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Edited by
Alex Cigale

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Editor & Publisher Daniel Veach

Russia feature editor Alex Cigale

Senior Editors Memye Curtis Tucker
Lee Passarella
Alicia Stallings

Managing Editor Lynn Alexander

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Welcome

Akhmatova, Mandelstam, Yevtushenko, Brodsky.
I have probably just summed up what most of us know of modern Russian poetry. And yet there could hardly be a nation more important for us to understand—or one with a greater enthusiasm for poetry. Yevtushenko's readings used to fill football stadiums. Brodsky might have, had he not been exiled from his country as a "social parasite." (On their worst days, poets sometimes wonder if what they do is useless. Imagine having your country tell you so officially!)

But what these poets do is far from useless, and it was out of fear, not scorn, that Brodsky was expelled from the Soviet Union. As Osip Mandelstam, who died in Stalin's prison camps, once said: "Only in Russia is poetry respected; it gets people killed. Is there another place where poetry is so common a motive for murder?" Independent thinking, a broad and humane perspective, imagination, fearless criticism, creativity itself—these are the things that repressive regimes fear most, and for which we turn to poetry and poets.

Here indeed are some chilling poems in which the personal and the political intersect, like Andrey Gritsman's "Sarin, Soman, Tobun." But also remarkable is the extent to which these Russian poets have refused to let political struggles dictate their agenda, finding space for free and imaginative exploration in the ample country of their own art.

At Brodsky's trial his Soviet judge sneered, "Who enrolled you in the ranks of the poets?" "No one," replied Brodsky. "Who enrolled me in the ranks of the human race?" Brodsky would go on to win the Nobel Prize and become Poet Laureate of the United States. But the young and unrecognized poet's answer still stands: what makes an artist is not the approval of society, but the expression of one's own humanity.

Nobel Prize or not, all poets still face the vast, snowy tundra of the blank page, with which this issue fittingly begins. And yet, from prison cell to castle keep, Arctic to desert to Amazon jungle, they come bearing gifts of the human spirit, for which we will always be grateful.

Dan Veach
Editor & Publisher

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Since You Asked About My Process

It's a little bit like falling in love
again: you know you probably
shouldn't do it, you've done it
so many times before.
It never quite worked out
did it? But there it is: the blank page,
without a history, or so it seems, virginal,
and there's the immensity of all you've got to say,
and, let's face it, the sheer impossibility of it,
and the jackhammer of the blood
ramming, ramming from behind.
So what if you've said it all already?
So what if you can only spoil
that whiteness
with your uncouth scrawl?
What is paper for, but this inky violation,
this rapturous besmirching?
You never quite finish a poem—
do you—you just abandon it,
or it abandons you
to go in search of other hungry arms
to fall into.

Richard Schiffman

Cell Time

Postcards bring cave art from France,
my neighbor starts screaming at dusk,
a star explodes on Orion's belt,
and I, alone in my poem, gaze
through layers of concrete. It
reminds me of a sea storm, how
image prevails in the mind
just as nature reigns in the deep.
I'm no stranger to solitude, my life
fated to gray from the outset,
like a kid who sails on a ghost ship,
ancient mariner inside, cold
as Poseidon's bones. Art
found forever in caverns of time.

Christopher Presfield

When Gabriel García Márquez played tennis...

the ball hung overhead in humid air,
his index finger directing flight
beyond tropical birds he knew by name,
over Macondo trees, their roots stretched
through centuries, winding like tendrils
of syntax across the rain forest
where ghosts of guerilla fighters machete
into sugarcane and wildflowers, a palette
of blood-syrup over crushed ice
at carnivals, children with tails swinging
from branches, their mouths stretching
down like the ball the old man smashes
open at last, sending a yellow army
of butterflies into the mountains,
an Aracataca sunset hatched
from the frenzied racket
in the author's mind.

Roger Sedarat

The Castle of Otranto

*Charmed magic casements, opening on the foam
Of perilous seas, mysterious doors,
Faceless monks, statues that moved or spoke:
I thrilled to all that wasn't ordinary.
Crenellations, bartizans, Spanish chests.
That's what I wanted—the sound of ravens.
In freshman comp I chose the Gothic Novel
For my research subject. I loved those books—
Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*,
Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho*.
Then years went by. I lived in noisy dumps
And went to work and listened to the news,
Despising the romances I'd read as a girl.
Back in 1764 readers were so dumb!
So were English majors centuries later,
Turning pages on a cold, crowded bus,
The windows thick with rime and breath that hid
Dirty snow humps outside, while crashing waves
Beat on the Italian shore. If the bus
Had only let me off in Otranto back then
Instead of Minneapolis—well, what?
But here it is a last—the real stone castle
Looming over a windy town and seacoast.
Portcullis, moat, drawbridge—closed for repair!
I sit in a cafe and stare at the walls
While pink clouds from the Adriatic Sea
Drift in. I lift my wine glass in a toast.
I've finally made it after all these years
To my castle of air, with its massive keep
Keeping me out again, just as it ought.*

Maura Stanton

Family Portrait

The children I never had
sit on beach towels
in the hot sand
underneath the striped umbrella.

Their chubby legs are covered with sand.
Munchable, I think.
Seagulls dive through the air
and the smell of grilled hamburgers
comes from the food shack.

Small children's hands reach for me,
for my face,
my hair,
my sunglasses,
wanting something,
wanting everything.
They are empty sacs of wanting.

I have to put down my book.
I have to put down my beer.
I have to pack up my daydreams
and tend to *them*.

The children sit on the beach towels
needing me.
They need me not *sometime later*
but right away.
"This is mommy time,"
I told them when we arrived,
but they need me now!
And they want,
and they want,
with a selfish want,

and they feel deserving.
They are crying now
and flapping their hands
in frustration.

Seeing those grasping fingers
coming at me,
fingers ready to clutch onto me
like ivy adheres to a brick wall,
reminds me
why
these are the children
I never had.

Suzanne O'Connell

There is a *Zabava*

There is a *zabava*,
and everyone is singing
the songs about the birds;
there is a pearl inside me
that wishes I could play
Dedushka's mandolin which rests
in its battered leather case
because I feel, at times,
that all we Ukrainians have
is each other and the music:
the squalling trumpets,
the plucked banduras,
the daring *dentsivkas*,
Diduk's silenced mandolin
and the tribal drums
that move our feet
and sway our hips
and preserve on our lips
that intricate language,
those spider-web secrets
that are precious to ours.
I spread my arms
and I embrace the notes,
I intertwine with the rhythm;
I am in flight like *sokoly*
who flies close to Sura's face
and kisses the clouds;
I am flying home
to Ukrayina's green fields,
those wheat-washed fields
from which my family
should never have been separated,
those fields to which I try so desperately to return,

and I fail and instead of *sokoly*,
 I am the phoenix crashing
 in flames to a world
 in which I cannot land;
 all that cushions me
 is the music,
 the music which lives in my hollow bones,
 the music which crept through my grandfather's bones
 and my father's bones,
 and drove them to dance.

Nicole Yurcaba

zabava party with music and dancing
sokoly the falcon, subject of the Ukrainian song *Hej, Sokoly*
Sura ancient sun god

At the driveway guitar sale

At the driveway guitar sale
 I watch old men
 Heft various 60's electrics
 And strike surly-lead-guitarist poses
 That would surely embarrass
 Their grandchildren
 They play snatches of *Light My Fire* and
Riders on the Storm
 To accompany the Jim Morrisons
 Singing in their heads
 And I can see the faded blaze
 Of their rock-and-roll dreams
 In their eyes
 And the language of their
 Heavy slightly stooped bodies
 That says *those doors are closed*

It is much the same at car shows
 Where old men display
 The hot rods and T-Birds
 And souped-up Bel Airs
 That drove them nearly mad with longing
 When they were young
 And even though the cars
 Of their hearts' desires
 Now park in their suburban garages
 I can sense a faint echo of disappointment
 Reverberating in the hearts that beat
 Beneath their Harley-Davidson T-shirts:
But I'm not 16

And me?
 When this old man was young
 He wanted badly to be a poet
 To smoke Gauloises
 To drink Wild Turkey
 To swim the Hellespont

And utter seismic profundities
In casual conversation and
Oh yes
To write stirring poems
And declaim them to a waiting world...
Which didn't exactly work out
And although he does still wonder from time to time

What it would have been like
To be a young writer of great promise
He is content these days to strum his ukulele
To drive his battered old Toyota
To pen verses that might occasionally
Lay a patch of rubber, ignite a little flame

Buff Whitman-Bradley

Sex

They say it was popular
in the 60's and all you had
to do was walk up to a stranger
on the sidewalk and tell them
they were beautiful and presto
there you both were under
a bright yellow forsythia bush
with a fresh breeze shimmering
the leaves and the earth rolling on
deeper through the blackness
and peace and drugs and rock
and love and roll and a joint
being passed somewhere and not
caring if you had a class
or a job or even a ride home
and every person in the world
coming at once and the happy sky.

Tom Chandler

Old Guy: Super Hero

feels like a young guy in a bad costume.
The arms and legs sag, and the waist's
too tight. Where there should be a large S,
golden star, or lightening bolt, there's *Fruit*
of the Loom, and on his trunks, *Depends*.

The boots look more like flannel slippers.
Some lout's made off with his super-hearing
and X-ray vision, leaving only an Ampli Ear
and Coke-bottle lenses. Like certain sheep,
he doesn't fly so much as plummet. He hasn't

smashed through a good wall or door
since before he can remember, which is
a little after breakfast. Speeding bullets
and tall buildings must now be snails
and mole hills. He has no fear

of an erection lasting more than 4 hours,
but he's depressed and often flatulent.
His best tactic, the long wait, accounts
for the demise of many a foe, that
or rambling on and on and on and on,

which can paralyze from as far as 10 feet.
He's not handsome like Clark Kent or rich
like Bruce Wayne, but in the prolonged run
he can be a deadly opponent, if he doesn't
mix you up with someone else.

William Trowbridge

On Going Deaf

It dawns on you slowly:
you can't hear rain on the roof,
birds at sunrise, waves pawing the shore,
your cat's soft snore. Even your dreams
are without sound.
Chords you mastered early on
have lost their luster,
trebles screech and squeal,
bass notes merely thump, all music blurs
into a benign equality, a communist
community, drab and sallow.
Vowels change places, consonants deceive.
The whole world mumbles.
Your tag line becomes "What?"
and family and friends bend closer
to repeat their words, patience thin
and worn as an elbow patch.

To grow up and old with only
invisible weakness is one thing.
To grow old with manifest deficiency,
something else again. Still, choose from
a buffet of possibilities—dementia,
incontinence, loss of taste and smell,
hips and knees that fail without warning,
complete blindness, a defunct sense of humor—
and deafness seems an easy preference,
a state almost to be desired:
to live inside your thoughts, remembering
music you thought lost, hearing the beauty
of words no one has actually uttered,
reading the unfamiliar silence—
lost hieroglyphs, ancient symbols
bridging the jungles of time
to bring you face to face, at last,
with the unexplored steeps and deeps
of your essential self.

Betty Littleton

The Power Plant

*Written while working as an engineer at
the Astoria Generating Station in NYC*

Five pairs of smokestacks rise out of the ten-story brick building.
Each is connected to a boiler
120 feet high and 50 feet square at the base.

The walls of each boiler are inch-wide pipes
where water turns to steam
to then turn the turbines.

Oil or natural gas burns in the dual-fuel boilers
from nozzles pointing in from the corners
making four 4-story-high jets of flame.

I've opened the portholes and gazed at the man-made suns.

The turbines that run off the steam all hum a steady low "A" *hmmmm*
whipping the generator rotors around at 60 cycles per second
where electric and magnetic fields dance
inside the house-sized housings on the Turbine Room floor.

You can fit dozens of gymnasiums in the Turbine Room
and a crane 200 tons strong rides on its ceiling beams.

Now I stand in its midst
as the voice of a massive organism
with bones of rock and steel
and veins of electricity and steam.

Stop and see what your electric bill is paying for. They owe you a tour.

Peter Arvan Manos

Goddamnitalltohell

Katherine Anne said, in a gravelly voice. Cat, everyone called her, friend of my mother, mother of my friend who told me those were her mother's favorite words. Cat said them when she called long distance and the operator answered *Sir*, said them when she stood in line to vote and was denied, because records showed—*deceased. Goddamnitalltohell, that's my husband.*

I'm his Goddamned widow and I'm here to cast my Goddamned ballot. She threw Bloody Mary parties after church and when we opened the front door and the dachshund slipped out, she said those words, shouting, *Shut the Goddamned door before Jimmy Dean gets caught in the street sweeper again.* Jimmy D., with knotty rivulets braiding his shiny back

and a corkscrew tail, zigzagged across the yard. Our parents drank Cat's bloodies, tall glasses black with cracked peppercorns, swirling with lemons, vodka and a little tomato juice, while we played jacks on the screen porch or rolled marbles down the sandy drive. If we kicked volley balls into her exquisite garden—*Goddamnitalltohell, keep those Goddamned balls out of my iris and the Goddamned roses.*

Few understood the rollercoaster that took Cat from high anger to the deepest wells. No meds then, only *Goddamnitalltohell.* But she didn't curse when she drove children to the Veteran's Home to visit, and to pick mushrooms under the old oak. And all she could do was weep when I called to tell her my mother was dying. After clearing the sparse apartment, I took

Mother's crystal bowl to Cat as no words could thank her enough. I stood on the front porch, breathing in the fragrance of jasmine, remembering the last time I heard her say those favorite words and Mother said, *Hush, Cat. Hush, and eat your salad,* that shrimp and avocado lunch Cat had brought, along with narcissus bulbs she would kneel and plant beside my mother's back door.

Diana Pinckney

My Brother Sings

when the dogwoods are blooming as I drive him and his wife along the highway from Asheville, away from a hospital where we waited in the doctor's office, sitting in gray chairs, joking about my allergies to their six cats, how I can't sleep in their house

and still breathe. I watched my brother move his fingers over swollen knuckles that he used to crack when I was little just to tease me. We were waiting to hear the results of the lung biopsy. Now we know.

We travel through Blue Ridge Mountains—cherry trees, dogwoods, redbuds—heavy with April's abundance. When my brother begins the song, his wife in the back seat on her cell interrupts, *Dabney, will you please stop singing while I'm telling Sis you have cancer? Oh, sorry,* he says.

He glances at me while petals drift with us down the mountain. Our laughter's almost soundless.

Diana Pinckney

Intruder

Death intrudes, sure of his lease
and steals Norman a little each day.
Still he laughs whenever I tease

and with that seems quite pleased
with nothing negative to say
though death intrudes despite my pleas.

The years move on, sighs in the trees.
Winter summer we keep sorrow at bay
and Norman laughs whenever I tease.

He laughs at trees losing their leaves
at every joke that comes his way
while death strolls around, taking his ease.

China, Kenya, we gulped life to the lees.
Now that is over. We live for today
because Norman laughs whenever I tease.

No one to blame and no one to please.
However it goes—we can't get away
because death pushes in, taking his ease.
Still Norman laughs when I find strength to tease.

Marilynn Talal

W Word

*Married poets don't write about their wives.
It's like the W word.*

—Billy Collins

My wife has trouble standing. It's the spine,
and it can't be fixed by surgery. Lifting herself
off the couch, she tries to straighten her back,
hands forward as if contemplating
notes she wants to play on a piano keyboard,
eyes shut against the pain, rocking a little
on the balls of her feet, till finally, triumphantly,
she comes fully erect and lowers her hands.
It's just two days after her hysterectomy,
done to remove a fibroid the size of Montana,
and she's not supposed to move from the couch.
She's supposed to rest and be waited on. For once.
But it's been two days since my eyes had drops,
the medicine I need to keep the pressures down
and beat back my glaucoma. and, predictably,
I cannot put the drops in myself. I've tried;
spilling my practice bottle of saline solution
down my cheeks like a phony's flop sweat.
Without me, she'd get shut-eye. Without her,
I'd go blind. So now she's waddling to where I sit,
tiny bottle in hand, and I lean my seat back
like I'm in a planetarium about to see
stars swirl overhead, but instead it's her,
her face a sun to make all the far stars vanish.
How do you capture something like that in a poem?
War? Sure. World peace? Why not? But her?
Eyes shed medicinal tears, mouth mumbles.
Wife, woman, wonderful: one of those W words.

James Valvis

Sophie and the German Girls

We were coming out of a castle in Germany,
of all places, having just seen the battle armor
used for war and the hole in the middle
of the room people used for a desperation toilet,
when a group of young uniformed girls
approached my wife and me and asked
if they could kiss our baby.
Sophie was eighteen months old.
Already the old people at the rest home
where her great-grandmother lived
wanted to take up a collection to buy her.
Already the waitresses at our local Denny's
fawned over her while child-star Spencer Breslin
sat in a nearby booth with his cup, unattended.
Now these little girls who spoke in German
wanted to kiss our baby just because
to do so would make them happy.
I didn't see anything wrong with it,
and so one by one they lined up,
approached, lifted Sophie, kissed her,
and then turned to us and thanked us.
There were maybe fourteen of them,
but each waited their turn and when
they finished they thanked us and left,
all except one little girl, who asked,
after the others left, if she could kiss Sophie
one more time. She seemed embarrassed,
this need she had for beauty, for innocence,
keeping us from the things we wanted to do,
but little did she know the reason we had Sophie
was for this reason, to offer the world more beauty,
to give a world full of armor and holes someone to kiss.

James Valvis

First Kiss

I was fourteen, and he the same.
Beneath the flickering shop lamp
we stood, in the garage behind
my house, a serenade of wind
and rain holding us captive.

He was darkly handsome. I wondered
if he thought me pretty. I could not tell,
so shy were we then, standing beneath
the flickering shop lamp in the garage
behind my house, a serenade of wind
and rain holding us captive.

Just back from a movie, *King Kong*.
Oddly romantic. He took my hand, and
in his gentle squeeze I heard the words
he could not speak, as we stood beneath
the flickering shop lamp, in the garage
behind my house, a serenade of wind
and rain holding us captive.

A tingle arose from my toes to my scalp
when with uncertain boldness, he put his
arms around me. I thought my heart would
stop, at the leathery squeak of his jacket,
and the feel of his lips on my own.

A simple kiss—my first—
soft and sweet,
enclosed within the scent of
leather and Dentyne.
I wished the rain would never end.

Roseann Ranieri

Gone Missing

I hear children's voices chattering
from the playground, ghostly
already as they filter through trees.

I have seen their books, satchels,
their crayoned alphabets of wonder,
the rain on their vinyl boots, coats glistening
as if even weather wept for them,
their last fragile smiles on the other side of mystery.

Autumn heaps its bags of fallen leaves,
branches crook sunlight over the lawn.
I mow as the shadows lengthen across it,
vanishing at last into the greater darkness.

Ann Robinson

Hangman

you play hangman
on the orphanage steps

in turn guessing words
with children who wear

broken flip-flops
and crush together

at your hip, eager to hold
your hand or impress you

with their small english.
across the hills a storm

moves. across the page
the charcoaled hangman

is closing in. but still
there is hope, still the sun

as you slowly make sense
of each small emptiness,

every letter bringing
you closer to an answer

and then it's there
i l o v e r w a n d a

a small boy lays down
his pencil. the hangman

lays down his noose.

Heidi Wallis