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Writing Sample

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Yuriy SEREBRYANSKIY

The sky above Lokhor

I am trying to think of something else. It is indeed hard. You have to picture the interior of your cranium as an empty room, concentrate solely on its emptiness, and begin to put plaster on the walls, floor and ceiling. You can also do the whitewashing. Then you spend five minutes dwelling on the blank emptiness of the room. Smelling the whitewash. If all sorts of rubbish show through the walls, you can begin to imagine objects rotating in the center of the room. Anything that comes to mind. Think of them and nothing else. Buddhists call this meditation.

When on the plane, I try not to think about the plane. When the entertainment program comes to an end, the map and telemetry fill the display. I can see that the tracking has been passed over to a Pakistani station. The plane will soon fly above it. We are currently gliding over snowy peaks, and somewhere down there is K-2, a high and forbidding mountain. The tracking station is out there. I am picturing it as a snow-covered portacabin on a dazzling slope. The footprints around it have been covered by the snowfall overnight. Bearded Pakistani men are having hot tea made with melted snow, standing by the entrance in down jackets, knitted ski hats and aviator sunglasses. They are looking at the rocky veins appearing here and there on the sparkling white peak. They are discussing something, pointing fingers. The possibility, and beauty, of an avalanche.

One goes behind the portacabin and makes a yellow smoking ravine in the snowdrift, his back to the mountain. He lingers up there. Zips up the coveralls in one sweep. Comes back to pick up his mug. His cap has "Nice" embroidered on it.

Inside the portacabin, on a green military screen there a blinking dot of us. In the midst of noise waves and lines of the scale grid. Red. Behind the closed door (to not let out the heat), you can't hear the alarm buzzer.

Only the silence emanating from the mountain, and the glare of the sun on the fluted surface of a metal mug.

Before landing, I always look at the passengers I'm flying with. I'm glad when I see a lot of small children. I try to figure out God's reasoning. It seems secure. Still, had the plane been filled exclusively with young children, I would have been afraid anyway.

I drink during the flight, wait for meals to be served, compose poems.

For the most part, like these:

Children's arms
of turbulence

Hold faces in oxygen-less
masks...

It is seven and a half hours of going crazy to Bangkok. I am praying. Six hours into the

flight, it seems that if I stop thinking about the reliability of the aircraft units and stop praying, we will fall down. That it is my mental tension keeping us in the air.

The monotonous humming.

I have never slept on a plane, and I have to fly a lot. A little turbulence can shake off the effect of a small bottle of red wine and a glass of beer.

Eight hours into the flight, I begin to see neat squares of rice fields below. The pax cabin lights go on, despite the fact that enough light gets in through the windows. Passengers stretch, throw off their travel rugs. They line up to the toilet. Swollen faces. Skin defects are visible on everybody's faces. Except the faces of flight attendants.

I feel like looking out the window. There, the straight highway of Sukumwit is floating past, and the smells of Bangkok come back to me. Two hundred and forty of the two hundred and fifty passengers of our flight will talk about it as an intermediate stinky horror on the way to some Pattaya. And only ten people will understand this city. Fall in love with it. Sell their business, get a divorce and leave for it. Or will be carrying the quiet grief of the absence.

The plane flinches on contact with the runway, the pax cabin is applauding. It seems to me that should the oxygen masks drop now, they would have been not masks, but wine glasses tied at the stem, they would have been filled with champagne through the piping and, having drunk it, all the passengers on our plane would have felt the same thing I did.

The relief of those who have survived.

*

On the ferry to Kabatach

We saw a growing crowd at the ticket offices, replenished by the passengers from Bus 63. Passengers were continually coming from the bus, giving the impression that a door on the other side and they were just passing through. Their flow blocked our way. Motley locals, some foreigners. There was no time to observe. We edged into the crowd.

The Eminonu station is the link between buses, ferries, trams and pedestrians, it is always crowded. And the crown is always in motion. The Turks are a nation generally in motion. Few are sitting quietly. If they sit still, they will at least talk to their neighbor or call out to passers-by in loud voices. Because of human noise, even ships and ferries are hard to hear. The trams can't be heard at all, and the stream of cars creates secondary background noise, which doesn't stir you at all. The only thing that seems rooted in this whirlpool is a gray fairy-tale mosque, watching from above with its many eyes what is happening around. The port is right here, with beautifully layered liners at the piers. The Golden Horn with its petrified shores. No rumble of the sea or cries of seagulls. Ferries, too, are poking into the piers almost soundlessly, gently bouncing against tire-fenders.

When you wait to land, you can see from the shore how the passengers of the ferry line up along the side of the lower deck are preparing for the landing. Their behavior is no different from that of the people on a subway train during rush hours. Indifference to the water element. If there had been water splashing in the opening (that gap that should be minded) between the subway car and the edge of the platform, I think nobody

would have noticed. No. But one day I saw how the water world, offended by the indifference, acted up, having sprayed a family of Turks with oily water. A fat wife, a nondescript little daughter and a boy. The father of the family was not affected. When the gangway was tossed onto the ferry and the passengers darted like sprinters, this family remained. The insulted father began to demonstratively criticize the ferry management in the person of the barman. He demanded to see the captain, as was clear without translation. But, speaking to the bartender and seeing that his women were calm, the father cooled down. Now they could board the ferry.

This time we didn't even buy tickets. Having ripped through the endless stream of passengers from Bus 63, I got to the ticket office and tried to buy a ticket for the ferry to Kabatach. I put the amount in the box that corresponded to the one specified in the table. To Kabatach.

The cashier had been looking at his stacks of small change for a long time, but now he looked up.

"You need to go to another ticket office, go there," in any case, that was what I thought he said.

There are several ticket booths as well as several ferry stations at Eminonu. The cashier told us to go to the right, and he was right. I did not understand just why Kabatach was on his board. A Turkish puzzle.

We bought our tickets. The controller let us into the waiting room, a roofed building, with turnstiles on one side and the pier on the other. There were a lot of people. I took an ad brochure of the Istanbul ferry lines from the counter and prepared to wait for the ferry.

Half an hour earlier, we were sitting under a bridge eating fish. A huge old bridge connects the two banks of the Golden Horn bay. Kabatach is on the other side. It is quite a distance. A tram runs on the bridge, as well as cars and minibuses. Fishermen took all the space at the railing. They are the reason that people sitting in a cafe on the lower tier of the bridge, see the panorama of the bay lined all the way to the water. Fishing lines. We were up there a few times, looking at the catch. Small fish, ten centimeters each, swam in plastic jars with muddy water. They used shrimp as bait. Also small, but a kilogram of such shrimp in our country costs much more than a kilogram of this small fry.

Some mismatch fishing.

The fish we ate in the cafe was much larger. No one paid attention to this, and the mood of those sitting there was elevated. We are eating the fresh catch. "Efes" raised it even higher. There were about ten items on the menu, but only one was in demand—fish fried in oil, packed in a baguette cut in two long halves. Onion, cabbage, salad went there as well. A wonderful dish to accompany with a beer.

I looked around. The cafe was packed with foreigners, but there were also Turks. Eleven *lira* for everything—quite a democratic price for Istanbul. Behind the wall there is a more expensive restaurant, the tables have tablecloths. Waiters with arrogant faces. But I liked our guys who wiped the wooden tables right there in front of the guests and took the payment in advance. They smiled rather sincerely too. It's just that they too pay in advance elsewhere. Without ceremony. I like it this way.

Of the democratic foreigners there was an American aunt with teenagers resembling her distantly in appearance. They must be her nephews. She let them drink a glass of beer, which obviously earned her respect. One of the nephews is already sharing some personal secrets. The other drinks beer, listens and smiles. He savors his first glass.

Two lovers from Europe clang glasses. They got this from us. Previously, they did not clink glasses. We, the Soviet people, were the ones who made them clang. In fact, I may be mixing things up.

And here's a Turk with his wife and child. He's about forty years old, manly. Turkish men are all handsome. When they are young, they are slender, flexible, have burning eyes and are probably sweet-talking in their own way. By forty they go large, but not fat. The face is respectable, the wrinkles properly emphasize the dignity of the solid cheekbones, the nose, the deep eye sockets. He has grayish temples.

Taking off from the Istanbul airport one day, there was an unpleasant incident. The plane stopped at the edge of the runway, ready to take off in the next instant. The engines gained momentum, but then the red lights lit up along the aisles, the ones the stewardesses tell you about every time, the ones you don't want to think about. It turned out the engine caught fire.

We were towed back to the sleeve. They let us out. Provided meals. Everything was taken care of. It was only that our plane was standing there all the time, behind a glass wall, and at the time of the call to boarding, it was still there. The mechanics crawled along the wing for two hours, and one specialist even climbed into the engine itself. But what did that change for us?

It turned out that the Turks took care of that as well. The first to board was the pilot, about fifty, in uniform and cap. With grayish temples. We, the passengers, followed him. The pilot, the "captain," I always thought of him like this: he settled in the passenger seat of the economy class and unfolded a newspaper.

Flying with such a man on board seemed perfectly safe. He will be a hero no matter what.

In short, the Turks —men—are "interesting" at any age. This is my aesthetic opinion. Turkish women are simpler. Those who wear the hijab escape my appraisal. Their beauty is not for me. The rest of the Turkish women wear casual clothes. Not defiantly casual, like German women. Some are stylish.

The main virtue is the hair. Unruly, violently curling black hair, held down in the wind with an elegant hand girdled by several thin silver bracelets. In Istanbul, the wind often blows at the right moment.

Two girls are sitting on a bench in the park next to Topkapi.

Two good-looking guys are passing by and suddenly the wind blows.

But the Turk who was in the café with us was not with a wife like this. The girl was obviously Russian. Formerly ours. She overdid the Muslim aspects of the attire, but still it was unmistakably clear that she was not a Turkish woman. And when a Turkish man marries a foreigner, it may probably only be a Russian woman. Only a Russian blonde. This can be seen everywhere. In fashion ads, for example. Even Turkish singers on tv look like Russian pop singers. It is apparently in demand. Assuming that the first

generation of shoppers flooded Istanbul in the early nineties, the pretty girls of about twenty who feel themselves so free here should be the children of the first mixed marriages.

Just like this. They went to war. The men fought, the women won.

But, of course, I realize that this is only Istanbul. The capital of the world in all senses, except the Buddhist.

You can meet anyone here. Especially on the ferry. A family of Americans, for example. Picturesque. I'll come back to them later. There's a girl. Russian. She deftly jumped aboard the ferry and got lost among those wishing to end up on the upper deck.

I understand them. There is nothing romantic in traveling by ferry. The lower deck smells almost like metro cars in Moscow.

I understood she was Russian not from some subtle aesthetic criteria. She spoke on her mobile just as she was walking past me. I write "mobile," because if you are not ours, not from Kazakhstan, you probably will not understand the word "cell". And we talk on "cells." That's it.

I saw the edge of her dress from my seat at the side. A Turk in a clerk's suit awkwardly pushed her into my field of vision, and she easily moved away, ignoring the apology, talking enthusiastically on her "cell."

I was interested in the bay because I rarely witness the sea. I was interested in the ferry, because I see even less of ferries. Foreigners on board. And they are all, in general, foreigners for me.

I should not be talking on the "cell" at a moment like this. I try to save the moments.

She obviously lives here. Or studies.

I could live in Istanbul too. I'm an oriental man. Hijabs do not frighten me.

My modest Kazakh gets me hospitable smiles from the Turks at the bazaar and in the hotels. Turkish and Kazakh are similar.

A pity I do not know either of them. I am ashamed to travel with my fairly good English.

I would like to know French. I like Czech. For its humor. I could use my Chuvash. But it's much farther from Kazakh and Turkish.

Yes, I could live here.

I would have rented or bought a flat in the Fener district. There are many houses abandoned by the Greeks there. I would get acquainted with my neighbors. I would drink tea the color of cognac with them.

But the trouble is that I am traveling. I love too many places in the world. There are places I have not been to. There are so many more than those I have visited. But I already love them. Nowadays English is sufficient for traveling.

The father of the family with suitcases spoke American English. I was sitting next to them. They were so large. It seemed that the ferry was not properly scaled for them. Like the plastic soldiers scaled one to seventy-five would go with the glued-together helicopter, scaled at one to a hundred. But they had to put up with this. The big American slapped his son's baseball cap on his head and solemnly looked around, considering this act very witty. Nobody paid attention. Everyone looked at the American himself. And at his wife, large, suited for him and freckled, like the daughter and the son. The daughter was apparently the only one who felt the awkwardness of the situation thanks to supernatura teenager abilities.

The American's wife did not give a damn about anybody, wearing her long hillbilly dress. The American was showing off in different ways. He made it clear that he is totally peaceful and friendly. Even in a dense Islamic country like Turkey.

We were going to Kabatach, but it turned out that the ferry was not going there, and headed for Kadikou instead. In a hurry, I had forgotten to look at the board.

The American wife had to drag two suitcases to the pier and manage the children. Neither she nor the American let anyone help them.

When the flow of passengers subsided, only three people remained on the empty pier. We and the girl who spoke on the phone.

Sophia.

The next station after the Ekkamai station

I have an odd habit of waking up two or three minutes before the alarm goes off. I'm trying to develop it further. The goal is to learn to wake up before the phone rings.

The apartment is dimly lit. This is its most favorable lighting, for it hides the poverty of the furniture.

I have no time to take care of comfort. I work or I rest, so the furniture is practical. A wide bed with a mattress covered with polyethylene, on which I toss and turn in restless sleep, occupies a third of the entire area of the room. Blue bare walls, a tiled floor. A dirty grayish ceiling somewhere above. This is the only room in the apartment. It is usual here. I looked into my neighbors' apartments. There is no kitchen in any of the apartments in our house. The doors in the apartments are ajar. Behind them there are Thais, sitting on the floor with a plate of noodles, leaning back on the edge of the bed, focusing on the TV. We all eat in the canteen downstairs, run by an enterprising family. The owner is a smiling tidy old woman.

You can eat in the city. Some people buy food to keep in their apartment. I don't do that. For I'm visited by competitors—large black ants.

In the lobby of the house there is a vending machine for ice and water. It looks like our soda machine. Washing machines. You can throw your laundry, put in a few coins—and no problems. The shop, whose owner I bow to as I buy beer and shrimp chips. We are almost friends.

Separated from the room, there is only a toilet with a water heater box for the shower and a mesh hole in the floor. No curtains, but the toilet is normal, white. My pride.

Opposite the bed there is a wardrobe, brown, for an office. It once contained archives and the smell of old wet paper got into my clothes.

I also keep souvenirs and music cassettes I bought at the sale there. I do not have a TV. I do not even know where to get it and when to watch. Near the house, there is an English-language video rental with ample choice. I am a regular visitor. I'll go in, take a tape from the shelf with a familiar name and, holding it, remember the film from beginning to end. Quite a pastime. Then the phone rings. Someone needs something again. The phone can not be turned off even at night. An alarm clock brought two months ago from Pattaya has been thrown under the bed, but the phone always wakes me up. But I'm still in the habit of setting an alarm.

On the floor to the right, there is a suitcase with a change of clothes laid out on the open front shell. It dries and is simultaneously ironed. By the evening. Exactly. It is evening now. I often cannot determine when I wake up if the sun is rising or already setting. I work day and night. Not without interruptions. There are even days off. But tourists come to us, to Thailand, day and night. That's why my job is like this, and I cannot immediately determine the time of day.

Once I decided to put the apartment in good shape. It was the twenty-fourth of November. I bought a kit in the supermarket, which, judging by the drawing on it, consisted of a tablecloth and curtains. I pictured a tablecloth covering a rough table by the window, and the window dressed in curtains covering the dusty curved blinds. Yes, there is a table and a window. And a balcony. And the most important thing in the furnishings of any apartment is the old nasty air-conditioner. It makes a newcomer's sleep almost impossible. Then you get used to it. You can't even sleep without it. When it spontaneously turns off at night, you meet the morning in stuffiness room, in sticky sweat, waking up from lack of oxygen. I put a "cracker" on the table. It is our name for a cheap radio, which can hardly receive radio waves through thick concrete walls.

I unpacked the kit. Two pillowcases designed for long cylindrical ottomans, tied with elastic bands on both sides, and an apron for the hostess.

But I did not back down.

A tablecloth of a strange configuration and stylish Roman curtains were now part of the apartment. The cracker covered the breast pocket of the apron, its bottom covering the pocket configuration. On November 24, I was expecting friends from Pattaya who were coming to visit me. Their visa was over and they had to go for a new one to Penang.

In the morning they were dispatched there by plane.

I hate this apartment. It is home to my loneliness. Life exists only outside these walls. Fun—in the crowd on the platform of the metro station, to the music of screens with ads and the noise of the coming train. Sadness—in the foyer of the evening hotels, when a slender Thai singer in a velvet dress sings in a jazz voice, accompanied by a black piano, in the coolness of the air-conditioner. The moments of rest—in the anticipation of late flights from Kiev, Almaty, Moscow, Yekaterinburg... I have already stopped asking: "Where are you from?" What for. For the next two days these people show me what they are like. Really. Not the office ones. I'm a bit disgusted, but I understand.

This is a vacation, and this is Thailand. Paradise for the saved money. I often play along. I have the microphone. I tell you vulgar jokes on the bus. I recommend brothels. I answer sudden questions, like "why do Thai students (seen from the bus window by a serious-looking man) go to school without textbooks?" The guide has no right to say "I do not know." And I'm lying. But not ungodly, like some. I'm saved by the history prowess and the experience with real Thais.

This morning I had an excursion to the safari park. Aviaries with crocodiles, lunch, dolphinarium. Tourists are always happy. A safe bet. These are their first crocodiles here. First impressions. Palm trees. Huge white handsome swans in a small pond under palm trees. It seems that they have already started to respond to the nickname "traitors." They pick up the bread. Beyond the pond there is a square, neatly strewn with gravel. It smells of hot dust and stale water from under the flowers. The square is surrounded by sheared bushes on three sides. And the fourth is a high wall of a dolphinarium with a stage. Three rows of plastic chairs. I've never seen anyone there. It's most scorching heat now. Through the haze it seems that the chairs will now melt.

On the stage there are snowmen tall as a man and a congratulatory poster in three languages.

New Year is coming soon. I've forgotten about it.

While tourists in the dolphinarium look at the inflatable boat with a child from the auditorium, which dolphins are pushing with their noses to the tune of the Titanic, the guides are listening to other music, hiding from the heat on benches under the trees. Christmas English songs. They talk about plans for the day off. Probabilities of meeting up. I suspect that everyone suffers from loneliness. It is special here. It consists of the inability to share your impressions with those close to you and the deeply rooted homesickness. For habitual things. Gray and not so bright. I do not want to call my relatives. The conversations are short. Alive. Well. The photographs sent over there do not convey the atmosphere of life here.

In the morning, when I was leaving, I found some message in a box on the apartment door, printed in Thai. Sergei, the guide from a competing agency, a good friend of mine.

It is a tourist attraction for both tourists and Thais. Fluently speaks the language. One should have seen see the Thai waiters who get into a stupor from his orders and tourists, filled with boundless respect for a person who understands all these commas. Thais are linguistic fascists. Most of them do not believe a foreigner is capable of learning the language. The language itself is beautiful, melodic, there are wonderful words, for example a toddler will be "pumpuy". In Bangkok, there is a growing generation of Pumpuys—foreigners attending Thai schools. Some locals will have to be more discreet, and soon.

We talked about our plans for the new year. They are the same for us. The thirty first day is a big race. I slipped a message to Sergei. He read and whistled. I straightened up. Felt like a trickle of sweat ran down the spine under the belt.

"Where did you get this?" he handed the note to Ot—a Thai girl with a traditional paper umbrella, bought from near the royal palace for twenty baht.

She is our Thai guide.

She shook her head and her umbrella. She stared at Sergei. Beautiful and clever. He reminds of Brodsky, she looks like the actress Lucy Liu in miniature.

"I found it this morning in a mailbox on the apartment door."

Sergei twirled the paper in his hands.

"It's your turn to wash the corridor, old man. This is the message from your landlord."

I swear, if Ot had not started laughing at this moment, I would have definitely bought it.

I took the note.

"Give it to Kun Vudu." An electricity bill.

"Thank you." I saw my people leaving the dolphinarium, and rose to meet them.

The bus left to the sea. To Pattaya. I took a taxi and returned to Bangkok. I drove past the golf courses, where in the morning airliners are flying over, and the players do not pay attention to the long winged shadows. Past the wholesale markets, with the inviting open bags of goods near dusty roadsides. I went on in the stream of motorcyclists, carrying their families on business. In the midst of cars. The new Japanese ones. Rare European. We stopped only at the booth at the entrance to the toll road, where I gave money for the possibility of quick passage to the Thai in a brown uniform, white mask-respirator and white silk gloves with a hue of ash. His dark, shining eyes studied the foreigner carefully.

Every half a kilometer we crossed three bulging black stripes. Trrrr... Trrrr... Trrrr... Riding fast. No motorcyclists on toll roads. Only the police in a spectacular, fitted, dark brown uniform. Tall and trim.

Finally, the road, gradually lowering, merged into the traffic jam in the streets of the lower tier near the entrance to my district, Pra Kanongu. At first I had trouble remembering this name. Pra means saint. I think that's the reason that on the way from the apartment to the metro station there are two Buddhist temples, and three more further. They have no strategic tourist value. Poor, looking like huts from Russian fairy tales. Looking antique. I can already distinguish a real ancient Buddhist temple from the newly built punching. Patina on frescoes, graves of monks at the roots of trees in front of the temple. The trees have thick tentacles of root. Buildings have long settled in the ground. There are many of them along Sukumvit—a sweltering highway connecting Bangkok and Pattaya and further to Rayong.

Nobody I know has traveled by car beyond Rayong. There are quiet fishing villages and a clear sea.

The reflections of the sun scatter in different directions from the mirrors that clumsily cover the façades of the temples and the demons at the entrance, which are given the appearance of circus acrobats. Why demons?

This is Thais. Demons are a small evil, they are put before every temple, so that when ф ишпнык evil passes by, it doesn't stay, thinking that the place is already occupied.

This is not a prepared answer for the entertainment of tourists. I hope, it's the truth.

Another Pra Kanong is the name of the monorail station of my district. It is the penultimate on the green branch and the next station after the Ekkamai station.

A beer. I need to sleep before the "evening Uzbeks."

The flight is likely to be delayed, and they will gradually become night ones. This means calling the airport every half hour. A stuffy windless balcony with a sea of moving and flashing lights of Bangkok.

Yes. It's definitely evening now.

Translated from the Russian by Alexander Platonov