

**The Dive**

Dear Whoever, on discovering these notes I authorize you to seal your lips like an envelope and find the spot (see the map) whence you can retreat into a better reality (take my word for it). Anyhow, make up your mind. Dear Whoever, I too was a disappointed biped smoker in size six blue jeans, my homes as many as those with whom I fell out of love.

So anyway as regards these beech bums, I first observed them for a month from a distance, my bike hidden in the shrubs, an open notebook over my face as they passed by, until they stopped noticing me altogether. I became a figure of the landscape and could now come closer to their secret boulders with my notebook, where I'm jotting down these lines in Russian.

The spring was dry, rain never once besmeared my scribbles.

That's how I have managed to perfectly preserve every comma of what I observed. Thus by June I had learned to say without the heavy hesitation of my foreign accent: "I'll go for it, Marty, if you can do nine." By July I knew how to graze pebbles over the water pastures, find a dozen on my way, the perfectly flat type with a leapfrog bounce among the water lilies that makes five, sometimes even seven stops.

Last night they suddenly gathered around me in a circle.

"You've got it, huh?" said Baldy, "I think you are ready."  
"She nodded," answered Marty on my behalf, "I think she can."  
"I'll go for the redhead," said Tina. "No, you won't," said Baldy, "she'll do it herself tomorrow. She did nine."  
I did? No way? And how come I never noticed it?  
"I'll do it myself tomorrow." I mean I'll dive from the rock into the lake, eyes open, the shirt clinging like fish scales, hoping to survive.

## **A Portrait of a Dog as an Older Guy**

When his owner died in 2000 and a new family moved into their Moscow apartment, he went to live with mongrels in the park. In summer there was plenty of food, kids often left behind sandwiches, hotdogs and other stuff. He didn't have a big appetite, still missing his old guy. He too was old, the ladies no longer excited him, and he didn't burn calories chasing them around. Then winter came and the little people abandoned the park. The idea of eating from the trash occurred to him but the minute he started rummaging in the overturned garbage container, a voice in his head said: "No, Rex!" The remnants of a good upbringing lower our natural survivor skills.

I met him again in the early spring of 2001. He looked terrific. Turning gray became him. His dark shepherd eyes were perfectly bright, like those of a puppy. I asked him how he sustained himself in this new free-market situation when even the human species suffered from malnutrition. In response he told me his amazing story: how at first he thought that life without his man wasn't worth it, how those who petted him when he was a pet turned away from him, and how one night he had a revelation.

His man came to him in his sleep, tapped him on his skinny neck and said: "Let's go shopping!" So the next morning he took the subway and went to the street market where they used to go together every Sunday and where vendors recognized him and fed him to his heart's content. "Perhaps you should move closer to that area?" I ventured.—"No, I'll stay here," he sighed, "oldies shouldn't change their topography. That's what my man said." Indeed, he sounded like one himself.

## **A Movie Star over Drinks Upstairs at the Pudding**

All tablecloths that are white, all waiters senile,  
and tuxedoed teenagers bore the hell out of me except for one  
with his second shot of whatever at the bar.  
You look like a question mark; ask me a question.  
The question looming in your eyes. Read my lips:  
it's all subtlety and fireworks. Another snapshot.

I look gorgeous in black, therefore I am.  
As a girl, I played in the lilac park, fed  
my donut to a squirrel, thought of death.  
My father didn't abuse me, I was loved  
by both parents equally, who danced tango  
in a club just like this one, long ago.

I had no siblings left when he left.  
How bad? Like a light turned off.  
It was pretty bad, but that's all right.  
Who, my favorite writer? I don't know one.  
I suppose it's Kafka, no, what did I say, yes, Kafka.  
Or maybe Tolstoy. What difference does it make?

Pure and naked we come into this world,  
and thus shall we leave it, dear! No shame,  
no regrets regarding beauty. Sold,  
goes the auctioneer. What's your name?  
Wait, don't tell me, let me guess. Mark,  
or Meister Eckhart or whatever.

Someone more recent? Gosh, Mark, I wish I had  
more time to read. What was your name again?  
Right, so you know who is good, you tell me,  
so next year I come more prepared.  
By the way, I like your beard.  
And now let me ask you: where shall we?

## The Airport is Another Country

At takeoff  
the silver bullet of your airplane  
pierced the heart of rain  
that dragged down with it the tablecloth sky  
with everything on it, and I,  
soaked wet at the bus stop—zero weight in my hand,  
where your suitcase had been—  
wanted to and couldn't vanish  
and stood mumbling *I wish...*  
The airport is another country.  
And thus I hopped into an empty  
bus of yellow light, whose driver  
was kind enough to mind his own business,  
whistling something abrupt but endless.

## **The Girl That Saved a Village**

The animals knew everything.  
On the morning before the tsunami  
the girl's cat carried her kittens out  
and lead them up the hill;  
the cows abandoned their pasture  
and roamed further inland;  
some goats quarreled at first  
for the position of the leader,  
but soon enough trotted away through the woods  
like a defeated army;  
pigs, big skeptics in the face of change,  
became disquieted and left the village  
in an organized crowd followed  
by the deaf village shepherd.

As she came home from school  
and her parents told her  
that the water had withdrawn far away from the shore,  
she also knew what it meant.  
Predictably, they didn't want to believe her:  
how could she know if  
she was only ten years old,  
and her geography book could be wrong anyway.  
So she ran to the beach  
where people were rummaging  
through the sandy wasteland  
picking crabs and fish.  
The bottom of the ocean lay naked and breathless  
like a woman after delivering a baby.  
There, she stripped off her school uniform  
and screamed until they couldn't ignore her anymore:

"Big wave is coming! Big wave is coming!"

## **In Nabokov's Memory**

Dead roses, plastic tulips, dry immortelles—  
he hated them in the German hotels,  
drinking coffee from cups whose shiny backs  
had been designed with swastikas of cracks.

He never settled down to sink his roots  
in any fathermotherland. Old bear,  
he wore the same old-fashioned English suits  
that had traveled so far during the war.

His wife, his alter echo, read him books  
as he lay ill in bed, prepared to die.  
He knew by name all foreign lakes and brooks  
as they passed by.

A man forgets men rather than forgives.  
Laugh, Mnemosyne, healing muse of those  
whose heads are crowned, but not with laurel leaves—  
with the whispering reeds of other shores.

## The Happiest Money I Made

I learned not to want to breathe under water,  
not to touch the sand bottom with my feet.  
When all my friends learned to read moving their fingers  
down infinite lines toward wise doppelgangers  
and the white cliffs of adulthood, I incarcerated myself  
in the lagoon. That summer I played alone.  
I stopped craving air and managed to push my body  
twenty meters forward in the green but lucid cosmos  
of the Black Sea. I kept my back straight  
like a catfish and glided above my own shadow.  
Other kids made bets on the beach that I couldn't hold  
my breath for more than two minutes.  
That's how I won the amphibian contest.  
Those five rubles I won were the best money I made  
in my whole life. At six  
you tend to extrapolate the present into the future  
and hope that things will keep going the same way  
as long as you practice at night in the bathtub.  
Tonight I rest my face against the enameled bottom,  
exhale small bubbles and see the whitewashed  
Crimean cottages in the sky  
waiting for me to come back.

## **The Hardest Money I Made**

For next to nothing, I held this part time job at the N Writers' Foundation affiliated with H University. I had to unlock the door at 6 a.m., launch the coffee machine, refill the fridge with soda cans. No big deal, good enough for me. The secretary, with dirt on her forehead, said, "Check their bags when they're leaving the building; writers steal." Her handshake was sweaty, and it wasn't dirt, it's was Ash Wednesday ash. Most of the time the writers slouched around the mansion, an apple lay forgotten on the porch table with clear white bite marks in its red skin, the chess game of plastic cups on the checkered floor was in progress, and half a chocolate chip cookie in an ocean of grass sat stranded on a napkin island. That night the alarm system misunderstood me as a burglar, though no police ever arrived to arrest me.

## Pot Luck

We had thought that damage wasn't exactly people,  
that what didn't kill us merely made us stronger,  
that the forbidden fruit was Newton's apple.  
Guys, it is time to candidly give the finger  
to all those who would have us believe this garbage.  
A live jackdaw is better off than a fallen eagle.

Guys, for five years our asses sit in the desert,  
our eyes filled with sand and marihuana smoke.  
Remember the fellow who, like a lizard,  
lost his tail on a mine field? What a shock  
it was when he burst out laughing. What was it  
that he groped for mumbling, "Where are my socks?"

Guys, it's not funny when out of the thick yellow  
nowhere, out of the purple nothing  
death strikes, cutting off your legs, and swallows  
your brain whole like a roasted marshmallow.  
Guys, let us say it out loud without blushing:  
we've gotten mortally sick of this affair.

We are human meat marinated in this pot luck.  
Who will give a shit if they fry us or if they fly us  
up the sky? No one will. It is late o'clock.  
Mars is stuck in retrograde, and so is Venus.  
Kindly duct-tape your mouth and humbly await darkness,  
while digesting the camp fires on an empty stomach.

It's stupid to wake up asking the morning square  
of the window whether this day will be the last one.  
Quit shaving, guys! They say that human hair  
keeps growing after death, but dead men  
take no comfort in the fact that the foam  
is needless now, and the razor, and the mirror.

## Saturday at Schoenhof's Foreign Books

1

Two gay guys, one Franciscan monk and me  
work the Saturday shift, as the intertwined  
piping across the basement's ceiling  
hums out the quiet morning hours. We read  
between dozing off, and visa versa.  
Father Paul puts aside Pascal's *Pensées*. Adjusting  
the brown cap over his sun-tanned tonsure,  
he prophesies, "Got a hectic afternoon coming."  
The annual regatta over, droves of freezing  
hungry people board all the stores,  
won't leave town until they've had their fun  
and pocketful of souvenirs. "Those regatta boys are so  
cute-yet-ignorant," sighs Mathew, a remark that gives  
our older and more managerial gay comrade a frown.—  
"Kindly return to your post and don't forget you're married,"  
grumbles Dean, and I,  
sensing the imminent alien invasion, escape to the patio  
for one last cigarette.

The blue abyss above redbrick well  
is clear, but one triangular cloud clings to the church steeple,  
even if not for long. Thus much for freedom.

As I pull the patio door open  
to go inside, two dry leaves blow into the hallway,  
pushy kids who always get ahead.

2.

Some Saturdays it's just us here and the regulars:  
two-three Harvardians and the bum called Stinky.  
He is an *omnia mea porto* guy  
and likes to stare into an obscure volume,  
deriving a sort of cabbalistic pleasure  
from "What the fuck is this script?"  
His suitcase in the corner, he whiles away the hours here,  
awe and happiness drawn on his face.  
America is his motherland, but Schoenhof's is his home.  
The Harvard folks, on the other hand,  
typically seem too bored and too tired to admire us,  
and that's why we have so much free time.  
God knows how we keep this place in business.

3.

Stinky is already in, I can smell him.  
He has no place to shower.  
His hair style turns his head into a Pollack canvas.  
Every other month he tries a cheap new dye  
from the Harvard Square CVS.  
To do him justice, he keeps his clothes in order:  
a black suit, just one, from working long ago as a waiter,

visits the drycleaner more often than its owner sees a bathtub.  
I wonder how he manages the cleaning process though—  
does he have to sit in his underwear on a plastic chair,  
electrocuted by a chilly draft from the front door,  
while they take care of the pants and jacket?  
Should I suggest to him gently that he should stop  
pouring all those colognes on his skin?  
Otherwise there's no chance he'll ever attract a woman,  
even a homeless woman, even the one that always  
sits by the CVS with plastic tubes in her nostrils.  
And why do the darn pharmacists sample only the stinky stuff,  
"Old Spice," rather than "Drakkar Noir," "Polo,"  
or "Obsession"?

4.  
God, if he exists, made us earn our daily bread  
in blood, calluses and sweat.  
He gave us two palms to hold the baby,  
to open the notebook, to write a line of verse.  
The wind-whipped Regatta crowds come rushing,  
the front door slams, the bell chimes twice.  
A monumental squared shouldered guy paddles his way in,  
hulking over me at the info desk,  
all chewing gum and Boston accent.  
"OK, I know it's kinda... a bookstore,  
but do you carry pop music?"  
Pop goes a pink bubble.  
And because every story needs a punch line,  
I reply, "Sure, and we also sell Cuban cigars."