

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?"

* * *

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.

... as the years went on, most of those kids had dropped their interest in me, like an extracurricular project gone nuclear.

“We belong,” she said, her Russian voice blanketing the room.

“No we don’t. We’re strangers.”
“Maybe...but we belong, Chucha.”

A kind-looking secretary with saucer glasses walked me to the library to introduce me to my new cohort. She kept saying something to me, repeating it actually, not understanding that repetition of what I could not understand made no impact upon my actual understanding.

Maybe it was intentional, maybe just one of those “God laughs” things, but I was delivered to the class while they played chess during their free hour. At each long library desk, two sets of kids sat quietly across from each other, looking me over curiously. I was a relic from the Cold War they had just been taught they won.

Smith Jobowitz sat alone, rearranging the pieces from an earlier game with someone who was no longer there. I was seated across from him. He offered me the first move. Next to him lay a tattered edition of the *World’s Book of Religions* with the general faiths catalogued on the cover. I tried practicing my alphabet and reading the words upside down, careful not to make eye contact with anyone. Only the word “Communism” was familiar to me. I guess here they considered it a religion. I felt the eyes around me make a failing effort to return to their games. Later I understood that whoever was the valedictorian the previ-

ous year was also assigned the responsibility of ambassador. Smith was the valedictorian every year. I finally earned a participation award at the end of eighth grade.

He asked me questions as I blinked back in a cold panic, still frowning, and so he flipped the board and made the first move, which I countered by mirroring him. Halfway through the game he tried asking me something again, as I lost queen after rook after knight. I can only imagine now what the questions were, because it is impossible to remember what you never understood. That was my counter, what I kept saying to him: “I no understand. I no understand.” That, “hello,” “dog,” “(k)at,” and “I am Russian, my name is Alexander” was all I knew.

I lost that game, though had I been paying attention to the board instead of the white fog within me, I should have won easily. Back in Moscow my grandfather had made a habit to practice with me during marathon weekends whenever his troop prepared to leave on tour, and I became the champion of my class, but that world was already becoming hard to remember.

I lost a lot, for a long time, until I finally began to understand...

When I finally got it, what I got was the recognition that I was not one of them and never could be. I stopped straining. I decided to become my impulses, a bit rough around the edges, letting the frown envelop me, shielding my eyes. As the years went on, most of those kids had dropped their interest in me, like an extracurricular project gone nuclear—the edges becoming too much for them. Except for Smith. He liked the rough play. The unpredictability and the indulgence. He learned that he could travel through me but with greater safety than if he had lived his own high-wire life.

As we grew up we skipped school together, me from my many public high schools and him from his private one. On Monday nights we would watch new episodes of the *Real World*, discuss what we would say in our interviews for the show, and I would sleep over on the cat-haired couch of his mother’s apartment. He kept asking me to take him to the courts in the ’hood, and to the parties that could be shut down with blue and red lights. We learned women together. We would lie on the beach and dream about tomorrows and everything we would make happen. Yet, somehow, his indiscretions were lighter in

consequences. They were extracurricular, whereas mine were always a cannonball into the the unmarked end of the pool.

* * *

There was a heavy knock on the door, and when I opened it there was a blindfolded Mexican on his knees, his hands bound to his back with a heavy coat of masking tape. I blinked the way I do when I do not understand as Jakko stepped around the doorway. He held his shotgun to the man’s shoulder and scanned the hallway for onlookers.

“You gonna let me in?”
“What the fuck...?”

“I need to piss.” He pushed himself past me, dragging his friend by the shirt collar.

“J, what the fuck are you doing here? I thought you left town.” I was ignoring the obvious questions.

“Just passing through, bunny-boy. I have errands.” He dropped his friend to the floor and plopped down onto the couch, resting his feet on the man’s back. There was a small tear in the black leather upholstery, which had started out as a few ruined fibers but each week became more noticeable. I still don’t know why he called me bunny-boy, and there’s no one to ask now.

“Where are your boys?” he asked.

I looked down at the human footstool and back at Jakko, my eyes rolling up to my brow ridge in confusion.

“Oh, don’t worry. He doesn’t understand English. Speak with liberty.”

I checked the clock on the microwave, as if breaking this down into measurable units would explain the situation. It was almost midnight. “They flew up to Maine to see Rory’s aunt,” I answered.

“Fancy. Not you?”

“I have to work. What the fuck is going on?”

“Yep, you have to work...” He smiled up at me as if we shared some secret, and I guess we did. I guess that’s why he was there.

“I need a favor,” he said coming out of the bathroom and looking boisterous.

“Fuck. No,” I whined. “Does this involve the Mexican?”

“He’s not a Mexican. He’s a Cuban. Learn your natives.”

He plopped back down onto the couch and splayed himself out again. I didn’t think that Cubans would be considered

native, not even here in south Florida, but decided this was not the best time to argue the point. Not when he was petting a shotgun in the midst of what looked like a kidnapping. Struggling against him would only end up getting you further entangled.

“How about a beer? Be a good host.”

Jakko reshuffled his feet. The Cuban whimpered but said nothing. He seemed to be resigned to whatever was the plan and made no eye contact, which comforted me. I frowned and got three beers, at which Jakko uttered a bemused chuckle. “He’s not drinking.”

“J, I don’t think I’m okay with this.” I eyed both of them, calculating everything that could go wrong. And yet I too was surrendering. “Does he need water?”

“That’s a sweet thought. Get him water.” When I did, Jakko poured it slowly down the Cuban’s mouth and then replaced the tape. I was surprised how tender he was as he did this.

“You’ve got to go. I’m not okay with this.”

“Bullshit, bunny. You owe me.”

“J, there are people looking for you, and now you have a tied-up Cuban in my living room.”

“Fucker, you’re the reason they’re looking.” This wasn’t entirely true. He knew that. I knew that. After my first deal had gone comically wrong under his watch, Jakko felt inspired. Rumor was that he had facilitated a large powder exchange and then dropped on both sides. It was a transition time for him, either to a kingpin or a dead man. Still, I did owe him something.

I was afraid of him, is the truth. Had always been. Tim was not, not because he was brave but because he just didn’t see the long possibilities of things. Rory saw Jakko as something of a playmate. A lovable misfit, someone to burn with and be shocked by. But I was afraid of what could happen when things went wrong, of what could be lost. Hadn’t we already crossed that line? I found myself asking. I knew that I was still afraid of him, which meant we had not gone as far as I had thought.

“I’m only going to be an hour, tops.” Jakko said. I was skeptical of this. “This is simple.” I was skeptical of that too. “He won’t cause any problems. He’s tamed.”

“The fuck am I supposed to do with him?”

“Nothin’. I just need to stick him somewhere while I wrap up a few loose ends. Consider this a favor from the

casa. You don’t even need to be here, though it might be best if you were... so he doesn’t get too lonely, is all.”

“I’m not okay with this.”

“Hello, apartment, are you accepting guests?”

“This can’t end well.”

“Hello *casa, casa*...where may I store my baggage?”

Jakko was wandering around, from Tim’s room to Rory’s to mine, opening doors and conversing with their knobs, improvising with lifeless things.

How the fuck did I get here? I still wanted to go back to school or maybe marry...something honorable like that. Is there any coming back from things like this?

“Tell me where you want him, dear. Dear, tell me where you want him... Booga, booga, boo!”

He wasn’t crazy. At least not in that traditional sense. He just saw everything as a joke. Everything for him resonated in one tone: a bar fight over a girl, figure eights in the dark fields of Wellington, a bruised-up Cuban tied up on the floor—these were all the same to him. That’s another kind of crazy. That’s what scared me, that with him things could change so quickly. You are just riding along, riding along, and then you find yourself way downhill and far away from home, freewheeling and out of control, with no choice but to grab onto the wheel and help him steer. And he’s just laughing, having fun all the way.

We stuffed him into my room, the Cuban-Mexican. Jakko threw him on the floor and turned the lights off but turned on the little television I had on the windowsill, satisfied when he found MTV, which he muted. Then he closed the door. “He’ll be fine in there. Just leave him alone. I’ll be back in an hour. If there are strange noises, you know...” I didn’t. “Two at most. And...” Absentmindedly he scratched his neck with the double barrel. “I wouldn’t have any visitors if I were you. Just, you know...let’s keep love private.”

* * *

After Jakko left, I sat on the coffee table and stared at the bedroom door. There was an absolute silence, the apartment living only by my sparse breaths. I had locked the door and even the windows. I bit my nails and stared ahead, still wearing that dumbfounded look, not even bothering to light a cigarette or get up for a beer. An hour must have gone by, maybe more, when a knock came at the door. I

jumped straight up through the fog. I was confident that I had made it to the other side and this episode was over. We were back on course. But at the door I was met with a familiar face I had forgotten to expect, and it wasn’t Jakko.

“What’s up, brotha? Long time!” said Smith.

“Hey...” It came wheezing out of me as if I were a discarded party balloon.

“I love the new pad.” He pushed himself past me, first giving me a big one-armed hug. “Got a drink? What we doing tonight, brotha?” That’s us Jewish kids: we compensate by speaking street language, but we do it badly. “My bo-y,” he said with a beer already in hand, a loose shrug, and the apparent buoyancy of someone on vacation. “What’s new?”

A tied-up Cuban in my bedroom and I’ve made friends with a psychopath, was my first thought.

* * *

We sat on the balcony and reminisced. I had taken him out onto the balcony because of what was inside. Some still human instinct in me did not want the two to meet. And yet his presence soothed me, inspired the illusion of order. We laughed as we remembered going to the county fair when we were thirteen, when, between the Gravitron and the imported snow yard, he revealed to me that the secret to meeting a girl was eye contact. “The ones that don’t look away are interested,” he had said. I spent the rest of the fair making crazy eyes at unsuspecting girls and terrifying them.

He told me of a cheerleader in school and how everyone there was “experimenting.” I told him of a bartender with perfect nipples, a coworker at a job I had recently quit. I didn’t tell him everything. He talked of the business program at his university, of the bars on the main strip, of college life, the accepted and overlooked misgivings of those who are endowed with a purpose. And though I wanted to feel jealous, and at other times I would, for that moment I just felt warm in knowing someone.

When we fell into silence, I saw him looking out in some new distracted way, as if those boisterous ramblings were covering up for something more devious, something that even he could not yet account for.

“You got anything?” he asked, looking up from one of those quiet travels. In past visits I had been a connection for small party drugs. He was right to assume that by

this time I would have found a way to skip a few of the middlemen.

“Some X,” I said. “But I can’t give it away.”

“That’s fine, brotha. I got college money.”

I went into my room to get two pills from the stash. I had nearly forgotten that there was someone else in there. I kept the light off, though the TV was enough to illuminate everything. I had the feeling of being in a room with a digesting snake. He looked at me without any emotion or disagreement, just staring without blinking. He writhed less to oppose the binds than to show that he was still alive. I stepped over him and wondered what the protocol was for getting drugs from your stash when a stranger is lying tied up on the floor and his master is late.

Smith squeezed one of the pills into his Parliament box and the other he swallowed with the last gulp of his beer. In ten minutes his toes would begin to tingle. In twenty, he would feel the hand of God in his heart. In the morning he would be withered and dry like the shed skin of a once larger creature.

We sat quietly. That sense that he wasn’t telling me something returned. That earlier exuberance and the way he looked out into the dark just didn’t match up. He was never a good actor. His skills lay in politicking and numbers.

“Let’s climb,” he finally said.

“What?”

“I want to be high.”

“You *are* about to be high.”

“No. I want a higher perspective.”

“Smith, tonight may not be...” But he was already out of his lawn chair.

This is not going to turn out well, I thought. But I had to follow him.

We climbed up to the roof. It was only three floors up, but under the circumstances it would have to do. At the overhang of the roof I gave him my shoulders for support and then swung my own body up in one easy motion. I had done this hundreds of times. When Tim, Rory, and I would throw parties and I wanted to get away, I would just climb up.

“Look at that,” Smith said when we were finally on top. “Freedom.” He was wistful in the way of a man who had recently second-guessed something. Like someone

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recalculating the past through the present, and failing in their measurements.

I looked up and around, tensing to understand what he was seeing, but all I saw was the quiet and obedient dark grass of the golf course and a few bored stars.

“No worries. No responsibility or upkeep. You found the life, man.”

I looked over at him and considered this.

“You all right?” I asked.

“I’m great. I’m great,” he answered. “Fuck it, you know?” He looked at me with fierce little eyes, nodding his head, as if I were supposed to understand what he meant.

“Fuck compromise. Fuck it all!” he screamed and walked to the other side of the roof. I stood up but did not make a move toward him or away. I studied him, trying to make the missing pieces fit. Maybe it’s a bad pill, I thought. Fuck. Though I’ve never seen this before, surely never this quickly.

“I don’t need shit!” he screamed.

I needed to get a handle on him and control him. I mean, a lot could go wrong tonight.

“Smith...” I whispered.

*I brought him water
and considered
calling his mom or
the hospital, but
instead I said,
“Want to see
something
really crazy?”*

“You’re living it.”

“Living what?”

“Freedom. You’ve got freedom. You direct your life.”

He was severely misdiagnosing my situation.

“You do what you want,” he continued, “and you answer to no one.”

“Hey man, you’re wrong. That’s not what it’s like at all. Let’s come down. Let’s go inside.”

“No!” He stood at the edge, and it finally hit me that the look in his eyes was that of someone who was in the balance of ecstasy and fury, and that the fury was tethered here to this flat roof while the ecstasy was found in the sky or in the nowhere, and desperately he wanted to bridge the gap. I began walking toward him in small, careful steps, taking a cigarette pack out of my pocket for show. He wasn’t allowed to tumble here. I was, but he wasn’t. I wasn’t prepared for that kind of responsibility. The moment he turned away from me I lunged, and we rolled on the roof before I pinned him. He was going to jump. I know that. I just still don’t know why.

My face was right next to his. He was sweating and breathing heavily, trying to wrestle against me, even clawing some, before I finally got him in a sedate lock. Of all the things I could have said at that moment, what came to me was, “I could have beaten you.”

“What?” He was panting.

I was a bit surprised myself, but it just spilled out as if from an unregistered crack in a glass. “In those chess games. I could have beaten you, you know.”

“What? Get off of me.” He struggled against me but was in no condition to win.

“I could have taken everything. *I* could have taken everything.”

He looked at me now with the same puzzled look I had had just a minute earlier, that very same bewildered look I must have worn when I first stepped into that class.

“Who cares,” he said. “It didn’t matter. We were kids.”

We were. We were kids, but it never felt like that. Still doesn’t.

I pushed him harder into the ground. “What the fuck are you doing?” I said.

“None of it matters. Don’t you get it? Have you been listening? Something is missing. All that work. All this effort to do it right, and something is still missing. There’s no point in winning, Alex.” He was crying now. The full emotional swing of the pill had taken course. “Get off of me. Please.”

“You gonna try that again?”

“No. Just get off of me.”

We climbed back inside, me following him just in case. In the apartment he lay down on the couch and curled up in a ball, still crying. Crying like I’ve never seen a man cry. In heavens. In surrender-like worship. I was lost on what to do. For so long I had done the wrong thing, often simply out of confusion, and I did not expect myself to start knowing now. I felt sorry for him, though still not clear why. But for the first time in years, I felt sorry for someone other than myself.

“Smith, will you say something? What happened?”

“I don’t want to talk. I don’t want to play anymore.”

I brought him water and considered calling his mom or the hospital, but instead I said, “Want to see something really crazy?”

“What?”

“Come on. I want to show you crazy.”

He followed me. We were like two boys in an ancient cave. I opened the bedroom door, turned on the light, and showed them to each other. I don’t know what I expected. I just felt the need to open the door and turn on the light

and let them see. Maybe I was experimenting. Maybe I was cold, numb to them both. Maybe I wanted them to tell me what to do.

We stood in my room, Smith and I, and the Cuban lay on the floor, his eyes wide open, as on the muted television screen a staged fight in sun-bleached Hawaii escalated on the newest season of the *Real World*.

“He’s not mine,” I said. “Someone brought him, and now he’s here.”

“Why is he taped up?”

“I don’t know.”

I took a step back. Smith stood there with his shoulders hunched over—stranger looking at stranger. They watched each other, and I them. No one moved. I tried to imagine what either of them was thinking, what either of them was there for, but I could not. It wasn’t that I couldn’t understand. A hundred different things could have brought them there, but in truth they were void of sense. What mattered was that they were there, face to face, with something new, something without familiarity, something other than themselves. And I, I had resolved to witness this confusion of others. To let them have their own foreign moment on this stage.

* * *

Jakko came back in the morning.

“Sorry,” was all he said. He looked like he had been drinking all night and had been in a scuffle. He carried a twelve-pack with him, also as an apology because none of it had been drunk yet. Smith was asleep on the couch, and Jakko paid no attention to him. He went into the bedroom and tore the bonds off the Cuban. He said something to him in Spanish, and the man followed him out into the living room where Smith sat up on the couch, wiping the cobwebs from his night. Jakko sat down next to him as Smith moved over. The Cuban massaged his wrists and took a seat between them. “Cabos sueltos. Bueno,” he said. I guess it was a leap of faith, on everyone’s part, worn out by their secrets. I opened a beer and Jakko motioned for one, so I brought one to each of them and placed the carton on the coffee table. I sat down on the floor with my legs crossed. We sat like that for maybe an hour or so, like fellow passengers on the last subway ride of the night, not competing with each other for space, until we finished the beer,

and then we sat some more. Nobody said anything. We strangers, we sat in our own emptiness until the morning ran out, and then each of them went their own way as if, almost as if, nothing at all had just taken place.

Nikita Nelin was born in Moscow, Russia and emigrated to the U.S in 1989. He has lived in Austria and Italy, and has traveled the U.S extensively. He received the 2010 Sean O’Faolain prize for short fiction, the 2011 Summer Literary Seminars prize for non-fiction, and was shortlisted for the 2011 Faulkner-Wisdon short fiction prize. His publications include *Southword Journal*, *Tablet Magazine*, *Elephant Journal*, *Rebelle Society*, *Electric Literature*, and others. He holds an MFA in fiction from Brooklyn College, and is currently working on his first collection of stories under the title *Amirikana Dreaming*.