SOVIET DIASPORA POETRY BY THE CHEBURASHKA COLLECTIVE
Wednesday, April 1st at 8:00 PM

The Cheburashka Collective is a growing community of women and non-binary writers whose work has been shaped by immigration from the Soviet Union to the U.S. Join us online for a poetry reading by Marina Blitshteyn, Julia Kolchinsky Dasbach, Ruth Madievsky, Gala Mukomolova, Luisa Muradyan, and Alina Pleskova, with host Natalia Smirnov. @the_cheburashki on Twitter

We also encourage you to consider purchasing books by collective members directly from them or their small press publishers. See their bios below for ordering information.

LUISA MURADYAN is originally from the Ukraine, coming to the US November 14th 1990. She holds a Ph.D. in Poetry from the University of Houston where she was the recipient of a Inprint Jesse H. and Mary Gibbs Jones Fellowship and a College of Liberal Arts and Sciences Dissertation Fellowship. She is the author of American Radiance (University of Nebraska Press) and was the Editor-in-Chief of Gulf Coast: A Journal of Literature and Fine Arts from 2016-2018. She was also the recipient of the 2017 Prairie Schooner Book Prize and the 2016 Donald Barthelme Prize in Poetry. Previous poems have appeared in Poetry International, the Los Angeles Review, West Branch, Blackbird, and Ninth Letter among others. You can also find her on Twitter at @LuisaMuradyan.

To buy American Radiance, visit https://www.nebraskapress.unl.edu/university-of-nebraska-press/9781496207753/

MARINA BLITSHTEYN was born in the Soviet Union and landed in the US on May 17, 1991. She is the author of 4 chapbooks, including Russian for Lovers, $kill$ (read 'skills'), and most recently Sheet Music with Sunnyoutside Press. Her first full-length collection Two Hunters was published by Argos Books with support from a CLMP Face-Out grant. She teaches writing at NYU and Parsons and runs the Loose Literary Canons women's reading group. This month we're reading Cixous.

To buy Two Hunters visit http://argosbooks.org/?p=2961

ALINA PLESKOV A is a poet, editor, and Russian immigrant turned proud Philadelphian. She came on December 31 1992. Appeared in new country in a new year. Her work has been featured in American Poetry Review, Thrush, Entropy , Cosmonauts Avenue, Peach Mag , Meduza, and more. She is co-editor of bedfellows magazine and her chapbook, What Urge Will Save Us, was published by Spooky Girlfriend Press in 2017. Find her at @nahhhlina on Twitter or alinapleskova.com.

OLGA LIVSHIN is an English-language poet, essayist, and literary translator. Raised in Odessa and in Moscow, she came to the United States Jan. 6, 1993 as a teenager with her family. She is the author of a hybrid collection "A Life Replaced: Poems with Translations from Anna Akhmatova and Vladimir Gandelsman" (Poets & Traitors Press, 2019). Her work is published in the Kenyon Review, Poetry International, Borderlands, Gyroscope, and elsewhere. She is an editorial and communication consultant in the Philly area.

To buy A Life Replaced , visit https://www.amazon.com/Life-Replaced-Translations-Akhmatova-Gandelsman/dp/0999073737
GALA MUKOMOLOVA emigrated from Moscow as a Jewish refugee on August 23, 1993 and grew up on Brighton Beach, little Russia by the Sea. She is the author of Without Protection (Coffee House Press, 2019) and the chapbook One Above One Below: Positions & Lamentations (YesYes Books, 2018). In 2016, she was awarded the 92nd St Y/ Boston Review Discovery Prize. She lives in Brooklyn and is the last of her line.

to buy Without Protection, visit https://coffeehousepress.org/products/without-protection


To buy Emergency Brake, visit https://www.spdbooks.org/Products/Default.aspx?bookid=9781935635536

JULIA KOLCHINSKY DASBACH emigrated from Ukraine as a Jewish refugee on November 17, 1993. She is the author of three poetry collections: The Many Names for Mother, winner the Wick Poetry Prize and finalist for the Jewish Book Award; Don’t Touch the Bones, winner of the 2019 Idaho Poetry Prize; and 40 WEEKS, forthcoming from YesYes Books in 2022. She is completing her Ph.D. at the University of Pennsylvania and lives in Philly with her two kids, two cats, one dog, and one husband.

To buy The Many Names for Mother, visit http://www.kentstateuniversitypress.com/2019/the-many-names-for-mother/

To buy Don’t Touch the Bones http://www.losthorsepress.org/catalog/dont-touch-the-bones-julia-kolchinsky-dasbach/

or order signed copies from Julia by emailing jkolch@gmail.com and paying via Venmo or Paypal

NATALIA SMIRNOV is a human, writer, scholar, educator and media and experience maker. Born and raised in Russia and molded in the suburbs of New Jersey, art colonies of Philadelphia, and lakeside lairs of Chicago, Natalia carries the grit and glory of each of her homes as part of her deeply nomadic identity. Natalia earned her PhD in Learning Sciences from Northwestern University. Her dissertation is an ethnographic study of two technology-mediated civic learning contexts. Natalia holds a B.A. in American Culture & Media Arts and a graduate certificate in Diversity Leadership (with training in Transformational Social Therapy) from Temple University. She has taught video production, civic journalism, media literacy, web development, human-centered design and multidisciplinary art-making in Philadelphia and Chicago. In addition to research and teaching, Natalia designs and facilitates immersive game experiences to engage participants in critically examining issues of social inequality and cultural difference; organizes nurturing gatherings and writing retreats; and collaborates with educators and organizations to help them analyze and improve their pedagogy and assessment practices.
Imagine

You are floating in space
and not in that Sandra Bullock
and George Clooney looking
galactically sexy way
but in that my grandmother
disappeared when I as a child
and I pretended she was
abducted by aliens way

Imagine that science experiment
you did in seventh grade
when the teacher kept adding
pennies into a glass of water
and no matter how much grief
you poured into your body
the surface wouldn’t break.

Imagine your grandmother waits for you
in the field of the dead.
You are wearing your purple
dress, she is wearing her purple dress,
the field is wearing its lavender dress.

Imagine being sad only some of the time.
In the spaceship when they took her,
they did not call her Jew, only
human and that fantasy
brings you comfort.
The Joke

My father is a funny man. What killed him the most was not being able to make my mother laugh in this new language. And no, I’m not talking about a mayonnaise knock knock joke or a chicken crossing the road. I’m talking about a joke you don’t tell in polite company.

The Midwest is full of manners but we came from a place of brutal intimacy. It took him months of study listening to the other men at the factory tell their jokes during lunch time, all Pepsi and sandwiches, until he came home one day shaking and ready.

He sat her down on the good chair and we huddled around the table as if we were at a comedy club

You see there was a woman and a taxi cab and a driver who tells her that a man with large feet has a large penis and a woman with a small mouth has a small vagina

And after a long silence my mother scrunched up her lips tightly and said Are you serious?
My Favorite Youtube Channel

think Beetlejuice without Michael Keaton
but with one hundred Geena Davis’
dressed in floral nightgowns

think absolute freedom

standing in a house
of haunted women

listen to the music

furniture moving
without explanation

in this video
you can clearly see
the outline of a face
in the fireplace

everything has burned down again

and I still can’t say out loud
the most erotic parts
of the alphabet

a ghost once spelled a dirty word
in a Ouija game and I am convinced
it was my childhood self
communicating with my adult self

in this video the dead give a makeup tutorial
and I finally have a smoky eye
without charcoal or blush
without violence or fire
I own exactly seven pairs
of crushed velvet Juicy Couture
tracksuits and I have kept each one
as a relic for survival.
Soviet diaspora women
glittering in Swarovski unison:
the rare turquoise teal
that I fished out of the sea
of discount bins, the buttercream
frosted banana that I accidentally
stole from an outlet store in Texas.
For the woman who is
interested in nature, I recommend
a hunter green or an ombre sequined sunset.
If you only want to dip your toe in velour
then we can start you off with a modest gray
or a cool mint. That was the color I was wearing
when a man on the street called me a Russian whore,
which wasn’t quite as bad as all of the academics
who have called me exotic, and asked how much vodka
Svetlana should drink in their short story. The truth is
I would be the Tsarina of tracksuits if I wasn’t born
after the denim revolution. When they come for me
I want to be dressed in the midnight blue
and buried with every stereotype you can think of.
Inside of my coffin there will be a smaller coffin,
the papers will call it “A Matryoshka Laid to Rest”
embalm me in caviar and have Yakov Smirnoff give the eulogy
that begins “In Soviet Russia tracksuit wears you.”
Yom Kippur

I know nothing of forgiveness,
it is a yearly tradition
for me to practice and fail
like the sonnet that I still
do not understand how to write.
I could tell you about the time
my mother forgave her father
for a lifetime of destruction.
She meant it enough to spend two hours
trying to pull his half dead body
out of the bathtub, tearing her shirt
and weeping. In his room a tower
of Russian smut magazines stacked
so high, they almost looked like a steeple.
"In your cyclical movements you often have to separate from situations and people you love, and the more you love them the more difficult it is to allow anyone new to replace them. This action can produce guilt, withdrawal, and rumination that some might read as depression. But to preserve, and return to a past you have voluntarily left—to suffer remorse—has always signaled a station in spiritual progress."

-- Fanny Howe

"There is so much we don't know, and to write truthfully about a life, your own or your mother's, or a celebrated figure's, an event, a crisis, another culture is to engage repeatedly with those patches of darkness, those nights of history, those places of unknowing."

-- Rebecca Solnit
me:

mom, i golemed
you out of a tongue
that fit ill in your mouth,
felt stilted, unnatural,
alien. out of this stuff i laughed
a medusa laugh that became
mine, i took for mine. in text,
in english, in imaginary voice,
i conjured you, you in verse,
a form i could live with. don't
say anything. you've said
your peace. in light a war
rages, ravages days and
faces. in my dark curled
figures you emerge a
victim, a virtue, a figment
of a collective collision
of cultural norms. mother,
woman, exile, wife. child
of the holocaust, beloved
miracle of the ghost
generation. how could you
have been otherwise
to me, ghost mother, mother
shadow of my american
airs. i wanted you
and i made you. industrious
as this english i learned
from the poets who
hated their
mothers.

me:

mom, by mid-day
the world is blue.
it speaks in a blue way.
i call your number.
there are two of us
in every conversation,
a conversion.
you are telling me
only the true things.
you can't hear me
on the other end
because the end is blue.
it whispers to me
in a blue way at work.
by evening the blue
leaves smears on my hands.
i wipe them on my lap.

mom: why don't you
call me anymore. i was
worried about you. your
blues leave me in streaks.
i mean i can't understand
the situation. you don't
understand the situation.
you write little blue poems
all over the house.
at night you watch
blue-born shadows,
complain about blue-
worn shoes. you have
everything, you know.
you don't know
anything about
watching the sky
turn pale by
morning after
another sleepless
blue.

me:

mom, if you told me to run
i would. i'd pack a light bag
looking back at nothing,
not turning to salt. i'd cry
for no one and anyone,
just the way a life unfolds
at the whim of the men
we've found to love or
to be made fools by. governments
are partnerships
forged in gold and
greed, seeking
revenge for our egos,
our eggs, our capacity
to suffer beautifully
without relief
for a life made
and unmade
like beds.

me:

mom, i'm your age,
an age that you were.
i feel myself aging.
my hair is grayer than yours.
you hate it. i'm stuck
at that edge between
mother and daughter.
my mother, my child.
i'm stuck at that choice.
i'm stuck at the border.
one country is any.
i'm stuck at the run.
in moldova i met you
at my age, young
and imagined again.
you traipsed down
your streets
like a daughter.
you married a man.
you made of yourself
a kind of mother
with me in your image,
imagined a child
to stroll this street with you.
ask me where we're
going, forwards or
back, ask me what
my life is away
from you in a
different city
where you call me
4 times a day just
to walk down these
streets with me.

me:

mom, i asked you
last week
when will we know
when it's time
to run again.
you only had one
run in you.
you said: what can we do,
just hope for the best.
we're here, it's where
i took you. it's where
they took me too. your
father, his side, his
parents, their
relatives. we go
where our family
goes. we're here,
and so are you.

me: 

i wrote myself
a counterfactual
collection of falsehoods
and myths
to make myself feel
better
and realer
in the world
i wrote you into it
with affirmations
and approvals
i wrote you showered me
with love and values
i wrote to mother
myself into my life
the allegorical

me: 

god said name
yourself after the battle
take your angel or
demon in your arms and
thank it for
loving you enough
to haunt you
me:

god said your hurts are your mothers and mother's mothers and all the mothers in the world who were born who became mothers or didn't, who made life out of the folds of any man's whims who scratched life into the abstraction of the desert in any language which is sand in any name which is sand also

light:

me the merciful me the all-knowing me to save you from to save you for me of the up-and-up the up-and-coming on the outs me of everyday
me of the event
the ordinary
the limited
me building you
up in my head
me exorbitant
me the abused
me to exploit
to reprimand
me miracle
me oracle

me sage

me:

i sage
my new home
or the home
of a man
i love
i bless these
corners
against
whoever's
haunting us
i never learned
our grandma's
curses but
i know them
in my heart
because i
chant them
to myself
me: mom, i make
of other women
martyrs. i turn
to versions of
myself. i make
mothers of my
friends, my
lovers, my
sister a mom,
my female
professors,
my namesakes,
my prophets
and saints.
all mum.
all married
to the good
in you. my
therapist,
my father,
my masculine
gods. all mother
figures. i want
them to worry
for me. i want
their love selfishly
like an only
child. i want their
secrets but only
as much as i
say. not closer.

me:

mom, you don't need
to say anything. i know.
i mean i've always known.
i take your voice
and add it to my own.
there's no space between
what i want and how you heard it.
these are empty gestures against your will.
December 31 1992   Alina Pleskova

WONDER WHEEL

Jack, I found the blistered tip
of summer

Swinging over the peninsula's edge,
a stoned русалка run ashore in

Little Odessa with pastel wig
slanted, petrified in lip gloss

Viewed from above, this place springs
a leak in my limbic system

Waiting for parents & their friends to
shop for discount furs—

Adolescent perversions, the black box glowing
with bad channels just loud enough

Knees in the carpet, figuring out how
to make myself shake & shake

in a way no visitor could replicate
or even mimic

I kept a careful guest book
anyway,

*s next to those
who came closest

I'm talking out my want,
Jack, & I'm trying to remember

Which where I'm in now
Hang back in a mother tongue haze

shaping Cyrillic aloud
I only want to say аптека,

say русский кассеты,
say останься со мной,

but that's later

We've been never since the start
& what to do with it now
I don’t know if a poem could
go on forever, Jack, as you say

but Kim wrote on Twitter
What else do we ruin our lives for

& Alice Notley wrote,
I’ll fuck up your life your cute life

& Masha Tupitsyn wrote, on Alice Notley,
Why shouldn’t you not know what hit you?

I thought it’d be more years of
men repeating my jokes louder

instead I swallowed
something electric

what I mean is, how doomed are we
who despite our intelligence

believe in retrograde panic &
the redemptive properties

of shoegaze
raspberry kush
ceiling fans
blue moon magic
sage
the pull-out method

a trap street in England called Lye Close

it all might be real

If no feeling’s final
I’ll pick a point to steady myself

call it horizon or
the simulacrum

I hold fast anyway & see for how long
Jack, if you keep me talking

One day, I’ll tell you what
I’m really thinking about
OUR PEOPLE DON'T BELIEVE IN TEARS

for Gala Mukomolova

I pull the Death card & you go Know what this means? not unkindly
Something crucial about living keeps grazing me by inches. No grip
on my future. As we say, nu i chlo? As we say other times, & so what?
Our people toast relentlessly to health, don’t fall for anyone’s easy grin.
We learn guarded early. In certain company, I’m cowed. I hollow out,
for ease of relations. My parents never knew Marina loved Sophia until
they heard it on the radio, decades after the poet’s death. Things were
complicated then, they said. You couldn’t just live as yourself. At Riis
with you, tits out & facing heavenward, I regard my debts to our legion.
In every direction, bodies gleam unpentant, however they present.
To be legible is a release. Someone’s hairdye trails fuchsia wake across
the water. Someone chugs rum on the sandbar. Someone dares leather
We’re no longer there or then, yet: Yelena Grigoryeva will be murdered
in St. Pete tomorrow. For living as herself & loudly. Tomorrow, we will
make blini from my babushka’s recipe & lament over our split culture.
Jokes cut with our first tongue, the one that tends toward withholding.
My parents never knew I loved _____. Occasionally, my mother asks
if therapy is working. Our people prefer their tea & humor darker.
Where were you when you first realized how many more of us exist?
I was here, now, waiting dimly for my undoing.
DAYLIGHT SAVING

This summer in Philly, a directive to kill spotted lanternflies formed citywide camaraderie: an outlet for our dislocated furies.

Neighbors swatted together in the still air. Some strung the insects onto earrings. Nothing is free in America—

that’s every first gen’s starting inheritance— but most anything can become commerce. As it stands, most of waking life is spent working

so we self-style into sentence-adjacency, plus kitschy phrasing like Sunday scaries & happy hour.

*

The inscrutability of my wanting makes an ever-shifting target. Was pleasure always so conditional? Or is too much else ruptured—

& not in the quick-fix way, where a few hours of airplane mode recalibrate the senses. Desire is propulsive, until I skid.

I wonder if anyone else can see my affections ricochet around, in search of a solid landing. If the muses get worn out, too, & take breathers

while the golden hour’s light remakes the world into a calm & creamy cosmic latte— the official average color of the galaxy.

*

When the clocks recede, I think of the boss who, when meetings ended early, would say I’m giving you back a half-hour, or whatever it was,

in full salute of chartering another’s time. I built a paltry arsenal of long strolls, uppers, benzos, valerian anything, post-it piles,

a blur of someones in expensed hotel beds, propped on elbows asking What is it that you do, again?

*
Bang to be let back into my own thoughts…

Consider healthcare coverage a windfall…

Mourn the fallen moon tree (though it was a copy of another moon tree)…

Mourn the redwoods, fireflies, platypuses, permafrost, all else that deserves to outlive us & won’t…

Mental math on what I can afford to enjoy…

Daydream what mutual care could do…

Daydream of everyone walking out & getting what they want & not coming back, even then… Especially then…

Reply & reply… Attach the attachments…

* 

Mid-workday, I pantomime being inconsolably turned on until we both are for real, & I catch you grinning on-screen.

Our little grid all lit now. Time taken back, turned into a dreamy, useless goo.

* 

The maple leaves wobble down each day, clump onto windshields. One hitches a ride on my shoulder all the way from downtown to West & the blinking reindeer wedged among six-pack holders in the bodega window for years now are the only seasonal décor I abide, & oh—it’s no longer a surprise to have our sense of temporality totally fucked with. I find equilibrium in some primordial tug from the earth, urging to spin away from the locus of enterprise, where it’s painted forever evergreen & you never learn how to keep still, each other warm.
Stuck at home
during virus outbreak
like one more pregnancy
carrying out
the grandest
plan the universe
ever patched
Back then
recognizing pine trees
in the window
for the first time
from the sickening couch
Now recognizing these his
hard shining legs
almost still running in sleep
as baby legs
for the first time in eight years
Separated
from the world
by this eggshell house
Dancing for Agnes

Imported me, I danced before our lord the sink
every night. Sponge to fast
smoothness, earth to Agnes, my grandmother-in-law from Tyler, Texas,
who had given us
all her Corelle, all easily washed. Wreaths of green flowers, big circles,
shining
smiling screens,
showing my Russian imagination her Rockport house, long before my husband
was born. Fast-fast 50s,
Agnes’s husband Nathan surfing, his dog smiling on the board
with him in black-and-white—

fast water, fast plates. I had
thought America shareable, banked my little dreams
on it. My ancestors hushed
under Stalin: if not to sponge them off, Corelle them
towards me, quick-quick?
Can’t I at least lighten myself, shimmy into a kinder future
stored in our small shared
female hips? Agnes, what a doll you were, dressed
in a small skirt of bubbles.
How I longed to be your plate—a frisbee thrown fast-fast-forward
by Texan God.

It was inconvenient, don’t you think, dear dead Agnes,
you in crown of coiffed curls,
in pantsuits, inconvenient that my husband reports you wished
you had had slaves.
Awkward now, isn’t it, my angel of future spells, my child’s face
framed with your genes,
when you tried to fire every Hispanic “girl” seating you down,
bathing you,
you yelled at them so. Can I love you a little still? Not you

white, circular, easy.
Can you still give me with something now, when we hurt deeply,
something borrowed, blue, not new?
What grit may come, when
we met at the airport,
me still with a big accent, and sang 40s songs? When
we held hands, you in big
stuffed chairs, and chatted of opera? When
the iron curtain dissolved
between us as chairs sat close.
Yes: when

you whispered: Back then,
Betty said, you married your Nathan, a Jew—if you
could, that meant I could
marry my love Frank (BLACK, you whispered, dilated your eyes).
Agnes, it’s night here again.
Insomnia. Nathan, your great-grandson, wanders in,
looking for a snack,
and hands me a full plate—on it, you and me, and old sadness,
and seconds
of love, and other helpings,
and more, and more.
Gestures

Unbuttoning a man’s shirt,
your hands grow girly, careful. A methodical—
metaphysical?—awe for what’s on the other side.
Your fingers, usually neurotic and quick,
unfurl the fabric, puppeteer-like, slow-alive,
dance with the last button. Dinner was fine,
you got straight A’s in beef, and there is still time
for delicious blue air that flakes, filters in
to greet the solid panorama of someone’s chest.

Buttoning a one-year-old’s shirt for the night,
you know there’s no time, none left.
So it must be a cowboy print shirt. Tuck it in-
to small jeans. There’s a man: watch him grin;
were you grinning yourself? With such panic you love
whatever temporal overlap you two will have.
What grins may come... How do gestures
birth men, anyway? And such solid ones,
golden-hued, singing softly in the crib.

No time, risking with every split
decision to not get it right,
you stumble into the bedroom, to the only person awake
at this hour, kiss him with an open mouth, into an open time.
Outside, every phantom of a wobbling night
is blue, every bit of it dyed.
Bosch™ Home

1

Walk through bosch-home.com, and what do you see?—Images of intelligent homes!—All our gardens of hardened designs.

The Bosch future is now.—Already today, I can open my oven door any way I want!—I am the oven. I come in

the left side opening

or the right one,

or a traditional, cozy drop-down door.

In the cavity of my Bosch oven, I burn effortlessly.—See what efficient access I have to the heated knives of poems between my ears.—See me boiling on Facebook!—Alone all day, I say: here’s my poetic equivalent of stainless steel! Peek at the green zebra tomatoes inside my belly’s refrigerator, picture what green borscht they will make!

All day long, alone—and some of the night, when I wake up with a fright, just to write!

And the Facebook Ladies of my suburb review me: “Olga cleans up like a charm.”

2

The kitchen I currently have is a 2019 Creative Listener©.—Which means: capable of conversation. “Hey, Bosch,” I say, “Cook me a future!” “Now coo-oo-ooking,” it sings to the tune of Bach’s Toccata and Fugue in D minor; and produces:

a digital metronome / candy thermometer;

which is possible to stick up a sinner’s butt;

and is also

partially

a rabbit who pierces your insides, turning them into raspberry coulis.

Sometimes the Poets of Instagram glimpse me burning, and ask me to follow their ovens too.—I trail them, trail-blazers, one image at a time, missives from inside
their homes.—We talk without talking.—Tell each other: Yay happy dance! I too am now available in sonnets.—In hybrid #flashfiction.—I, too, work in updated #terzarima with a touch of #ghazal.—My poetic door flaps for anyone who wants to publish!

And the Poets of Instagram flip each other: What **TIMELESS DESIGN**!

3

But... please don’t tell anyone... sometimes I feel there’s nothing left for me to do.—As the Facebook Ladies of my suburb say, “Hey, Bosch: make me a purse-shaped heart.

Make it also have the functionality of a bagpipe,

and a tablet,

while you are at it.”

And I don’t. And Bosch does.

And the Poets of Instagram beg Bosch for

electronic borsch

in which we find a lyrical mandolin

which is also a harp

with sharp strings to pierce the existing power structures!

And it makes, and it makes, and I sits and do not fits.

No room for me in my home. In my own home where I sit with what looks like a cat, and two men who say they are my husband and son,—Where did they all come from, by the way? Why their odd standard functioning?—What is this sudden present, this gift of the present, while Bosch promises a tantalizing future that requires burning?

The man who says he is my husband asks me if I’d cooked the pasta yet.—I am thinking. If I could I part with all my Bosch, where would I even put it?—This compendium of places where I can burn.—This creature, that helps me install whatever the **HELL™** I want.

Yea, today Bosch walked through his garden and saw the i-Hells of my generation.—And he saw that every thing Bosch had made was good.
Vladimir Gandelsman (translated from Russian)

* * *

What are these smells—the iron as it cools, the old room’s dusky, milky evanescence, these lovely hands, their movements effortless? Of course: a child asleep, the smell of sleeping fabric, where silky momentary fear plays hide-and-seek.

On any given day, there is a pause. It’s then that we are almost free from love’s load. A woman, at that time, is not a wife or mother; so other—to her own dream-come-true—the dream may as well be a life sentence.

Her pause does not exclude me, it’s not me she’s taking out. I am only guessing at darkness, and the mirror’s blackening square, where a carafe is saying something flickering to a small set of vodka shots, or something.

It’s for the better that we were not close, and feel the tides of this amazing sadness more separately than together, the same tide as children feel when waking from a nap, or in the morning, in the pitch-black darkness.

1979-1980
To Valery Chereshnya

I chilled out in the kitchen,
I was free, or quite nearly,
owning nothing, consisting
of the same stuff as silence,

as the windows breathed,
barely, sailing the curtains,
and street lights’ glass pendants
lit the floor of my home-boat;

ships passed by on the Neva,
since those big things were raised
until dawn, and those other
blackish things floated by,

so, what else?—guess that’s it,
think we broke bread, drank wine
in the best place on earth,
were together, apart,

what was that?—that was it,
and this might be goodbye;
I look back, and get charmed—
fearfully, late at night—

oh, by nothing, by nil,
cooler yet, more sarcastic,
sinking parts of the stern
with my soon-to-be carcass.

1995
Nina Iskrenko (translated from Russian)

In places that are far from perfect, any movement often seems desirable and tempting, like an exciting journey. More than that: as a way out of the dead end. An Exception. An Exodus.

Question: Are there places close enough to perfection? The answer is obvious. Yes. No matter how ridiculous they may appear to be.

For example, Home. A bunch of rocks and planks organized in some way, limiting the space where people who love one another live. A microscopically small place with a monstrous density of internal energy, an emotionally charged black box. In fact, no motions or travels are necessary, and perhaps they’re not possible. Unless you count turning on the light or brushing your teeth. Not possible and not needed, like Numbers and Spirits, the Morning Sigh and Clean Towels. They are the ones that distort the space-time continuum.
Maya Loves Devotion of All Kinds  Gala Mukomolova

I

Body first down dark back roads, dwellings numberless or without order. We came for red rock, relentless landscape stripped so God’s hands stay on you.

We came for Georgia, unmythed, whose ashes swirl the Pedernal. Juniper, pinon, cedar: corpses that claim this landscape for centuries.

We’re both dissociative, bilingual, brute and girls, a fact not unremarkable given the black night and disappearing map. A man follows us for miles, speeding so we pull to the shoulder and wait for him scream GO when he pulls up. We punch a shark in the nose and later, we can’t say what predator is since we’re not perfect prey

which is to claim: singular. Here all of us, witches—even & especially Georgia—who spent her 90’s rattling up a ladder, naked and hard as a mountain. & Claire, having found our yurt, returned to the road’s opening her car lights twin moons and her heart, still as a horse’s pressed against her herd, summoning us out

from disorder. The many possible outcomes, a gun for instance, a woman spends her life preparing for the wreck. Bet I’m speaking your language now, rest assured
every language I speak is wrong.

We empty our satchels out on
carpet, feast by firelight.
Claire brought three kinds
of cheese and an apple pie.
Under constellations I’ve never
seen, a gratitude list:
I’m not dead.
You’re not dead.

Brights from passing cars
project beams through
the body of our dome.

II

“Paint the Pedernal enough times,"
God said, “and Georgia, you can have it.”
but the Gods of White Women have no
Jurisdiction over the Gods of Mountains.
What do mountains demand?
All of this once Rancho de los Brujos,
marked by cow skulls, wild bones
long before Georgia, long after her.

What’s fear and what is intuition?
Counter narrative of my body
as place of pleasure.
A cowgirl named Sunny
prepares our mounts
pairs us horse to girl
leads us out over Ghost Ranch.

I lock my hips to a horse
I rock up red hills
red hills
red hills
riding behind Claire,
before Maya,
our collective
equine body purrs.
Scent of leather,
smoke, sweet
grass, our sweat.
All night, Claire and I don’t touch, 
two boats in a queen bed, 
tethered, bobbing dreams. 
Here I pretend to see myself: 
corpse pose, my hand 
over my heart all night

I save a seat, leave my sound on. 
Text me again, I’m no one’s poem 
I had a king—I served her 
apples in my mouth & hive 
of shut-eyed bees supine 
in honey—her kingdom 
remains, ruin in me. 
Attraction: this dagger 
I take both ways 
I touch a world 
where we go on together 
knowing what’s sacred is singular.

Smoke is a veil and morning too, 
Across the yurt, a tiger guards 
Maya in her sleep—our fire eats itself 
by dawn. I wake first, stoke the flame.

“what’s sacred is singular” is a line from Adrienne Rich poem “Solfeggietto”
The water is OK, Jennye says, sprawled on the shore having not yet touched the water. Everybody looks out at the ocean and has a Thought.

I was a mollusk closed and riding foam, I beached this inlet’s other side, under rotting piers once walkways to the moon. Now smeared

with hopelessness, blood of fish. Salted inside the ruin of Dreamland, piles of sunflower seeds, meatless, cleaved

wet and littering the sand. Me and my leonine lover in neon amusement light, he brushed my hair behind my ear, loose. I knew I was a girl

I opened then and have been open ever since, peerless purse, powerful with emptiness. Women wade in two by two, topless, adorned in chains.

Beauty, I remember, is trading one truth for another.
Ana, I don’t forget those mornings I rested in your childhood blizzard town, where time froze and we walked knee-deep in atmosphere toward each other.

I was a stranger everywhere, I wept at the homeness of your language weight of your pen’s black line, circumference of your thick hair bound—impossibly ungendered. Leather satchel at your chest heavy with stones, a spell.

Today’s wind is bold, my windows shake with language. What is the message? Birds, trees, and buildings register although they’re human-made. I think I might be otherwise. Wish I wasn’t prone to put myself in the center of stories of the Earth, the heart, its weather. This clear sky is otherwise radiant. It streams through glass onto my hands warming them. Sometimes I see a woman with rings on every finger and think of drives north to Astoria.

That baker gave us her begonia because I loved its underside—hot red hearts—she loved us, our strangerness.

Raw buckwheat honey we bought off the truck religiously, road over Youngs River so close to water I could taste it.

Anxious for wild coastline, there are days when I think I know why we loved each other, readily, away from daily life rarely in it. Days I unknow like death unwinds a clock.

Unknowing is a kind of language too, a kind of wind. If we had known how to forgive each other at the same time—

In the shadowlight, staring at a satellite, imagining an owl. It is impossible to really know another person, you taught me that.

Wild things come as often as they leave, don’t they?
You have a Russian soul,
since some feral part of me

to throw herself down
In obeisance.

our soviet estrangement.
our afternoon.

my mother fetched for me
from Russian market.

would have plucked fruit
but our season’s over.

Flour over all flat surfaces
roll dough, cobbled scraps,
resistant to rolling pin.

Dipping one finger in red water
Polina sealed each purse.

I die to look at women.

English vowels fill up my purse
with foreignness—

pressing post-lingual
tongue down to knuckle
—new embankment. All dykes an island.

All mountains touch under Measureless Darkness.
Have known, have loved, have stood in place, turned stone.

Sainted animal, wounded hoof
living in hovel of my companionship.

Resist healing wholly lest in healing we forget.

I’m sure one act is enough. “My love, call me Sasha,”
Never had a lover Alejandra wrote.
use a name that has power over me.

someone said sweet girl sweet girl sweet girl

What was it like to be cared for? 
Sometimes knowing what won’t be enough, is enough.
**Marina, if you weren’t in Russia.** Marina, it’s Spring this imagined separation. Our bodies sleeping satellites looking back at Earth. We are small

not like children though sometimes I think of us as children. My child self would have loved your child self and pushed her dutifully on the swing

chains clanging overhead and ran behind her limbwild. Awake. Pretending long enough for pretending to become the truth love can be like that for people

but not for us. Why is that? The ungentle animal way I don’t know how to love women anymore. Marina, I’m on your plane, your face makes of my heart one season.

In New York, I have seen no more than five lilac trees. In the whole of Brooklyn! In Russia, I hope you wade through boughs of lilacs. Lilacs older than your father.

Death gives way to life, of course it does. Everything is green again, neither of us alone. I call the flat shape of your nose into my mind and breathe in very slow.
Marina, against tyrannies, in your house I call a cabin, whipping cream for strong coffee in small teacups rain overflowing a small stream.

First time you brought me here, I liked it inside your eye, went into waist-high fields of grass seeking beating branches to raise our blood.

I wore your shorts, I bound you to me. Your breath, red string pulled through a needle’s eye or tied gently around my wrist, sign that someone Russian loved me once and wanted to protect me. You were moving stones in the stream for your mother. You went down to the river, I was warm and safe in your forest house the morning the first child died in ICE Detention. You were on the phone with your mother saying We got confused

by the river... Got confused
by what the river wanted...

Moved some rocks around.
Now it’s raining like crazy
Mama forget about the river.
**Intro:**

Hello! Thanks, everyone, for being here with us. It’s such a weird time, and I feel lucky to be here taking a break from stress-eating mac and cheese with all of you. The community we’ve built through The Cheburashka Collective is so meaningful to me – it’s something I never imagined existing even two years ago. Thanks for making me feel like the luckiest post-soviet poet-pharmacist ever!

I’ll start with a poem from my book, *Emergency Brake*. *Emergency Brake* has a series of thematically linked poems in it called “Shadowboxing,” and this is my favorite of those. In sports, shadowboxing refers to an exercise where you fight an imaginary opponent.
SHADOWBOXING

I was waiting for my hairpins
to turn back into gods,
I was waiting for my pillow
to stop resembling a guillotine,
I was wondering whether I was
the burnt rubber on the highway,
the wad of gum
my brother swallowed
and the stomachache that followed,
I was feeling like both the scalpel
and the kidney,
like I had opened a back entrance
into a classroom
but the classroom had left,
like I was carrying my dead
in my back pocket,
which was also full of bees,
like the blood inside the bees
and the hemoglobin
inside the blood,
like everything
I had ever told my lover
was tap-dancing down my spine,
I kept seeing myself
wrapped around him
like a car around a tree,
I let the slow insomnia
of August
build a condo in my head,
tear the plastic off the furniture
the way I sometimes
tear off my dress,
I fed myself to a screen door,
I let my mouth
become a matchbook,
I lit myself on fire,
I didn’t light myself on fire,
but something smelled like it was burning,
some piano inside me
fell over, my left hand
gave my right hand sleeping pills,
and my right hand took them.
This is a newer poem from my 2nd poetry collection, which I recently finished. I’ve always had this tendency to assign feelings to things that aren’t human. My little brother and I are super sensitive to anthropomorphism. When we were little, I once terrorized him by telling him our soccer ball was an orphan whose parents died after long, painful illnesses. We both ended up weeping.

THE POOL FILTER IS SORRY

the crop circle in Nebraska is sorry
the stale crackers on the sale rack are so sorry
the praying mantis eating its husband is sorry
the laundry machine that shrunk your underwear is sorry
the lightning which usually regrets nothing is sorry
the bee never meant to die in your finger
the couch leg you stubbed your toe on tried to jump out of the way
and the dolls that know they’re creepy are sorry
and the doorknobs hiding electricity in them are sorry
and the Coca Cola that took a wrong turn down your windpipe is sorry
also sorry:
the avalanche
the blister
the hole in the soccer ball
the fever in the baby
the catheter in the old woman
the ladder with the man on it that’s about to tip
the cell growing something bad inside it is sorry
and the bad thing spreading to the brain and bones is sorry
and the liver pushing its own off button is truly very sorry
when I was six my friend and I rode each other like horses
and when I collapsed under his weight and wept
he said sorry sorry sorry
I didn’t want to forgive him
at six I was already tired of forgiving things
but when he started to cry
I was sorry
and we exchanged apologies like amulets
against the hurt to come
I thought I’d close with the last poem in *Emergency Brake*. It’s about reemerging in the world and being happy to be alive, which is something I think we’re all looking forward to. I was tempted to replace the word “October” throughout the poem with “May” or “June,” but in true soviet fashion, I was afraid of jinxing it! Thanks again for being here and for listening. I hope we can all be together in person before long.

**BECAUSE IT’S OCTOBER**

and I’m watching ambulance lights
bathe a motel
and not thinking
about the loose glitter
my mouth is,
because everything inside me
isn’t rattling
like a change purse,
not splitting
into smaller versions
of itself,
small enough to be threaded
through the eye of a needle,
I think my brain
is done swallowing itself
the way the ocean
swallows itself,
I think I’m done
being car parts
in a shed,
because I’m watching a bee
fuck a rosebush
and not seeing switchblades,
not counting
the number of times
I’ve worn anxiety
or thought my fingers
didn’t belong to me,
and because I’m wearing
new shoes
and have painted my toenails
the red of balloons,
not blood transfusions,
I’m looking at a poplar tree
and understanding why owls
might couple there,
I’m feeling like a real person
with real skin, real hair,
a real heart
that isn’t packed in a cooler,
real lungs tied together
not hostages,
but two people
in a bathtub,
and the spider
above my head
tunes its web
like an electric guitar,
reeling in the fly
that expected today
to go very differently,
and I’m not seeing that
as a metaphor
for my love life,
not feeling like plaque
in an artery,
a ransacked castle
with its drawbridge up,
I’m not losing my name
in someone else’s cigarette
or looking into eyes
and seeing zeroes,
so I think I’m ready
to spit out
the needle-nose pliers
in my mouth,
I think I’m done
being a dimmer switch,
because it’s October,
and I’m touching your face,
which feels like a face.
Misremembering Stones

*We are always afraid.* My mother and grandmother say. *Afraid to lose everything.* Their echoing refrain. They want me to live more cautiously. To live as though I’d lost more. *Afraid because everything has been taken away before.* Their fear didn’t start out this way. It has grown heavier and more urgent with each year—poppy seed to sunflower to stone, a bone lodged in the throat—because each year brings more that can be lost.

In Ukraine, we had little, but I remember it as always enough. Though tangerines and American candy bars were only for special occasions, and I had to keep secret that I was buying them with Hanukkah gelt, I’d never known my grandfather’s starvation or father’s bloodied Jewish nose or the stones they’d both placed on unmarked earth beneath which their missing ancestors might lie.

Once though, I was teased for being the *zhid* girl. The neighborhood boys threw stones. My parents don’t remember this. Maybe the memory isn’t mine or isn’t a memory even. Maybe it’s part of the mythology written for my short-lived Soviet childhood—floating amid hours waiting for bread and walking atop rusted fountains when the Dnepr flooded and watching women move through our tiny kitchen with its bathtub doubling as a table when covered by a wooden board and eating hot persimmons ripened on the radiators and knowing someone was always at the stove, the flame always lit.

Maybe it’s something I’ve chosen to claim, so I too have the loss my family passes down. So my un-accented English is tinged with our refugee-immigrantness. So I remember that here, I am being passed as a white woman, while across the Atlantic, whiteness washes away and I’m that little girl I imagine, everything to fear and little to lose.
Bone Appendix

After Alexandra Petrova

Trace your son’s left hand
against construction paper
with a non-toxic marker,
teaching him the edges
of his bones. Then fill
the space between
with what shines
or powders, glitter,
crushed cheerios, even
flecks of skin, teaching him
his bones remain
in spite of it. Let him
try to fit his fingers
in the contours,
tomorrow or
the next day, teaching him
his bones keep growing.
And when he makes
two fists, afraid
his body can’t keep up
with what’s inside,
clenching hard as teeth
to keep his bones
just as they are, to keep them
from sprouting out, tell him
of the oldest Ukrainian apple tree
that grows its branches
low into the ground
until they drink the soil—
an indiscernible colony
of roots or eternally new trees.
And when he’s falling
asleep pressed to your chest,
trace his right hand
against the tree-house
ribcage it first grew, teaching him

the endlessness of bones.
Babushka wants us all to take a cruise

because she made her son ride low
in a cargo ship once when a storm
slammed against the portholes
waves crested hounds’ teeth
and lights rattled like scared hands,
because my uncle’s small ones couldn’t hold
the acid inside and let it pour out of him,
because he’s been afraid ever since,
of ships and dogs, because Babushka
can choose on which deck we’ll sleep now,
can buy us a balcony or concierge, can name
the ships, Summit, Century, Solstice,
Silhouette, Reflection, Equinox, nothing
that rings of freight or Soviet, because she refuses
to retire, but comes home aching
nearly eight decades hanging
off her spine, living only to do it
all over again, because of her children,
because she’s spent a third of her life
in this country and knows
she’ll die here, still foreign,
because she loves
the way home is possible
in no one’s waters and go years
without seeing her sister’s face,
though they only live twenty minutes
apart now, but family, she tells me,
is different here, is gone, because
there is no such thing
as obligation and I’m complaining
about cost and difficulty, traveling
with a toddler, because we hardly had enough
underwear for our children, she says,
because some days, she wanted chocolate
so badly, but could never spare
a kopeika, because she never went hungry,
even after the war, her mother made sure
there were always potatoes and onions,
because these are still
her comfort foods, but she can choose
to dip anything in chocolate now, though her stomach
can’t handle seeds or nuts anymore,
because a week of all-you-can-
eat-and-drink, together, locked
in metal and salt, isn’t
too much to ask, because once,
    she called “ship,” a “sheep,” struggling
    to differentiate the long [ee]
    and short [i] sounds, because now,
    she can say “shit” and means it,

to describe old age or laxatives or
    my grandfather, because now,
    she must hang a “sheet”
    above the toilet to remind him,
    “flush,” because I’m not afraid

to die, she tells me, but shit, she’s a bad liar
    and the Atlantic is as good a place as any
    for truth to drown, because
    in the end,
    all of us float.
my son calls any body
of water—man, mister,
uncle water, uncle sea, uncle
ocean, dyadya, not father
but close, though we
didn’t teach him this.
Kinship, nature flowing
into family, vast
expanse into what is
already inside him.
*Obnimi Dyadyu Voda,*
he says, and wraps
his arms around the waves,
*Hug Uncle Water,* and he falls
flat onto the sand, palms
wide and sinking
as though into my body.
*Your kid is beautiful,*
a passerby says, *have
more, a whole litter,* and if
you have them close together,
his cheek is in the sand,
mouth full of salt,
*What’s one more?*
Everything, I think and want
to hold him, but he is water
and no matter how wide
I stretch my arms, I cannot
hug or count, cannot
contain the whole of him.