their third evening together they were making love in the chill-out room on a bright orange sofa that Maia had designed, inspired by the memory of an evening she had spent at a club in Lugansk, in the arms of a stranger, sitting, drinking juice, taking drags off a hookah, getting asked from time to time if she was ok.

This time she was also ok.

IRENA KARPA

Born in 1980, this freedom-loving girl was brought up in a small town in the Carpathian highlands. Since her graduation from Kyiv National Linguistic University where she majored in French, Irena has established herself as a uniquely versatile personality on the Ukrainian cultural scene. Among her accomplishments: celebrated author; front-frau for her alternative band “Qarpa”; MTV- Ukraine v-jay and TV personality; “Playboy” and “FHM” cover-girl; tabloid as well as mainstream media journalist; world traveler; and controversial media cause célèbre. Irena’s constantly enriching personal experience affords her infinite resources for producing her singularly autobiographical, paradoxical, and aphoristic prose. This *ladette* and thoroughly 21st century non-glamour beauty is the most frequently quoted author in the Ukrainian blogosphere. Her novels, stories, and essays have been translated previously into Bulgarian, Czech, German, Polish, Serbian, and Russian. The excerpt here, “Kropyva, Me, and the Stolen Shovel”, is from her most recent novel, *Doblo i Zlo*, (2008).





IRENA KARPA

KROPYVA, ME, AND THE STOLEN SHOVEL.

There really is magic in the world: pitchers with no top or bottom, but inside the future and the past are hiding; snake tongues that, if you swallow one, you'll find yourself conversing with the birds and the beasts; enchanted rings that, whistled through, (any fairy tale princess can show you how), bring a winged horse to the rescue. Magical brooms and shovels, too. Climb on. Whisper the spell and you're swiftly above the clouds – but hold tight....

We, Kropyva and I, had swiped a shovel – with thoroughly righteous intent – for the ethnographic display that our history class at school was putting together. Nothing could escape our light-fingered creativity when it came to assembling that collection: not jars and plates broken and re-glued – *really, mom, it was an accident!* – nor flea-market crap like those “Happy Hutsul” wooden pens with the cock that popped up when you pulled down his pants, (school kids couldn't get enough of these); and especially not quilts, embroidered handiwork, spinning wheels, wooden bobbins, and the like. These latter, more “seasoned” items rounded out the collection and provided it with its gravitas.

“We've already got a couple of those there,” Kropyva hissed at me.

“These? Where?” – to me it was all the same. I mean, who would criticize a couple of kids for exercising their democratic imperative and choosing to cut (even if they didn't precisely have permission to do so), history class? While it is true that we exchanged ‘Ukrainian History’ for rough-n-ready archeological endeavor and that our teacher eventually nailed us (also true), and the good times ended, nevertheless, we had tasted – for a bit – a freedom unknown to the other kids buried alive in their note-taking.

It was right at that time that my town, Yaremcha, was going through withdrawal, “The Rich Cry Too” having just ended its run. The whole town was glued to their sets when it came on; so much so that the church decided to push services back by half-an-hour. The faithful just started showing up at church thirty



minutes late, right after “Marianna,” which was followed by “Simply Maria.” But for Kropyva and me “Maria” didn’t hold a candle to “Marianna,” let alone “The Slave Isaura” which, during that miserable, forgettable time, milked tears and blood from me by the bucket.

I was going to art classes then, first grade, maybe second, I forget. Suffice it to say, I was little and Isaura, as comforting as a plate of mom’s roasted chicken and mashed potatoes, was on TV at 7:00 o’clock, every evening. Evenings that I was usually spending until 7:45 (with homework afterwards), in art class. I was just getting home when it was ending.

At first, our teacher, Natalia Petrivna, had pity on our addiction and turned on the TV for us during classes: “as long as you’re busy painting.” But you try painting a batik egg while simultaneously keeping track of the ups and downs of the love lives of 19th century Brazilian slaves! Anyway, I couldn’t do it. I’d sit there, mouth open, staring high up on the wall where the black-and-white TV-set was mounted.

“Karpa! Get to work!” and the rolled up magazine Natalia Petrivna held in her hand would slap the desk next to my elbow. “I’ve had it with Isaura!” as she snapped off the set.

I get it now. She was busy building character in us, and I can see now that TV is evil. Then I saw only heartless opposition from Natalia Petrivna toward my spiritual bent.

It didn’t help that I was a couple of years younger than the rest of my class, mostly boys. An easy target, chunky, little Karpa, briefly put. So, each weekday, as seven o’clock rolled around, (Lord only knows why they didn’t show it on weekends!) and I started squirming in my seat, Krayliuk and Shamala started chirping, all quiet and nasty-like:

“Karpa...Karpa, it’s seven.”

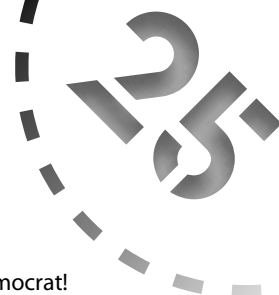
“Karpa...Isauuura!”

“Ooooh!” Shamala, that toad, howled.

“Shamala! That’s enough!” Natalia Petrivna intervened, too late. She had a seven-year-old fountain of tears on her hands.

Kropyva didn’t go to art school. She, with the rest of the good girls, attended the folk dance classes taught by Nadia Vasylivna. Probably because Nelia Romanivna, who handled non-folk dancing, liked to throw her hard-heeled shoe at you if you danced badly. I took Nelia Romanivna’s class for a couple of years and got the boot, so to speak, more than my fair share. I could neither run nor dance then, so it seems.

Nadia Vasylivna took a fairly traditional approach to teaching. She was kinder, more considerate of the kids and consequently it was Nelia Romanivna’s students who took all the prizes at art school recitals.



It's not that Nadia Vasylivna wasn't open to new things; she was. She was a great democrat! When we turned eleven, or twelve, we all signed up for "rap" classes. That's exactly what they called it: "How to Dance the Rap." We had no idea what we were in for. Somebody said that it really should have been "hip-hop" but Kropyva and me, we didn't believe it. "What the hell is 'hip-hop'?" Had they called it "ding-dong" or "tick-tock" it wouldn't have been any more ridiculous. We all went. Boys and girls, all ages, sizes, shapes, and colors – sluts from every corner of town – showed up. Oh, the intrigues!

We met in the mirrored dance room of the "little school," a ramshackle place where, along with "rap," were housed a stuffed-toy factory and a warehouse filled with army duffle-bag backpacks, lumpy cotton sleeping bags, and faded orange tents with tree-branch tent poles.

Picture, if you dare, the slanting floor of the standard soviet-school mirrored assembly room, a tape recorder sitting on a chair in the corner, and Nadia Vasylivna in red Beatle boots and a long, grey skirt showing us *rap* movements and managing to remain emotion-free. "Right-foot, turn – left-foot, turn. You may add your arms." The coolest boys, Kulyk and Boris Sherbakov, made the most of the opportunity and started striding around as they'd seen it done on TV, on "Take That" or "Snap" or whatever the hell they were watching then.

Vita Dudina – with her Nordic-blonde head of hair, blue-eyes, and perfect ass – was the girl to watch. Kropyva and me, to put it mildly, weren't much to look at and usually had to get by on character. And the help of short skirts.

On his sewing machine, my grandpa produced a made-to-my-order skirt resembling a sausage casing: two pieces of elastic sewn together with a hole for my head and two for my arms, like a neckless bratwurst, but skin-tight and so short. In black, which is, of course, slimming.

Kropyva and me, we've been friends since we were four, in kindergarten, in the "Kalinka" group. "Malinka" – another group, but only for blueblood four-year-olds – wouldn't have us, which meant that in school we subsequently missed out on the "A group," reserved for Malinkas, and landed in the "C group," which was reserved for, well, you know.

Kropyva was the one person I could say anything to. And she to me; sometimes the wildest, coolest stuff. When it came to sex, Kropyva was THE source for information. Compared to her, I was so naïve, linear, bookwormish; the one you could cheat off if you needed to. We'd cut classes at my house, but that was later. (In fact, much later, after a bunch of our "C" groupers had been siphoned off by trade schools, those of us remaining were re-christened "B group", and almost everybody knew that my parents' place, aka "apartment #70", was the place to cut class.)



What's funny is that I, under mom's strict control, was the best-attending student in my class. In exchange for the use of my apartment as a hangout, my classmates were pretty good about keeping the place clean, even heating up my dinner so that after "normal" school I could make it to art school with no problems.

This arrangement worked well until one day Kropyva – moron – washed the windows, something I'd never have done, not even for Easter Sunday! She forgot to close a window and my mom was all over me: "Now, it's coming clear! How could I have missed this? You'd never clean up like this!" I took a hammering for all my sins, real or imagined: for letting strangers into our home unsupervised; for participating in this class-cutting scheme; for untouched physics homework, which was apparently the result of negative peer-pressure.

Kropyva sat near me in the last row, reserved for lost causes, aka, underachievers. Oddly, Torous, a top student, math-whiz who wore coke-bottle-thick glasses, sat right in front of us, uncharacteristically far-removed from the usual spot reserved for that type. Egg-headed Torous. It was particularly satisfying to share in his hard work during algebra, geometry, what-have-you, tests, *absit omen!* He even let us have a bite of his garlic-flavored lard sandwiches. State school was so tasty!

Kropyva's unrealized dream was to sit, by permission, with her feet up on the desk. "They've been doing it in other countries forever!" she assured us, stretching her right leg impossibly and elegantly resting her foot near Torous's shoulder. She was a vision of nonchalance, bending over her emancipated limb, her fingertips gliding along its length.

This display was possible only during the gaps between classes or when we had a student teacher. I didn't like it when Kropyva would show off like that, but I never told her so. It was so humiliating that I'd usually just disappear to the cafeteria and swallow my embarrassment along with one of my mountainous aunt Anya's amazingly tasty and ridiculously-bad-for-you fritters. The *foie gras* served at the most exclusive restaurant stands little chance of unseating from my memory (or my arteries) auntie Anya's fried dough filled with jam, cabbage, mashed potatoes, or even "liver." Only rarely did I get through one alone and undisturbed without one of my fucking classmates popping up with a "give me a bite!" (I, by contrast, was far more refined when begging others to share.) Worst of all – even worse than her legs, clad in classic greyish-brown soviet-style tights and perched on a desk – was the chills-and-fever-inducing slang phrase that Kropyva picked up someplace: "dish, tightwad!" Translation: "would you be so kind as to temporarily lend me a little change, my good fellow?"

"A little change" we had. Everybody did. We were good at scrimping and saving and tucking



something away for a computer game or, like me, for a puppy. We did all right in school at the expense of our spineless classmates who, like holy martyrs primed for sacrifice, we had trained well to keep us in petty cash (theirs) or sandwiches when they were broke. We sincerely intended to return every penny one day; and it's surely worth pointing out that we were capable of random fits of decency now and then.

This strong-arming talent came in handy when we were working on that ethnographic display. If we needed an antique or a handicraft, we just assumed we could get somebody to provide it. Sometimes we could get them to bring two or three items on our behalf; that was when Kropyva really went to town. She'd settle on a kid, like Petia Petrashuk:

"Petia," she'd say, "we'll say that you found the platter but that Karpa and I came up with the old pitcher and the rake."

"You're kidding right? You get my pitcher and rake and leave me with the platter?"

"Why so greedy, Petia? Fine. The rake is yours but we get the platter AND the pitcher."

When it finally clicked for Petia he was getting set up and that his hard work would be helping our grade-point averages he asked: "Why should I give you anything?"

"Because then Karpa will get you through French class," which took the wind out of his sails.

French was a joke. Our elite – the "A" group – studied English, of course. But we, the dregs of "B" group, got French, apparently in some harkening back to the glory years of the classical gymnasium-academy here in storied Galicia, western Ukraine! "*Comment t'appelles-tu?*" and "*je m'appelle Vasy!*" was about as much as any of us could come up with, though Kropyva was a little brighter than your average bear, but even she preferred to read French that had been transliterated into Ukrainian. It was difficult for me to imagine the preternatural level of patience and memory that it must have taken – such fiercely-maintained opposition to cerebral function! – for them to transcribe with Ukrainian letters what I was dictating in French and then to learn all that shit by heart in order to fake out the teacher and get her to think that they were reading from the original. Christ! I always figured it was easier just to sit down and learn how to read it.

Behind her back, we called our teacher "*zhema*" from "*je m'appelle.*" Get it?

It was only fitting, I suppose, that in the future a lot of us would end up in France, looking for work hanging tile or cleaning bathrooms. When in Portugal we western Ukrainians pick oranges. In Italy, we're caregivers for Italian geriatrics. Kropyva ended up in France. She continued to live and study there until long after my own university experience had turned into a distant memory, though I'm getting ahead of myself. That



wasn't at all how we'd imagined it would be back when we were making off with our shovel.

"You're sure nobody lives there?" I asked, eyeing suspiciously the cottage near the glade.

"Yes, I'm sure. Nobody," she confirmed, "except this one old hag who comes once in a while. A real witch."

"Right! A witch," I said, doubting her now.

"I'm telling you. Anyway, shut up. Let's go."

We slipped over the hedgerow and off toward the cottage. The grass hadn't been cut in a long time, nice and high. It was the Hutsuls, the locals, we were afraid of much more than some witch. If they saw us tramping all over this hay, they'd tear our heads off.

The cottage windows were all boarded up and a wealth of useful items, most of which weren't antiques by the look of it, were lying around: plates, bowls, jars, pitchers, scissors. If we could have gotten our hands on an excavator the whole house, save a few odds and ends, would have gone back with us to the exhibit.

"What should we take?" Kropyva asked.

"How should I know? This comb looks good. Old, anyway."

"Sure," Kropyva said and dropped the comb into the plastic bag she was carrying with the words "Major Shoe Brand" printed on it.

"Hey, Nad'ka. Let's grab the shovel, too."

This big, flat shovel, the kind they clean snow off the roof or slide bread into and out of the oven with, was sort of mysteriously leaning against the wall. "I'm taking it," Kropyva said, grabbing it, and bringing everything that it had been supporting, including that part of the cottage thatch roof, down on our heads.

Then there was this voice, screeching, seemingly from nowhere: "Take what you've got coming, you little shits!"

"Witch!" we squeaked and bolted from there. Opportunistic child that I was, that shovel went with us.

"Pain, Blood, and Hell wait for you, you thieving little whores! Drop what you took or you'll never see a cock all your days!" she spit curses as she ran after us.

"Kropyva, you cow! You said nobody lived there," I was nearly vomiting.

"She's not alive!" Kropyva was gulping air. "That was the witch, back from the dead!"



I screamed again and ran faster. Here I was, an almost twelve-year-old girl, hurdling down this hill, crying my eyes out. How humiliating! All I could think of was getting away from that place when it struck me: I've got a witch's shovel under my arm. If we can concentrate hard enough, really WISH IT! we can fly out of here.

"Hop on, Kropyva!" I barked.

She didn't hesitate. So there we were, loping along, our four legs in sync with the shovel handle between them, the scoop behind us, and believing with all our hearts that we were about to lift off...

Only we didn't manage to get off the ground; likely the result of attempting to fly on a stolen shovel.

The history department soon changed the policy governing submissions to our "museum." My history teacher narrowly avoided the unpleasantness of provoking my family, already extremely sensitive of its national heritage, into a vendetta against him. I had told him: "I'm not a Hutsul girl!" and so he called me a "Russian."

When you're a kid, odd misunderstandings like that just sort of have a way of working themselves out. "How?" you ask. How would I know? That was so long ago.



KATERYNA KHINKULOVA

Kateryna is a Ukrainian author and journalist who has written two novels; *36 Songs About Life* (2006), and *Drifters* (2007), both of which were published to critical acclaim by the Kapranov brothers. Born in Kiev in 1973, she now lives and works in London, though travels regularly back to Ukraine. Kateryna earned an MSc in Political Studies from the London School of Economics and is currently involved in researching TV formats. "Red" and "One-Two-Three-Four" are short stories from her forthcoming collection "Love Square". "Three Lessons" is a chapter from her first novel, *36 Songs About Life*.





KATERYNA KHINKULOVA

RED

**SHE LOOKS MUCH MORE LIKE
A KATYA THAN I COULD EVER HOPE TO.**

Her hair is red. A true Katya should have red hair: I've known this since I was a child. I've always thought letters, numbers, days of the week, months, people's names all must have colours. Monday is orange, Friday is purple, Sunday is milky off-white; February is pale yellow and black checks, March is greyish with specks of pistachio green, October is plum – am I starting to sound banal? Three is bright green, eleven is black, twenty two is in stripes of pink and lilac. I was ever so disappointed to learn that Nabokov had a similar idea. And so are the names – Lusya is straw-coloured, Tanya is red cheeks, Olya is sky-blue and Katya is red. As in red hair. Not carrot red, not bright coppery red, but very light, natural red of an old gold watch handed down from grandmother to mother to daughter. For all we know, that watch could have once belonged to the Duchess of Byelorussia and Lithuania, or to the Countess Golitsine; a Swiss-made simple watch fitting tightly around the slimmest of wrists, a watch that survived Bolshevik searches, the Great Terror and the evacuation of the Second World War, always treasured and never swapped, however great the temptation, for a sack of frost-bitten potatoes, for a warmer coat, for a bandage, or a life. A watch that's come to symbolise the victory of human survival. Well, her hair is precisely that colour.

Her eyes are peculiar, too, – Mongolian slits diluted with lake-like shapes of a European face. They are light brown and clash beautifully with the generous sprinkling of freckles across her nose. Her teeth are imperfect – spaced out and pointy, so when she opens her mouth to laugh, for a split second she looks like a dreamy wolf cub. She laughs a lot, so much in fact, that I start to think I must be very witty. She responds to the lamest of my jokes, listens to all my anecdotes and asks how much I write these days – if I say I hardly do, she frowns and says I should, as I have so many stories to tell.



First time we meet is in a gloomy café – I have a beer and a baked apple, she has a sugarless, milkless tea, which she insists on paying for herself. She asks me about my writing and her questions are all right, I suppose, not the sharpest but they are all right: I sense her genuine interest and am helplessly grateful.

Second time we meet is in a cinema – she insists on handing over a copy of the newspaper she works for that has my interview in it. She is waiting in a queue of journalists to interview some visiting Russian star, a film director or maybe an actor, she is not sure. We sit on a red velvet bench among the marble columns of Stalinist architecture, she talks about her own writing and jots down the name of her website on the edge of my newspaper.

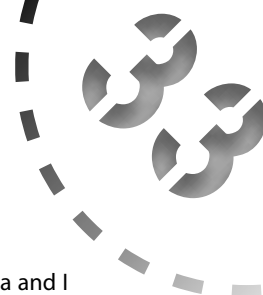
Third time we meet is in a teahouse where she has a milkless, sugarless tea and I have a slice of almond cake wishing I could order a gin with that, too, but they don't serve gin here. She asks me about my writing and how many pages I do a day? I say I don't know and add that last night I did 10 pages but before that I hadn't written anything for two weeks. She says that's cool and I am helplessly grateful again because to seem cool to her is suddenly precious.

Fourth time we meet is on International Women's Day: I am half an hour late coming from my Grandmother's with a bunch of tiny tulips. She is very cold but waves off my apologies and declares my flowers to be funny. We go to another teahouse which reeks of incense and where the waiter leading us to the last available table minces with his narrow hips. In the middle of our spicy chai her phone rings, she talks urgently and muffled for a couple of minutes and then says she has to go because a friend has taken some pills, is not sure how many and that the friend is starting to feel unwell. I say that's OK. She waits a second and then: "It's not just a friend. I am very fond of her." She says: "I am in love with her." I shrug, curiously non-jealous, and ask whether she needs to rush off. She asks: "Have you ever had a relationship with a woman?" "Relationship or sex?" I reply. "Is there a difference?" she says. I feel older and more cynical than I have for a long time. "Yes," I say. "Yes, there is." "So?" she offers with the same urgency she was talking on the phone a minute ago. "I am not good with relationships," I say.

Fifth time we meet is in a hot late spring park, she is sitting on a bench, bony knees wide apart and I am half an hour late. "That's OK," – she says. "Do you want to smoke?" Her face tilted towards me has soaked up half an hour of sunshine and each freckle is bursting with will to live. "Yes," I say. "Yes, I want to smoke." We walk down the boulevard and the fluff from poplars is landing on the pavement in balls big enough to kick.

"How did it end with your friend?" I ask.

"It hasn't," she says. "But she is fine, thanks."



We get to my empty flat, she rolls a joint, we pass it back and forth, then have some tea and I tell her more of my stories. She laughs and compliments me on my sense of humour. The harmony is palpable. And then it occurs to me that she looks much more like a Katya than I could ever hope to.

ONE-TWO-THREE-FOUR

It's dark at the bus stop. It's also dark around it. The light bulb is smashed and it's 8 o'clock on a November night. I am not cold. "One-two-three-four, one-two-three-four, one, two, three, foouour" – I count to myself. I am coming back from my dance class. It's modern dance, so we make a lot of sharp movements; we jump, we hop, we point our toes. It was my first lesson and the third for everybody else, so I am pleased with myself. I did really well. "And a one, and a two, and a three, and a four..."

If only everything could be counted out like that. If only this rhythm was in everything.

I begin to think that I really ought to be counting like this at all times, especially when my head is ringing with emptiness, like it was yesterday and I wanted to do something really crazy like jump out the window, or under a car, or sleep under a bridge.

We are also learning to fall. "And a one and a two and a three and a four – and a fall and a catch! One-two-three! Four! And a catch!" The teacher leaning, her body at an incredible 45 degree angle, steps forward sharply and saves herself from falling down. We try to copy her. You have to catch yourself on "Four!"

"One-two-three! And four!"

– Excuse me, which bus are you waiting for?

She has a round dark face, a beret and round spectacles.

– One nine nine, I say.

She nods and folds her hands on her stomach.

– Is it twenty past eight yet? She asks.

– No, I say. It's only ten past.

– Then we have to wait another ten minutes, she says. One nine nine always arrives at twenty past.

– Really? I say.

Her tone is calmly confident like she is reading passages from the Bible.

– Yes, she says. Sometimes it's a minute late, or even a minute early. But mostly it's at exactly twenty past.



She turns away from me and starts singing. Black people sometimes sing in a manner of utter social independence. Probably, a hymn.

– Have you been here long? She asks, interrupting her singing for a second.

“One, two, three... And a four! We catch ourselves on the four!”

– Not long. Maybe, five minutes.

The dance teacher told us how she saw a man fall into some mud last Saturday right next to our dance school, by the Thames.

“He was waist deep in mud but kept talking on his phone like nothing had happened. He called the fire brigade! Can you imagine?” She tells us this story during a short break in our class, a short break from skips, hops and self-catching. She tells it several times, demonstrating the man, his waist, his mobile phone in his ear. Her gestures theatrical: sharp movements at the waist, kicking around in the mud, spread out thumb and little finger in a “phone” symbol.

– Have you heard, I ask the black woman in a beret, on Saturday a man sunk in the mud next to the river?

– Did he die? She asks, lively now. She stops humming and I am telling her the story about his waist, his mobile phone and the fire brigade. I am illustrating theatrically.

The black woman asks:

– And? Did they come?

I can’t answer her question.

– Yes! Three at once!

– Typical! She says annoyed. A real fire and they’d never turn up.

She continues singing. My dance teacher has light hair cut into an unimaginative bob, her nose is too long for my liking and her arms too muscular. And also – she tries too hard to be nice. She is trying too hard. It puts me off.

– What’s the time? The black woman in the black beret asks. She has finished singing her hymn and switches to something contemporary.

– Twenty past, I say.

– It’s going to come.

We wait another few seconds in the dark watching the cars appear around the corner and charge past us.

– Interesting, she says.



For a few seconds she doesn't add anything so I ask: – What's interesting?

– I always used to wait alone at this bus stop and now there are two of us.

She is not expressing any joy at my appearance at her bus stop. Or maybe she is. I don't understand her and it attracts me.

A red double-decker with the number "199" appears from around the corner and flies toward us. I step to the curb and think it's funny that the driver hasn't indicated that he's going to stop. The bus whooshes past us and disappears. The black woman is looking at me in shock:

– Why didn't you stop it?

I am too ashamed to admit that I'd forgotten that at bus stops like this one you need to raise your arm and signal for the bus to stop.

She is mumbling angrily that had she known she would have stopped the bus herself and now – how long until the next one?

– I am sorry, I say with feeling.

– Do you have a travel card? She asks.

– Yes, I say.

– Then we can get the 188. The stop is further along. One eight eight usually comes at 8:25. I catch it when I miss this one. Do you want to come?

Having forgiven me the fiasco with the first bus, she is inviting me to take an exciting journey to another bus stop. I can see that she is struggling to understand what's wrong with me and that it attracts her. We trot to the new stop. She is limping. She is singing Aretha Franklin.

– Did you know him? She asks.

– Who? I say.

I think about my dance teacher and how sad that she's teaching these evening classes for adults and how it didn't happen to her as a famous dancer: spotlights, applause, admiration. Instead she is, probably, on some other bus – the 177 or the 166 – on her way home to her joyless flat which she is, probably, renting with two other girls just like her – dancers forced to teach; actresses, temporarily; artists who haven't sold a thing.

– Him, the man who drowned in the mud? The black woman in round spectacles tugs me back to the topic at hand.

I consider whether I could have known him.

Yes, I say. Yes. We were going to get married.



– Really? The black woman screams and grabs my hands.

– Oh no, that can't be! But... so, they didn't save him?

– No, I say, lowering my eyes modestly.

– The three fire brigades were too late.

– Oh-oh-oh! Moans the woman.

The 188 flies past us. Is that my dance teacher in the window?

– Don't be too upset, sweetheart, says the woman, stroking my shoulder. Have a good cry and then find somebody else.

– All right, I say, keeping my eyes lowered.

I do enjoy telling lies sometimes. Just a little experiment in human nature, so I don't feel too guilty.

– But what are you doing here at this time of night? asks the woman in beret and spectacles. She is still squeezing my shoulder with one hand and my palm with the other.

– Just wanted to have another look, I say, nodding towards the Thames and her treacherous mud, dangerous and silent behind the rows of terraced houses.

– Oh my sweetheart, whispers the woman.

She is shaking her head. There is so much compassion in her eyes that I am sorry that I don't have a camera; it's like a scene from a film.

The bus stop, the darkness, the cars flying past, her hand pressed against her cheek, my tragically lowered eyes.

– But, sweetheart, she says, the most important thing ... don't fall! Don't fall! Don't loose your will! I also... Myself...

She pauses and sobs:

– I've been through so much! But don't you fall! Because if you do ... there will be no one to catch you!

One-two-three-four! We catch ourselves on the "four!" I am thinking again about my dance teacher and how she keeps on catching herself on "four" though she is certainly sick of it.

– Thank you, I say to the black woman. I think we've missed all the buses.

We return to the 199 bus stop, she gets onto one eventually. I decide to walk mainly because I can't handle another minute under her keen eye. She is probably going to tell her children and grandchildren that she met someone whose fiancé drowned in mud last Saturday.

I walk, thinking, up the hill past Greenwich Park: how great it would be if my fiancé had, in fact, drowned in mud. I wouldn't need to catch myself on "four!" every day. And sometimes even on "two!"



THREE LESSONS

(Soundtrack: Flaming Lips – “Yoshimi Battles the Pink Robots”)

I am lying on one side, then on the other, then I turn over and still I can't find a comfortable position for my tired body. I put one hand on my shoulder, and stroke my arm, I touch my stomach and my thighs. The touch of my hand warms my body but my mind continues to race.

I am thinking. Lying down, just like last night and the night before that, I am thinking, my brain torn by insomnia. I am thinking.

Were my mother alive still alive, she would remind me of three important lessons. First, – “Life's unfair”. If ever I am washed ashore a desert island where I am to spend the next 50 years, I will chisel this statement into the wall of my hut.

Life's unfair. It's always been like that and always will be. My mother was a beautiful and clever woman, tall and slim, with long legs, and perfectly round breasts that stretched her blouses in a most intoxicating way. She had a deep laugh reserved for men's most desperate jokes. She had red skin on her rough hands. Her wedding ring was stuck on the fourth finger of her right hand. “Shall I saw it off?” the short-haired janitor at the morgue asked me. His cheeks were alcoholic pink. He wanted a bribe, a little one. “No, thank you,” I said. She was buried like that. Apart from her wedding ring, she had three pairs of shoes and some awful underwear.

I am stroking my side and stretch my silk nightdress over my hips. I have countless shirts and bras, I never mend my tights, I am constantly buying new shoes, as if something important depends on it. And yet, just like my mother, 20 years ago, I am lying in this lonely darkness and keep repeating, lips salty and trembling: “It's not fair, not fair, not fair” though my reasons are different from hers.

Before I descend into a chaos of tears and snot and start rocking pointlessly back and forth on my bed, I remember the second lesson my mother would have offered, had she wanted to, had she had the time: “Things could have been worse.” Or, her way of saying it: “Someone's always worse off than you.”

I've come a strange way – from home to London, I used to have parents, and a best friend who happened to be a woman. They are no longer with me, though my son is. I've had lovers and will most likely have more. I live in a reasonably free country where 'til I die people will probably always ask me whether I've come here on holiday. But it could have been worse. I could have been dying of AIDS in South Africa. Bolik could have died in the car with Tanya. My mother could not have divorced my father making her life even more difficult and unpleasant, and mine, perhaps, too. Yes, it could have been worse.

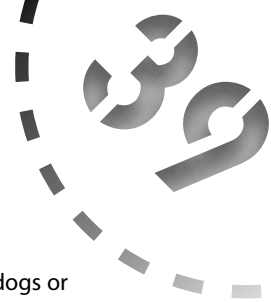


Closer to dawn I lull myself into a couple of hours of wakeful sleep. I have to be up at seven. I hear Bolik's voice: he is singing in his bedroom, getting his bag ready for school and I remember lesson number three: "Life is too short." It's too short to suffer and torture yourself and feel offended by the world. You have to believe in good, because life is too short for pessimism. It doesn't sound realistic after lesson one, but I also believe it's better to have this as your third and final lesson and to start your day with that. I believe that something good will happen, my life is not fair and not perfect, but it could have been worse, and it isn't, so I believe that my future will be even more of a "not worse" one. Life's too short to think otherwise. So despite my insomnia and frequent tears, I am an optimist. I am used to surviving.

I get up, I pull the curtains open and look outside. Sometimes I see the milkman on his rounds with his milk and other trifles. Or the friendly neighbour couple with a daughter Bolik's age who get stuff delivered by the milkman to support the spirit of local community; everybody pretending that they still live in ye olde England, where girls are rosy-cheeked and cows produce pure cream, where all the neighbours know the postman's first name, and in the evening they all go to a local pub together. Reality is different; most of the houses in our street are fitted with burglar alarms, and everybody is scared of local teenagers, who are always kicking a ball next to the parked cars, but no one dares to say anything to them even when a crash of a wing mirror occasionally rings along the street. My neighbours are optimists, too.

Bolik is five. He just started school. He gets only "A's" and as his teachers say, he has no problems adapting to a "culturally-diverse" environment. He is sunny and smiley, and it's hard to take in, looking at him, everything we've been through together. I often wonder whether he has nightmares of the accident, whether he hears the sirens of police cars and ambulances, whether he dreams of Tanya's hands twisted round the steering wheel, the bloodied back of her head, her dark hair mixed with shards of windscreen. We never talk about it. I hope we still have time.

So many people from my past are dead but I am used to it. Tanya, my mother, auntie Asya – all turned happy into memories. I've got used to their absence and have forgiven them the fact that they left me alone in this world. It could have been worse. So I tie Bolik's scarf, he is looking straight into my eyes with his clear grey ones, and I admire his pure skin, his tiny neck, when he is standing against the sun. My only, my beloved, my sweetheart. "Will you be a good boy today?" I ask, squeezing him in my arms. He nods and smiles at me with his sweet-corn smile. His perfection is that of a flower just-opened. I stroke his freckled, velvety nose. "Bye-bye," he says. Eleanor, another neighbour and a semi-friend, who has a little boy slightly older than Bolik, is already waiting outside in her car to take them to school. He shoulders his rucksack and runs to his adventures. For me it's time get dressed, put my make-up on and, along with a million other commuters, make my way to my job at the bank.



I don't really like this job but it pays well and it's much better than walking somebody's dogs or cleaning somebody's toilets or entertaining somebody's children, which is what I did my first couple of years here. Then I got a legal work-permit, took a course, passed some tests and was able to get a job at a bank. I started a junior administrator, and now, after only two years I have my own small project. I am capable and have a reputation as a quick learner.

I am lucky. I speak English reasonably well, was in the right place at the right time, and was able to convince them that I had exactly the skills they were looking for. Or maybe they just pretended to believe me. They also seem to admire my simple clothes; the tighter the better.

"They" are, naturally, men. Luckily, they are still running the world, or, if not quite all of it, definitely my bank. They enjoy the shine of my hair, the angle of my eyebrows, the turn of my neck and the movement of my thighs. "Great arse!" I hear the occasional muffled comment. Do I mind? No, not at all. As I said, it could have been much worse.

Am I lonely? That's the wrong question. I have Bolik and I don't need anything else to fight the solitude. A man – a husband – would not have made me less lonely, I am sure of that. In the same way men – those you meet, talk to, have sex of varying quality with and then part – also wouldn't. Do I hope to meet someone and fall in love? No. Loneliness is a state of mind: certainly for a cynic like me.

Even Tanya failed to help my loneliness towards the end – probably, she was too lonely herself. When it comes to long-term relationships between the sexes, I'm sceptical. I've yet to see a happy marriage and am convinced they don't exist. My mother brought me up on her own, though she had boyfriends. They were far from perfect and one of them even started seeing someone else. My mother enjoyed the benefit of kicking out anyone she no longer liked without the hassle of dilemmas like – what about the children? On the day Tanya was born, her father abandoned her mother. She never met him.

So, Bolik is off and I have exactly 23 minutes to get ready. I brush my hair. I put on mascara and lipstick. I drink coffee. I zip up my skirt. I look for the house keys and for the phone. I throw them in my handbag. I grab my umbrella. I take a last glance in the mirror. I walk out onto the street and I'm feeling good. The fresh air makes me feel alive and ready to face the job, the day, the world.



SVITLANA PYRKALO

Journalist, editor, scriptwriter, translator, researcher, essayist, and novelist; Svitlana Pyrkalo was born 1976 in Poltava, in eastern Ukraine. She is a regular contributor to two Ukrainian-language periodicals, “Glavred” and “Gazeta Po-Ukrainskiy”, which allow her to write about pretty much what she damn well pleases. Her past work in Ukraine, as a TV producer, political activist, investigative journalist, and fashion magazine editor have all served, to a greater or lesser degree, to sharpen her eye for the often absurd, always real, and unfailingly hilarious detail that marks her prose. Her first novel, *The Green Margarita*, was published in 2000 while a PhD candidate at Kyiv State Shevchenko University. Svitlana currently works as a producer for the Ukrainian Section of the BBC World Service in London where among other things she oversees the “BBC Book of the Year”, which recognizes the best in contemporary Ukrainian prose. She is married, in her own words, “to a nice American gentleman.” The happy couple lives in London.





SVITLANA PYRKALO

HOW MANY RUBBER ITEMS DO YOU KNOW?

I loved the May Day parades of my childhood in the early 80s, because of the balloons. Balloons were the stuff of birthdays, New Year, and parades.

The other big parade with balloons was the October Revolution parade on the 7th of November (after the Revolution, the calendar had been shifted forward 14 days). But I hated that one.

November in the sharp continental climate of Eastern Ukraine was not nice, to put it mildly: windy, rainy, with occasional sleet. Nobody in the mental hospital where both my parents worked ever wanted to go to the October Revolution parade. But the happy mental healthcare workers were supposed to form an impressive column, an exclamation mark affirming the righteousness of our way of life to the imagined evil eye of the West.

Zastoy, or Stagnation, as the late Brezhnev period was known, was in full swing. The workers marching in their columns, my parents, their colleagues, and especially the party officials; all believed it would never end.

"Hurray for the heroic workers of the Order of the Red Banner, the Order of Lenin, Revolutionary War Plant of Poltava!" the first secretary of the regional Party committee would yell into a loudspeaker. Though one would never guess it, there wasn't much by way of revolution in our untroubled backwater.

"Hurray! Hurray!" the heroic workers would bark back. After the parade, they would reward themselves with a glass, or ten, of vodka and a pickled mushroom chaser. A holiday was a holiday.

"Hurray for the heroic workers of the Order of Labour Glory Sewing Factory Vorskla!"

"Hurray! Hurray!" the melodic female choir would chant. The women of the factory carried socialist slogans written on red fabric; their children dressed in clothes made of materials suspiciously resembling those used in the factory's grim fall-winter collection.



Our column, mental health workers, was always last for some reason.

"Hurray for the Order of the Sign of Respect Regional Psychiatric Hospital!" the Party secretary would proclaim with a somewhat uncertain expression on his face.

"Hurray-hurray," the column of psychiatrists would mumble in response. Manic chanting, depressing weather, October in November, demonstrations of force and unity: all for an imaginary enemy. It just felt too much like work.

But May Day was in May.

Four colours and two shapes of balloons enticed the working masses: blue, yellow, red and green; round and long. They were made out of rather thick rubber, and daddies were essential to inflate them. Luckily, I had one, and he could be relied upon in these matters.

Once the balloons were inflated, they would be tied to a stick and taken on a half hour bus ride downtown. Some would perish on the way. We, "the crazy-house kids," always tried to out-balloon each other. We would paint the sticks or tie tulips and daffodils to them, some would even wrap them in candy paper. But on this May Day in 1981, I was determined to win.

The day before, while rummaging through my parents' wardrobe, I had found something precious, something unspeakably beautiful: some white balloons, with a small, adorable pimple at the top. This would be the ticket.

I went to Dad with my treasure in hand and asked him to inflate a couple. His reaction was not at all what I had expected. He snapped them away from me and ran off to talk to Mother.

After some furious whispering my parents told me that they weren't balloons but some secret medical device. I wasn't to mention them to anybody. My dream of a bunch of beautiful, striking white balloons against a happy, bright blue Ukrainian sky had been shattered. I was crushed. For a whole hour. And then promptly forgot all about it.

Years later I remembered that day and laughed at the obviousness of the answer to this mystery. The balloons, of course, what our pharmacies coyly labelled "Rubber Item Number 2" – thick condoms sprinkled, probably, with white talcum powder and designed, if not to stop people from having sex, then at least to punish them for trying. My father vaguely remembered that I'd found some of his condoms. He said that having sex in them was like kissing in a gas mask.



DID YOUR HANDS EVER STEAL ANYTHING?

In a famous gesture, Ukrainian President Yuschenko, he of the Orange Revolution, threw his hands in the air on live TV and proclaimed indignantly: “These hands have stolen nothing.” Well, somebody stole half the country and I keep wondering: if his hands were clean, then whose weren’t?

Mine, for starters. My hands stole.

At age six, I went to school, to the so-called “zero level” with a curriculum not much different from that of a kindergarten. That year was memorable in three ways: General Secretary Brezhnev kicked the bucket (my evening cartoon was cancelled for three days because of the bastard); I tried to extinguish a forest fire with my school bag; and I stole Oksana’s felt pens.

Soviet felt pens were a a joke. Hidden inside deceivingly bright-coloured plastic tubes, their weak hearts routinely gave out on the first day of use. A well-known trick was to pour some cologne or rubbing alcohol inside which served to prolong the miserable thing’s death throes, but failed to provide a serious solution.

Imported felt pens cost 12 rubles. Only Grandpa and Grandma had this kind of money, and only on pension day. But Grandpa and Grandma were all for paint and pencils and against the silly and expensive – but oh, so bright, so happy, so wonderful! – felt pens. So I stole a pack of six felt pens from my classmate Oksana.

In order to avoid any awkward questions, I hid the dishonestly gained pack in a wood pile. But mother noticed that I kept running around the house with pieces of paper, on which, magically, poorly drawn pictures had appeared. Predictably, justice was served the very day of the crime.

Having lectured me about stealing, Mother sent me with instructions to return the felt pens to Oksana, explain to her that I had stolen them, and bring her back a note. She still has that misspelled note somewhere: “Sveta gave the felt pens back.”



EVER HAD YOUR HEAD BANGED AGAINST A WALL?

There are people who can, with natural grace and dignity, say to others: I like you, let's be friends. I have had difficulties in this regard for as long as I can remember. My two preferred ways of expressing interest were always: 1) give candy; 2) give a bloody nose.

The first object of my amore, Ruslan from kindergarten, was lucky. I used to bring him chocolates from home. Those sneaky chocolates hid from me on the tops of wardrobes in pretty boxes, begging to be transformed into, in the parlance of the day, "gifts" for "necessary people."

But my parents never knew how to get acquainted with "necessary people," how to talk to them, let alone how to give them a "gift." They simply forgot about these boxes of chocolates, which they, fittingly, had received at work as "gifts" from patients' families, to whom they, naturally, seemed to be "necessary people." I never forgot.

My second love, Serhiy, became my victim. In the first grade. KGB man Yuri Andropov had replaced the once merely senile, now late Leonid Brezhnev as the General Secretary of the Communist Party. The price of oil had plunged some years before and it was beginning to show. The candy, probably, had run out. I decided that a noticeable push would tell him about my love all the same.

I was blinded by passion. He was taken to the school nurse. Dark blood permanently stained the blue corridor wall. I got an "unsatisfactory" in behaviour.

During my three remaining years in that school, Serhiy and I never spoke again. What can you say to somebody whose head you nearly broke from love too great?

Later, our parents took us to a holiday home near Lviv, in Western Ukraine, where I fell in love with Andriy. He spoke perfect, literary Ukrainian; and I, an eastern dialect peppered with bastardised Russian words. He said he liked me. I wanted to answer, "I also like you terribly, and your freckles, and the way you speak so beautifully," but instead I said: "You are stupid." We were both nine.

I like to think that I've since learned to express my feelings better, though I'm a bit ashamed of my behaviour. So to all of you whom I beat up at school, please forgive me. I loved you.

HOW MANY FIANCÉS DO YOU HAVE?

Counting “fiancés” was our childhood game. My list included every boy I knew who waited for at least three minutes before starting a fight (with me), and also the host of the *Sunday Morning Post*. It was, probably, the only weekly TV entertainment programme at the time.

Our future together looked like this: I would grow up, become intelligent and beautiful, and by then he would be disillusioned and disappointed with other women and the world altogether, and would gratefully rest his greying head on my strong, young shoulder.

The other “fiancés” – as many as twelve at times – I knew personally. One of the longest fixtures in my list was the Carrot, my older second cousin from the capital, Kyiv.

When I was six, our relatives came to visit us in the summer. We did not have a well then, so we got our water from our neighbour’s well down the street. The teenaged Carrot, then still known as Serhiy, pulled a young carrot from our vegetable patch, washed it in the neighbour’s well bucket, bit half of it, tastily, crisply, loudly, and threw the other half into the air. It flew far.

This absurd act of the throwing of the carrot into the sky by a city boy was pure poetry, freedom, even protest against the carrot’s low origins. I immediately dubbed him “The Carrot” and put him down as #1 in the List of Fiancés.

A couple of years later he got replaced by the Rooster, from four houses down the road. We called him that because of unruly ginger mop on the top of his head.

The Rooster was the most beautiful creature in the world. He liked to fish. One day, just after the ice had broken up, he took me to a secret tiny pond to see some tiny fish. The spring water twisted sunrays into golden smiles on their grey backs. Pathetic, naked buds trembled on the willows. I was so in love with the Rooster that I jumped and laughed with joy.

The other day while I was riding home on the tube, some guy just kept smiling at me. Maybe I resembled somebody he knew, but it felt like he was flirting. It occurred to me to enter him into the list of fiancés. Only I don’t have it any more. And all the other girls who had played this game got married and have changed their names.





WHAT DO YOU DO FOR VALENTINE'S DAY DURING A FINANCIAL CRISIS? HEART-SHAPED BEETROOT FOR BORSCHT?

I don't believe in this day. Primarily because of butts. I like butts. They are useful, neat things, in the middle as a rule, helping to imagine what comes next. Usually my butts divide a phrase into two contrasting parts, just as the grammar gods intended. But! On Valentine's Day the first part of everything is horrible, and the second even worse.

Greeting cards naff but large. Teddy bears cheap but expensive. Restaurant meals set but cold but badly served.

Love songs inane but endless. Sex obligatory but boring but the bed encircled by teddy bears and frigging musical cards but also gas from that excruciating meal but mercifully, quick.

Secondly, wasn't St. Valentine actually marrying Roman soldiers? That's more of an occasion for a boozy night in certain areas of Soho (with optional bondage) rather than one celebrating mainstream, obligatory heterosexual torture.

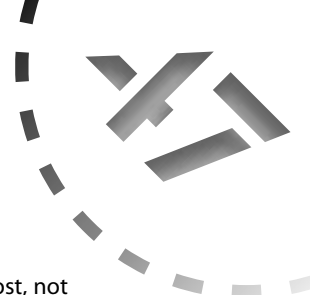
And thirdly, as everybody who's ever been in love knows: Boys' Day falls on the 23rd of February, the Day of the Defenders of the Fatherland; Girls' Day on the 8th of March, International Women's Day; and the class disco that comes somewhere in between... THAT is the day.

Girls bring cakes and cookies, boys – lemonade, and you can listen to the Soviet mega-band "The Tender May" until six p.m.

The single most magical moment of my life occurred in the 5th form, during just such a disco. I was terribly in love with my classmate, Serhiy. (A different Serhiy from those previously mentioned. Our parents' generation had naming issues apparently).

So, I was madly – the only way, really – in love. It was a late afternoon in late February, dusk peeking into our windows, the crooner's voice slowly modulating from "castrated goat" to "romantic." At first, nobody dared to dance; the boys grouping deliberately, making a good show of ignoring the girls.

The only dialogues centred on the topics of cake and lemonade: "More cake? Puke alert!" "The elastic in those panties won't take the abuse!"



The quick dances, in a circle, got everybody involved, but during the slow numbers most, not all, wandered back to their chosen spots, leaning against walls, simulating indifference.

Then another slow song started, and Serhiy asked me to dance. I smiled at him and off we went.

Carefully at first, afraid of a wrong step or word, or gesture, and then bolder, freer, and finally, a random glance, and we both were struck with the realisation that we belonged to each other, and that it would always be so. So powerful was that moment that I remember it better than whatever it was that I did last weekend.

Would that it had happened. That dance was the fruit of imagination of a girl on a slow walk home from school. Serhiy moved away that year, and never learned that we belonged together, or that it would be always so.

WHICH DO YOU LIKE BETTER – NEWSPAPERS OR DINOSAURS?

When I was nine, mother decided to get me started on serious reading. She tore me away from my Astrid Lindgren, Mark Twain and the wonderful Ukrainian writer Vsevolod Nestayko and gave me “Pravda”, the newspaper. The lead story was about the preparations for the 27th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Mother told me to read aloud, but I couldn’t.

“How can you take this crap seriously?” I thought, perhaps aloud. “I suppose there are some imbecilic adults who believe in the Party, the percentage of fat in our Soviet milk, and the tonnes of coal per miner, but you and I know that only dinosaurs, pirates, and maps of the night sky matter.”

Mother sighed, took away the newspaper, and started reading.

That year, my Grandmother pinned a cut-out of a photo of a young Moscow girl from some pan-USSR magazine on her kitchen wall. The caption read: “In the year 2000, she will only be 30”. Only 30? That was practically retirement age! Mum was just over 30, and she didn’t care about dinosaurs. I calculated that I would be 24, also quite a lot, but not the blood-chilling 30!

Now I’m over thirty and that Moscow girl is nearly forty. What would we talk about if we met? Would she tell me that she also liked “Ronya, the Robber’s Daughter,” or would she yell – a Party shill to the end – “Pay for our gas”? And what would I say? Would I ask where she saw in the millenium or, instead, where was Ukraine’s share of the USSR’s foreign holdings?



It's kind of depressing that we're no longer citizens of that common, great, and kind country. I'm not talking about the Soviet bloody Union. I mean childhood. We grew up, forgot about dinosaurs, and started reading about party congresses. Just different parties. And different papers.

HOW DO YOU MAKE A FIRST IMPRESSION?

I recently saw my classmate Olena, still as sporty and energetic as twenty years ago. She would always walk home, and I, despite living closer to school, would always wait for a trolley-bus. She also almost always came home first.

Here's how it usually went for me. I'd hang around the stop for ten minutes, then realise I could have been home by now, start getting a little annoyed and finally decide to hold on, waiting just to prove some point. I'd wait another ten. Get even more annoyed. Finally, I'd start walking, and end up watching as my trolleybus whizzed past, curse and, against all logic, return to the stop. By now Olena had finished her homework and gone to hang out with the gang.

I wasn't always in her class. At first, when we had just moved from the village to the city (I was ten), the headmaster did not want to admit me into the class that specialised in mathematics, or the one that specialised in languages, or history. He only wanted me in the class that specialised in bugger all.

"She's a child prodigy," my parents exaggerated.

"Aye, maybe she is in your village, but this here is a city," the headmaster refused.

So for over a year I was in Class A, which was, coincidentally, the class of drugs (like heroin, but not pot) which my ex-classmates went on to abuse.

As it turned out, that group did specialise in some things: smoking Bulgarian cigarettes in nearby construction sites and chewing on stolen parsley to kill the stench. The most talented among us specialised in dirty jokes and elaborate profanity. I was doing rather well.

Finally the headmaster relented, and I was transferred into the class of the clean, polite children and intensive science lessons. I very much wanted to make a good, right first impression.

So when the cutest guy in class, Tolik, pulled my braid, I turned to him and offered, loudly, the most cutting-edge, wicked phrase of the new season: "Screw your mother in the leg!"



Instead of laughter and fart noises, my new classmates puzzled me by simply, quietly, backing off and staying away, for a long time.

In due time, we all became friends, including Tolik. However it was years until my pony-tail saw any action again.

REMEMBER GORBY, GLASNOST AND NEW THINKING?

One effect of Perestroika was the emergence of Komsomol Video Salons. It was said that organizing videotape viewings for money in stuffy basements on tiny televisions with smuggled VHS players was somehow a new way forward for the Union of Socialist Youth, or Komsomol (aka, the Young Communist League).

It was, in fact.

Most of those *komsomoltsy* were later involved in business structures of varying legality during the early 90s, in big businesses during the late 90s and, balding but still possessing that Komsomol glint in the eye, in governments and parliaments during the noughties. Sometimes I fantasize about catching a young-ish MP and peeling a few layers off him, to reveal everything all the way back to the brave video salon organizer who first brought the delights of Rambo and Jackie Chan to his neighbourhood. That and so much more.

One summer, Mother went on a Qualification Heightening Course for psychiatrists. They were a regular occurrence, but this time the course was taking place in Crimea, in the summer, a couple of hours away from the sea on a trolleybus. (Yes, a trolleybus. It is the longest route in the world, starting in the city of Simferopol, jerking through the mountains, vomiting new arrivals on the Black Sea coast). So Mother took me with her, and I was even allowed to sit quietly in some lectures. And who, at 14, wouldn't want to know all about sexual neuroses *a la* Sigmund Freud?

One day after the sessions there was a film viewing scheduled. Nobody knew what film exactly, we knew only that we were to see an American psychiatric movie. Mother went off elsewhere; I stayed, lured by the promise of the weird. The bearded male psychiatrists, strict female psychiatrists and I filled a room with some assorted chairs and a small imported TV-VCR combo. Then some condescending guy walked in, (somehow those guys who know how to press more buttons than the rest of us always look condescending), pushed a videocassette into the player and left.



The screen was soon filled with naked people screaming in German, having violent sex.

“Odd choice,” I thought. “Not a lot of dialogue. On the other hand, they are all clearly insane.” I, having innocently taken this for a psychiatric exercise, wondered if any of our doctors would be able to guess what was wrong with these people before it was made clear in the film.

We didn’t get to hear the diagnosis. Mr. Condescension, sweating and panting, without a trace of his former cockiness, ran in, changed the videocassette, and escaped without a word, skilfully avoiding eye contact. A proper movie started.

“Rain Man” with Dustin Hoffman, an *American* psychiatric movie. The diagnosis was “autism”.

I was fourteen. Yet the bearded and strict uncle and auntie psychiatrists sat silently beside me while the porn was on. Why? Maybe they just liked it. Or maybe they had been Soviet for so long they could not remember how to stand up and say: “This is wrong. We’ve got to stop this show.”

DO YOU STILL REMEMBER YOUR FIRST LOVE’S NAME?

All normal, well-adjusted people have a proper first love. They date, kiss and so on, and then part on graduating from school and remember about it after the first row with their spouse. What if? Should we have...?

I also had a boyfriend with whom I dated, kissed and so on. And there was also... well, let’s call him “a musician”.

The musician was married, but when, upon our first meeting, I managed to tear my eyes away from his face and saw his wedding ring, it was too late. Awkwardly but eagerly, I helped myself to his friendship.

There was a room in the Palace of Pioneers, the sort of culture centre for youth that still bore its Soviet name, where local amateur folk singers congregated. We went there, sat in the round and sang. One cold evening he warmed my hands in his. I stole a glance at him and wondered: what was he doing in our provincial town? He who was so striking, so out of this world, who only wrote one song a year, but it was about the sea, the yellowing grass, and women with the magical beauty of the Autumnal Equinox. I thought he might just dissolve into the sky one day.



That was the kind of friendship we had.

My relationship with the boyfriend, meanwhile, grew worse and worse. I went to Kyiv to study, he followed me, and a whole new drama began.

Many years later, I was sitting at my desk at the “Studio 1+1” TV channel where I worked as a script supervisor when the musician called. “Long time no see,” he said. “I heard you were living in the capital. Maybe you know some cool new music that goes with fireworks?” He had abandoned his guitar and got interested in fireworks. He was preparing a display for the fireworks festival. What a crazy country! Screw the bread, give us circuses. A fireworks festival!

The firework enthusiasts’ meeting place, he told me, was in that same Palace of Pioneers though now renamed The Palace of Culture and Arts, opposite our old bard room. I bagged some CDs and left for Poltava, as it happened, on my birthday.

The musician met me with a bunch of lilies: on my 25th. He had a lot of new wrinkles, a son born since we’d last seen each other, and I could see that he was going nowhere.

A bottle of cognac also featured at that meeting. At two o’clock in the morning the musician decided that my birthday gave us the best possible excuse for fireworks.

He snuck into the Palace of Pioneers, which had commissioned him to prepare the fireworks for the festival, helped himself to the heaviest box, and together we blasted the hell out of the quiet starlit sky of Poltava. The eternal, pale, and poetic stars were humbled by our ersatz, shimmering, manufactured beauties, which dissolved into the sky like I once thought he would.

Apart from some old lady who feebly swore at us from her window, these stolen, perishable stars were ours alone.

I told him he was my first love. He did not answer.

HAVE YOU EVER WANTED TO BE SWALLOWED UP BY THE EARTH?

One wintry day I got lost in an unfamiliar area of London. The sun was shining pleasantly, the cyclamens blossomed away, and I forgot where I was going.

Some stranger offered to help. A sharp, unusual ray of the January sun highlighted his face, and I saw such giant, abnormal bags under his eyes that they cast their own shadow.



“Where’s the money? In the bags. Where are the bags? Under the eyes” as they say back home. He must be some drinker!

The guy showed me the way to the tube, put his hands into the pockets of his elegant cashmere coat and went off. I felt ashamed of myself. I remembered something that happened seven years ago.

We needed an interesting and unusual – almost unbelievable – story for a TV programme. Some church-going woman, I guess she was an accountant with the channel, told me a story about her pastor. The church was one of those new Baptist-y ones. So the pastor, she said, married a drunk, a tramp; first pulled her out of the gutter, then washed, got her treated for cirrhosis of the liver, and now they were married. The church buzzed with sinful excitement.

I came to their cosy flat to meet the pastor’s wife. She had the same kind of bags under her eyes. She poured me some lemon balm tea. The couple looked blissfully, iridescently in love. My guts knotted up, I did so not want to ask her about the damned cirrhosis.

“Yes, I worked at a chemical plant for twenty years”, she said. “It was so awful! My first husband, let the Lord rest his soul, also worked there. There’s where I got sick. That’s why Petro and I had to postpone our wedding.”

I finished my cookie, lied that I was going to come to their church and ran away. Out of deep shame – for myself, for the accountant, for the whole congregation of gossipers who out of wickedness or boredom threw this kind woman into a ditch as a dying alcoholic – I prayed to be swallowed by the earth.

To this day I cannot remember whether, asking her about the cirrhosis, I mentioned the ditch.

HOW LONG DOES IT TAKE YOU TO GET FROM WHERE YOU LIVE TO YOUR REAL HOME?

I occasionally do a marathon from London to Poltava. I present the early morning radio programme, get on a plane at Heathrow at eight, get off in Kyiv at midday, and by six PM I am, tired and sleepy, sipping tasty, sweet railway tea in the first class carriage of the Capital Express. This train is so called because it connects the past and present Ukrainian capital Kyiv with the one-time early Soviet Ukrainian capital Kharkiv.

On this particular trip I shared a compartment with three men, who could, with a certain margin for error, be classified as intelligentsia of that unique Ukrainian male generation who, while physically still



strong, have no future.

"Let's meet," one of them demanded. "You're such a pretty young lady that, maybe, I could finally settle! Huh? Heh, heh, heh!" He grabbed my suitcase and threw it onto the highest shelf.

"Old dog," I thought. "Old enough to be my father."

"Your generation – it's, I don't know! What do you sing?" – suddenly, without pausing, he started almost yelling. "What are you singing? 'Kiss me everywhere, I'm already eighteen!'" – he quoted a popular Russian song with which I was barely familiar. "What is that? Here's what we used to sing: 'I'm looking for a person, grey-eyed, of medium build... ' A person, do you hear me, a *person!*'"

"Blue-eyed," I sniped. It was one of my mother's favourite songs. "What else *could* you do? Go to the Party meetings and sing."

At this point it turned out that, thanks to the Communist Party, the guy had built a hundred nurseries in Kharkiv with his own hands. Now they'd all been turned into casinos. More. Presidents Kravchuk and Kuchma were traitors of Communism and of the Ukrainian people. That he was a gynaecologist and tired of abortions. (I decided against asking, since the Party was sending gynaecologists to building sites, whether the construction workers were checking vaginas). Still more. Hetman Mazepa also betrayed the Ukrainian people, because he conspired with the damned Catholic Swedes in 1709 in the battle of Poltava against Russia.

Since Russia had won, I didn't see how that mattered, but pointed out that Swedes were Lutherans.

"Catholics!" he yelled. The other two guys shushed me and told to listen to a wise man. "Europe is rotting, there's nothing there, no progress, no culture!" I said that I lived in London, and there was plenty.

Their mouths collapsed in a kind of ugly anti-smile and never got up again. I had betrayed them by deserting them for the enticements in the lair of the enemy. In Poltava, I asked them to get my suitcase back down. The alpha male told me to have the quietest guy to get it (he did, if uncomfortably), and asked if I was going to pay for the service in dollars.

I didn't. They were, after all, travelling first class.

HOW DO YOU LIKE YOUR MANICURE?

I only ever get a manicure in Kyiv. In London, DIY has to suffice. To do it professionally is too expensive, and there's too much gender equality in the air to bother.



There are many other things I only ever do in Kyiv. For instance, wear a sheepskin coat with silver fox collar and cuffs.

Especially for Kyiv I bought suede boots on stiletto heels. This purchase turned out to be both wise and not. Not, because the suede immediately got wet in the thawing snow, and wise because only stilettos could keep me on the pavement when it got crusted with ice.

This means that I am constantly needing to become re-acquainted with habits of Kyiv manicurists. They communicate with your fingers; when they need to get one out of the water bowl, they silently lift it out with the handle of some terrifying instrument. The prices are higher than in the US, and the loo doesn't flush. The manicures, however, are usually great.

During one such session, listening to some Russian prison songs on the radio, I realised: Kyiv is my Sinyava.

Sinyava was my University roommate's home town. Home village, really. We called her Little Tanya. In winter, she wore two pairs of sweatpants to Uni. The bottom, warm and thick layer, had holes in them, so she covered them up with the top, thin, water-resistant pair. Even for the mid-90s and potatoes three times a day, it seemed dire.

"Here's the thing," she explained. "Nobody knows me in Kyiv, anyway. In Sinyava, it'd be a different story! I wouldn't leave my backyard in this."

Little Tanya graduated and, not a bit tempted by the bachelors of Kyiv, returned to Sinyava to be a teacher. I bet she looks good.

BUT WHAT IF A MANICURE GOES WRONG?

Once, swearing and thinking of my Motherland, I spent all morning removing gold nail polish, probably made to paint Sputniks, that had apparently fused with my nails.

The paradox of Ukraine lies not only in its improbable mix of East and West. The real puzzler is how everybody always knows what's best for you, even if it loses them money.

In Poltava, I liked some curtains that my sister had made herself. So we went to the same market to get me some of the same fabric from the same ruddy-cheeked, young but sturdy seller. He only had one cut left, three meters long, a meter and a half wide, and I was prepared to buy it.

Then the guy demanded to know what the fabric was for.



"I need three little curtains, a metre by one and a half", I said.

"It's no good for you. It's too wide and too long, the remnant will be too large. Look for something else," he said and tried to take away the cut.

"I don't care about the remnant. I can make a pillowcase out of it."

"No, the remnant is still too big."

"I'll make a wallet as well. Sell me the cut."

"Some wallet it will be, for way too much money!"

Only after I had promised to make six curtains instead of three, miraculously remembering about three more windows in my house, the guy had mercy and sold me the bloody fabric. My husband hated it.

As for the nails. I had asked for a clear coat, and instead got offered some green and pink varnishes, with accompanying floral design, "very popular". I said that I wasn't everybody and insisted on the clear polish. But while I was looking out of the window, the manicurist got the upper hand (sorry, couldn't resist) and painted golden stripes on my nails, so they looked pretty.

Which damn chromosome is it that does not allow a Ukrainian to earn money by following the client's simple requests? I struggled with this question for days.

And then, finally rid of the last glitter of gold, I realised: salesmen and manicurists just care about me. They take a look at me and think: what does she know? What does she understand? She's not adjusted to this life. If not for us, who will save her from the remnant and make her pretty?

DOES YOUR MOTHER HATE YOUR SHORTS?

In Uni, I wore jeans and shorts with many, many holes. I reasoned thus: if I don't have money to dress in something new, I'll give new life to something old. So I tore my jeans and joined a punk band.

Mother, Grandmother and my friend Julia, she of pink frilly dresses, hated my jeans. And really – really – hated my shorts, which were the remains of a pair of corduroys bought when I was 12, with threads loosened and plaited. They had worn thin in the crotch so I patched the hole with a square of red silk, which drove Mother mad like a bull in the ring. I embroidered them with slogans: "For Ukraine! For her Freedom!"; "I want beer", and nonsensical rubbish like "Love is gone, tomatoes wilted." They barely covered my then bonny behind. Everybody except my friend Pasha was against them.



Once I was going home to Poltava from Kyiv, and made a stop in the village where my Grandpa and Grandma lived. I had those shorts on and no other clothes with me. The poor old woman was so shaken when I showed up, knowing that I had walked through the entire village in broad daylight. She knew what they were going to talk about for the next five years. Grandpa growled. When I was ready to leave, Grandma, on a clear summer day, wrapped me in a homemade plastic raincoat and asked me not to come again *like that*.

It was in those shorts that I helped excavate the ancient city of Chersonesos, a Greek outpost in Crimea on the Black Sea. Pasha and I had friends in the History faculty, so they let us join the student archaeology expedition.

I found a lot of pottery. Some of it, whatever didn't look important, or wasn't part of a whole, I nicked. Well, I nicked lots, truth be told, and packed it all into a backpack to take back home. I wrapped the largest pieces in the shorts.

We took cheap seats on the train back to Kyiv, in a carriage with no compartments, just thirty six benches for sleeping passengers, and my backpack was stolen. I wish I could see the face of the thief when he/she got off at some random station in the dead of the night, opened the stolen backpack and saw a bunch of broken pottery and those shorts!

Mother and Grandmother were extremely glad to see the back of those shorts, metaphorically. But recently they resurrected. Pasha saw them on a bag lady at the Kyiv Central train station. He said they became her.

HOW MUCH DO YOU LOVE YOUR DENTIST?

Mother first brought me to a dentist when I was twenty. She practically had to carry me in. My entire mouth was inflamed: the gums and seemingly even the jaw. I couldn't open my mouth for three days and lived on soup. A Kyiv dentist made matters even worse. I bought an overnight train ticket and went home to mummy.

It was a Sunday. Mother called her dentist friend Oleksander Oleksandrovych, San Sanych for short, and we went to his house. They put me in a chair in the living room, told me to open my mouth, put in some powder and ordered me not to move for an hour. San Sanych's daughters were watching "Titanic" on TV.

I've never known such torture, before or since. Once the movie had finished, I felt much better.



Some years later, now 27, I got my first cavity and again ran to mummy. San Sanych had just screwed up her root canal, and at that particular moment she believed that there wasn't a worse dentist in the business. We went to somebody recommended by a relative. In Ukraine, one does not go to random, un-recommended, places or medical practitioners. Before leaving, I decided I was hungry and opted for a slice of cheese. The dentist had never seen anything like it. "You've got cheese in your teeth," he shrugged. "What were you thinking? You've plastered over the cavity, and over everything else in your mouth. Come tomorrow, without the cheese."

I felt too ashamed to come back, so we went to a random, un-recommended, place. We went to the regional dentistry centre.

There, an untidy lady doctor poked my tooth with an instrument, wiped that instrument on my cheek (my American husband refuses to believe this), filled the tooth and threw the instrument back in the box – to be disinfected later, I decided to believe. The filling crumbled, spoiling many a good steak, and fell out completely in three months.

After that, mother found Konstantin and, in him, heaven. Konstantin had sparkling black eyes and long eyelashes. When he bent over me with his drill, I was ready to give him all my teeth without any anaesthesia. Suddenly, I began to follow the recommendation to visit the dentist regularly, even if nothing was wrong. I started flossing and rinsing. The results failed to match my intentions. During my last visit Konstantin didn't find a single cavity. I was so upset!

In the time it took me to produce another cavity, Konstantin had changed jobs, and now I'm scared of dentists again.

HOW'S YOUR HAY THIS YEAR?

It's a shame we don't keep goats. (Not really). My lawn is usually so lush and neglected, and the grass so succulent, that I keep thinking: a goat would love this!

However, I did nothing about the lawn, until my order-loving sister visited one day and brought a lawnmower. My husband gave the lawn a once-over to salve his conscience, proclaimed the job done, and returned to his sofa. Sis and I stayed around to enjoy the smell of the freshly cut grass. The sun showed up, my baby nephew laughed, and a dove called from the tree: "Go-lub-ko! Be-lo-ved!" Its song opened some secret



door in my memory, and through that door I stepped into a long-gone, light-green, sun-bleached, old tinted photograph, summer day.

I was three years old, and grandpa Mikhailo was alive. The doves called out from a great old oak in our neighbour's yard. Grandpa translated their calls for me into human language: the dove, he said, was calling for his little wife to come.

To me, the oak resembled my grandpa. Maybe because of his long, thick beard, which made him look ancient. I wasn't the only one to make the connection. When he died, somebody planted a young oak tree to the right of his grave, between his and grandma's, for when he would call for his little wife to join him. The oak grew well.

A year before she died, grandma Maria found an acorn with a tiny tender oak showing through a crack its husk in her garden. She said that oaks never come for no reason, and so re-planted it in the cemetery, to the right of her own plot. Grandpa had shared his oak with grandma, but it seemed like she had been greedy with hers.

Recently, the family of the folks in the graves next to my grandparents', displeased that the oak shed its leaves every autumn, cut its bark, and it dried out. That family also dried out apparently, because they neither felled the dry oak, nor tidied up their ancestors' grave. Now the dead tree just sits there, a monument not to my Grandpa but to neighbourly pettiness. But Grandma's oak is alive. I keep thinking: how did she know it would come in handy one day?

I also have an oak in my garden. Probably a squirrel brought an acorn and dropped it into a flower pot, and the oak happened. I have nowhere to plant it, but can't throw it away. It's as if grandma Maria were telling me something.

**DEAD PEOPLE CAN ALSO GET TOO
CLOSE SOMETIMES, DON'T YOU
THINK?**

For ten years after my father's death, the plot next to his in the cemetery lay vacant. People didn't need to be told that one day the wife would join her husband. The newly dead populated the rest of the cemetery in neat rows, until it was almost full, leaving our plot to wildflowers.



One day, my sister came home and announced that such and such a woman was buried next to our father. Mum froze in bewilderment.

“Are you jealous or something, mum?” my sister giggled. “Mother is jealous!”

Mother told me this story while we were painting the walls of my new house in London, bought at the height of the property bubble. I only had enough money to fly my mother from Poltava; she’s as skilled at construction and refurbishment as any honest Ukrainian doctor. So she was painting and telling me how she went and saw the fresh grave, and didn’t know what to think, and how weird it felt, and how she, probably, was a little jealous, if truth be told. I felt a bit jealous myself. Why had some strange woman cozied up to our father?

Mother went on: “I later met her husband, or rather widower and he goes: ‘She and Slavik used to be friends a long time ago, and she always said that he was so much fun; now they are neighbours, it’s more fun for them there’”.

People say the craziest things when they’ve just lost somebody dear. I remember my mother throwing herself at the fresh grave and crying in a voice that chilled me more than the twenty-five below temperature of that January day: “Slavik, you so loved the warmth, how will you stand this cold?”

We finished painting the room in silence.

Wiping her brush, Mother said:

“But, you know, here’s what I’ve decided: when I die, just put me in with him into the same grave. What difference would it make?”

The next day we put the brushes away, dressed up and went to “Mamma Mia” in the West End. After that she went home and fell in love again.

WHAT DOES YOUR NEW YEAR TASTE LIKE?

2009 was the first time in my seven years in radio that I had to work on New Year’s Eve. I came prepared, with mountains of black chocolate, rivers of ambrosial coffee, and, most importantly, an orange. I ate it and then squeezed its peel and released the flavour of New Year. That’s what New Year smells like: oranges. And fir tree sap, maybe. But it was the oranges, these fantastical spheres of happiness, precious and rare, guarded in the market by moustachioed Georgians, that were the ultimate luxury of the stagnating Soviet



1980s; oranges arrived in mother's handbag before New Year, and their happy colours rivalled Mother's cheeks burning from the frost.

There were usually two oranges; one each for me and my sister. Sometimes there was only one. Our parents would occasionally take a segment when, if, we offered, but usually refused saying: "Ah, you have it. I like apples better". We just shrugged. The cellar was full of apples from our garden. We could have apples any old time. But what can you do, if your parents don't understand oranges?

I would eat mine very slowly: biting off little pieces from each segment, chewing them, sitting, enjoying the lingering sweetness, smelling my fingers and the peel, then moving on to another segment. My sister would eat hers quickly and then watch me with hungry eyes. It was unbearable for both of us, and so I would share the remaining bit.

(Since then I have concluded that the fable about the ant and the grasshopper is a load of bull. In reality, the ant is always the loser. Labouring, saving, employing common sense, and thinking about tomorrow means you usually just end up bailing out the grasshopper, too).

Sooner or later the orange was gone. Now it was time to take the peel, cut off in a spiral, and sew it back together. My sister was very good at it. Her orange, remarkably lifelike, sat on the dresser amid crystal bowls and vases, and reminded us of the sweet bliss of its flesh.

Once, my sister's friend came to visit, saw that orange on the dresser and got excited! She thought we were going to eat it, and that we would invite her to the feast. Her eyes brimmed with tears when we awkwardly explained that the orange was gone, and this was only its mummy.

I told this story to my husband Daryl, and it nearly made him cry, too. But there's no call for pity. We had a very happy childhood. We had parents who liked apples.

OSTAP SLYVYNSKY

Born in Lviv, Ukraine in 1978, Ostap Slyvynsky is a graduate of the Department of Slavic Philology at Lviv University where he earned a PhD in contemporary Bulgarian literature. Poet, translator, and essayist, Ostap has authored of three books of poetry - *The Sacrifice of Big Fish* (1998), *The Midday Line* (2004), and *Ball in the Darkness* (2008) – and was the 1997 recipient of the B.I. Antonych Literary Award. His poetry and critical essays have been translated into English, German, Polish, Russian, Bulgarian, Slovenian, Serbian, Croatian, Lithuanian, Czech, and Belarussian, and are included in many Ukrainian as well as foreign language literary anthologies.

An active participant and contributor to numerous literary festivals both in Ukraine and abroad - notably the International Book Fair (Leipzig, 2007), Festival “Poetry Spring” (Vilnius, 2007), and “Literatur im Herbst” (Vienna, 2008) - Ostap also coordinated the International Literary Festival at the Publishers’ Forum in Lviv, Ukraine in 2006-2007. In 2003 he served as a guest lecturer of Ukrainian language and literature at Sofia University, Bulgaria. He is currently occupied teaching Polish language and literature at Lviv University.

Recently Ostap Slyvynsky has been working at the crossroads of poetry and other art forms, co-authoring with Natalia Ilchuk the screenplay for “Bodiless Lovers” (Ukraine, 2008), and, since 2009, working as lyricist while performing with the Kharkiv, Ukraine based post-rock group Junipertree.





OSTAP SLYVYNSKY

LIMBO

The nocturnal hills were as crumpled bedsheets
In which birds had nested. Remember:
One can trust only chance discoveries,
I found the remnants of someone's coat
That had become hooked on an oar. The heap
Resembles only second-hand clothing and
Concentration camps, and here? A massive laundering
Arranged for us by the nightlong fog?
As though a hotel had been opened above the sleek
Smoothness of the lake –
Glowing lanterns illuminate the water through-and-through
A fire ladder leads down to the floor-bed sands below
One could spend the night airborne, if only the earth and
Its putrefying cemetery wouldn't persist in dreams!
With the whole bundle of insulted
Coats, abandoned shoes and deserted hats!
One must be cautious, so as not to slip on a dead shirt,
For example. – It's enough not to close the window to
Keep away moths that transport the virus of a different light.
The act of one of the dreams took place in a wardrobe
Which gives birth to the rival universe.



TRIBUTE TO MARCIN SWIETLICKI

Turn down all the lamps, leave only the light of the radio receiver
A tiny desert of light, to which arrested radio stations are banished,
A lantern, which automatically lights up
At the faintest hint of a touch, - when someone comes
From over there,
To knock with a key against the doorway, to leave a clue about yourself
When the cat saunters by with its
ever-dark hieroglyph of sleep
It appears, there was a girl lying alongside
Who is now getting up to change the station and you are watching her huge, unfinished shadow,
Not knowing, in what instant all was lost:
When you arrived at nightfall near the yard
And waited awhile, not turning off the headlights?
When you came out and started off in footsteps populated by colonies
of phosphorescent fish, and didn't break the bones
of light,
of silence?
Why did the river with all of its fires, not recline across the orchard path?
When was I turned away by the cylinder of spray from the shores, along with fear, irresponsibility?
A tiny wilderness of light in which I dream,
Leaning on the steering wheel; who is still reaching out to me across the hushed windpipe of the wind,
whose
writing is glittering
between the branches? And is it writing?
Who knows that I am not asleep yet, that I haven't yet been banished below, with the keys and a bottle, and
even dozing off, hear everything, their heavy tossing in the bedsheets –
Oleksandr,



Blaga?

“Why,” you ask, “does the one who pauses midway, reach the furthest?”

Somewhere, there is a ministry of answers. Someone should finish the narrative. But right now I turn back to the window, leaving everything unlistened to and see only the lit-up place, some brighter spot amidst the grasses, powerless to take my eyes off of her, I fail to notice your leave-taking, your prolonged standing under the lamp in the foyer, the rattle of dishes, the whizz of the zipper, someone is sending me this light, and probably is waiting for an answer, a visit, a call, but there is no return address, unless one should stand and watch the sky or look into the river, or, contributing lines of brilliant shorthand, remain silent, lock yourself in your cab, put out all the lights, be silent.

SEQUENCES

With this tooth that is growing stealthily, taking advantage of my sleep
In order to, perhaps, flash forth one morning like a terrible weapon
With an adequate physique, although with a more sluggish flow of fluids
And an additional millisecond, necessary, in order
To react,
I can nonetheless still attempt to bribe at least the most insignificant angel.

The irritated gods of all my life, menacing and kind spirits.
That anticipate from me the most cruel “no”, the wheel,



That rolls by itself, driven by the wind and the augur of a rainstorm.
 All of the creatures who came around to show me something,
 Grow silent here, and move away, as though writing in another direction.
 A steady rhythm, like that of the Sudanese market, conveys something else about the same simple sadness.
 The stray embassy of tungsten,
 that provides me with a glimmering sign, what is the meaning,
 where does one begin
 to exit: Everything is written toward the center, toward that uncertain sign,
 the self-deciphering hieroglyph that translates itself as the Spasm and the Trumpet.

EVA

The old university building, which has been named “The Barrack,” and the almost always barricaded botanical garden; a few of us on bikes leapt over the low-lying chain enclosure, the intersection at a standstill, cursing the changing Lights.
 My immature spirits
 Will guard over you, Eva. Then for a long time, inhaling the scent of the rose-filled bathtub after the school festival, I did not open the shampoo “Salt n’Cherries,” which you
 Loved, the Minister of internal affairs of the land of kefir promptly closed his borders Every morning when it was time to run to the Stadium, and amidst the branches rustled the awakened;
 I patiently waited while you spoke with the elders, I
 Imagined the steering wheel and turned it
 Before you is an image, full of signs unknown to me, I recognized myself and marked the “0” sign, and moved as though in a somnambulant dance;
 I recognized your friends and house pets,
 And also assigned them numbers, near to me. And further still, birds flew in very deeply
 I did indeed speak to you in the language of feathers, but you know how feathers, like a drainspout, let everything escape,



as a drunken patrol guard would. This is called “the pelican syndrome,” I was simply a perfect example, and when I turned away in shame back behind the bench, I recalled that one sentence of yours: “So as not to be afraid, I imagined people as trees.”

Eva, I stopped answering

To my own name.

THE SKY OVER BERLIN

Heart is thumping, as if I know nothing yet.

There was a short ringing, then hours of waiting at the harbor;

Near the private barges, where the Wannsee ends

and something else began – a canal? In which

the water smelled of green tea,

lit from the bottom by an entire ministry of submarines.

And I walked along the shore where two Russians were casting fishing hooks, although

what was it that they wanted to catch at that hour? Voices, spying seashells that had documented 1942 and 1944, negotiations between the sky and the water on short-wave radio? I would not have believed it then...

that I

would wait in vain.

There is no substance to the matter. It leaked out, like a shattered eye.

I have only one desire, and even that is hardly achievable:

That death, as though a border tower, may dispatch at least three forewarnings.



TWO POEMS FOR N.K.

1.

It's only six yet outside there reigned so many brilliant sovereigns! My she-devil!
The light seemed to pierce the sheets through and through, I felt ashamed, not for long,
There seemed to be some algae sleeping there, where under the quilt,
it seemed as though inside a transparent whale. And believe me, there I saw the center of the earth, it rotated
like a red sticker on a record, it smelled like a charred tape, it stank of fish, that fail to wriggle out from under
the burning shroud –
I know, you haven't been sleeping for two hours and managed to make breakfast, which is now growing cold
on the stove,
And you stood beside me for a long time, opened and closed the window, and
returned to the children the ball
that had accidentally flown onto the veranda,
but did you see the same thing? As though through scorched air? And heard that din of the depths, mephitic,
suffocating, and iridescent?
Otherwise, why did we, exchanging glances, in a flash – sort of fall into a dance – when I finally awoke?

2.

Believe me, tiny glow-beam.
Even when –
when the shadows of fish rise from the bottom to the surface – sparkling in the sun – and I
see their murkier
aspect, I fumble, fire blindly – even then
believe me, tiny glow-beam.

Just now, when it seems the entire ocean fell on a tiny town,



The trees rustle, stirring translucent water,
And it is as though we are homeless, begging to stay the night in an all-night laundromat,
quiescent and content amidst the surrounding splashing,
in a dance on a sail mast, in the heart of a comet
that is full of old names and dates suddenly melded and forged into one kernel in a scalding cauldron,
scattered and dispersed thus, as we can only run within our love.
Tiny glow-beam, I can't go on without your breath.

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BOOK FUND

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The BOOK FUND is a part of the “Cultural Horizons” Program of Open Ukraine Foundation to promote Ukrainian culture abroad. The grant program supports translation of contemporary literature outside Ukraine in order to promote Ukrainian literature and support intercultural dialogue. Popularization of the best Ukrainian writers will increase understanding of Ukraine internationally.

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Application forms must be submitted in English to Open Ukraine.

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