

Edited and Translated by TATIANA KLEPIKOVA

CONTEMPORARY
QUEER
PLAYS
BY RUSSIAN
PLAYWRIGHTS

Satellites and Comets by Roman Kozyrchikov |

Summer Lightning by Andrey Rodionov and Ekaterina Troepolskaya

A Little Hero by Valery Pecheykin | *A Child for Olya*

by Natalya Milanteva | *The Pillow's Soul* by Olzhas Zhanaydarov |

Every Shade of Blue by Vladimir Zaytsev

A City Flower by Elizaveta Letter

Contemporary Queer Plays by Russian Playwrights

Tatiana Klepikova studied Slavic Literature and Culture in Passau (Germany) and Language Pedagogy, Linguistics, and Translation in Yaroslavl (Russia). She is a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Toronto, where she is working on a monograph about contemporary Russian queer theater and drama.

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To artists, who create worlds no matter what

Contents

Acknowledgments	viii
Foreword: Landscapes of Russian Queer Drama <i>Tatiana Klepikova</i>	xi
Note on Certain Idiosyncrasies of Russian that Repeat Throughout the Book	xvii
<i>Satellites and Comets</i> Roman Kozyrchikov	1
<i>Summer Lightning</i> Andrey Rodionov and Ekaterina Troepolskaya	19
<i>A Little Hero</i> Valery Pecheykin	83
<i>A Child for Olya</i> Natalya Milanteva	135
<i>The Pillow's Soul</i> Olzhas Zhanaydarov	167
<i>Every Shade of Blue</i> Vladimir Zaytsev	201
<i>A City Flower</i> Elizaveta Letter	279

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Foreword: Landscapes of Russian Queer¹ Drama

Tatiana Klepikova

In 2016, three years after the infamous “gay propaganda” law was passed in Russia, the playwright Olga Malysheva submitted a documentary play called *Community* to the Russian drama competition Lubimovka. This major festival of playwrighting craft annually receives a few hundred submissions, and the Kazakhstan-based Malysheva had been shortlisted before, with another play. This time, she tried her luck with a text about two gay men from Kazakhstan seeking asylum in Sweden and discussing the challenges of this process on Facebook Messenger with their friend back home. Malysheva’s play was rejected by the jury and did not make it into the program of the drama festival in Moscow, where all shortlisted plays were presented to the audience through staged readings, framed by readings of new plays from established playwrights and other events. This would seem an unsurprising outcome, given the silencing and repression of the queer community in Russia that has intensified over the past decade and too often led to violence, torture, murder, and forced migration. However, what makes this story so interesting is that even without Malysheva’s play, the festival ended up featuring two queer plays (not to mention plays by queer playwrights exploring other themes). During an interview at the staging of *Community* in Almaty a few months after the results of the competition had been announced, Malysheva was asked if she could think of a reason why her play had been rejected. She recalled seeing a post on Facebook by one of the Lubimovka jurors who had been positively surprised by the overflow of queer-themed plays submitted for consideration. It turns out, her play was rejected not because it stood out too much, but because it failed to do so among queer plays that were too many!

The news of the booming interest in exploring queerness that contemporary Russian culture demonstrates might come as a surprise, since media reports often fail to cover this side of the story in Russia. This collection, which includes the two texts that were presented at Lubimovka-2016 as well as five other plays, opens a window onto the landscape of queer drama that is as vast and vibrant as Russia itself—all despite the efforts of Vladimir Putin’s constantly toughening regime. It is the first anthology of queer-themed plays from Russia to be published in any language, including Russian. It showcases the diversity of queer experiences that have found their representation in Russian dramatic writing around or after 2013—the year when the law banning the “propaganda of non-traditional sexual relationships to minors” was passed. These texts outline a variety of problems that people who identify as LGBTQ may confront alongside joys they may share with others. They also make clear that a queer scenario of life need not lead to tragedy just because it was imagined and set in Russia. At the same time, the tragedies that are depicted in this collection are very real for a lot of people living in Russia and elsewhere in the world, because homo- and transphobia are not tied to national borders.

Written by authors who range from established playwrights contracted by leading Moscow theaters to writers who are just starting their literary careers, these plays have followed various paths to reach their audience. Some have been shortlisted for major Russian drama festivals (e.g., Lubimovka, Remark, or Eurasia) and staged successfully

for a few years in a row. Some have faced backlash from the authorities or anti-LGBTQ groups. Before you meet the playwrights and their works, it is also crucial to understand that while the sexual identity of the authors of queer-themed plays often remains undisclosed in the current Russian political climate, the profound and touching stories of queerness that affect hearts and minds on paper and on stage are just as important as the writing of openly queer playwrights. While an anthology of drama by Russian queer playwrights is a hope we have to hold for the future, this anthology of queer drama by Russian playwrights is a collection of texts written by queer and straight authors alike that have been sparking much-needed conversation and changing Russian reality today.

The curtain opens with Roman Kozyrchikov's *Satellites and Comets (Sputniki i komety, 2019)*—a one-act play that follows the return of a young man to his hometown, which he left after the tragic death of the man he loved. During his visit, the protagonist runs into their common friends and acquaintances; these meetings trigger memories about the moments they shared and reveal an open wound that keeps bleeding grief, which will not let the protagonist forget, which—possibly—will not let him keep living. Longlisted for the 2019 competition of new drama Remark, this text by the Ekaterinburg-based author is as powerful in portraying the unfading trace of a comet of queer love as its protagonist is powerless in reversing time and regaining his happiness with his beloved.

The anthology proceeds with a Lubimovka-2016 text, Andrey Rodionov and Ekaterina Troepolskaya's *Summer Lightning (Zarnitsa, 2016)*. This rare example of a queer play in verse is the second play in Rodionov and Troepolskaya's set of poetic dramas dedicated to marginalized individuals in contemporary Russia that begins with their *Project Swan (Svan, 2015, available in English in New Russian Drama: An Anthology, edited by Susanna Weygandt and Maksim Hanukai)*. Both plays transfer the reader into a dystopian poetic Russia of the future, where the migrants' right to work and live in the country depends on acing an exam in speaking in verse (*Project Swan*) or where people learn from childhood to reject same-sex relationships (*Summer Lightning*). Named after the Russian military-style game for teenagers, *Summer Lightning* portrays the love between two girls sparked by the ancient magic of forest spirits. The girls work to reverse the spell and dissolve the bond forbidden in the Russia of the future but grow fond of each other in the process. This mistaken identity play that re-imagines William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* situates a love story within a broader conversation about marginality, national belonging, and ideological wars. Performed at the Meyerhold Center in Moscow by the actors of Brusnikin Workshop under the direction of Yury Kvyatkovsky since January 2019, this play is a brilliant satire of a state overpowered by its own ideologies and a promise of a better future under a dystopian cover.

This play in verse is followed by a play “in exile”—Valery Pecheykin's *A Little Hero (Malen'kii geroi, 2014)*. The acclaimed playwright, whose creative collaborations with the director Kirill Serebrennikov at the Moscow Gogol Center theater have repeatedly sold out and have even reached the Avignon Festival, wrote this text in 2014 upon the request of Alexander Kargaltsev—a Russian gay artist who had left the country a few years before for the United States. Originally conceived as part of Kargaltsev's art exhibition in New York, it was a direct response to the 2013 law. In a witty and satirical manner, it depicts the coming of age of a boy called Vovochka (a diminutive from Vladimir—the Vladimir, as the play hints quite clearly). From a local vigilante against

his homosexual neighbors, he grows into the founder and leader of Crematorium—an ominous organization whose mission is to identify homosexuals across the country and torture and humiliate them in order to “save” Russian children from “pedophiles.” While the play is focused on the catastrophic results that a project of political homophobia can yield, it also uses the politics of sexuality as a lens to delve into broader questions of morality, tradition, integrity, and citizenship. In 2014, a staged reading of *A Little Hero* was presented to the public at the Gogol Center as part of a drama festival, but the play never made its full stage debut in Russia. Instead, its English translation by Zhenya Pomerantsev and John Turiano became the backbone for a dystopian phantasy titled *Crematorium* that Kargaltsev directed in New York in the summer of 2014. In 2018, the full version of the play was brought to life on stage by the White Bear Theatre in London. With Pomerantsev and Turiano’s translation never made accessible to the general public, this anthology offers a new translation of the Russian text, connecting it with English readers who were not able to see the productions in New York and London.

Natalya Milanteva’s *A Child for Olya* (*Rebenok dlia Oli*, 2016)—the other queer text of Lubimovka-2016—delves into the life of a lesbian couple and explores the challenges of navigating the landscape of parenting that queer families confront, which are often not so different from those that straight families may have. Her text foregrounds the relationship between two women, Olya and Zhenya, which reveals its shaky foundation when Olya, who wants to have a child but cannot give birth, starts pushing her girlfriend Zhenya to do that in her stead. While Zhenya eventually gives in to Olya, the pregnancy does not bring much-needed peace into their life but instead exposes a whole array of incompatibilities between the two of them.

Olzhas Zhanaydarov’s *The Pillow’s Soul* (*Dusha podushki*, 2012) offers insight into Russian drama created for children. Easily the kindest play in this collection, it is set in a daycare and features pillows—the stars of naptime—as protagonists. Their everyday routine is disrupted by the arrival of a new pillow different from all the others. Zhanaydarov’s text leads the readers from the discovery of one’s difference to acceptance by others and, finally, to acceptance by oneself. This heartwarming story of an unlikely friendship sends a message of kindness, diversity, tolerance, and the importance of embracing difference. The reading of this play at the Moscow International Open Book Fair in 2014 was banned by the Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation due to its “potential for promoting homosexual propaganda among minors,” thereby making this text one of the first but by far not the last victims of the 2013 law.

The exploration of the Russian queer universe continues in one of the longest-running queer plays on the Russian stage—Vladimir Zaytsev’s *Every Shade of Blue* (*Vse ottenki golubogo*, 2014). *Blue*—or, rather, “light blue” (*goluboi*)—is a Russian euphemism for “gay,” and this play has been telling the coming-out story of a sixteen-year-old since its 2015 debut at the Satirikon theater in Moscow. The play has been running uninterrupted for five seasons just a few miles away from the Kremlin, despite several fake bomb threats the company received while on tour in Saint Petersburg. *Every Shade of Blue* examines the life of a boy who comes out to his parents with the hope of preventing their divorce. While the family mobilizes all forces to “cure” him back to “normality,” he is left to deal with his coming out completely alone. This text, which received a special mention at the Lubimovka festival in 2014, moves from comedy to drama like a rollercoaster, taking the family on a ride to an inevitable wreck.

The collection bows off the stage with Elizaveta Letter's *A City Flower* (*Gorodskoi tsvetok*, 2017). This emotional, confession-style solo play is an exceptional example of a trans voice within Russian literature in general and drama in particular. In an intimate dialogue with the reader, a young woman called Erika finds her true self after a journey of questioning, suffering, and regaining hope. Deeply autobiographical, this play has been performed by Letter herself in Moscow and Saint Petersburg at small, independent venues as part of the repertoire of the theater of social drama Garcia that she pioneered.

The plays you will read in this book are just a fraction of a vibrant and highly diverse dramatic scene that has championed conversation about queerness in today's Russia. One of the texts I have not included in this anthology but strongly encourage everyone to explore is the verbatim play *Coming Out* (*Vyiti iz shkafa*, 2016) by Nana Grinshtein. This text about diverse coming-out experiences of gay men and the embracing of this process by their parents has been performed at the theater Teatr.doc in Moscow since 2016 (directed by Anastasia Patlay). A slightly abridged recording of this play's performance is available on YouTube (<https://youtu.be/64KebAvZy9c>), with English subtitles based on the translation by Molly Flynn.

Many more dramatic works telling stories of LGBTQ persons in Russia are out there, and even more of them are yet to come—they will keep growing in number and varying in form and content as authors engage in conversation with the readers and each other in the coming decades. If you are curious to continue exploring queer literature coming from Russia and the broader Eastern European region beyond this collection and beyond dramatic writing, take the pathbreaking predecessors of this book in your hands—*Out of the Blue: Russia's Hidden Gay Literature: An Anthology* (1997), *120 storinok sodomu: suchasna svitova lesbi/gei/bi literatura: kvir-antolohiia* (120 Pages of Sodom: Contemporary World Lesbian/Gay/Bi Literature: Queer Anthology; 2009), *El armario de acero: Amores clandestinos en la Rusia actual* (The Steel Closet: Clandestine Love in Today's Russia; 2016), *Pod odnoi oblozhkoi: Sbornik kvir-poezii* (Under One Cover: A Collection of Queer Poetry; 2018), and *Life Stories, Death Sentences*, a special June 2019 issue of *InTranslation* journal. Published around the globe over the past two decades, these collections of literary texts have repeatedly drawn attention to the imaginativeness and agency of queer authors in the region. In so doing, they have shown the limits that any repressive power confronts in the face of artists' inspiration to create stories that always manage to find their paths to readers.

Despite this variety of queer writing from Eastern Europe and Eurasia that has been made available to readers in several languages, drama has been a rare guest on the pages of these collections. In fact, it would have remained completely invisible to the reader outside Russia had it not been for the play *The Slingshot* (*Rogatka*) penned by Nikolay Kolyada in 1989, which appeared in the first English-language anthology of Russian gay literature *Out of the Blue: Russia's Hidden Gay Literature* in 1997. Kolyada's groundbreaking text was the first queer play authored by a Russian playwright to be staged in Russia (by the openly gay director Roman Viktuyk in Moscow in 1993). It explores a fleeting and tumultuous romance between two men which sparks in many ways against their will when the younger of them saves the other—an Afghan war veteran now in a wheelchair—from committing suicide.

It's been over two decades since *The Slingshot* was published in English and over three decades since it was written. All this time, queer Russian drama has been waiting

in the wings to speak to the reader in languages other than Russian—the situation that is not at all reflective of either the landscape of queer playwriting or of the special place that drama has held within Russian culture. Names like Alexander Ostrovsky, Anton Chekhov, and Maxim Gorky are carved into the canon of Russian literature. Most recently, drama as a literary genre in Russia witnessed profound transformations when around 2000 it took a radical turn away from the relatively canonical language and play structure. It made a decisive step toward a more experimental form that focused on the search for a language that could bring theater closer to the real-life experience of post-Soviet Russia. This new form that came to be known as “New Drama” drew inspiration from the rich legacy of Russian literary postmodernism and demonstrated unprecedented directness and a desire to inhabit spaces of discomfort, anguish, and trauma. The publication of two anthologies in the past decade in the United States—*Real and Phantom Pains: An Anthology of New Russian Drama* (2014) and *New Russian Drama: An Anthology* (2019)—has made it possible for global Anglophone readers to meet many key texts of this new literary tradition. These collections shine light on this exciting and potent experimental genre of dramatic writing alongside other, research-focused, scholarly reflections on it, such as *Performing Violence: Literary and Theatrical Experiments of New Russian Drama* (co-written by Mark Lipovetsky and Birgit Beumers, 2009) and *New Drama in Russian: Performance, Politics and Protest in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus* (edited by Julie Curtis, 2020).

Moreover, in a country where freedom of speech was heavily curtailed in the Soviet years and has been shrinking again the longer Vladimir Putin has stayed in power, theater has remained—as it was in the Soviet years—one of a few niches where people can come and witness a bold conversation on a controversial topic or see aesthetic experiments that reshape the borders of the political. Although theater is an art sphere funded predominantly by the state in Russia, it has maintained its ability to speak relatively freely due to physical limits to its audience size—unlike cinema, which has been exposed to severe censorship in the 2010s. As a result, while queer characters and themes have been infrequent guests on film screens over the past two decades—at least, rarely in the protagonist role, with exceptions like the films *Winter Journey* (dir. Sergey Taramaev and Lyubov Lvova, 2013) or *The Student* (dir. Kirill Serebrennikov, 2016)—they have often appeared on theater stages in Moscow, Saint Petersburg, and across Russia.

The confluence of these unique conditions of a thriving theater landscape and ardent debates around the passage of the 2013 law has resulted in a tidal wave of plays that examine queer lives. Dozens of texts were available to me when I started thinking of this book. As a straight ally of the Russian queer community, I felt great responsibility for creating a collection that would be balanced in terms of themes and voices, as well as representative of the literary and theatrical process in today’s Russia. I therefore included two plays that focus on the same-sex romance of women (including one written by a lesbian playwright) and one dramatic text by a trans author to enrich the fabric of queer stories that is dominated by gay narratives in Russia (just as it happens in many other places around the globe). Authors of plays in this book also represent the geographical diversity that nourishes the Russian literary scene. Only one playwright in this collection was born in Moscow—all the other authors have their roots in the Urals, Siberia, Ukraine, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan, with some still living and working outside of Russia’s capital.

The plays collected in this book unlock the potential for imagining the yet non-existent queer futurities in Russia and beyond, making them more tangible today than they were yesterday. They are universal stories of humanity that spread a message of kindness and love. They show that breathing, growing old, falling in love, falling out of love, and falling in love again (among many other things) are just as challenging and rewarding in Moscow as they can be in New York, Tokyo, Johannesburg, or Buenos Aires. Erika, the protagonist of Letter's *A City Flower*, says at the end of her story, "Every life is a challenge. Every story deserves a beautiful happy ending. An ending, which marks not the end of life, but the beginning of a new wonderful long-awaited life." Not all stories in this book bring their characters to a happily-ever-after destination; it is their very existence that is a sign of Russia's queer happy ending-in-the-making. The words we read, the words which, in rare cases, we hear from the stage, are footsteps of this future approaching that we can discern from afar. And with stories like these imagined, put into writing, and shared, it is not too long a wait until this future is something we actually live.

Note

- 1 Throughout this foreword, I use the term "queer" when talking about culture and "LGBTQ" when referring to a broad spectrum of sexual and gender identities and expressions. My choice is reflective of the use of these terms in Russia: "queer" (*kvir*) is increasingly used in the cultural sphere, whereas the abbreviation LGBTQ mostly appears within the activist discourse.

Note on Certain Idiosyncrasies of Russian that Repeat Throughout the Book

Russian Names

Many plays in this book feature at least two different ways in which one and the same character is addressed by other characters of the play: Vladimir—Vova—Vovochka, Sergey—Seryozha—Seryozhenka, Alexander—Sasha etc. Such variants of first names are typical for the Russian language and reflect either formal or colloquial/affectionate way of calling someone by their name. Almost every first name in Russian has a few colloquial versions (used among friends, family, etc.), which might be shorter or longer than the formal variant of the name. The rule of the thumb with diminutives of Russian names could be phrased as: the longer they are, the more affectionate the use (for instance, Serezha is a neutral colloquial version of Sergey, whereas Seryozhenka is a variant of this name marked by deep affection).

Homosexuality/Homosexualist

In some plays, characters use the terms “homosexuality” and “homosexualist” referring to homosexuality and gay men, respectively. These terms date back to when male homosexuality was criminalized in Russia (until 1993) and are just as derogatory as “queer” can be to some English-speaking persons identifying as LGBTQ. The choice of endings “-ism” and “-ist” is intentional and presents sexual orientation as an ideology and gays as its practitioners (think of communism/communist or fascism/fascist). Currently, LGBTQ activists in Russia are pushing for the terms “homosexuality” (*gomoseksual’nost’*) and “homosexual” (*gomoseksual*) to replace these derogatory and inflammatory variants in the public discourse.

Parent Hierarchies

Another word pair that may strike the readers of this book as unusual is “Dad and Mom,” which you will encounter in a few texts in this collection. If you have never given a thought to the order of parents fixed in the language, that’s alright, neither had I—until readers of first drafts corrected my translation. While I immediately recalled many English-language films and TV shows that prove their point, I decided to keep the Russian hierarchy of parents the way it was in the original. More than just an order of parents, it is a signal of the dominant role of masculinity in Russian cultural and linguistic imagination, the ripple effect of which leads to many of the problems characters in this book face.

Satellites and Comets

A ONE-ACT PLAY

Roman Kozyrchikov

Roman Kozyrchikov was born in 1988 in a small town of Troitsky, in the Urals. He studied in Nikolay Kolyada's class at the Ekaterinburg Institute of Performing Arts. His plays to date include *River* (2014; published in the collection of plays *The First Bread*); *Je suis Justin* (2015; published in *The First Bread* and staged at the Center for Contemporary Drama in Ekaterinburg); *Satellites and Comets* (2018; published in *The First Bread*, in the journal *Ural*, and magazine *Happy*; staged at the HERE theater in Ekaterinburg and at the Centre for Topical Drama in Belgorod); and *A Quiet Light* (2019; published in the journal *Traditions and Avant-Garde* and staged at the Kolyada Theater in Ekaterinburg).

Author's address

In the night skies and on nocturnal Earth, I remember every satellite and every comet I encounter. In the remote depths of slumber and the sharp clarity of day, are they—my satellites and comets.

In October, when it drizzles, it seems that the rain doesn't fall on the ground so much as rise up from it, vertically touching your cheek, ear, and hand.

The train arrives; I step off. The familiar crossing by the school, and there, a bit farther, lives an old lady; in her front yard . . . Don't speak, memory.¹ As the rain licks me, I make my way home, to my mom. The wooden children's library (*Robinson Crusoe*), still as green as I remember it. The good old five-story apartment buildings, our "skyscrapers." The smell of the fresh, damp soil: vegetable gardens have just been harvested, and little patches of bare earth lie like graves at the cemetery—a picture so familiar to me, so dear.

My face grows wet, even though it isn't really raining, like when it's hot and sweaty. Further on, your house, but I won't go there. I'll take the turn and follow the road alongside the overground heating pipes.² The windows of your two-story apartment building—I can see them from my yard. Don't speak, memory.

—Oh wow, look who's here!

I turn around—It's Oleg.

Oleg I haven't seen you for a year and a half.

Me I haven't been here for a year and a half.

Oleg Visiting your mom?

Me Yep.

Oleg Shall we sit down, talk a little?

I shrug; we go to the pipes, sit down. At first, we don't look at each other, but then, well, there's no choice, we have to.

Oleg So, how are you?

Me Been better. Work. What else . . .

Silence.

Oleg You've grown up, so different somehow.

Oleg laughs; and then again, we're silent.

Oleg My mom's fine now, and I got married.

Silence.

Oleg Will you ask who I married?

I look at Oleg but don't ask.

Oleg Do you think it was our fault?

Me No.

Oleg He was my brother, you know.

Me No. No.

4 Satellites and Comets

Oleg You do think we're guilty, don't you?

Me You aren't.

Oleg Then say something. Talk to me.

I look at Oleg.

Me In the morning, wasps came to me. One sat here.

I put a finger under his right earlobe.

—And then it moved over here.

I draw my finger from his earlobe to the corner of his lips; the lingering rain leaves a crooked line.

—The second one was here.

I touch the artery on his neck.

—And the third one was here.

I touch his shoulder.

It's so scary: each sting can bring you death. Are you afraid?

He is afraid.

Oleg No.

Me Well, I am, I'm afraid of everything.

Oleg pushes my hand away. Silence.

Oleg (*laughs*) Remember that time, when a wasp flew into Seryozhka's curls and he was running around, his eyes all bulging out, nobody could get what was going on.

Me Right. Right. Right.

I close my eyes. Memory, don't speak.

I want to open my eyes and be at home, to look out the kitchen window and see the roof of the small banya,³ a bit of the garden, and to the right—the fence. Behind it, there's a short alley—a road for people, for cars, and for cows. The mud covering it has been distinctly sculptured by the October cold. And if I try to remember, it is now that is the easiest to walk this road. And of course, I do remember it.

Mom The heating still isn't on, so I've lit the stove.

Me It smells nice.

Silence. The stove takes up one third of the kitchen. It gives off this tasty aroma of the warmed brick from which it is made, or of cement; a smell so autumnal that you can even hear the rain in it. The sky is clear now, but the sun is still on the other side of the house, where the porch is; it is the morning sun, and the kitchen is lit with soft natural light. We are sitting by the window, each of us on either side,

separated by a table with a blue plaid plastic tablecloth. It has red poppies in the corners, they are a little withered, as if they also already hear autumn approaching. I'm staring at them.

Mom Well, tell me, how are you doing out there? You call so rarely.

Me Everything seems fine.

Mom (*purses her lips, looks out the window*) I can barely get a word out of you.
Silence.

Me How are things going here?

Mom The day before yesterday was Auntie Natasha's funeral, the one who lived down the street, you know. You've seen spruce twigs on the road, haven't you?⁴ They're still there. She was such a good woman. They say it was her heart, probably. I saw her just this Wednesday, she was walking down the street, so lively, told me what was on sale. Sugar, at our corner store. And now here we are—her heart. But I didn't go to the funeral—too negative for me. And it rained that day. Just watched it from my window.

Me I don't remember her.

Mom Oh, come on! The house right by the river. We went over there all the time.

Me Well, maybe I do.

Mom Dark hair, not very tall. Has a lisp.

I shrug. Silence.

Mom You must hardly remember my face, not to say hers.

Silence.

Mom Not a visit in a year and half.

Silence. A cat cautiously pops his face into the door, stares at us. It's a new cat that I don't know. The cat I knew died that very October, two years ago; he's buried behind the woodshed, and the grass has already grown over that place; he came to me in a dream just once: he touched my neck with his nose and woke me for the train back home. This one, a white tomcat, with a few random spots (or maybe it's a female?) made a small circle around the room, paused next to my mom, said something. My mom waved her hand at him: go away. He thought a little and left the kitchen, the floorboards creaking twice under his paws.

Mom You could say yes, sure, I remember yours, of course.

Me I do.

Mom Right, you do.

Silence.

Me How's school?

Mom Everyone's still hustling and bustling. Other teachers are trying to make Marina Arkadyevna retire, but she won't. They resent her for it, keep wondering whether she just plans to sit around and disgrace herself in front of the kids until she dies. She says, even after that, she'll rise from the dead and come back to teach.

Valentina Vasilyevna almost drowned in the snow last winter. She decided to make a path through the field behind the school. A faster way back home, she'd say, and others could use it, too. So, there she went, and fell under the snow. She said she barely made it out of that hole and had to crawl through the rest of the field. She walked into the teacher's room soaking wet, the snow falling off her skirt. Can you imagine, "others could use it," those were her exact words. Eighty-five years old, and still full of energy.

Me I just ran into her on the train, on my way here.

Mom I'd take a trip on a train, too, I like them. It's kind of romantic. One problem: where would I go? And the cats, too.

Years ago, in our old, other life, my mom and I would often take a train to go to the city. Most often, to the hospital; we'd get up around 3 a.m. to get there by the morning. I'd always wake up ahead of time and would lie for a while in darkness. Then, hearing my mom's alarm clock ring, I'd turn on the light. We'd quickly get dressed, in silence, take the bags we had prepared the day before, check if we had all the necessary (IDs, money), and leave the house. We would walk to the train station. Three blocks and two turns. I'd always run a little ahead of my mom—I was afraid of not catching the train, of not leaving, of missing out on something. My mom would also worry, but probably her worries were completely different from mine, unknown, unrelatable, which I'd only notice by her rare shouting to me: "Don't rush, there's still time!"

We'd always arrive at the station before the train. There was no one there at night, and we'd almost always stand alone on the platform, and I'd immediately hear the roar of the trains. And something enormous would rise and stir in my chest, and in the pitch-black darkness of the rural night I'd see a never-ending journey, a big city, its glistening streets. As if all of my future enormous life were pounding in my chest on the platform of the train station that belonged to me and my mom. The train would arrive slowly, its bright windows shining in the darkness, and we'd finally board. The warmth of the electric semi-darkness, the smell of the people who'd been sleeping there for hours, and upper berths—everything that I hate so much now—seemed the most genuine, the most spot-on signal of a life that was going in the right direction.

Mom It looks like it'll rain again—the wind's picking up. This day used to be sunny, with no rain.

Silence. Well, the wind did bring a rain cloud. The light has sharply split the room from the threshold to the window: the area, where I am, is dark, and the other, where my mom's sitting, is still bright. My mom turns on the electric light. I remember this combination of natural and electric light before every thunderstorm: the rain clouds would cover the house, and the horizon would show the sky as a long strip of light.

Me Your birthday, we almost forgot.

Mom I'll make tea; we'll toast with teacups at least.

From her seat, she reaches for the kettle and turns it on. Silence.

Mom Well, make a birthday speech or something.

Me Maybe later? I'll make something up.

Mom I'm all sober now. I don't even take a sip at school parties. Blood pressure, you know.

Silence.

Mom Do you drink?

Me No.

Mom Why did you pause before answering?

Me I don't drink, almost. Sometimes.

Mom Tanya's sister's husband almost died of DT. Grabbed a knife, started to make a scene, and fell down on the floor. She called an ambulance, all tears, they barely saved him.

The kettle clicks, saving me. My mom takes out the cups. Oh my God. Our sweet old cups. Tall, with pinecones and lush spruce twigs (three pinecones and two twigs) printed unevenly over them; I close my eyes. Then I look at the window, scratch my lip with my teeth. My mom serves the tea. Silence.

Mom We do need the wine though. Tanya will come.

Me Why?

Mom What do you mean, why? It's my birthday, we are good friends.

Me I didn't know that.

Mom We are really close now. I helped her a lot after Seryozhka . . .

Me Right. Right.

Mom It hit her hard. She was his mother, you know, and stuff . . .

Me Right. Right. I got it. I'll go buy some.

Mom She is a very good woman.

Me I got it. I'll go now.

I walk on the grass along the side of the road to avoid messing up the sculpture of the mud. On the corner of the street, there's a convenience store, where a school friend of mine, Anya, works.

Anya Oh, fuck, you finally came to visit.

She throws her arms around my neck; I'm silent.

8 Satellites and Comets

Me Did you get knocked up or what?

Anya Huh, don't even get me started.

She goes behind the counter.

I can't wrap my head around it myself. Go figure, we were wasted. A real bender. I leave their place in the morning, and as I am walking, I feel a hair in my mouth; I fish it out—a pubic hair. Well, I thought, whatever, to hell with it. And now this! Turns out it was Slava, you remember him?

Me You haven't changed at all, Anya.

Anya laughs and shows me the ring.

Me Anya, I'll get three bottles of wine. Dry and cheap. And cheese, I guess.

Anya It's also dry and cheap.

Me Slava seems like a nice enough guy.

On a stuffy July afternoon that oozed a smell of honey, Anya and I hit Slava in the head with a stone. He started crying, and we ran into the forest. Anya took her braid in her mouth, so that it wouldn't get in her face, and her dress was wet in the armpits. We were hiding in the forest until the evening, but then they found us, and Slava pointed at me. Anya and I cried a bit to show our guilt and went back home. Me, sweaty Anya, and Slava, who was laughing, dried blood on his head. But I feel a hair in my mouth, and my memory stops speaking.

Anya puts the bottles in a plastic bag for me.

Anya The best we have! I can down two of these in a night.

I count out my cash.

You haven't been here since the funeral, have you?

I'm silent.

It's fine. I get it.

Me Anya, are you afraid of the dark?

Anya shrugs.

It sometimes gets scary at night.

Anya Slava and I went to his grave not too long ago.

I'm sitting at the school playground. I'm drinking the best imitation wine; my eyes follow the raindrops on the bottle. I close my eyes.

On a tire half dug into the ground—Seryozha, hunched down, looking at me, smiling.

Seryozha Tomorrow we start our last year at school. The last time. We'll bring flowers.

Me I'll cut down our peonies.

Seryozha Will you bring one for me?

Me I will.

Seryozha Just kidding. Bring it to my grave.

He smiles, stretches his legs, and rubs at the ground with his feet.

Me I'll bring a peony, Seryozha, for you. Red, like your hair.

I put my hand into his curls, he looks at me.

Seryozha I have money for some beer.

Me There is a God, after all.

Seryozha Shall we get a 40?

Me Behind the monument to the revolutionaries.

We hit the road, swim by the kiosk. The 40 oz bottle is ours—the woman who works the counter loves Seryozha's eyes. Like everyone does. Like I do. Auntie Lyuba said: I love you, Seryozha, my bunny. We get behind the revolutionaries, the foam on our pants, in our pants, just like our desire. The beer is light, like our hearts. Warm, like our blood. We are silent, just smile, take turns drinking. I spot my mom. I give the bottle, the heart of mine, to Seryozha. I run to my mom without turning around. His silhouette will be getting smaller, but I don't want it to be smaller than it already is. When I do turn around, Seryozha with my heart is not there, his silhouette is gone. And a snowstorm began in the world. A blizzard began in the world, and a frost swept in. Snow covered the ground, and Seryozhenka, and my heart. And the planet now lies like a lump of ice in my chest. Because the snowstorm started, and the blizzard, and the frost. I close my eyes. Don't speak, memory, don't.

Mom You got two bottles? Tanya may be the only one drinking. I'll just have a sip.

Me I'll have some.

She purses her lips. Silence.

Remember the lullaby you used to sing to me?

Mom Dili-dili-don.

Me Right, dili-dili-don.

Silence.

Mom The tea is cold. It's freezing in here.

Mom brings us slippers we leave by the stove to keep them warm: feet are always cold when it rains.

Mom I can't stand the winter now at all. It used to be okay, but now I'm always cold. The stove is the only thing that saves me.

Me It just used to be warm all the time. And sunny. I don't even remember any winters.

Mom I remember pulling you once on the sled in the winter darkness. It was morning, but it was pitch dark.

Silence.

Are you warm enough there?

Me Now it's also dark and cold.

Mom Nina, who lives on our street, knits mittens and socks with dog hair. I'll order some for you.

Me The sun seems to have gotten smaller.

Once when the sun was still steadily high in the sky, Mom and I went to see an eclipse. We had prepared pieces of glass. I had found mine by accident in May, dug it out in the garden behind the banya—deep in the darkness of the ground. Emerald, transparent, its edges rounded, it was a shard of somebody's vibrant alcoholic life. Who'd left it there? Was it a teen mom who had laughed there heartily with her girlfriends at night, at a party that their parents knew nothing about? Or did some half-naked relative dig up the planet and drink heavily, sweatily, from a bottle warmed by the sun? I'd been saving it secretly for two months under a rug, and here it was—today the sun would go dark; it would hide from us mortals so that we'd look at it and understand what we've lost. It would hide from all of Europe, and from us, too. My mom even said, "It's just like in Paris here! They'll have an eclipse, and we will, too!" We have a photo from that day. We don't even remember who took it anymore. Some neighbor whom we've erased from our memory took a picture of us and printed out copies for everyone in it. The sky is black, slightly lit with what's left of the sun, and here we are on the ground, with our contrast shadows. Our neighbor Nina is looking up to the sky with her mouth wide open, without a glass, she's got nothing to lose; it's as if she were ready to step on a path and start walking toward the place from which she'd been chased away long ago. Auntie Tanya has her left hand on her breast, as if she can't breathe, while her right hand firmly presses the glass against her eye. My mom is looking intensely at the star. And me—I'm not looking at it, I've buried my face in her skirt and am clenching it with my hands. This memory fades away, leaving Auntie Tanya in the room.

Tanya I barely left my place during the summer. Would only go out into the garden and to visit you. I lay around like a seal, watched TV shows. I even got sick by the end of the summer—too much lying around doing nothing. Did no renovation, nothing. I signed up for Facebook though. I've friended all our girls there; we sometimes write to each other. One fellow messaged me there, not in Russian, a foreigner or something. I mean, it's clear from his photos that he's abroad, he might even be an American. Well, I called Lenka, and told her, come on, translate it for me, you're the English teacher here. She said it wasn't even English, she didn't understand a thing in that message, that it had to be some con. Told me to turn off my computer asap. And I'm like, what about the computer? Why? And she's like, well,

you'll catch viruses from it, and will have to pay later. She knows nothing about the internet, only logs in on Classmates regularly.⁵ Do you hang out there?

Mom I do sometimes.

Tanya Everyone is addicted to it already, of course. It used to be so nice: you're enjoying your vacation days, and you can forget about everyone. Now they write you all day long, post photos, like yours. If you don't like theirs—you're arrogant, Yelena Petrovna in particular is like that. She'll then act all hurt around you, and you'll keep guessing what it could be, and it turns out—a like. That's how she is now.

My mom replies something to her—I'm more interested in the roof I see out the window. All my thoughts are about how the glass windows that we used to have were better than the new plastic ones.

In summer, when all the windows in the house were wide open, and the curtains in them rose like sails in the wind, the house became suffused with indolence and a quiet laziness.

We'd wake up around noon, have tea, usually. Then we'd move to the shadow of the porch, eat some hackberry or sarvisberry, and after that—the pinnacle event of every day, the backbone of the free summer weeks—a TV show. We could barely breathe as we watched it; only rare gasps revealed our sympathy for the protagonists. I cared for the suntanned and beautiful Milagros and Diego just as much, and sometimes even more, than all the street gossip, games, and dramas. Noble Argentinians and Brazilians could beat Auntie Natasha and Yelena Petrovna (an ugly and gossipy woman), and all our teachers (nice people, but nothing special) on all counts. It seemed that the latter didn't have any eternal love, only potatoes to plant and students' homework to grade. After the heat of the screentime, the day would be coming to its end, the sun would penetrate almost all of our rooms and burn them with such hot beams that the windows were immediately curtained, and life in the house went quiet in anticipation of the cool of the night. When it finally arrived, we would move over to the porch, and women who lived nearby would come over, noticing the light of the table lamp, to have some adult, unimportant conversation: somebody was getting divorced, another one was getting buried, the cucumbers wouldn't grow, and somebody chased his family around with a knife. These were vague snippets of somebody else's big flow of life just next to us.

Of course, not every day was like this. We'd also have rainy, drab days, when your heart would be seized by such a melancholy, such a child's solitude, that a premonition of something bad would linger heavily over you from the moment you woke up. Once, on just such a day, when the rain had suddenly picked up and we could already hear long rumbles of thunder, and the wind started to rock the poplar outside the window in the living room, a phone ring pierced the room. My mom picked up and, after a moment of silence, gave a loud scream, covering her mouth with her hand in a flash. It terrified me so much I locked myself in a dark bathroom. It was some far-away death, some relative I didn't know. And neither the incredibly honest Milagros nor the good Diego could explain to me the fear that got so close to me for the first time, the terror caused by my mom's scream. I spent an hour or longer

in the darkness, until the rain stopped, and my mom finished all her phone conversations.

Mom Oh, somebody is pounding on the window on the porch!

My mom rushes out, leaving Auntie Tanya and me in the danger of each other's company. Silence.

Tanya Well, let's catch up or something, I haven't seen you for ages!

Me A year and a half.

Tanya Oleg told me he saw you today.

I nod. Silence.

Tanya Are you still single?

I smile.

Tanya Well, let's talk before you leave!

Me About what?

Tanya About something important, what are the important things you think about?

Me Well, the important . . . Alright, how about this. What do you think, there, in the army, did he cry or scream when they were throwing him out the window?

Silence.

Tanya puts her cup back on the table, freezes, looks out the window. Silence.

Tanya It's getting dark too early.

Me It's getting dark the same as always.

Tanya What is it now? Which month?

Me I think he screamed.

Tanya I think, you know, I think I was wrong. I'm a coward.

Silence. My mom closes the door so that the cats don't get in. She's standing by the door.

Mom It was your father. Didn't want to come in, he's ashamed, tipsy already. Left these socks for you though. Warm. Spent a few bucks on somebody else, never happens.

My mom smiles and sits back down at the table with us.

I'll drink just a bit with you, the wine seems good.

I take the socks—they're warm. I put them in my pocket so I don't forget them.

Tanya You know, I often remember the day when we took them to school for the first time. Do you remember? They were so afraid; they were hiding their faces

behind the flowers at the school assembly and crying. Because we weren't there with them. We made a home video of them later. I haven't gone back to that tape in a long while.

Mom They had five peonies each, I remember it.

Tanya (*looks at me, smiling*) Yes, he cried, he did, as if I don't know it.

I close my eyes. I'm looking at you through the peonies, I'm not afraid. I'm just looking at you and I'm smiling. Our moms are sitting there, talking to each other, and you and I are not afraid at all. There, where they are, is not interesting but important; here, where we are, is good. They are saying goodbye to each other—and we're saying goodbye, see you.

Mom Will you finish the wine? Tanya left a little.

I nod, I drink.

Me I saw Oleg this morning.

Mom They're expecting a baby soon. This spring. I'm ready to retire. I'd play with my grandson. Or with my granddaughter. I had a dream that you'd have two daughters. (*Knocks on wood.*) I saw it very clearly. So, I'm waiting now.

Silence.

Me People must love children because they miss themselves.

Silence. We sigh, we drink. My mom freezes, she looks out the window. The wind has picked up; it blows through the chimney.

Mom When I was six, we moved into that two-story old wooden building that was almost falling apart. I always went out into our yard at night; and there were these raspberry bushes all around it, so scary. I'd lean my back against the house and stare at the sky, at the stars. I could stand there for an hour like that. And now I still go out on the porch in the evening and look out. I stand there for a while. And keep staring. And then I put my head back down, and my eyes look for those raspberry bushes. As if I'm six years old, and this life never happened.

Silence.

Mom This world has seen so many things, but the sky doesn't change.

Silence. The wind breaks a twig, blows it into the window. We start. My mom whispers something.

Mom Move away from the window, just in case.

We take the stools, move to the door.

Me Mom, was I ever afraid of heights?

Mom Oh, did you see the flash?

Me Now I am. I'm afraid of everything now.