MYRA EASTMAN

The Great Migration from El Salvador to Santa Cruz—Water Jugs, 2018
Acrylic on canvas, 36 x 46 in

NIKITA NELIN

Nu Means "Well"

Our immigration from Russia to the United States

It is 1995. I am fifteen. We are in Florida, and now you know where we're going. You know where we will land, and so you know that geography is only the context for this story.

I am by my mother's bed, restraining a fury that is failing me. I am trying to pull her out of bed. I am making speeches with the conviction of a revolutionary about how this is our chance at life again, how this, "this," I wave my hand at the window to exaggerate a future outside beyond what we're living, "this can change everything." It can get us out of here, this place we were never supposed to land. It can set things right.

She barely moves.

I am packing her bags and mine. I try to pull her from the bed, by her leg, but my effect is nothing. There are plane tickets waiting for us, to a new place, away from where we had been beached for all of my adolescence. I am yelling. I am convinced that this is the moment, this is the moment to go. But she cannot move. There is nothing physically broken in her. The trauma is deeper than even my knowledge of our family stories.

Having exhausted my anger, I sit down on the bed next to her. Bill Clinton plays the saxophone on the TV and the background noise is supposed to make us feel less alone in what is otherwise the beached state of nomads. I can sense the light setting outside and between us into dark.

"*Nu* . . ." I say.

* * *

Nu means "well." As in, "Well, here we are." It never means "we are well." You are never "*nu*." It is never a commentary, though it can be a pause—"*nu* . . ." It can't be a "so," because you can never be "*nu* and *nu* and *nu*" like you can "so and so." *Nu* immigrated to Yiddish, not the other way around—*nu* was slowly cooked in clay family stoves to kill its bitter root. *Nu* finds its origins in Russia's horse-whipping serfs—*Nu*, thank you, Gogol. *Nu* is mostly gentle, mostly spoken by a friend, by someone familiar with your soul, unless they are packing a sidearm. If someone packing a sidearm says *nu*, they are demanding papers.

My mother admits that, *nu*, she does not remember much of that first train ride when we fled Moscow in November of '89. She had had a molar removed three days before we left. By the rules of Soviet dental barbarianism,

"Nu! Show us your papers! Nu, leaving, huh . . . ? Traitors." Entering Lithuania. "Nu, nu, nu, nu," in rapid bursts, waking the cabins. Exiting Lithuania.

they stuck something back into the absence, as if to say, "Don't you forget us." So apparently there was a rod sticking out of my mother's jaw and inflaming it as we traversed the destitute Soviet land.

That's why she was green and her face was swollen. So, when I tell her that just after we left the station her sister walked into the cabin and said to her, "*Nu*, you've finally done it," my mother agrees now . . . "*Nu*, it sounds about right. She probably did say it that way. She probably thought it was a compliment too."

To be fair, I do not remember too much of that first leg either, and then, much of what I remember has coagulated with glimpses of my mother's fever-struck memory. I remember moods and single-frame images. I remember that north and south were just directions while East and West were destinations, philosophies, Capital Commitments, signs impacted with a meaning far greater than mere orientation principles. They were boundaries beyond which no one was permitted to see, new ways of life. I remember the first atmosphere. It was night. It was dark. Everything smelled of boiled eggs.

We were in a four-cot cabin. A few hours, maybe days, after liftoff, our cabin had picked up another passenger, a large village-made Russian woman who came packing a suitcase of boiled eggs. She also snored like an early-era five-year-plan tractor. This I remember well.

My mother lay on her cot between tea breaks and dozed into her missing-tooth delirium. My aunt had her arm wrapped around me, urging me to lean into her. She understood the poetic setting of letting go.

In between the snoring, and the tin-can rattle of the train, there were many stops. No one ever got off, but people got on. At the stops there was shouting. There was a trained anxiety that preempted these stops, a well-documented conditioning.

It was mostly during the night that the men would turn up. They walked the length of the train, waking its tentatively floating souls. There were dogs with them, rifles, flashlights, and sidearms.

"Papers! *Nu, davai, davai*." *Faster, faster.* Exiting Russia.

"What's wrong with her?"

"She lost a tooth."

"Fine. *Nu, bumagi*!" *Papers*. Entering Belarus.

The egg lady stirred and reached into her egg bag.

"*Nu*, papers, papers! Where you going?" We didn't know. Exiting Belarus.

The egg lady searched her bag for something that was not eggs. I could hear tiny continents of eggshells collide against her bony fingers.

When she wasn't trying to hold me, or making hot-water runs for my mother, my aunt stared out the window dreaming of her own aliyah voyage one day to come.

"*Nu*! Show us your papers! *Nu*, leaving, huh . . . ? Traitors." Entering Lithuania.

"*Nu, nu, nu, nu*," in rapid bursts, waking the cabins. Exiting Lithuania.

People would complain about these entitled strangers bursting into their dreams, but in tentative whispers and never less than a few miles after clearing the checkpoint. Only the egg lady never said a word, fitted as she was to cruel indifference.

"*Nu*, good riddance," said our faceless document query at the final border.

My mother's eyes were thinly open. We sat on her cot. She cradled me with her fever-weak arms draped around my shoulders and a hand lifted up to animate the worlds rushing by. "See," she said, in a hoarse voice, "how everything changes in the window." "Like on the television?" I asked. "Yes, honey, but no one can turn it off. There is no switch. This is a very, very special mission we are on, sweetheart. Now, watch the world change. Notice how the landscape evolves. The breath of the frost contracts to the bark, the armor of the trees grows thin, and the winter unclasps its grip from them," she said, echoing the meter of her favorite poetry.

As you travel West, the world becomes more organized, less deranged, less wild, less desperate.

"*Nu* . . . ?" Valentina said, preparing her thin parcel. We were at the final border. Here she would be getting off and boarding a train back to Moscow.

For my mother it is the deformed core and mangled Soviet rod where her tooth used to be that hold all the pain of leaving. It would be years before she allowed a dentist to repair that broken root. For me it's my dog.

Marpha was a dachshund crossbred with something even more awkward, and thus absolutely blameless. She was terrified of heights and never nipped at my feet. She is the one reason I know to have not been the reason for us leaving.

When it was time for the family caravan to depart our apartment for the train, I assumed all of the adventured naïveté of Marco Polo—all eyes on the unknown, no collateral rumination.

The farewell party poured out of the apartment. My grandfather was already outside warming his Volga. The Nebulous One disappeared to perform a taxi miracle for the remainder of the group.

My mother and I finally step out of the apartment. I am bundled up in a fresh new parka. An old, pious girlfriend of my mother's remains behind to clean up, wishing us "god's blessings, forever" through the closing door. The apartment is due to be transferred over to an actor friend of my mom's who was a husband of hers, briefly (not really an episode worth recalling at this moment except for comedic relief). He had lost a finger to a staged saber fight and was one of the few people we knew who could offer a fair price for the Moscow two bedroom, and when I remember him I just see a stub of a finger.

Marpha would be taken in by another friend of our family, I was told. It appears we had many friends. I believed this telling, without trusting it entirely.

As we walked out, my dog crawled and wagged and clawed at the door, my mother's friend trying to pull Marpha back. I was already on the outside. There was still an opening though, the door not yet shut. There was the glimpse of abandonment. She said goodbye with all the power of a threatened Rottweiler, that little body that knew me. And on my side of the door there was no brave mask or adventure or story solid enough to keep me protected from the actuality of goodbye. Something at the core of my small body could not allow me to take another step forward. I kept holding the door open, squeezing my leg through the crack, back toward my dog. I couldn't let go. No one had taught me how. I held on to the door, not ready to lose sight of my little powerful dog, crying, kicking, not having words for it as on one side a woman, jammed up by her own witness tears, pulled and held one innocent small thing, and on the opposite side, my mother summoned her galactic courage to contain the other. As the door between us finally closed, I knew with full certainty, beyond any words, that there was something out there I would never see again. My mother comforted me, dragging me through the corridor and downstairs. "We have an adventure that waits us," she kept saying, "with all sorts of unimaginable creatures."

A bright light lapped up the sickly green walls. Their paint curled in my sobs. There was a mournful barking. There is an innocent animal in the heart of every resolution.

My mother's sister, Valentina, stood on the other side of the train, below our window. My mother on the inside. Their father's live, playful eyes—motionless, mournful, resolute, infinite in their tenderness. We pulled away from the platform through a series of high barbed wire fences, leaving the last contained edge of the crumbling union. Men with fur hats and shouldered rifles stood between the fences, smoking and spitting, indifferent to the departing. My mother wrapped a scarf around her swollen mouth and sighed with pain. I imagined the future. The egg lady again dug at the crumbs inside her egg bag, finally fishing something out of there. She pushed a vial of some village remedy into my mother's hand. "Take it. Take it. *Nu*."

A Small, Great Container

When I remember this thing that we did—and I mean *remember* in all its carnal rapture and wicked magnitude—I think of god. Not the embodied type. No robes,

gold-trimmed throne, no ledger accounting for pious deeds or the abacus beads of moral accounting.

Nor is it the G-d from Hebrew school of whom something always feels omitted. I mean the feeling of god. The god found from the other side. The one admitted when you are not looking. The extra, undefined sense, found in the confrontation with something unmistakably larger than you are. For some it is war, or love, or the transmutation from an otherwise hopeless condition of mind and body. For me it was adventure, a headfirst dive into what even my wildest imagination could not fulfill. It is the source of all unproven gravities. It can contain every meaning and still not answer your desperate questions. It is bewildering and amusing. It inserts no other purpose but for the purpose of merely experiencing itself, as itself, without reductions and inconclusively.

I remember waking up on the moving train in the morning. We were already out of Soviet territory, progressing to unimagined lands. There was the feeling of a weight having been removed. Somehow, all in one night, I had mourned and then ceased mourning everyone. Now, with the past seeming adequately dispatched, I could live inside of this living story, far greater than I was, and greet all its revelations.

My mother was still asleep, with our documents clenched in one hand and a porcelain teacup in the other. Her swelling was down. Why did she hold a teacup in her hand? Because for the coming indeterminate time of our lives our most immediate concerns were rumored to be weight and money.

Weight was one thing. All refugees leaving the Soviet Union were allowed a certain weight they could take with them. Basically, a couple suitcases each and a box filled with knickknacks. There was fear within the authorities of what was being dragged away—of the newly non-Soviets evacuating with them some mass and weight deemed essential to Soviet continuity, I suppose.

There was a list of things one could not take with: gold, handguns, medals, citizenship, any cash above three hundred Soviet rubles, etc. . . . Regardless, people still managed to smuggle out all sorts of charms, lining their coats and undergarments, bribing every fat guard along the way, devising inventive ways to trick the bag and body searches. I've heard stories of men transporting Russian mole rats by the dozen; of a large Caucasian family who smuggled out a whole car, piece by piece, later reassembling it in Italy only to find out that neither could they get it to run again nor did it contain any vintage value but irony. We took my grandfather's Kodak because (logical thought) it had been assembled, bought, and smuggled in from abroad and the family samovar because my mother always whimsically compromised between nostalgia and practicality. Otherwise, my mother elected to be light for the travel—weightless. Money was a whole other thing, though not entirely disconnected from the weight we carried.

All refugees leaving Russia were concerned with money. We didn't know what to expect. Rumors rained down like a Chernobyl rain—terrifying but not yet verifiable in its makeup. "Europe is lined with thieves." "There is a KGB informant in every train car." "You can get rich selling condoms in Italy." They were padded with more easily verifiable, if not resolvable, questions. How do you survive, feed yourself and family? How long will you be in transit? How much money do you need for the trip? Where are you going? How cold will it be?

Everyone sold everything that could be sold. Those who had nothing to sell, stole. The great haul for our adventure was the apartment, which was quite the source of contention. My mother often remembers stories from Russia by saying things like, "You know, the neighbors on the fourteenth floor . . . the ones who babysat you, the ones with the little boy, Vassily, who's a popular musician now . . . ?"

"What fourteenth floor?" I ask. "I remember the one that was a tram ride from that fancy restaurant that served vanilla ice cream in those little metal bowls. The ten-story one. That's all."

"Oh . . ." she realizes and retreats to memories I cannot share.

I only remember our second apartment—us having relocated to the two bedroom when I was five. She realizes that that second apartment, to me, was my first, the only Moscow apartment I'd known—that our experienced memory is actually divided.

We are Jewish. She is irreconcilably overbearing, theatrical, witty, and bright, an indescribable force of nature when terrified for my safety who orders lemon and a straw with her water as I cringe at her entitlement with service.

I was a rambunctious handful from the start, a rapscallion in advanced training. I was trying to find my father in great heights and burned myself over and over against the limits of things. There is a diagnosis for us in every attachment theory handbook and each Woody Allen film. So, yes, she needs help admitting that our memories differ, that there may not be such a thing as a psychic umbilical cord. Or if there is, that it does not transfer everything.

Anyway, we needed to sell that second apartment. The first and only one in my mind.

My grandmother really wanted it. She had been living in a cold, leaky basement dwelling for years. Somehow the publication of twelve books did not lead to tangible securities. My grandmother could not offer much money for it. In fact, she pretty much admitted that it should have been her consolation prize for losing her family (that's my mom and me, for anyone counting). "I deserve something from you! For my suffering," she said.

There were numerous fights in our kitchen leading up to the sale. My mother would be cooking something: crème anglaise or our famous family apple pie. My grandmother would sit at the kitchen table insinuating something about how my mother always used too much sugar, and then it would all rise into a fight. Someone cried. Someone felt betrayed. Both someones felt abandoned but from quite differing points of departure. My grandmother would storm out with a pair of my mother's leather boots instead.

When my mother finally crawled out from under that repository of guilt, she sold the apartment to Sasha, her short-term ex-husband, the method actor with nine fingers. They had married years earlier, merely so the actor could receive permission to stay in Moscow, where the film scene was. These papers were hard to come by. My mother agreed out of kindness, out of a sense of adventure, an anecdote-hungry whimsy, out of some guttural power play to make my father, the Nebulous One, take notice and possibly appear again. I only found out about the marriage when I came home from summer camp to discover wooden crates filled with fruit on our balcony. "Where did the fruit come from?" I asked. "Oh, from Sasha," my mom answered. "Okay," I said and waited for my father to return again.

Why the fruit? How did I know? I have no idea. It must be a tradition or something. I just remember seeing the fruit baskets and then knowing my mother had gotten hitched. Hm, maybe we were more prepared for the adventure to come than I admit . . .

They separated soon after. I remember his toothbrush drying on the sink and the night he came back for it. In the interim, since Russian lodgings came with separate bathroom and shower rooms, he taught me how to pee in the bathtub if the woman of the house is occupying the toilet. "Just make sure to run water after so there's no trace." "Warm or cold?" "Eh, just run the water." Also, my father came back sometime around then. I don't remember that, because he left for another secret adventure soon too and thus became the Nebulous One once again. I just know that in our mythology it happened.

Well, so the method actor bought the apartment. My grandmother was furious. I was indifferent, plotting my new identity. My mother was hiding our money.

With the money she bought a parka for each of us; a shiny red tracksuit for me; a stylish green raincoat for herself; two expensive embroidered tablecloths to sell abroad; about a dozen Russian dolls; a few pieces of jewelry; five or six dozen condoms, also to sell abroad; and a Russian

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teacup painted with fruit. She packed it all tightly and carefully in the center of her suitcase, pressed firmly against her life's collection of little alabaster elephants. The rest of the money she exchanged into Austrian schillings and Italian lire, whatever there was that I hadn't stolen of course. I too had been planning for abroad.

We traveled with all of that, and the family samovar—a samovar that by all accounts didn't even work. It never made tea, at least not in my lifetime, though my mother remembers having had tea from it before I was even an idea. It had been passed down a few generations until it ended up abandoned at our dacha. It stood there, season after season, until my mother and I began arriving in the summers. We would board the train amid the deafening bustle of the city at Mayakovskaya station and take the three-hour ride away from the world. My mother would buy candy and pierogi from the vendors who passed through the compartments, and she would buy seeds for the garden, and flowers, always flowers. She would tell me that my great-grandmother had done this with her when she was little like me and they went to the dacha together, that the old woman would say to her granddaughter, "The summer is a time to watch things grow," through a cloud of smoke escaping her cigarette.

"The summer is a time to watch things grow," my mother said to me, smiling some secret knowledge.

"Which things?" I asked.

"Things, like you!" she said and handed me my half of the pierogi.

The train would stop at a small wooden platform in a quiet place where a thin dirt path led into our summer. Every turn was familiar to me, as it still is now, and draped in an other-world mystery. At the wooden gate to the house I would climb a forked tree to jump the fence and fetch the gate key from its hiding spot under the kitchen balcony. My mother would scream, "Nikita, please be careful!" I would then unlock the gate for her, feeling like a conqueror.

She would open the shutters and free all the windows. The breeze lifted dust from the dormant surfaces. The sun caught the dust and shredded the rooms in thick, yellow rays, as if an artist had returned from their respite to add to their great work.

I would go searching for my secret spots where I had buried things, proof of my existence the previous summer, the decay and dirt on my treasures confirming some undeniable effect of aging, and she would place the fresh flowers into the samovar as maybe her grandmother had once done with her after the heirloom had ceased making tea.

That's how we knew the summer had begun, quietly and together in the magic house, with the strokes of light and the flowers. The flowers would slowly give up their quintessence, spreading their aroma through the rooms, week after week, after month—blooming, drying, dying. It's how we told time. And by the end of the summer they were gone and we knew it was time to return to the other seasons, to those of the city. But at the end of our last summer, my mother scooped up the timekeeping samovar and brought it along.

So we traveled with it, along with everything else impacted by weight, time, or money. That's why my mom slept with a teacup clenched in her hand.

She laughs when she reveals this, the surprise at her own unknowing, the image I reflect of her and the teacup, "That must have been why . . ." she says.

". . . But wait, you still haven't told me. Were you afraid it would break in the luggage?" I ask.

"Probably . . ." she hesitates, starts giggling again. She too isn't sure why we did this thing, and she can't contain such awareness in any vehicle smaller than laughter. At her best she allows the laughter to fill in the missing details for her. I allow it to remake the story into a more necessary illusion.

"What happened to the cup, Ma?" I ask, playfully teasing her now.

"I don't know." She is laughing again. Even on the phone I can clearly see her doubled over in her giggles. Laughing so hard I can hear her choking on her spit. She even snorts a little, she finds the whole teacup image so odd, so accurate.

I buckle in for details, plug an ear cord into my phone and light a cigarette. It is 2015. She is in Florida, anxiously waiting for something. There are no seasons there to guide her.

Her landlord of the last fifteen years has again informed her that she will need to find a new home, but she can no longer remember how to navigate such decisions. Even on the opposite end of the country, I can feel her unease building, reaching out for me through the cord. I am far away from her because I am the one in charge of distances now. Our worlds are still drawn by the effects of taller shadows and we are still trying to resolve them without naming their source. Beneath each of our conversations we are quietly debating a void and its haunting impressions upon us.

A stranger with an excited pit bull bums a smoke from me and tells me of his plight and that his life is collected in a Winnebago. I am outside of a library in Seattle, where the collective summer mania is drawing to a close and the locals are organizing their possessions for the dark, rainy months to come. There are old SUVs parked on the street. A Pathfinder and a Suburban, late-nineties models, and the Winnebago. They are currently vacant but books and toilet paper rolls are piled up on the dash. The back seats are folded and spread with bedrolls, clothing and plastic bags strewed about the remaining open spaces. There is sadness here, a slow and beautiful evanescence—souls lost, rudderless but curious—I can see that too. The stranger walks away with a weightlessness that I am sometimes almost jealous of. My mother sighs in the pause and giggles on the other end of the line.

"Let me get this straight," I say into the phone, guiding her to her one great relief—remembering together—"you literally had a root carved out from your jaw three days before we left everything and everyone, and then you traveled across the Soviet Union, on a train, holding a teacup for no discernible reason?"

"Yes . . ." is all she can muster through her fit. She can barely talk, so amused by the randomness of what she was doing. "I don't know why . . . I was just . . ." laughing, ". . . just holding that cup in my hand the whole time."

I could tell you she used it for a saline solution to calm her inflamed roots. I could tell you, poetically, that there was some umbilical link between the teacup and the samovar. I could tell you there was no teacup because neither she nor I know what happened to it. But none of that is true. There is no purpose to the teacup except that she can't stop laughing when she recollects it, except that its unknown purpose is the source of her bewildered amusement. After all these years, it is holy.

Nikita Nelin was born in Moscow, Russia, and immigrated to the U.S. in 1989. He has lived in Austria and Italy and has traveled the U.S. extensively. His work has received the 2010 Seán Ó Faoláin Prize for short fiction and the 2011 Summer Literary Seminars Prize for nonfiction, and landed on the finalist list for the 2017 Restless Books Prize for New Immigrant Writing and the 2018 Dzanc Nonfiction Prize. He holds an MFA in fiction from Brooklyn College and is a 2019 associate fellow at the Hannah Arendt Center.