



# Brisbane

*Also by Eugene Vodolazkin*

Solovyov and Larionov

Laurus

The Aviator

A History of the Island

A NOVEL  
**Brisbane**

**EUGENE VODOLAZKIN**

Translated from the Russian by  
Marian Schwartz

**Plough**

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*There is a reason to imagine that a continent,  
or land of great extent, may be found to the southward  
of the track of former navigators.*

— JAMES COOK, 1769

## APRIL 25, 2012, PARIS—PETERSBURG

Performing at Paris's Olympe, I can't play a tremolo. Or rather, I can, but not accurately, not cleanly – I play it like a beginning guitarist, producing a muffled gurgling, not notes. No one notices, and the Olympe explodes in ovations. Even I forget my failure, but as I get in the limo to my admirers' shouts, I catch myself making the characteristic finger movement. My right hand now performs the no longer needed tremolo, as if atoning for its mistake. My fingers move with incredible speed. Touch imaginary strings. The way a hairdresser's scissors break away from the hair for an instant and continue cutting the air. As we pull up to CDG, I tap the poorly played melody on the window – nothing difficult. How could I have stumbled in concert?

I'm flying from Paris to Petersburg to shoot a video. My seatmate is buckling his seatbelt. He turns his head and freezes. He's recognized me.

"Are you Gleb Yanovsky?"

I nod.

"Sergei Nesterov." My neighbor extends his hand. "Writer. I publish under a pseudonym, Nestor."

I half-heartedly shake Nestor's hand. Half-listening. Nestor, it turns out, is returning from the Salon du Livre in Paris. Judging from the smell coming from his mouth, the book fair presented more than just books. Not that this writer has a very Chekhovian look: jug ears, a saddle-shaped nose with large nostrils, nondescript rimless glasses. Nestor bestows his card on me. I stick it in my wallet and shut my eyes.

Nestor to the supposedly sleeping me:

"I doubt you know my things. . . ."

"Just one." I don't open my eyes. "*Tale of the Interim Years.*"

He smiles.

“Oh my. That’s my best.”

I write, too, actually. A diary – not a diary – occasionally I jot down notes, during evenings at home or in airports. Then I lose them. Recently I even lost them in an airport. Pages covered in Cyrillic. Who would return them? Should they even?

The plane taxis onto the runway and stops, but then the engine revs hard. Snarling and shaking with impatience, the plane picks up speed instantly. Like a predator on the hunt – trembling, twitching its tail. I don’t immediately remember which predator exactly. One of the cat family – maybe a cheetah. A fine image. A hunt over the distance between Paris and Petersburg. The airplane lifts off. Tilting a wing, it makes a farewell circle over Paris. I feel myself drifting off.

I wake up from a rattling accompanied by a turbulence announcement. A request for everyone to buckle their seatbelts. And I’d just unbuckled. I’d even loosened my own belt – too tight. The attendant approaches with a request to buckle up. I tell her I don’t like seatbelts – not in cars, not in planes. No kind of contraption for a free person. The young woman doesn’t believe me, chides me flirtatiously, and responds to all my arguments with a brief “wow.” She is sincerely sorry that such a marvelous artist is flying unbuckled.

To end the conversation, I turn demonstratively toward Nestor. I ask whether it’s hard to write books. Nestor (he’d been sleeping a drunkard’s sleep) mumbles that it’s no harder than playing the guitar. The attendant expresses not the slightest irritation, since it’s clear the star is just being capricious. Oh well, stars can get away with it. She wags her finger at me and goes away.

Watching her, Nestor suddenly says, “I just had a thought. I could write a book about you. You intrigue me.”

“Thank you.”

“You could tell me about yourself, and I could write it.”

I consider his proposal for a minute or two.

“I don’t know what to say. There already are a few books about me. Decent ones, in my opinion, but they miss the point somehow. No understanding.”

“Musical understanding?”

“Human, I’d say. I’d put it like this. There’s no understanding that the musical stems from the human.”

Nestor carefully considers what I’ve said. His conclusion is surprising.

“I think you’d like my book.”

An alcoholic exhale proposes I believe him.

That’s funny.

“Indeed? Why?”

“Because I’m a good writer. That’s immodest, of course. . . .”

“It is a little. On the other hand, why be modest if you’re good?” I tap out the tremolo on my armrest. “Go ahead. Write it.”

The rhythmic tapping reminds me of how more than forty years ago, in Kyiv, Fyodor, my father, tapped out a rhythm to test his son’s musical ear. Why shouldn’t that be the start of the book? I turn to Nestor and briefly tell him about my very first test, and even reproduce the test question proposed then. At the time, I failed. Nestor, smiling, taps his armrest. He fails too.

## 1971

The night before the first day of school, Gleb sat in front of Fyodor watching his long fingers, and attempted to reproduce the rhythm. Outside, streetcars clattered as they made the turn. The china in the sideboard clinked briefly in response. Then Fyodor sang something and asked Gleb to repeat it. He couldn’t repeat the melody, just the words: *paba-paba, paba-paba, paba-pa* . . . Pretty forgettable words – not exactly moving, and the only reason he remembered them was

because they sounded like “papa.” Actually, Fyodor had asked him to use the Ukrainian, *tato*. Hardly anyone in Kyiv called their father that. It had been several years since Fyodor had lived with his wife Irina and Gleb: Irina had left him. Or rather, Fyodor had left after Irina asked him to move out of their place in the family dormitory. Once driven out, he’d rented a room in another part of town, and since he had a diploma from the music institute, he got a job at a music school teaching violin. For a while after the divorce he drank, preferring cheap stuff like 72nd Port or Bouquet of Moldavia. He didn’t like hard liquor. If he did drink vodka, he’d fill a shot glass but wouldn’t drink it right away; he’d bring it up to his eyes and his mouth a few times. Exhale a few times. Then pinch his nose and pour the firewater into his gaping mouth. His former wife considered this drinking purely for show, inasmuch as it took place primarily in front of people who could tell Irina about it. In one of her rare conversations with her former husband, Irina called this behavior childish. Without switching to Russian, Fyodor objected that the definition did not hold up to criticism, since children, as far as he understood, don’t drink. Logic was on his side, but it didn’t help bring Irina back. Three or four years later, once it was quite clear to Fyodor that his wife wasn’t coming back, the drinking stopped. Irina allowed Gleb’s father parental visits but derived no joy from them. Strictly speaking, neither did Gleb himself. When Fyodor took the boy for a walk, he was mostly silent or recited poetry, which for Gleb was worse than silence in a way. Sometimes, when Gleb got tired at the end of their walk, Fyodor would pick him up. Their eyes were on a level then, and the son would examine his father with a child’s unblinking gaze. Under this gaze, tears would well up in Fyodor’s brown eyes. One after another, they would roll down his cheeks and disappear forever in his fluffy mustache. Despite his obvious sobriety at the beginning of their walk, by the end, in some inscrutable way, Fyodor would be tipsy. Sitting in his

father's arms, Gleb picked up the smell of cheap wine. In the boy's memory, his father's tears were firmly merged with this smell. Maybe they really did smell like that. Who has studied the smell of tears? When soon-to-be first grader Gleb announced his desire to learn to play the guitar, Irina herself brought him to Fyodor. She sat in the corner and silently watched Gleb fail to match the tones his father sang. "*Gleb . . .*" Fyodor poured himself half a glass of wine, drank it in three goes, and said, in Ukrainian, "*Gleb, my boy, you weren't made for music.*"<sup>1</sup> "Papa, don't drink," Gleb asked him in Russian. His father drank another half-glass. "*I drink because you weren't made for music – a first for the musical Yanovsky family.*" He noticed a heel of bread on the table and brought it to his nose: "*Prikro!*" "What's *preekro*?" Gleb asked. "*Preekro* means 'too bad,'" Irina said. "Yes, it's too bad," Fyodor confirmed. Without another word, the mother took her son by the hand and led him out of the room. The next day they went to enroll him in the nearest music school. There, Gleb was also asked to repeat a rhythmic phrase and a sung melody. Nervous, the boy performed even worse than the day before, but this didn't discourage anyone. Surprise caught Gleb in a different way: his hand turned out to be too small for the guitar's neck. So they suggested enrolling him in the school's four-string domra class – at least until his hand grew. Visibly distraught, Irina asked why they were talking about the four-string domra specifically. They told her that there was a three-string domra, of course, but typically the Ukrainian one (they replaced the guitar in Gleb's arms with a domra) was, after all, four-string. The boy's fingers gripped the domra neck without straining. Irina was also asked not to confuse the two domras with the Eastern dombra, and they were even about to explain the difference between them, but she didn't want to hear it. She wanted to ask why they didn't simply

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1. Italics here and throughout the novel indicate a non-Russian language being spoken, in Fyodor's case, Ukrainian.—Trans.

choose a smaller guitar for Gleb, to ask whether they weren't trying to trick her son into going somewhere no one would go voluntarily – but she bit her tongue. She stood up and simply took Gleb by the hand. His other hand was still holding the domra. Irina indicated with a glance that he could put down the instrument, but Gleb didn't. "You want to play the four-string domra?" she asked. "Yes," the boy answered. That decided the matter because his mother was trying to spare him yet another no. They signed him up for the domra class. At the same time, Gleb started regular school. He always remembered the colors, smells, and sounds that came to him that September 1, 1971, because on that day his senses sharpened dramatically. The smell of his freshly ironed school uniform – brown, with knife creases in the trousers. Gleb thought it was the color and creases that made the smell. Exactly the same way the smell of his nylon jacket came from the material's waterproof qualities. At the first rain, the material turned out to be permeable, but this had no effect whatsoever on his memory of the smell. This was Gleb's first nylon jacket; up until then he'd only worn coats. The warm September day didn't call for a jacket, but the boy very much wanted to arrive wearing it, though his mother was opposed. Years later, examining his first school photograph, Gleb Yanovsky found the jacket quite shapeless. He never did understand what it was about this item he liked so much then. Maybe its smell intoxicated him, the way a carnivorous plant intoxicates insects. Whatever it was, on the first of September his mother met him halfway, as always. She helped him put on his jacket and satchel. She advised him at least not to button the jacket. The satchel smelled of leather, and also water and oil, and also his noxious plastic pencil case. When the boy moved calmly, the pens' and pencils' rattling was moderate, but when he broke into a run, the sound increased many times over. The precise rhythm he pounded out reminded him of a band's maraca. When he was a little older, the boy asked himself where

people studied the maraca. Could there really be a maraca class at the music school, like a violin or piano class? And he found no answer because there was no such class. So there it was, his satchel, his school. At his father's wish, Gleb was sent to a Ukrainian-language school. His mother didn't object. She almost never objected. Knowing her ability to reconcile herself to circumstances, it was a wonder she'd had the character to separate from her husband. The real wonder, though, was that she and Fyodor had ever gotten together in the first place. Fyodor was from Kamianets-Podilskyi, Irina from Vologda. At one time both studied at the Kyiv Civil Aviation Institute, both landing there randomly, Irina after a failed attempt to get into the theater institute and Fyodor the conservatory. That's why they were allowed to stay in the city. They had not the slightest interest in civil aviation. This was one of the few things they had in common. As for the rest, they spoke different languages in the literal and figurative sense. People think dissimilarity breeds attraction, and that's true – but only at the start. Yes, the dark-haired southerner Fyodor was drawn to the northern beauty Irina, whose beauty was like the fog in a brief morning calm, like the dream of a tsarevna all too tempting to interrupt, like the quiet pond one wishes ripples would form in. Fyodor's invariable pensiveness made an impression on Irina; it implied experience and wisdom. She enjoyed listening to the Ukrainian words he uttered and demanded a minute-to-minute translation. Over the course of time, though, what had stoked their feelings in the first years turned into its opposite in Irina's eyes. Fyodor's pensiveness came to seem like sullenness, his wisdom did not manifest itself with the frequency she'd been counting on, and the incomprehensible words of the beautiful but foreign language began to get on her nerves. She stopped asking for their translation, waiting for Fyodor to guess and do it himself. Irina could have insisted he switch to Russian (as he did in important instances), but Fyodor's pronunciation mangled her native language.

And in bed, hearing his Russian words, she would laugh as if she were being tickled, push him away, and ask him to speak only Ukrainian. And then she left. After he was grown, Gleb heard many times about another reason for the divorce: Irina's "frivolous" behavior. He may have been able to believe in his mother's frivolousness (whatever that involved), but he didn't connect the divorce to that. The reason for the divorce, it seemed to him, was deeper and in a way more tragic. Gleb ascribed what happened between his parents to the particular pensiveness his father fell into from time to time. It was a pensiveness his mother, a vivacious person, came to dread. Those moments made Gleb uncomfortable too. It was as if his father had fallen into a deep well and was contemplating the stars from there, stars only he could see – even in the daytime, such being the optics of wells. When Irina left, the violin felt the fullness of Fyodor's emotions. Usually he played when he was alone. Gleb had once heard this playing when, with his mother's permission, he'd spent the night at his father's. Early in the morning, so as not to wake the boy, Fyodor shut himself in the bathroom and played. Turning on the water as well, to muffle the violin's sounds. These sounds, mixed with the water's noise, shook Gleb to the core. In 2003, he wrote several compositions that laid the guitar over the sound of water. This was his memory of his father playing. When he was writing them down, he'd had another thought, that in fact his father had turned the water on then in order to hang himself in peace. When Gleb finished writing his rain compositions, people told him they bore traces of despair. Gleb didn't respond. He remembered the particular expression in his father's eyes, an expression that could only be defined as despair. What really happened then? Was Irina frivolous? More likely, she took everything lightheartedly, showing a marked preference for the sunny side of life. And was disinclined to delve particularly into its shadowy aspects. She often repeated that she'd like to live in Australia; for some reason, that country seemed

like the embodiment of the carefree life. Jokingly she would ask people to find her an Australian husband she could travel the world with. It was in one of those conversations that Gleb first heard the word “Brisbane.” Talking about the city of her dreams, his mother named Brisbane. When asked why that city specifically, she said simply: it sounds beautiful. Her answer seemed silly – to everyone but Gleb. Brisbane. He easily linked the city with Zurbagan, Gel-Gyu, and Lissa, which the boy had read about in Aleksandr Grin. At the time Gleb had asked his mother whether she was going to take him with her to Brisbane. Of course she was. His mother kissed his forehead. How could she not? The time would come and they would live in Brisbane. Years later, when Gleb was graduating from high school, Irina wanted to buy a trip to Australia with the money she’d saved up. She was called into the Party commission, which had to give its consent – or rather, as it turned out, not give its consent – for the trip. She wasn’t a member of the Communist Party, so it’s an open question why the Party committee had any say at all. They proposed she name the members of the Politburo, asked what was discussed at the last congress of the Communist Party, and had her list the basic advantages of the socialist over the capitalist system. She answered the first, the second, and even the third. The third was the hardest for her, but she managed that one, too, because she’d prepared in the most painstaking fashion. And then Irina was asked one last question – as unstoppable as tank fire. They asked her whether she’d already seen everything in the Soviet Union. This question could not be answered in the affirmative; the country she’d been born in was too big. A negative answer implied that Gleb’s mother should put off her trip to Australia until she’d fully gotten to know the Soviet Union – or so the commission members, at least, thought. She was denied permission. Actually, Irina took it lightly, as she did nearly everything. Maybe it was thanks to just this quality that soon after the divorce she got a

room in a communal apartment, given to her by the design office where she'd been assigned after her studies, as a young civil aviation specialist. Had she taken this job opportunity seriously, they probably wouldn't have had to give her anything. A lot changed in Gleb's life with the move from the dormitory to the communal apartment. First and foremost, his grandmother Antonina Pavlovna showed up. She came from Vologda to help out his mother, who frequently went off in different directions. His mother called her absences business trips; moreover, each one ended in a present for Gleb. The presents – plastic toys usually – were quietly placed on the sleeping boy's pillow. He didn't give much thought to why his mother liked those toys particularly, he simply accepted them with thanks. Like a dog trained to search, he would wake up from the faint plastic smell touching his nostrils, because this was the smell of joy. He'd open his eyes and see his mother. She'd be sitting on the stool by his bed and smiling. Sometimes she'd cry. Her return was never an ordinary event. "Why do you take so many business trips?" Gleb once asked. His mother blushed and didn't answer. She glanced at his grandmother, who pretended not to notice anything. His grandmother wiped her hands on her apron – her saving gesture. When his mother left for work, Gleb repeated his question to his grandmother. Antonina Pavlovna fell silent and pressed a finger to her lips. "Tss," she told Gleb, "you see, she needs a reliable man by her side, only where are you going to find one?" "And my papa," Gleb asked, "is he unreliable?" "Your papa . . ." His grandmother sighed and shrugged. Meanwhile, his papa was very glad that Gleb was playing a Ukrainian folk instrument, and especially that his son had chosen it himself. Fyodor no longer saw Gleb's lack of absolute pitch as an insurmountable obstacle. He even said as much, that you didn't need absolute pitch to play the domra. To play the violin, which has no frets, yes, it's desirable, but for instruments whose neck is divided by frets, that

requirement is superfluous. Not only that; in Fyodor's opinion, his ear could be developed (*to an extent*, he clarified). One day Fyodor took Gleb to the musical instruments store and offered to buy him a domra. The father demonstratively let his son choose; he considered assessing twelve-ruble instruments beneath his dignity. After running all over the store, Gleb settled on the darkest of all the domras and brought it to his father. Fyodor looked sternly at his son. "*It doesn't have any strings. Pay attention, son.*" After a slight hesitation, his father picked up one of the domras and ran his thumb over the strings. He frowned at the plywood sound, which reminded him of a toy balalaika's rattle. The other domra was the same, and so were all the rest. They chose the way Gleb had wanted to, by color – not as dark as the first, but with strings. When they got back, home smelled of a cooked dinner. "Will you stay for dinner?" Gleb asked his father. "*Ne. Ne zaproshue.*" "What does *ne zaproshue* mean?" the boy inquired. "No one's asked me," Irina explained, looking into Fyodor's eyes. His grandmother silently wiped her hands on her apron. It seemed to her that the man who not so long ago had been her daughter's husband should be asked.

### **JULY 18, 2012, KYIV**

Arriving in Kyiv on tour, I visit my father. He receives me good-naturedly but without any special fuss.

*"Hi there, Muscovite. What do you say?"*

He smiles. I smile back.

"I say, join the empire!"

My father sprinkles tobacco on a cigarette paper, rolls it, and running his tongue along it, seals it.

This is something new.

*"We can't do that."*

“Why?”

He flicks his lighter and releases the first puff of smoke.

*“Figure it out for yourself, son.”*

Galina, my father’s second wife, walks in and nods at me apprehensively. Sets an ashtray down in front of her husband and goes out.

“I’m having some problems with my right hand.” I bend and unbend my fingers. “I was performing in Paris and nearly screwed it up.”

*“You play with your heart, not your hand. Think of Paganini. He played no matter what the circumstances.”*

He looks at me with a half-smile.

“He still had one string. That’s something. But without a hand, you know . . .”

*“He would play without any strings at all, son. Even without a hand.”* My father thought and added, *“But in the meantime, go see a doctor.”*

“Yes, I may well do that.” Right before leaving for some reason I remember the Petersburg writer’s proposal to write a book about me. I tell my father about it. He shrugs, and I already regret telling him. He rolls another cigarette, lights up.

*“Music’s music even in Petersburg. Let him write.”*

The released smoke does a somersault – as complicated as it is slow. My father seems to have slowed down with age. Softened. Or maybe he’s become indifferent.

“It’s not a matter of the music,” I say. “It’s the musician’s life experience that needs describing, not the music. After that comes the music, or maybe the literature. I don’t know whether the writer will understand that.”

I walk back from my father’s to the hotel. So as not to be recognized, I pull my cap down to my nose. This is better than sunglasses, which themselves attract attention. My route takes me

through the Botanical Garden. Via a side path I reach the café where my grandmother and I used to have ice cream. The café's still there, the ice cream, too, evidently, but my grandmother isn't. Each time I visit, I go to the cemetery, where we're separated by two meters of dirt brown clay.

I sit on a bench and look at the café. There's a squirrel, a *belka*, right at my feet. On its hind legs, its front legs crossed prayerfully at its chest. I explain to it that I have no food with me, that I might have bought something, of course, and brought it, but that's so complicated. Words are powerless. I clap my pockets so the squirrel can see I have no treats for it. To make my point, I get out my wallet and even open it. There's an excessive theatricality to this, unquestionably. In the sense of food, the wallet has nothing whatsoever to offer. The limit of my dreams is a cheese slice.

I notice Nestor's business card. Why did I start telling him about my childhood? Why would he write all this? It occurs to me to toss the card to the squirrel – let the squirrel call him. He can write about the squirrel's life. Isn't that interesting? A half a dozen books have already been published about me, but not a one about the squirrel, I bet. Except for *Tales of Belkin*. I take the piece of card-board in two fingers, all set to let it fly. And hesitate. In essence, not a single one about my *life*, though. They've written about all sorts of things, just not about my life. Hmm, that's something to consider. I put the card back.

## 1972

Gleb spent the entire fall with Antonina Pavlovna. After school they would go to the Botanical Garden, which was right across from their building. No one called this fabulous spot the Botanical Garden; they said "the Botanic." There Gleb and his grandmother collected

bouquets of maple leaves, bright yellow and bright red, which they put in milk bottles all around their room. They collected rosehips, which his grandmother used to brew tea. In and of themselves, rosehips aren't all that attractive, so she would mix it with something to enrich the tea's flavor. But the tea's main interest, of course, lay in the fact that he had collected the rosehips with his own hands. This was an open section of the Botanic, where you were allowed to gather anything you liked. The garden sloped down from the hill in terraces, and squirrels lived on one of the terraces. Or rather, they lived all over the Botanic, but on this terrace they could be fed. They took food right from your hands. Antonina Pavlovna brought hazelnuts for them in the pocket of her demi-season coat. She'd bought the coat in Kyiv, and for a while she pronounced the word "demi-season" very nasally (evidently having heard it from someone), but then she stopped. For all the rest she had a strong Vologda accent, with a heavy stress on all her o's: *khO-rO-shO* (good), *mO-lO-kO* (milk), *mO-rO-zhen-O-ye* (ice cream). Yes, *morozhenoye*. That was the Botanic's main pleasure, and its day was Sunday. At about two, grandmother and grandson would come to the open air café above the University metro exit. Everything here was round: the metro exit, the café, to say nothing of the ice cream scoops. What else could they have been? They were served in little plastic cups and eaten with little plastic spoons. These marvelous items were the café's inalienable property, inasmuch as the era of disposables had yet to come. Meanwhile, Gleb liked the little spoons very much. One time, he licked one after his latest portion of ice cream and stuck it in his pants pocket. He told his grandmother about his acquisition at home. His grandmother said nothing right away, but her response was imprinted on her face. Everything in it literally fell: the wrinkles over her eyebrows, the bags under her eyes, the corners of her mouth. It turned out that he had stolen the little spoon – and tomorrow, after school, they would go return the little

spoon together (after all, we stole it together, his grandmother made it clear). Gleb conceived of the return as a solemn and terrifying act, involving the entire café staff and maybe even the police. That night he barely slept, though then it turned out that he did after all, but his dream was worse than his vigil. Here they are, he and his grandmother, entering the café, they sit at a little table. Before they can order anything, policemen pretending to be ordinary ice cream lovers come running toward them from neighboring tables. In civilian dress, but they look too casual: Panama hats, neckerchiefs, shorts. From this alone you could tell it was an ambush. The policemen rush at Gleb (his grandmother's horror-stricken eyes), and this is the most terrifying episode of the arrest. When they bend his arms behind his back, he's not scared, and when they click the handcuffs and lead him to their Volga GAZ-21, he's not scared. But when they leapt up and rushed at him – he was. Bastards! Freaking cops! Gleb shouts, transitioning to a wail. This is how their neighbor Uncle Kolya shouts when they take him in – he shouts and rolls around on the floor, and the whole apartment looks at him censoriously. Looks down at him. Gleb rolls around, too, catching his grandmother's look: so it's come to this, has it? What, you couldn't have sat tight at home? His grandmother is crying because now she understands everything. Sitting in the car with his hands cuffed behind his back is uncomfortable, but the fact that they're driving him in a Volga takes some of the edge off the situation. Gleb had long dreamed of riding in a Volga (the deer hood ornament alone!), only somehow it wasn't working out quite right. Yes, some of the night he didn't sleep – and then he dozed off in class. After school, he and his grandmother really did go to the café. The boy's expectations notwithstanding, everything went fairly simply and even without unpleasantness – probably because the worst had happened that night. His grandmother ordered two portions of ice cream and while they were bringing them put the ill-fated spoon

on the next table. Many years later, Gleb recalled that little spoon on planes while stirring tea served by a flight attendant. At that time he was flying almost weekly (his grandmother was no longer by his side – she lay, dead, in Kyiv’s Berkovtsi cemetery) and had, accordingly, expanded his opportunities for taking whatever spoons he cared to. But he didn’t take even a single one. Life is a good teacher. Now about his studies. As was said, Gleb attended a Ukrainian-language school. This choice was welcomed not only by his father (which is understandable) but also by his mother, who felt you should know the language of the land in which you live. True, a practical circumstance did influence the choice. While all the Russian schools had more applicants than they could accommodate (five classes per grade, with forty-five pupils in each), calm and intimacy reigned in the Ukrainian ones. Gleb’s class had twenty-four pupils, and there was only one class per grade. The children of Ukrainian writers studied in this school and – since it was next to the train station – so did children from the villages closest to Kyiv. Gleb wasn’t either, and his Ukrainian was limited to individual words heard from his father. Actually, in important instances it became clear that the writers’ children didn’t know everything either. When in the first lesson the teacher, Lesya Kirillovna, asked what the Ukrainian was for *pebble*, only the village children knew it. *Ochyeryet*, said a pupil whose last name was Bdzhilka. *Ocheret*, Gleb whispered, enchanted. He thought bitterly that there was no place for him among people who knew such marvelous words. He was doomed to drag along at the back and admire those who were ahead. Gleb was mistaken, though. In all the years that followed, Bdzhilka did not give a single additional correct answer. *Ochyeryet* was his shining hour. Subsequently, Gleb tried to remember why Lesya Kirillovna had started talking about pebbles in their first lesson. Evidently, it was an explanation for something. Although not necessarily. Inexplicable things did happen in general

education institutions too. Enigmatic things, even. Thus, in a moment of anger, Lesya Kirillovna, moving her lips, would say something soundlessly. That is, in these instances she did say certain things out loud, but what was audible had, on the whole, a happy character – at least compared to the expression on her face. What had no sound remained a puzzle, and her facial expression evidently corresponded to that. Once, when Gleb's ear happened to be right up to Lesya Kirillovna's lips (she was leaning over him), some of the puzzling words became clear. There are times when a solution does not bring consolation. Or joy. Generally speaking, joy in life is a rare visitor. Of all the joyless things during those years there was nothing more joyless than Russian lessons. Lesya Kirillovna began each such class with a warm-up that, following the methodology's recommendation, included a tongue-twister. In essence, it was always the same very sad tongue-twister: *zhutko zhuku zhit na suku*. Dreadful for a bug living on a branch. First, each pronounced it in turn; then they all did in unison. After listening to everyone with a gloomy look on her face (what other look can you have listening to a text like that?), Lesya Kirillovna would lick her lips and prepare to demonstrate the standard pronunciation. On the first *u* she slid smoothly into a moaning *oo*, and the rest were not much prettier. In this performance the tongue-twister lost in speed but palpably gained in dread. Only after listening to Lesya Kirillovna could one fully appreciate how the bug felt. Some cried seeing their teacher standing by her desk and letting one *u* after another fly uncontrollably (and dreadfully) through the classroom. Generally speaking, things weren't all that simple when it came to Lesya Kirillovna. Once, in the middle of the school year, a pupil, Plachinda, looked through the cracked door and saw Lesya Kirillovna sit down in the seats of different pupils in turn and, imitating them, give answers to the teacher's questions in delicate, childish voices. Each time, the pedagogue returned to her desk to ask the

question and in an intentionally crude voice addressed her next victim. In and of itself, her voice was sufficiently crude that, strictly speaking, no amplification was required. What struck the pupil most were two things. First, in answering in the role of Plachinda, Lesya Kirillovna would make faces, gesticulate heatedly, and from her squeaking make it clear that the lesson had not been learned. Second, after returning to her desk, Lesya Kirillovna would unleash on the respondent a stream of choice curses. Yes, the pupil was unhappy that someone viewed her this way, and yes, she was upset that she hadn't learned the lesson, but why the obscenity, she asked herself, and obscenity like that to boot! When she recounted all this at home, her parents, to her surprise, showed restraint. Chewing his lips, Plachinda père murmured that ultimately it was a general education school, that schoolchildren's studies were conducted along the most varied lines. . . . Meanwhile, in addition to regular school, Gleb continued to attend music school. For the first two weeks he studied only with Vera Mikhailovna, a plump young woman. A few times the boy heard that she was his teacher "in his specialty." He liked that he now had a specialty and had a teacher working with him individually and "training his hand." In Vera Mikhailovna's hands his own little hand was like putty: his teacher sculpted from it the hand of a genuine domrist. She would give his fingers the correct position and sometimes shake them, as if shaking off all their mistakes and imprecisions, and kneaded, kneaded, kneaded. It was this part of his lessons that Gleb liked most of all. Vera Mikhailovna's touches sent a low-voltage current down his arm and spine. Maybe that's why he learned quite quickly the right way to hold the pick, the small plastic petal that touches the domra's strings. Unlike guitar strings, which are long and pliant, the domra's strings are short and stiff, so you had to use a pick. You have to hold it with the right thumb and index finger, while the hand itself has to have the shape of a little house. You have to play – and this is a very

important point – by moving the hand, not the whole arm. It was the hand movement that wouldn't come together for Gleb. For some reason his entire arm would start moving. But by early October, come together it did. In October, Irina wasn't living with Gleb and Antonina Pavlovna. She stopped by nearly every evening for tea, but went off to spend the night somewhere else. Unlike her business trips, this was a long-lived story, and most of all – much more serious. Where are you always going? Gleb would ask her, but his mother wouldn't answer. She would smile. Happiness shone in her eyes. In November, she came home, oddly, and, moreover, in the middle of the night. She looked downcast. Gleb and his grandmother didn't ask any questions, and she didn't explain. From that day on, Irina spent all her nights at home, which made Gleb unspeakably happy. Not that he minded being with his grandmother, not at all, he just liked it when they were all together. Moreover, Antonina Pavlovna, no matter how you slice it, was a grandmother in every sense – age and status – while Irina was a young woman who he found much more interesting. That fall, though, a woman appeared in Gleb's life who turned out to be even more interesting to spend time with: his music school teacher Klavdia Vasilievna (privately, Gleb called her Klavochka), who became his first love. Klavochka was essentially just a girl herself still, but even in these circumstances she was three times her admirer's age. And approximately twice as tall. Actually, that wasn't what bothered Gleb most. Klavochka taught what a beloved woman should in no instance teach: *solfeggio*. Heading off once a week for his lesson with her, Gleb experienced two conflicting emotions: love for Klavochka and revulsion for her subject. Before *solfeggio*, music seemed to have flown down from the heavens, possessing no explanation for its beauty. But explanations existed, and they looked more like mathematics than music. The airship in which Gleb had set sail had a fairly dreary engine compartment, it turned out, where flywheels slapped and there was

an acrid smell of grease. Most surprising of all was the fact that Klavochka was in charge in this hellish world. The properties of this world did not make themselves clear to Gleb right away. While Klavochka was explaining the duration of notes and the characteristics of the staff, he had no inkling of anything bad. His first worries began creeping in when she moved on to triads. She informed him that a triad was a chord made of three sounds spaced in thirds. His sole delight was in watching Klavochka's slender fingers when she demonstrated triads on the piano: do-mi-sol. Then she would also sing: do-mi-sol. A gentle voice, velvety—he honestly wished she would sing something else. . . . What else was bad about solfeggio was that Klavochka didn't teach Gleb alone: there were seven others in class as well. And everyone, by the way, except for Anna Lebed (specialty, cello), disliked solfeggio. For instance, Maksim Kleshchuk (accordion), who shared a desk with Gleb, was constantly twisting his feet, and at the word "triad" would become covered in sweat. Once, Klavochka devoted an entire lesson to the inversion of triads, which consists of moving the bottom note up an octave. The first inversion is a sixth chord, the second inversion a six-four chord. "Kleshchuk," she said at the end of the lesson, "construct a tonic sixth chord in C major for me." Kleshchuk, who had already been sitting with a tense face, positively turned to stone. Big tears rolled silently down his face. A quiet gurgling was heard under his seat. Everyone looked under Kleshchuk's seat because, however big his tears were, they certainly couldn't gurgle. The accordionist's right hand lay on the desk and held a pen while the left squeezed something under the desk. From his seat, which had a bend in it, a thin stream was running into a puddle forming on the floor. Klavochka never asked Kleshchuk about triads again, limiting herself to questions about note duration. This meant the other pupils had to talk about triads more often. Gleb had little to tell his beloved girlfriend about triads, and this upset him greatly. At

home he would sit for hours over his textbook with just one goal: not to disgrace himself in front of Klavochka. From time to time he would pluck the chords he was studying on his domra. Occasionally he would look up and watch the snow skidding along outside, since winter had arrived unbeknownst to him. It was hard for Gleb to concentrate on triads – and not only because of the snow. There was a lot at home to distract him. At home. Homeward. Home. Maybe the only one in his life. Later he had lots of homes – so many that they lost their homelike quality and became residences. But an umbilical cord connected him to this one: home. A small, two-story building on Shevchenko, formerly Bibikovsky, Boulevard. On the second floor – a balcony hidden behind the branches of an old chestnut.

#### **JULY 19, 2012, KYIV**

I go to where my building once stood. Rising in its place is something glassed – a five-star hotel, to judge from the sign. A window-washer cradle is sliding down the glass wall. There are two window washers standing at opposite ends of the cradle making energetic arm movements. The window reflects them, and also the sunset's orange rays, which pour down the glass with the cleaning fluid.

My grandmother washed windows very differently. First she wiped them with a rag, and then she made the final swipes with a crumpled newspaper. A fresh layer was added to the soaked newspaper time after time, forming this sort of onion, which squeaked and squealed when it touched the window. String instruments make a similar sound when the nails of the thumb and index finger run down a string together.

I turn my back to the hotel and examine the poplars on the boulevard. Unlike my building, they've lasted. If I don't turn around, I might think my building is still behind me. That they're just about

to call me to supper, for instance. Or bring out a warm sweater, because it's evening. No, they won't. No one calls out to me. Something's gone wrong. My mobile rings, lights up: *Mama*. From my long ago, as from oblivion. The voice is muffled, broken up by static.

"Gleb, how are you?"

"Thank God you called. Thank God. . . ."

I walk into the hotel lobby. People recognize me, and a crowd gathers. I tell the hotel management that's run up that I once lived here. The management nods politely, although (he finds this strange) he remembers nothing of the kind. It's even stranger because they usually make precise note of this type of visit.

"You've misunderstood me," I say. "I lived in the two-story building that stood at this location."

"Now isn't that something," management marvels. "Remarkable. Rather unprecedented even."

"The building's gone," I continue, "but the address stuck in my memory: 28 Shevchenko Boulevard, apartment 2. Like the leash of a dog that died long ago."

Everyone smiles with restraint. The staff of an expensive hotel aren't supposed to laugh out loud.

"A remarkable comment. Showing a love of nature, as they say."

"As a child, I very much wanted a dog. Very much, but the neighbors wouldn't allow it. And now – I don't."

## 1972

"*The boys are all right, but the girls are stupid,*" Lesya Kirillovna reported at the parent meeting. By way of illustrating her idea, she imitated Lyusya Mironenko, who thought about anything and everything except the lesson: chin on her palm, eyes unfocused and basically gathered somewhere on her forehead. And she wrote her own last name with an *e*: *Meronenko*. Lyusya's mother smiled, embarrassed.

Noticing the smile on another mother's face, Lesya Kirillovna switched over to her: *and Sidorova writes 'hopework.'* *Hopework – simply brilliant!* Everyone knew Sidorova was beaten at home, so the slip of the pen might be called Freudian, but in the seventies no one knew that author – not Sidorova, not her parents, not even Lesya Kirillovna. When it came to Sidorova, her life experience had led her to two simple conclusions: she liked being at school and she didn't like being at home. And this made perfect sense. As for Gleb, he liked music school most. Now that he'd mastered the basic techniques of domra playing, he and Vera Mikhailovna had started thinking about the aesthetics of the matter. Play with nuance, Vera Mikhailovna never tired of repeating to her pupil, and the very word “nuance” captivated Gleb. It was so expressive, so refined that it required no refinement. Playing with nuance became the young domrist's favorite activity. Sometimes, carried away, he would put his fingers in the wrong place or pluck the wrong strings, and then Vera Mikhailovna would shout: *cringe!* But in her cry one sensed an understanding that the technical flaw was a necessary sacrifice in the name of beauty. The performer knew he would be forgiven his cringe, whereas an absence of nuance – never. Maybe this was why Gleb loved music school. Actually, that was not the only thing he loved. Unlike Sidorova, Gleb, who knew no beatings, liked his home in the communal apartment. Everything there was simpler than at music school, and more modest when it came to nuances, but this was his beloved home, which no school could replace. Three other families lived in the apartment, besides Gleb, his mama, and his grandmother. Their names were listed under the doorbell with a note saying how many times to ring for each. These names greeted the boy every day, and even after his neighbors were gone, let alone the building itself, Gleb firmly remembered that the Pshebysheskys had to be rung once, the Yanovskys twice, the Kolbushkovs three times, and the Vinnichenkos four. No one rang for the Kolbushkovs or Vinnichenkos

because they never had guests. You could have put a zero after their rings and made it thirty and forty without disturbing anyone. But the single and double rings were firmly imprinted on Gleb's ears. The boy could easily tell from their volume and duration who was ringing. It turned out that even a single ring (and this was where the real nuances came in) could be made with limitless variety. For instance, a momentary touch of the button – and the bell was like a puppy's yap. You could ring without pressing the button too much – and timidity would creep into the ring. When, on the contrary, they rang until their finger turned white – there would be a scandalous sound full of crackle. Two short rings sent the listener to an ethereal staccato, two longs engendered thoughts of a bomb shelter. This was excellent training for note duration, Kleshchuk's favorite topic. Beginning in second grade, Kleshchuk would sometimes come over to Gleb's after school. His brief brushes against the doorbell yielded two exemplary eighth notes. Generally speaking, the old fifties button possessed the expressiveness of a violin, and because of this the full spectrum of its possibilities was utilized only by Fyodor – when he was a bit tight. From the characteristics of his ring you could immediately determine how drunk he was. But it wasn't only the bell that made a sound, there was also the door, which had its own range: from the latch's quiet click (the morning departure for work) to the hurricane slam that shook the double doors in the evening hour. Slams like that usually accompanied a stormy departure or a stormy return. The latter was a rarity because, after spending a while outside, the person would cool down. This person was Uncle Kolya Kolbushkov. Actually, he rarely went out either: he preferred driving his wife Katerina out of their room. In those instances, she would bed down and curl up on the big rug-covered chest in the vestibule. In the middle of the night she would go up to the door to their room and ask in a dispirited voice: "Mikola, let me in!" Abbreviated but harsh curses would follow from

the other side of the door. Sometimes – if Mikola came out to the vestibule – a muffled blow; Katerina’s abundant body absorbed all the sound. One time, in front of the neighbors, he lunged at Katerina with a handsaw, which pierced Gleb’s door and for a while oscillated with a brief, mournful melody. It even seemed to Gleb that a minor sixth dominated there, like in Francis Lai’s “Love Story” (dó-mi-mi-dó-dó and so on). Evdokia Vinnichenko called the police, but nothing came of it. Uncle Kolya managed to stash the surprisingly musical instrument in time, and Katerina did not press charges. Uncle Kolya’s wife expected nothing else. Ultimately, he’d played her “Love Story.” Katerina herself was no namby-pamby and – give her credit – she never missed an opportunity to wrangle with her husband, most often when Uncle Kolya, a war veteran, tossed a few back after his factory shift, went out into the yard in a T-shirt, sat down at the table under the crooked olive tree, and started chatting with the public. A light hung on a wire over the table, so that the socializing could continue in the dark too. In his right hand, Uncle Kolya held a pack of Belomors, and in his left, matches, which he pressed to his palm with his pinky and ring finger. Those two fingers of his were always bent: they held the matches, which were extracted as needed. After he started one of his cheap cigarettes, Uncle Kolya would tell stories about how he, yesterday’s Voronezh peasant, had been in the front ranks that liberated Kyiv. *Anyone who walked in the front ranks is long gone*, was the invariable debunking from Katerina, who didn’t seem to have been there a minute before. Retribution was not long in coming. If the woman was within arm’s reach, Uncle Kolya would give her a good smack; if not, he’d stick to elaborate obscenities. After an instant’s flare-up, Uncle Kolya would calm down just as instantly. A minute later the smoke from his cigarette would cozily envelop the burning lamp and vanish in the olive tree’s dark branches. His war stories would continue. Nothing could stop him, even Katerina’s interventions, which

remained a puzzle to everyone. This woman's longing for truth was combined with a taste for suffering, inasmuch as the two were clearly intertwined in her life. It may have been she didn't get enough feeling from the now old Uncle Kolya and she was trying to elicit it, like an artillery spotter who despairs and brings down the final volley on himself. What was important here was not the feeling's nature but its strength. Many years later, when the district authorities started resettling the communal apartment, people in the know advised the spouses to divorce temporarily. Then they would get two one-room apartments instead of one, and after that one of them could sell or, say, exchange their apartments for a two-room. And remarry. Opposed to this clever plan was Katerina, who refused to divorce, even fictitiously. She was afraid Mikola wouldn't marry her a second time. By the way, Gleb never saw any weddings in the apartment, although he did once see a funeral, when their neighbor Evdokia Vinnichenko died. Despite her mellifluous name, Evdokia was not remarkable in any way. Her sole distinguishing quality, perhaps, was that she never left the apartment. All chores outside the house, including the shopping, rested with her husband, Silvestr. No one had ever seen Evdokia in street clothes; she was always wearing a floral flannel robe and fur slippers. She walked quietly and spoke quietly – and mostly not at all. She and Silvestr barely talked either. They communicated in gestures and looks but didn't waste words. Most likely they had no children because how can you conceive them in a silence like that? Silvestr's silence was so profound that his voice seemed to have disappeared. Ultimately, Silvestr himself disappeared. Evdokia provided no explanations for what had happened. Maybe she didn't have any. To questions of Silvestr's whereabouts she would answer briefly: d'speared. After this event, her life didn't change in any way. Amazingly, she never did start going outside – at least, so it seemed to Gleb. In his imagination she was one of those people definitively tied to a specific place. Evdokia's

place was by the kitchen table. She spent more time there than in her own room; washing something, cleaning something, moving things from place to place—from the left side of the table to the right and back again. She would do this in an odd way, picking up one foot off the floor and balancing on the other. Evdokia herself would sway as she did this, reminding him of a roly-poly toy, or a ballet dancer. A dancer, more likely. Observing Evdokia once from under his own table, unseen by her, Gleb noticed that her standing leg bent beautifully, balletically even. A sad and beautiful melody would pour barely audibly from her lips. He had no more doubts: Evdokia was dancing. Gleb badly wanted to ask what exactly Evdokia was singing, but even as a child he understood that if a lady of pension age is dancing and singing, it's better to pretend you haven't noticed anything, and under no circumstances ask questions. The boy recognized this melody on the day of Evdokia's funeral, when a brass band played it. The music breathed, each breath accompanied by a stroke of the cymbals and drum, making it heartrending, tragic; it had lost that shining sadness he'd heard in her quiet singing. Gleb asked his father, who had come to accompany Evdokia on her final journey, what the melody was. "*That's Chopin's Piano Sonata no. 2,*" his father replied, "*part three, the Funeral March.*" "Evdokia used to sing it when she was alive," Gleb said, astonished. "*That's evidence she dreamed of dying,*" Fyodor said. "Does that really happen?" the boy asked. Fyodor looked at his son closely: "*People usually sing about what they dream of.*"

#### **AUGUST 28–31, 2012, PETERSBURG**

On tour in Petersburg. En route from the airport, I stop the car at a bookstore and send the driver in to buy all the books they have by Nestor. He comes back with two. There had been five others, but they were sold out. I think two will suffice.

In the hotel I take a shower and unpack. Knocking timidly, the maid wheels in a cart with Veuve Clicquot and fruit, a gift from the establishment. The young woman blushes and asks for an autograph. As I get out a tip, I come across Nestor's card. I put it by the phone. I dial the first digits and hold down the hook.

I get out the package of books purchased and quickly look them over. *Aeronaut*, as the title says, is about the history of aeronautics in Russia. Flawed flying machines and selfless aviators. Fur jackets, leather helmets, safety goggles. A full catalog, it seems, of mono-planes and biplanes. "The list of ships I . . ." For the enthusiast.

*Some things are more important than a shot.* In the crude language of summary, the reader is informed that this is the story of a nurse who became a chief physician. Her rises and falls. Relations between patients and staff at a medical institution, difficult hospital days, where love and death live side by side. I open the book at random – short, choppy sentences, precise descriptions. I like the rhythm, but most of all, the gaze. Her rises and falls. . . . Judging from the theme, the first book is about falls too. This reminds me of something. There are things more important than music. . . .

The card is by the phone. Why should I call? I ask myself. I have three concerts in Petersburg, three evenings in a row. Nestor is certain to show up at one of them.

He doesn't. The last evening, after the concert, I call Nestor after all. To the long beeps in the receiver I doodle squares on his business card. Just as I'm about to hang up, he picks up at the other end. Nestor is very happy I called; he knew nothing about my tour. I draw a fat exclamation point on the card.

Nestor suggests we meet the next day, but my plane is in the morning. Right now then. Nestor thinks we need to meet right now. He and his wife Nika invite me over. I'm still acting undecided, but

inwardly, I may well be ready. The thought of entering someone's nighttime coziness fills me with joy.

Nestor dictates the address. He plans to pop out for vodka too. And also, Nika asks the guest to grab his guitar. I report that this will be done and put a second exclamation point on the card. I call a car and grab my guitar. Approaching the door, I notice the cart the maid brought – they refresh it every day. The Veuve Clicquot and fruit go straight into the bag of books.

Nestor lives on Bolshoi Prospect on the Petrograd side. It takes exactly ten minutes to drive there from the hotel. As I'm getting out of the car, Nestor is just returning from the store. We go up to the apartment together, where we are met by Nika, a lady with a low, husky voice. Nestor, Nika, and I, by all accounts, were born the same year or very nearly so. You usually feel at ease with people like that.

The table is set in the kitchen. Cheese, sausage, sardines, vodka. Before sitting down, Nika shows me the writer's quarters. All as it should be: bookshelves packed to the limit (her husband is given many books, we haven't bought them in a long time), vertical and horizontal placement side by side. In addition to the books, room has in some inexplicable way been found for many knick-knacks. Books on tables, on beds, on the floor, on the microwave and washing machine (the writer likes reading in the bathroom). Nika refers to Nestor as a writer and is very proud of him.

The Veuve Clicquot goes into the freezer, but no one here seems to have any particular interest in it. Nestor pours vodka for everyone, including his wife, arousing no protest in Nika. We drink to our meeting. Nestor recounts to Nika in detail how it began. He acts out our airplane conversation. He shows her how arrogantly I answered him and put his card away without a glance. I applaud Nestor.

“Is that really me?”

Narrowing his eyes, Nestor shakes his head.

“That’s the view from the outside,” Nika reassures me. “I wouldn’t trust it.”

“And I don’t.” I drain the shot I’ve been poured. “But I do want to say that your writer is pretty darn good. A decent writer.”

Nika’s phone rings. Covering the mouthpiece with her palm, she says it’s their son. She lights a cigarette and goes out into the hall to talk.

“Your son doesn’t live with you?” I ask.

“He lives nearby.” Nestor also lights up. “And I’ve already started writing, you see. . . . Are you truly agreeing to the book? That’s an outside view too.”

Three decisive noes come from the hall.

“I’ve looked at myself so long from the inside.”

With the fourth no, Nika appears.

“Get lost,” she whispers and hangs up. She sits down at the table. “I’m sorry, an educational moment.” To me: “Do you have children?”  
“No.”

A phone rings – Nestor’s this time. After a brief, dry greeting there is yet another no. They have a taste for that word here. Nestor leaves the call unexplained. The topic of children is not revived because Nika makes a toast:

“To collaboration!”

Everyone drinks.

“We have just clarified . . .” Nestor sounds depressed, like someone who hasn’t joined in yet. “We’ve clarified just how seriously Gleb regards this undertaking.”

“How seriously is that?” Nika asks. “You know, even I’m amazed. You always speak so well about life through your music, why do you need his words?” She nods to her husband.

I take a cigarette out of Nestor's pack. Nestor offers me a light.  
"It's hard to explain. I think music . . . and painting, too,  
probably . . . Ultimately they exist only because the word exists."

Nika nods at the guitar lying in its case.

"Will you play?"

I suggest we all switch to informal address, the familiar "you." I  
get out the guitar and tune it for a few minutes. Nika points out the  
empty glasses to her husband.

"Whereas at the edge of the word I experience fear." Nestor is  
about to pick up the bottle but puts it back down. "You know, where  
the word ends, that's where the music begins. Or, well, yes, painting.  
Or silence in general."

I start playing a Ukrainian song, "The Sun Is Setting" – first the  
theme, then variations. I hum along quietly. The words aren't entirely  
clear to my audience, but it's obviously a sad song. It's night. A young  
girl's beloved comes to her. As she let him in, she *squeezed his hand*.  
And as she let him go, *she asked him the truth*. Voice and strings reso-  
nate. "*Do you love me?*" she asks. "Might you be seeing another," she  
asks, "and won't admit it?" "No," he answers, "I love you, *only you, but*  
*I'll not marry you.*" Guitar solo. Pizzicato on the high notes – all the  
way up the neck. "*Oh, my God, my God . . .*" Clearly he's telling her  
everything. The height of sound shifts to the height of suffering and  
dwindles until it is completely inaudible because grief has no expres-  
sion. His fingers are now still, but the music keeps pouring out.

I leave at dawn. At the open door, Nestor embraces me firmly and  
Nika's arms rest on top. The three of us stand there like that at the  
open door, the night's lingering chill on our backs. His eyes dropped  
delicately, a neighbor walks by with a fishing rod. There's a car  
waiting for me by the front entrance.

**1972**

Soon after Evdokia's funeral, Gleb heard the cymbals and drum once again. This was at the opera theater, where his grandmother took him to hear *Eugeny Onegin*. What struck him first was the way the orchestra started up. The enormous hall filled with melody fragments. A grandiose torrent of sounds freed from the music forever, it seemed, creating a new fellowship. That was only how it seemed, though. In the darkened and stilled hall the fragments were gathered up by the very first sweep of the conductor's baton. And Gleb burst into tears – at this harmony, at this fullness and power of sound such as he'd never heard before, because, plunged into darkness, the hall slowly soared, and he was part of that flight. An incredible journey began for the select – those who had had the courage to sit in the dark hall. The boy sobbed, covering his mouth with his hand, although no one could hear him over the loud music, and in the darkness no one saw his shoulders shaking. Gleb and his grandmother were sitting in a first-tier box, while two tiers above Sergei Petrovich Brovarnik, who taught compulsory piano at Gleb's music school, lay on the floor. Sergei Petrovich believed that music should be listened to by tuning out not only the surrounding world but even one's own body. He would bring a sheet to the theater and spread it on the floor, where the rows ended, lie down on the sheet, and close his eyes. He didn't miss a single opera performance. Keen on opera, Gleb very often saw Sergei Petrovich in the theater. Once, when Antonina Pavlovna and her grandson were sitting in the third tier (they were performing *Ivan Susanin*), Sergei Petrovich was lying directly behind them. From time to time muffled sighs could be heard from where he lay, and the audience, alarmed, not versed in the various ways of perceiving music, would look around into the darkness behind the seats. In Gleb's memory, Sergei Petrovich was an example of true devotion to music.

As for *Ivan Susanin*, the boy liked the opera, but it wasn't a patch on *Evgeny Onegin*. Singing over the cacophony, Lensky with maximum precision: "I have simply asked Mr. Onegin to explain his actions. He does not wish to do so, so I ask him to accept my challenge!" Oh, how harsh this was; *Ivan Susanin*, for all its tragedy, had nothing like it. Especially that "simply." And the cry of the mistress of the house, "Oh, my God!" musically repeating the exclamation "my challenge!" Plus, of course, the word "Mr.," which Gleb liked tremendously – so elegant compared to unkempt, unwashed "comrades." An extraordinary item was the top hat, filled with aristocratism, instead of the worn, here-we-go-again cap. Nonetheless, in Gleb's eyes, what hit hardest was the duel scene. He acted out this scene endlessly with Kleshchuk, whose parents, it turned out, had also taken him to *Evgeny Onegin*. Kleshchuk-Lensky would sink slowly to the floor after Gleb-Onegin's shot. Tubby Kleshchuk sank awkwardly and unnaturally, and each time Gleb had to show him how people usually fall after being shot. Gleb took some satisfaction in this – as an artist and a teacher. Despite all his efforts, progress was imperceptible. Kleshchuk, overcautious, would manage to look at his feet a few times, although what did he actually expect to see on the highly polished parquet? While instructing Kleshchuk, though, Gleb tried not to go overboard. He knew what comes from excessive pressure on people, and he didn't want to spoil his impression of *Evgeny Onegin*, which became the chief delight of his first academic year. The fullness of this delight was reached when, as of that winter, the boy was able to listen to the opera on record. For New Year's, his mama and grandmother, after long consultations in the evenings, gave Gleb a record player. Even Fyodor was drawn into this expensive purchase, and, impoverished though he was, he came up with the last twenty rubles. Along with the record player there was a cardboard box in which lay three records: *Evgeny Onegin*. And although subsequently other records

were bought as well, Gleb listened to *Onegin* almost exclusively. In a couple of months he knew all the arias by heart. At family parties, the boy, at the guests' request, would sing them all in order or at random – with feeling, although, according to his father, who was once invited, not entirely in tune. His mother, indignant, objected that *how* the child sang the arias wasn't the point, the point was that he was *singing* them, and that instead of supporting him, his father was spouting all kinds of nonsense. Being out of tune isn't *nonsense*, Fyodor muttered, but he didn't get into an argument. Gleb pretended not to eavesdrop, but deep down he was hurt. He very much wanted to impress his father. And didn't. On the other hand, he did impress the others – his classmates, for example. Although not all. His aria performances did not impress Bdzhilka, who had known the magical word *ochyeryet*. He asked Gleb to sing folk songs and even sang one himself – “Oh, in the grove by the Danube” – one especially beloved in his village. The song was beautiful (Ukrainian songs are fabulously beautiful), but this did not induce Gleb to change his repertoire. He continued to sing his arias under Bdzhilka's mocking gaze. Meanwhile, Bdzhilka would ask questions to which Gleb could not always find an answer. Listening to Gleb's performance of Lensky's aria, Bdzhilka asked what an “aurora” was (“aurora's ray will shine come morning”), why the “biss” was slow (“the young poet's memory swallowed by the slow Abyss”) and the urn early (“shed a tear over the early urn”). Outside, sometimes, he would stop over an urn and start collecting imaginary tears in his hand. Actually, when it came to laughter, Bdzhilka couldn't come close to Gleb – Gleb and another classmate, Vitya Kislitsyn. Gleb and Kislitsyn were called the laughers because they were constantly guffawing. If they looked at the passing bursar (squint-eyed, fat-lipped), they'd laugh. If they looked at a dog (one ear up, the other drooping), they'd laugh too. Whoever they looked at, they'd laugh, because there's something funny about everyone, it just

takes an eye. An eye and company, since you're not going to laugh alone. The English teacher, as long as a stork, arms and legs like the blades of a pen-knife, was walking down the hall. Walking stiffly: in lockstep, her head thrown back. Irina Grigorievna. Gleb and Kislitsyn started laughing. Irina Grigorievna complained to Lesya Kirillovna. At her very next lesson, Lesya Kirillovna, an unsmiling person, called Kislitsyn to the board. Without warning, she picked up the pupil by the nape (his legs quietly swinging) and prompted him: "*Laugh!*" Kislitsyn didn't laugh – evidently that's hard to do dangling. It had the exact opposite effect: tears started rolling down his cheeks. Gleb realized that he was probably next, which was scary. Scary and funny, as can happen. He looked at his dangling comrade but got no look back. Kislitsyn had no thought of exchanging looks, he was looking at the ceiling. Gleb was the first to notice that Kislitsyn had an incredibly big head over his small swinging body. His friend looked like an eighth note on the top line of the staff – the one with stem and tail pointed down. D, apparently. Or F. Gleb smiled at this thought, and now it was hard to imagine what punishment awaited him. But once she'd set Kislitsyn down, Lesya Kirillovna unexpectedly smiled too – for the first time in a year, maybe. Something had touched her, either Kislitsyn's tears or Gleb's smile. Lesya Kirillovna turned out to have quite a few gold teeth in her mouth. Gleb thought her smile was blinding and was amazed that the possessor of such wealth had never smiled before. Actually, she didn't smile much afterward either, except for one strange instance Gleb was told about by Plachinda, who continued observing Lesya Kirillovna. This time, sitting at Kislitsyn's desk, the teacher smiled shyly, evidently depicting the pupil's smile. Then, after she was back at her desk, she burst into laughter with a brutality compared to which all her former swearing dimmed. Lesya Kirillovna pulled an imagined Kislitsyn off the floor and demanded, "*Laugh!*" But the real Kislitsyn wasn't laughing anymore. He never

did recover from that dangling at the board, you might say. From time to time he would still smile, but his smile would sometimes turn to tears. Maybe this was why Plachinda told Gleb, not him, what she'd seen. As for Gleb, he also got what was coming to him, only in a slightly different way. Seeing Gleb laughing, Lesya Kirillovna once advised him to hide his *buck teeth*. From the standpoint of pedagogy, this advice might raise questions, but the comparison certainly did hit its mark. By the middle of second grade, Gleb's upper teeth had shifted noticeably forward and become exactly what the teacher described. The sole advantage of teeth growing in wrong was their acoustic properties. By clicking his thumbnails on his teeth, Gleb learned to do a virtuoso rendition of Gershon Kingsley's "Popcorn." He could play other things, too, but nothing could compare to that staccato, xylophonic melody. After what the teacher said, Gleb's amazing gift was forgotten overnight. Everyone in class repeated what Lesya Kirillovna had said. Kislitsyn, who didn't want to be known as the only one to dangle, had an especially good time with it. Listening to the new teasing repeated in different ways, Gleb wondered at what cruel creatures children were after all. Why, Gleb thought, were they (we) considered angelic? The only person who expressed sympathy for Gleb was Bdzhilka. Sensibly, he didn't comment on Lesya Kirillovna's statement, but he did give practical advice. "*If you lick your teeth, they'll straighten out,*" he told Gleb, and he even showed him how it was done. Bdzhilka's tongue—surprisingly long and agile—moved freely across his teeth. At one point his tongue even seemed to latch on tight to his front teeth and drag them back by force. And although upon closer examination it was discovered that Bdzhilka's teeth remained in their former position, his power of persuasion was so great that for several days Gleb did in fact lick his teeth. Without results. No, that's not entirely true. The result was his grandmother became aware of the problem. She took Gleb to the

dentist. Before she could put the boy in the chair, the dentist said he needed a retainer. Gleb had the discouraging thought that his bad bite could be seen from the threshold. So as not to lose time, they decided to take measurements for the retainer right away. The nurse took a metal form and filled it with wet plaster. The doctor shoved it deep into Gleb's mouth, telling him to bite down as hard as possible. With his lower teeth the boy felt the metal, but his upper ones sank into the mildly malodorous mass. It felt as if this mass was growing, that soon it would block his throat and he might suffocate. He started to feel sick. He tried to hold on, told himself it would all be over in a moment, but nothing was over. The fear that if he started to vomit the vomit would have nowhere to go rolled over him in uneasy waves. He threw up a second after they removed the form with the set plaster from his mouth. A couple of weeks later, when the retainer was ready and Gleb put it on for the first time, he threw up again. The plastic palate looked disgusting, touched his real palate disgustingly, and unstuck with a disgusting sound. The one more or less acceptable part of the gear was the double wire that grasped the teeth that deviated from the right position. When touched with a finger, the wire made a quiet but melodious sound. That alone reconciled the boy to the teeth-straightening process. An outside observer saw only the wire, not suspecting the construction, physiologically repulsive, that held this fragile detail. Sometimes Gleb's patience ran out. He would look around, take the retainer out of his mouth, and put it in his desk. And honestly (though perhaps not very) would forget it there. Be that as it may, the next morning he would invariably receive the retainer from Lesya Kirillovna and put it in his mouth under her stern gaze. Gleb wore the retainer for nearly a year and – who would have thought! – his teeth were fixed. Now they were big and even, qualities that undoubtedly constitute beauty for men's teeth. This did not happen without loss, though. Now that his teeth were even, for some reason they lost

their musical properties. They no longer played “Popcorn.” On the other hand, how his domra played! Little by little it was becoming clear to everyone that the boy possessed great talent because he alone was capable of playing with such impressive nuance. At times his technique betrayed him – he didn’t always keep to the tempo – but when it came to nuance, he had no equals. This was what made Gleb the pride of the music school. Yes, his ear was still far from perfect, but he wasn’t playing the violin, after all! Strictly speaking, Gleb’s current domra was nearly a violin by now. Seeing her pupil’s success, Vera Mikhailovna presented him with his own instrument for his studies, a custom domra made from Caucasian fir. To carry it, Gleb was given the brown case originally ordered with the domra. The boy was enchanted by its velvety sound, and he admired the amber relief of the old wood. Everything pleased him – except for the case, because the case reminded him of a coffin. Each time Gleb opened it, the domra looked like a broad-hipped beauty brought not from music school but from the Berkovtzi cemetery – then still deserted but already enormous. Putting the domra back in its case, he pictured it as his lost beloved taken away to the cemetery forever. The case poisoned his life.

#### **SEPTEMBER 15, 2012, MUNICH**

Our building on Am Blütenring. Katarina and I are reflected in the evening window. Katya. I’m sitting at my desk while Katya stands behind me, her hand on my shoulder. My desk lamp is turned on, and in its yellow light the reflection in the window is fabulously beautiful. Painted by the lamp, we remind ourselves of an old photograph and look to ourselves vaguely posthumous. Actually, there’s a painting hanging in a hotel with the same composition (including the reflection), but we prefer resurrecting it every evening. We

appreciate the details – the turn of the head, the bend in the arm, the placement of the fingers on the shoulder.

“It’s long since time for you to have your hand checked out,”

Katya says.

“It is.”

I find a lighter in the malachite desk set and flick it. One more point of light appears in the window.

“Barbara will help. She’ll set it up at her clinic.”

“Let’s try to get along without Barbara.”

Katya’s lips graze the top of my head and she sighs mournfully. I feel the warmth run through my hair. I’m irritated that her sister Barbara comes up no matter the subject. A tall, red-haired German with a loud voice. Everything about her is excessive: her voice, her laugh, her movements. She also likes to drink.

An hour later, as if on cue, Barbara arrives, already a few sheets to the wind. I need to answer several letters urgently, so I go into the other room. When I return, I see Katya and Barbara over a bottle of vodka. I call their interest in alcohol unhealthy. Katya, vindicating herself, starts talking about some reason they needed a drink today, but Barbara interrupts her.

“There is only one reason, my friend: no children. And all we have left is to show an interest in alcohol. And cry.” She wipes her eyes with a hankie. “Wet tears.”

Katya and I speak Russian. This doesn’t work with Barbara. Switching to German, I summon resolve. I pour the vodka into the sink, pick drunk Barbara up off the floor and, despite her size, carry her to the sofa. She calls me a Russian brute, but she’s fine with this brutishness, basically. On the sofa, Barbara offers some resistance. Subduing the woman, I sit on top of her and inform her that she’s a lush. They’re both lushes.

“Possibly,” Barbara replies. “But on the other hand, take a look at *what* we drink: a purely Russian beverage. Because even while displaying unhealthy interests, we want to make a good impression on you.”

“Without much success, though.”

Barbara to her sister:

“Looks like we’re not winning him over this way. Too bad.”

Katya sighs.

“Alas. But maybe” – she points up – “maybe we’ll win over the Russian writer coming to see us.”

Barbara’s look is full of surprise.

“A Russian writer?”

“His name is Nestor.” Katya smooths her imaginary beard. “He’s going to write a book about Gleb.”

“He’s already writing it,” I say angrily.

“Already writing it!” Barbara throws up her hands. “How timely!”

“We agreed that every few months Gleb would send him tickets and Nestor would come see us. They’ll be working on the book.”

Katya draws a book in the air with her index fingers.

“A Russian writer might come see us!” Barbara slides to the floor and leans back against the sofa. She flaps like a crane a few times.

“That’s marvelous! That’s simply wonderful, that a Russian writer can come visit!”

## 1973

That summer, Gleb and Antonina Pavlovna went to Kerch and stayed with his grandmother’s friends on Cooperative Lane. Gleb’s eye linked the two cooperative *o*’s with the *oo*m of the front entrance. And the *cool* when you came in from the scorching street. To his ear, those two *o*’s cascaded deliciously from the long to the short *o* – in everyone but

