

YARI OSTOVANY

Fragments of Poetry and Silence (for Andrei Tarkovsky), 2015
Oil on canvas, 24 x 36 in



COURTESY: THE ARTIST

NIKITA NELIN Strangers

I still had two hundred pills to get rid of and my broken nose was askew, though returning to a state of grace. The remnants of my inheritance gave me cover from making an impression on the world: a harsh eastern European brow ridge, offset by my mother's eyes, their green kindness committed to covering for anything misformed or damaged, then the brow ridge working its own peculiar shadows. For the rest of my life I would carry a small stump at the top of my nose, but otherwise the damage was fading.

My first American friend called, said he was in town for winter break. He received winter breaks because he was in college, and I was just always on break.

"Why is there so much shit around you?" he always asked whenever he visited.

"Must be the Russian winter still with me," I would reply. "We are harsh people, accustomed to inhospitable climates."

"Whatever, silly. Where is the party?"

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When I arrived in America I was told that because I was ten I was supposed to be going to fifth grade and was given a full scholarship into a private Jewish middle school. That's the anatomy of culture shock; I didn't even know I was Jewish.

My mother translated the details for me as we sat in the principal's office.

"Chucha, it will be great. Wipe that face off." I was frowning because I was afraid. I had borrowed this expression from my mother's face along the way of emigration.

"Ma, can you stop calling me that?"

"Why, Chucha?"

Cheburashka was a cute, awkward Soviet cartoon character, a fabled little furry who, from its love of oranges, became trapped in a container full of them and ended up in Moscow. When the grocery store owner unpacked the container, the little creature tumbled out with its paws still numb from travel and from having gorged itself on the oranges. The store owner named it Cheburashka—one that tumbles awkwardly. Chucha, for short. From there on, the creature would cause adorable mischief, always to be saved in the nick of time. I didn't want to be called that.

"Because we're not in Russia anymore. We have to try to belong," I whispered.