

Franz Rosenzweig; and the philosophy of Martin Buber, Jacques Derrida, and Emmanuel Levinas, is a brilliant piece of writing and she is an avid novel reader—but she has plenty of other things to do and no insights as a fiction writer. She can't be my partner and my editor. I need more context, more feedback, more humility.

I join a multidisciplinary group of artists, soon to be named the Guttery, which will still be in my life when these pages are written. After trying a few overpopulated poetry groups, I start one of my own. The genre is so subjective I find only so much value in discussing it with poets whose aesthetics are entirely different.

Critique groups are a meaningful sacrifice. While one or two of my nights each week are dedicated to reading the work of others, I benefit immensely not only from their wisdom about my texts but also from the exposure to the tools and tricks they use, to their process as writers. It's a slowing down and refocusing that helps me hone my skills.

My poems improve and, along with a few stories, are sometimes accepted by magazines. *The New Yorker* and other top-notch journals occasionally send me personal, encouraging rejections.

In my forties, it becomes clear that I can't succeed in music and literature and visual art and film all at the same time. Literature must become my first priority. It's a necessary sacrifice. In terms of taste, something softens in me. I realize I don't *always* have to do things differently. I don't have to wear rainbow colors head to toe, including my nails. I'm not as drawn to the experimental anymore, at least in film and literature, the narrative forms. It's the human stories that matter most, the core affinity that first drew me to being a writer.

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Krzysztof Kieślowski's melancholy oeuvre is the best cinema since Tarkovsky; it deals with people's stories—there are no fancy tropes. So do Egoyan's films, which lovingly dissect grief and obsession, immigrant fears and history's ironies.

I look into work by minority authors, fall in love with Toni Morrison, James Baldwin, and Zora Neale Hurston. The more I engage with the varied stories of real or *really rendered* people, the less necessary it seems to come up with formal maneuvers to enliven the plot.

I question why so many among the admired cultural figures are male. Most books recommended to me in my life have been written by men. I seek out women's writing: Elena Ferrante, Lidia Yuknavitch, Nicole Krauss, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Hanya Yanagihara, many more in poetry. I discover that most of my positions align with women's aesthetics and points of view.

I grow fond of nonfiction. Rebecca Solnit and Nick Flynn find immeasurable poetry in real life, often their own. I'm smitten by Svetlana Alexievich's oral histories.

In 2013, I move on to writing realist novels.

Committing to one is a responsibility. It means I'm willing to think through each of my characters' past, consider their parents, siblings, best friends, homes, schools, their opinions on current events. I have no right to turn away from imagining their present—their jobs, homes, relationships. From the universe of possibilities available in life, I must choose a particular plot path with its myriad of details to research and shape, hoping to infuse them with meaning and emotion. I must emerge with believable characters, genuine interactions.

I find myself at the conclusion of a quarter-century cycle of experimentation. It no longer seems possible to be original by intention alone. Instead, I must write, and live, with integrity and discipline, hoping that the story carries enough emotion, enough tension, enough action and world-building to welcome readers in, to let them roam, happy and unimpeded.

Born in Russia, **A. Molotkov** moved to the U.S. in 1990 and switched to writing in English in 1993. His poetry collections are *The Catalog of Broken Things* (Airlie Press, 2016), *Application of Shadows* (Main Street Rag, 2018), and *Synonyms for Silence* (Acre Books, 2019). He has been published by *Kenyon Review*, the *Iowa Review*, the *Antioch Review*, the *Massachusetts Review*, *Atlanta Review*, *Bennington Review*, *Tampa Review*, *Pif*, *Volt*, *2River View*, and many more. Molotkov has received various fiction and poetry contests and an Oregon Literary Fellowship. His translation of a Chekhov story was published by Everyman's Library. His prose is represented by Laura Strachan at the Strachan Literary Agency. He coedits the *Inflectionist Review*.

GILLIAN PEDERSON-KRAG

Still Life with Little Equestrian Hero, 2017

Oil on canvas, 16 x 16 in



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