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International Writing Program Archive of Residents' Work

Fall 10-1-2016

Writing Sample

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From *Aquamarine for Aquarius: A novel-confession*. "At First Sight", "The City of Bright-Orange Dreams", "Vodiana, 1909", "The year of 1925", "He", "1932", "1933", "Epilogue", and "Ten Years Later"

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Recommended Citation

Troitskaya, Tetiana, "Writing Sample" (2016). *International Writing Program Archive of Residents' Work*. 573.

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Tetiana TROITSKAYA
 From *Aquamarine for Aquarius*
 A novel-confession

They say that when the world ends, the good part of humanity will receive the gift of prophecy. I see only the ill face of my destiny. This is a warning. As if I had been given a chance for atonement. But I'm making the same mistake twice and the reality turns into a nightmare ...

The Moon and the Sun engulfed each other and spread in bloody-pink radiance through an untainted night sky. On the horizon, full of discernible childhood dreams, there appeared the same pink wave – only to absorb the nocturnal silhouettes of trees, a fence around the monument to the unknown oldier, finally moving to the yard. Stars began dancing in the shape of increasing chaos. “Hurry, hurry to the house,” appealed my frightened heart. I ran to the porch and flew through the emptiness of the rooms up to the huge window in the hall. A deadly river of lava moved somewhat artificially across the yard, where for some reason I could feel the presence of my dad. And through the walls of the paternal house, behind a window of the low-slung summer kitchen, I saw the figure of my late Grandma holding a candle. “Apocalypse,” my mind flashed. “The foundation won’t last.” And then I realized: there is no more chance to beg for forgiveness. Too late.

I fell to my knees. “Lord, do not forsake the sinners!” And woke up.

“Morning, make the night go away and take the dream with it.” I whispered three times the incantation, which I had read somewhere, but the sense of reality did not want to vanish. Blanket turned down on the bed, I looked into the eyes of the Universal Mother. In them I read a mute reproach.

“I know I neglected my soul. It’s time to beseech You for absolution ...”

**

At First Sight

He arrived unexpectedly. Just appeared on the threshold of my dorm room.

We met a year ago at the winter school dance. I was a schoolgirl with aquamarine-naive dreams, and he an adult, a student, almost with diploma. The concert program finished, and a DJ played the first slow dance.

“Snow Maiden, do you dance?” I heard him ... and was lost.

...

Now he appeared in my new, adult Kharkiv life. Black as night, his eyes burned through my soul and reached my heart. In a blink his hands clasped my thin body and my long chestnut hair.

**

The university and the sciences absorbed me. It was fascinating to learn, with almost no time for sleep.

In winter it was hard to wake up in the darkness so as to show up in time for the first lecture. And the cold... The temperature in a Ukrainian hostel a like in the buildings during the siege of Leningrad! Snow lies flat against the window sills. House plants die! And we learn. Heaters are forbidden! The house master and her assistants staged a hunt on students! What do property rights mean there? Next to nothing... If you don’t lock the door in time and keep quiet, the room will be occupied by a malicious battalion, and the search will start. In the wardrobe, under the bed,

everywhere, every inch would be rummaged through. Who cares about the health of young girls, fading in those rooms like potted flowers on the window sills?

And heaven forbid they would find anything. A formal note would be written, and huge fine would be issued (they need money for their New Year's celebration, you know...). Or they would make you leave the hostel. It isn't a secret that we faced a shortage of beds. Then again, there is place enough for a certain category of students. The housing problem only exists for our Ukrainian people. Foreigners have everything – a separate bathroom and shower suite. Not in the basement, like our students, where hot water is supplied two hours on weekdays, and which is closed on weekends. Foreigners pay in dollars. They should be protected. And we, in our country, who needs to take care of us?

The hostel is a school for survival in every respect– just like the army. If you manage to resist, you will overcome everything.

At one point the hostel faced a blackout caused by the heaters. The place sank into darkness. The old wiring had failed.

“Oh, we can just imagine the hunt tomorrow,” the graduate student shook their heads. I for one was not terrified. At the time there was almost nothing in my room except an electric kettle and hot water bottles in my bed. The student world of 2001 wasn't as equipped like the world of 2009, and even less that of 2012. Only older girls or students from wealthy families had cell phones. Not to mention computers. I got my first only after I graduated.

As usual, when times were hard (or vice versa, during holidays) there were student get-togethers in the kitchen. We lit candles, fried potatoes, exchanged stories. Guests came from other floors. While I was setting the table, someone grabbed me by the arm.

**

That same spring, in April, there was another event. If you go to the eighth floor of the hostel, in one of the rooms you will notice a metal door. Everyone will tell you that a girl lived there – Eugenia Veselska. An orphan. No mother. Her father had already found another wife, and the daughter from his first marriage was too far away to be bothered with. She started dating Den Wolf – a rotten guy, but later she fell in love with his friend, and decided to break up with Denny. Wolf turned out to be one of those who don't forgive. He waited until the weekend, when most students had gone home and the floor was almost empty, and visited his ex with someone in tow. Being an athlete, he just knocked in the old dormitory door. He slapped the girl and proceeded to rip off her clothes. Resistance was impossible. They raped her in turns, and filmed everything.

Denya ran merrily around the hostel with a bloody sheet.

“I am her first. Everybody look here. Eugenia is a virgin!

Eugenia was saved by Kostya. Denya got a bruise, and they managed to snatch away the camera. But there was no punishment. The stranger who accompanied Denny appeared to be with the secret service or something like that. And Denya's parents did everything to help their son get off without punishment.

Eugenia's father installed a metal door. I don't know what would have happened to the girl had it not been for a friend of Dennis', the first cause of the whole story. About six month later, Evgeniya and Dennis married. And two months later, Eugenia gave birth to a lovely girl.

I began to respect Kostya.

**

The City of Bright-Orange Dreams

There were elections that year. Kharkiv Liberty Square turned into a torrent of orange flags, the place for arguments and meetings.

For some reason that color was chosen by the intellectuals. I found myself in the square concern of my professional cause. I had never considered the word “revolution” as a personal issue. Especially after the revolution of 1917, when the blossom of our intellectuals had disappeared –and alongside it the fortune of my Grandma.

But the people believed... It’s a wonder how our people, waiting for something, are able to believe in the good Tsar. As for me, the 21th century must exist under the sign of disbelief in politics and the vast return to religiosity begun at the time of president Gorbachev. The fruits of the 1917 *coup d’état* had rotted and turned into dust.

The principle of non-equal equality divided people into classes again. We must return to the past. We had expiated our revolutionary sin in 1933 by our blood, the torture of GULAG and the victims of WWII, and the downward steps did not go up. It’s interesting that the totalitarian machine had crushed first of all the creators of the new world. And, it crossed my mind: was it God’s sword that punished them for their crimes? For the crimes they inflicted on the people?

We had redeemed our errors. If we were forgiven, we would be worthy of trust. And this forgiveness would come true when we returned to our vital force – our soul, its morality, God’s grace.

Now we are in favor of revolution again. We forgot the fact that people who support rebelliousness, both orange and blue-white, or any other color, would repeat that hundred-year old crime--the crime of separatism, the crime of separating brothers who live along both banks of the Dnieper. But we are united. We are not white or orange. All of us are blue-yellow. And only in these colors is eternity.

In our heavenly-blue aquamarine sky framed by golden crops...

And it will last as long as our native Ukraine, which gave birth to me, and which is unique in the world.

“Yushchenko! Yushchenko” – the square exploded.

“Girl, are you also for Yushchenko?” I heard in my ear.

“I am for my Motherland.”

“That means for Yushchenko.”

“That means you didn’t understand me.”

“Girl, let’s get acquainted. I am Arthur. And this is Yevhen.” – The two tall dark-haired boys were standing nearby.

“Lilia.”

“Lilia, coffee?”

“The whole square is hot already... what with the oranges,” I laughed. “OK, I’m joking. Let’s go to *Puzata hata* and warm up with real Ukrainian borshch.”

The café was crowded. We pushed through the crowd of hungry students to have the house specialty with *pampushka*.

“So, Lilia, you are a journalist.”

Arthur spooned the pleasantly warm broth.

“I am graduating this year, let’s live and see what it will be.”

“We need a journalist in our team.” Yevhen was chewing the *pampushka*.

“I don’t write about politics. Very seldom. I am mostly a law journalist.”

“Journalism must be related to the present,” noted Arthur. “And now politics is topical.”

“Politics is always topical,” I noted. “That’s not the point. I only write about things I believe in. And here I don’t have a clear position.”

“Every conscious citizen must have a clear position.” Evgen finished his borshch. “Especially young people. The future is in our hands, it has our back.”

“We have pokemons behind us, German porn and empty beer bottles on the hostel. Plus, I’ve forgotten the used condoms on the trees under the hostel windows.”

“The future will only begin when there are real rather than worthless values.”

The discussion was turning into a quarrel. We had coffee, and went our separate ways.

The revolution won. I don't know if I was happy about it or not, but... scholarships and salaries were paid out. And what else does youth need?

I was finishing my diploma thesis. It was not a piece of cake. But I enjoyed the process. University graduation work... I had no time for other things. One time the dean's office gave away free theater tickets, to a play about Marina Tsvetaeva. I decided to go.

All the pedagogical elite was gathered there. A small cozy hall. Semi-darkness. Classical music. And a flawless performance by one actress. How much feeling there was in her words! How much pain in the poet's incredible fate. How many times during the performance was my breath caught, tears rising in the throat, and indignation, or just great bitterness about the ruined life filling my soul.

We all left the theatre stunned, silent, full of thoughts...

**

Vodiana, 1909.

She was the fifth daughter in her family. Bad luck in prerevolutionary Ukraine. Land was could only be inherited by a boy. How to feed all of them, and what? Don't girls eat? My great-grandfather didn't know yet that he would give his life for that youngest child... He didn't realize that alongside with that Scriptural name she had been given by the priest Fedir, she would carry the same fate as one known to the whole world as Maria, to whom he had prayed so often.

When my great grandmother recollected her childhood from the distance of the years, a Christmas day came up. Nobody was at home. She decided to fish out a small pork skin from the jellied mincemeat. But from the corner she was watched by the Saint Nicolas icon: little Maria closed the door and was ready to pull for the forbidden food. One glance – and she saw that St. Nicolas was looking at her through a small crack in the door... She didn't even try to taste the treat.

**

They lived in poverty. The first church school was opened in the village, but she had nothing to wear on her feet. One time she cut off the sleeves from an old sheep skin coat, sewed up the ends and went to the school she was yearning for.

When I take the fresh daily copy of the newspaper I now work at, the bent figure of my Great-grandma appears in front of me. She would pick up the piece of print, smell it, then look at the straight lines with her dim sight. Then her thin fingers, whose perfect nail shape always envied, would follow the lines, and she would whisper something. In my childhood I thought she was reading. Now I know she named the few familiar letters, then put the paper aside and called her daughter-in-law, Nina, a teacher, and asked her to read aloud, as long as the grandchildren weren't nearby.

She only went to school for three days. A magic number. When the snow began to melt, the sheepskin coat shoes were soaked. As she told my brother and me, she put them on the stove-bench, but those "dog-soles" went so stiff that she couldn't get her feet in.

The year of 1925.

The sun seized the body like a crazed lover. The girls ran away from it into the cool of the trees growing along the way, but the sun inched into the gaps and stretched its hands under the salt-sweaty chemises.

That summer she too went to work harvest at a neighboring farm in Solontsy, where the wealthy farmers Kotcha and Hloponya lived. She earned her dowry.

The master was kind. They were fed well, and paid generously. Saturdays they let the girls out early so they could get home before dusk, because of the wolves.

Old Jacob's girls were nice. My granny loved saying: "We all were snapped up, like sugar."

When the girls were given away in marriage, nothing was in the cottage. The parents went to the field, cut down the stubble and stuffed their mattresses with it.

In the fall of 1926 it was Maria's turn. That evening, three came seeking marriage. She had never been a beauty, though, and chose him...

He

On the old grave stone, there is a picture of him. This is where we met. What clever and strong-willed eyes – just like hers. They follow me today. I am looking for them in 2009, to fall in love as they did, as she loved him...in her time.

They got married. A story of the great but unhappy love had begun. The whole Soviet Ukraine was sick at that time.

They spared young Maria. His brothers even did the laundry for her in the icy water in the winter river.

Her son Tolia was born. Her pride.

**

1932.

In life – as on the long cornfield... When things go badly badly, wait for what's good; if all is well, then wait for the bad turn.

"You are for me a whole world." His eyes looked into her soul. "How can I leave you?"

"Go, Mitia. Find our fortune. Later you will bring Tolia and me. Go, or they will shoot you."

The new government had turned to the family its frightful face. The wealthy *kurkuls*.

Her husband Mitia had to run away. Peasants had no passports. In Vodiana there lived a man who made false documents, but the young couple didn't know about it. Without a passport the only way out was to the Belomor canal, dug by political prisoners.

He wrote letters to her but she couldn't read them. Maria gave everything to the *kolkhoz*. Left in the yard were only chicks and one goat.

And yet they came to her house. The metal roof on their house led to the dispossession of a *kurkul*. Even the red beets were taken. Her little son was sitting on an embroidered cushion, and even that was needed in the *kolkhoz*. The property was handed over to those who seized it—good-for-nothings.

Of the 25 homesteads in one village section, 13 were confiscated. Had that not happened, the famine would have been overcome.

**

In the old cemetery of Vodiana, in an abandoned corner, there is an unmarked grave under a maple tree. "I planted it the following spring, as I had promised to my father" – the wind has been reporting the words of my Grandma. – "He died in the 1934, under a tree. He didn't eat anything. Everything he could find, my dad gave little Tolia and me." He was buried together with a woman. Her relatives weren't able to dig a grave, and asked to have her body put next to old Jacob.

...

1933.

People died like flies. The peasants whose land had been taken weren't allowed to work. Mitia's parents hit at a kolkhoz in the village of Koraichne, where nobody knew about them. This was what saved their lives. Maria stayed in Vodiana. "I would bake three thick pancakes out of cattle feed," she said. "Tolia is walking around them to choose the biggest. But those pancakes are all the same size. He is walking around and around, eating his, and ready to eat mine..."

She remembered that hungry spring, when the snow melted away and the little Hurtiaks' children were collecting the stones from last year's cherries in their garden. Having gone so long without food, their bellies were all swollen. They died that same day.

When she swelled up because of hunger, Mitia's parents told that a young blacksmith fancied her. The blacksmith always had bread...

She wanted to eat. When she turned blue, she went to the blacksmith.

Epilogue

A cloudy, dull, autumn day against the background of Kharkiv. A young man stops by a florist's kiosk and buys two flowers. Having paid for the purchase, he hides them under his coat and moves on. A cold wind of the farewell season beats into his face, leaving rain drops on his chin, leather jacket, his stylish jeans. Once he has reached the Shevchenko Park, he stops, turns his back to the wind and lights a cigarette. Then continues on his way.

....

A pigeon was sitting in a tree. Frightened by the unexpected guest, it left its path and flew off somewhere, to a place where a quiet "ding-dong" could be heard. The man stopped, crossed himself, then went on.

Where the lane ended, the man reached a busy crossing, and turned left. Passing a supermarket with the sign "Big Pocket," he found himself near St. Panteleimon Church.

By the entrance was an assortment of hard drinkers, gypsy women, and plain old beggars. Passing them by, the man came up to a crippled woman with a clean spiritual face, gave generously, made a sign of the cross, and entered the temple.

He stood and prayed for a long while, then walked around the temple looking attentively into the faces of the saints. Not having found what he needed, he came up to an old woman serving there.

"Could you tell me, please if there is an icon to St. Lilia here?" he said into her ear.

The old woman stared at him in surprise.

"Does that saint exist?"

The man hung his head and left.

....

He waited until others filled their plastic bottles with water and returned to their cars, and the spring was left to itself. Then he unbuttoned his jacket and took out the two white flowers – lilies.

For a time he stared into their white clean petals, then kissed each, sighed, and laid the flowers into the spring.

“Farewell, Lileya... you were like these. wherever you now rest ... who knows where...”
And left.

**

Ten Years Later

Under the aquamarine sky of the Mirhorot resort, two little girls were at play. One, around nine or ten, with wheaten hair and eyes as blue as the sky--a symbol of Ukraine as much as a child. She was picking flowers, making dollies out of them, watching furtively what was going on around her...

The other, four or so, was feeding bread to ducks under her mother’s supervision. The ducks were happy caching the treats, flapping their little wings, swirling the muddy water in Gogol’s famous pool, which had never dried up and occupies a special place in the writer’s stories.

...

“Aunt Irine, Dad,” Bogdan said to his step-mother and father, “Meet the princess – Marine.”
The father, who had been setting up a parasol, pushed up his glasses and asked the little girl: “Marine – does that mean the sea?”

“No,” objected the girl, “Marina is a part of the word *aquamarine*.”

The father got the pail and dropped the parasol.

“Kostiantyn , be careful!” the woman said nervously.

The man seemed not to hear.

“And who gave you that name?” he asked flatly.

“My Mum!” Marinka answered cheerfully. Then she went silent and added: “And I have aquamarine earrings.” She touched her wheaten hair from under which two aquamarine earrings gleamed. “The same colour as my eyes...” - she said proudly.

Everybody laughed except Kostiantyn...

“And where is your Mum?” he asked.

“Over there,” the little girl pointed sideways. Kostya pushed up his glasses again, left the parasol to Bogdan and went where Marynka pointed.

On a grassy, sandy bank, in aquamarine-colored swimming suit her long plaits gleaming, her back turned....

...Lilya!

Kostya felt his legs tremble... he kneeled.

“Lilya...”

She turned. The sun blocked her from seeing the stranger’s face. Lilya put her hand in front of her eyes.

“Kostya?”

She went silent, then added, “Are you here?”

“Lilya, is that you or your ghost?”

Silence.

“As you see.... flesh and blood... alive...”

“How is it? ... Why is it...”

Kostya didn’t know what to say.

Lilya remained quiet, examining Konstantyn’s aged face. Later, remembering that she had to say something:

“Yes, very simple. Marynka is saved...”

“What?” He didn’t understand.

“Marynka gave me my life.”
