

## ALEX KANEVSKY

*Embrace*, 2015  
Oil on Wood, 20 x 20 in



COURTESY DOLBY CHADWICK GALLERY

## EIREENE NEALAND

# That Season's Exchanges

Outside, on the balcony, this is us: two socks hanging from a skinny clothesline. It's getting colder outside. The wind makes us flap. There's nothing but little wooden pins to hold us up by our toes. Two friends have already fallen this year. Both suicides. One because of a car.

"Not worth fixing," the mechanic said.

Matt, innocent as he was, took the comment as being about himself. Already he could hear the sound of the tow truck, its deafening chop, calling attention to his all-too-obvious helplessness; already he knew how the driver would look, a taut-faced man with giant pores, skin ruined by methamphetamines and prison food. Nothing Matt could do would help, and why should he help? The man'd had more good times than Matt ever did. Indeed, as soon as Matt hopped into the passenger seat, the mechanic began to chatter on, hopeful but cynical about being redeemed. For more money than Matt could pay, he dragged Matt's broken-down heap of metal to a private parking lot that Matt didn't own. Safe from the police, but not from the landlord.

These days, you can't even abandon your troubles on the side of the road.

\* \* \*

Because where is she now, Nadezhda? Bulgaria, if you know where that is. She looks out the window and sees birds flocking past. The last of this summer's swallows, she thinks, but they are not. They are grey pigeons, the same rumple-feathered ones that curl up on her windowsill, attracted to whatever heat leaks through the window panes, whatever protection from the wind her wall allows.

When she opens the window to offer bread, they flee.

Why shouldn't they?

She, a former squatter with shaggy bangs and blue-bleached hair, has come here to test her survival skills. Yes, a bit of partying is involved. Her bangs lie flat on her forehead and, given the distance of an actor's gaze, she'll pose in a stance like she's ready to punch.

"It's capoeira!" she'll say when a thug grabs her backpack and runs.

These days, there aren't any fighters, only a dance of adjusted desires.

"Be in the moment," she'll scream after she curtails

the hand of a drunk who’s got a hand on her sleeping bag.

At the party that night, two young women, who have shyly confessed to being clever at crafts, perk up and stare. Their thin faces have protruding bones as if from some more ancient time, and she wishes she could offer some wise advice: *The past is now*. Or *What is desire in an age without plans*? Only, the music is loud. The club they’re in was once a bank. Someone else tugs at her arm—“Let’s see if we can sneak into the vault.”

That is forbidden. The club has its own security guards, but she follows the insistent Brit with a bright yellow sweater-vest and cropped purple hair. She follows her, sighing, as if she has just lost an argument with some elderly parent who told her to conform.

“What is desire in an age without plans?” she does say aloud.

Her voice echoes in the big vault. No one bothers to answer: the hardest thing about desire in a capitalist age is making it last.

Because now she’s below us, shuffling through the yellow leaves, mired in the season’s discards. Out to buy morning yogurt, out to experience the day as if it were real. In dark leather boots she approaches an enormous glass kiosk where an elderly woman stands before what appears to be an infinite number of dresses and coats.

“Infinite skins,” Nadezhda thinks as she tries out the zippers and fit the snaps. Meanwhile the old woman stays busy, attaching a story to the coat Nadezhda will eventually buy.

“In the early fifties,” the old woman says, “that very coat was left in the cloakroom of a disco bar in Blagoevgrad.

The girl who owned it had legs the length of tall a pine. All her life she was thin, but the coat kept her warm until she took it off to dance. Who needed warmth then? When the lights were down and the smoke filled the air, the tall thin girl wove through the crowd like a giant jellyfish, all those long angles freed by memories of swimming in the Black Sea.”

Yes, this is a story from another place, from another time.

Still the old woman goes on.

“One night, soldiers came.”

A war had just ended, but the tall thin girl didn’t care. She undulated in the bar’s smoke, and along came a soldier

who ran his hands over her ribs. Suddenly, the girl felt curvy and svelte. Who cared what side the soldier was on! She let him wrap her, first in his green army coat, then in some old sweater left on the bar. She picked up mittens and stuffed them into her bra, but she didn’t need them. When the soldier found scarves, he wrapped those on too. The girl was puffed up like a hive of bees.

“I’ve never been warmer,” the young lady cried.

At this point, the old woman at the kiosk sighs.

“I’ll let you have it for thirty-five leva,” she says.

After all, she, too, had been young at that bar. Young for years and years, but that was during the Communist times. Her family was re-educated through work. So she worked, keeping track of the coats in the coatroom, clearing away empty beer cups, starting at the age of nine. By the time the thin girl came with her soldier, the old woman was already forty years old. So she didn’t think twice about taking the long leather coat, limp on the bar cloakroom’s hook. Yes, she had coats of her own. She had a wood stove, but she wanted the dream of a soldier. She wanted the idea that the tall girl was her, the tall girl, who’d never come back.

No, her dream didn’t come true but the woman, night by night, got busy collecting, sometimes a sweater, sometimes a scarf.

She, before anyone, understood Communism was on its way out.

“Yes,” she sighs to Nadezhda. “Those were good times.”

Nadezhda doesn’t believe the first story, nor does the second one promise to be true. You never are when it concerns yourself. And why rely on truth when money’s at stake? You’ve got to make the commodity dance, attach a significance to each worn scrap of skin, ripped from a bleeding cow and boiled to expunge flesh’s live smell.

Nadezhda likes the heavy solidity of wearing what had once been alive.

Now that she’s under it she’ll teach it to spin!

She has to or she’ll end up like Matty.

Back home, in Oakland, they address capitalism’s centrifugal tendencies with a spaghetti dinner held every Tuesday night at the lake near Matty’s house. Not that it’s really about him or his death. Where they gather is a picnic table on a vast ratty lawn that, locals explain with pride, has been organically overfertilized by the hard poops of

geese. There, on old wooden benches, she and the rest of the millennials squeeze in and sit as close as they can. Before them is a giant shiny pot. One after another they heap their plates with gooey stuff that looks like intestines and guts.

“I am Matty,” they say. Then, they go through their own names so that everyone *is* them; they are the whole of experience. All for one, and one for all, except no one really *is*. When it comes to the bottom of it, the only real thing is the pot of starch, overcooked with a little bit of tomato plopped on. What else can you need when you’ve already got a hat, coat, and socks to keep you warm?

**Eireene Nealand** was a 2014–2015 Fulbright Fellow in Sofia, Bulgaria. She currently lives in Santa Cruz, where she writes fiction and translates Russian and Bulgarian prose and poetry.