

Letters from Aldenderry

Born in Moscow in 1966 and raised in Russia and Moldova, Philip Nikolayev grew up equally fluent in English and Russian. On relocating to the US in 1990 to attend Harvard he has written primarily in English. His poetry is published internationally. Nikolayev's previous collections include *Monkey Time*, winner of the 2001 Verse Prize. He lives in Boston and co-edits *Fulcrum: an annual of poetry and aesthetics*.

Also by Philip Nikolayev

Poetry

Monkey Time (Verse Press, 2003)

Dusk Raga (Writers Workshop, 1998)

Artery Lumen (Barbara Matteau Editions, 1996)

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PHILIP NIKOLAYEV



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Several of the poems in this collection were published in the chapbook, *5 Poems* (A Rest Press, New York, 2005).

Eagles

Two eagles circled over Cambridge today,
a rare sight, lovely
against the chalkboard sky.
Drawn to stare, I soon noticed
that they went around in near perfect circles
at even speed.
In fact they looked exactly identical.
Their widespread wings didn't so much as flutter.
I heard a thin electrical whiz
and wondered if they carried
tiny surveillance cameras on board
that could scan
"Shakespeare and the Pathos of Rambling" that I was reading.

Secluded

The water truck is stuck,
a callow yellow mushroom
marshmallow, among branches tangled
with birdships and their nests,
with bishoprics of twitter.
I am into the kitchen garden,
primroses of the gods creep up my sleeves,
extend out the situation.
Whatever falls into the eye falls.
You can't open the same door twice,
you can barely open it once,
and then you find yourself silhouetted
all out of proportion against the
duration of their fall down the cast iron grille
of the kitchen garden.
Morning exercises of the will,
nicotine, attempts at staying afloat,
if not on top of things. Whatever
is the water truck doing here,
what stitches it in this fabric?
Throughout the fall they fall,
while there is indeed a run, what the British call
a ladder. Thus the need for a mender.
Ah to have been sequentially estranged,
by attrition rather than ambition,
into such a loophole of oneself, such a
snail's carapace of self
in the material garden of things,
that exit were temporarily precluded.
Maybe that's why the water truck is here,
and it's time someone answered the phone:
its ringing pierces
the stuffed owl to the bone,

me to pieces. Alone,
I'm into the kitchen
garden. Under turn-key.
Secluded zone.

Thunders

1.

Throughout the musicolor sky
and visible land—
swift alternation of night and day
with more blinding crashes
per minute per minute per minute.
Tonight they really mean it up there
and are gonna make a big racket
for fully a couple of hours
across rain hanging in strobe tatters.
Car alarms go off in the thunder
and the photosensitive lighting of the parking lot
keeps coming on and off and on and off,
weakling competitor to the sky.
All windows stay fast unlit. Electricity
wells, smells and clangs a thousands bells.
In the middle of this mess,
absolutely and temporarily free,
a poet on the balcony
smokes into the sky,
grateful that he couldn't sleep.

2.

At the playground with Sophia at 6:30 p.m.,
an F15 fighter jet flew by low
(nowadays they sometimes do that on purpose)
sending off a shockwave of sound and fury through the streets,
triggering car alarms at the said parking lot.
Once the air-blast passed,
the playground filled with the weaker
alarms of stunned children,
the sandbox sounding the most desperate.

Pyromania

Whatever happened to the childproof lighter?
I don't see them on counters any more,
but I remember that day in 1995
that I bought my first
(since Nini's Corner didn't carry the normal kind)
and on a midnight subway ride
across Boston tried
to figure out how to use it,
but couldn't. The sticker
read in terse verse:
*To operate push
button in and up,
rotate sparkwheel,
push down on lever.*

But I saw no button. The sparkwheel
kept firing into the void until eventually
a heavily stoned good natured fellow from across
the aisle volunteered to help me. He said,
hey I done seen this shit before lemme try
and pointed out the safety button, cached shyly
on the back of the activation lever,
then asked if I had a pen on me.
Surprised but professional, I produced a pen
and he used the ballpoint expertly
to pry and rip out the disabling button.
Try it now, he said. I did. The damn thing
exploded in our face, singing our eyebrows.

A Key in the Puddle

At the foot of the Caucasus on the Black Sea
in Sochi, they stood me under palms when I was three
in my red shorts and mom told me
not to screw up my eyes against the sun,
but I couldn't help it. I still screw them up
because the sun's too bright and the photographer
chuckles, making me uneasy. I came out
slit-eyed with sun-bleached hair
under the palms and with the facial features of
vaguely Ugro-Finnic physical anthropology.
There are fat miller's thumbs aplenty
in the clear Khosta river, though the hook
frequently gets stuck against bottom snags.
My newspaper hat sails away toward the Black Sea.
I've made acquaintance with shy lizards
of the boxwood grove. My pet female mantis
prays as she devours her puny husband
in my sand bucket. Then I see
a lost apartment key
in a sunny puddle on a wish-filled walk after some rain.
I say, "Dad, look." He looks.
"Ho-ho-ho, so have you found
the key to your life, maybe, or, as they say,
the key to the money-stuffed apartment?" —
"Yes!" say I, laughing, though I've no idea.

Locked

I know two homeless men, they both believe
that evil forces have messed with their lives.
Always, every time something good seemed about to happen,
something really bad happened,
and so it keeps going on
for ever and ever more—
like a bad spell, a curse.
Evil forces will do anything,
repeatedly steal your eyeglasses to keep you from reading,
put you in trouble with the law,
cut the strings of your guitar, plagiarize your songs,
gun down your mother in a Chicago supermarket
during a late night shift (this a long time ago),
make you sleep God knows where, God knows how, alone.
Whenever there's the littlest chance of a romance,
some nasty shit happens and screws it all to bits.
One believes in an afterlife and in numerology,
the other is an atheist but sings in a church.
If you carry a guitar the cops don't harass you as much.
If you panhandle and get donations from college students,
cops will suspect you're pushing dime bags.
They both hate the distant, indifferent rich
and both respect me just because I'm a poet.
How locked are we all into our respective fates.
The rich can't help being rich, the poor poor,
the invisible hand piles invisible cash,
wants its streets clean of trash.

Nostalgia

Good thing we no longer write poems about
a Red Skimmer dragonfly alighting on a poem,
ignoring the true autobiographical fact—
nor about anything good that we have done.
Autobiography no longer saves.
The old masters, they
savored every comprimé of pain & painkiller:
it near killed all of them,
with the exception of those that it killed.
They died the death of unfulfilled nostalgia.
Now we have innovation,
a novel preciousness & pride, a fresh method
of feeling good or at least better about ourselves.
It too no longer saves,
but it no longer kills us either,
does it?

You Who

You, savage Sicilian Irish,
the sharpest string in our Beethoven quartet,
who kick butt long distance but drive
three hours so we can compare our spondees
and fill up right and proper with Blue Moon,
you who then drive
us all who can't drive
back another three into your woods
(man, I abhor your techno selections),
you who bring out two power fans
against the mosquitoes
so we can while away the stars in open air,
you who make Amherst inhabited,
who when a fellow insulted me yelled
in the best accent of your youth
I'll serve his ass some Jersey justice
with meaning and purpose,
who cook fine French dinners for your dog,
you, lunatic prepostmodern Catholic,
who call on Christmas at midnight
us, who trashed our blinking lights two years ago,
you who yell merrily
Hi! It's John Hennessy! Are you guys celebrating?
who rouse me out of my oblivion,
who make sparks fly where there were none,
must you always announce yourself,
do you think I have forgotten your voice?

The Art of Forgetting

Last night I cooked my socks in the microwave
by mistake. What to do when you're so absent
minded? As well, I have frequently
refrigerated my poems in the freezer
to the point of having to thaw them later,
and poetry's what's emerges in defrosting.
I have also lost to nature generations
of galoshes, coats, scarves, umbrellas,
even once an Egyptian skullcap,
whose individual names I forget.
The name of the czar escapes my mind
on whom was meant to be my dissertation,
or was it thesis. Water,
all kinds of water under the all-purpose bridge.
If I've forgotten so much via absentmindedness mostly,
then how much have we forgotten as a species?
One day we learn, another forget
everything, including this fact.
It's possible given enough time and effort
to forget anything,
which's why we like to reminisce sometimes
on those even who've decided they don't like us.
We'll *fight* for our memories, the truth as it appeared once.
But to remember something we need to forget
something, a different truth. My grandmother
believed that if you dab any convenient spot on your body
with iodine daily
it will help you keep your memory in old age.
Head of the Marxism-Leninism chair
at the Ivanovo Energy Institute,
where she taught philosophy and scientific atheism,
she was the kindest soul, loved and spoiled me to distraction,
and her blueberry cakes were of course the best
in this world. Baptized as a child,
on her retirement to a small apartment in the Crimea

she read the Bible, perestroika raging all around.
Everyone wrote, thought and talked of
Stalin, Stalin, Stalin, Beria, Stalin.
She read the Bible, both the Testaments.
Thus dialectical materialism was forgotten
and an ancient faith recovered.
I too would like to forget a few things,
keep trying, but tend to forget instead
all the wrong ones, like submitting payments
by the due date, the need to tie my shoestrings.
Mnemosyne, and her daughters the Muses,
and her grandsons the museums . . .
Literature too is a museum,
as well as Lenin's mausoleum,
which is essentially a tomb.
As you must of course know I've forgotten
the remote control on the bathroom sink
where my reflection in the crooked mirror
distracted me with its scowl.
This is earth life, but like hailing from outer space.
When my daughter was born,
I spent the night with her and my wife at the hospital
and went home the next day to clean the apartment.
I vacuumed the floor very thoroughly,
my thoughts soaring far and wide. Little did I notice
that the vacuum was running in blow out mode
so the condition of the floor changed
hardly at all. This still makes my wife laugh
and may indeed be worth remembering
against all death. While stress, duress and strain,
the painful neck crane
and other stuff rotten
are best forgotten.

A Plaint on the Parting of Inversion from Poetry

Impossible's inversion, say they—
therewith to differ beg I please may!

To clarify sometimes used it's,
as verify help you your wits.

Invert everything and you'll see,
and see'll you everything invert.

Like today blossom you a tree,
but dust tomorrow are and dirt.

Becometh every gem a sand,
still but try we to understand

laws mandatory what prevail,
what from what follows without fail.

Why indeed not, indeed not why
on life get drunk we before die.

Nature's melancholy in humors,
ourselves expunge from earthy rumors

and crux into the formal dig,
back in put poetry a wig

bitter and face the boldly sand,
better so can we understand.

Friend, doing out there are you how?
Me understand you better now?

Let together then us perform
inversion formal of the norm.