GILLIAN PEDERSON-KRAG

Still Life with World, 2016
Oil on canvas, 12 x 12 in

COURTESY WINFIELD GALLERY

A. MOLOTKOV

The Imagined Path

My journey to discovering myself as a writer and artist

How do we decide who we are?

It's 1984. I'm sixteen. I live in Leningrad, USSR. My mother takes me to see *Solaris*, a film by Andrei Tarkovsky based on the novel by Stanisław Lem. Popular in Soviet Russia, the book is based on a striking concept: the planet Solaris is occupied by a single living being, an ocean that covers most of the planet's surface. The thinking ocean penetrates the minds of human visitors and constructs replicas of people from their past. The protagonist's replica is a woman who killed herself ten years earlier as a result of their breakup. We are not informed of the personal relationships that shaped two other characters' guests, but we are led to believe that they have to do with conscience.

The novel suffers from pages and pages of excessive world-building—still, the best parts are so compelling I've already read it two or three times. Today I anticipate a treat: a cinematic retelling of this fascinating story. But what welcomes me operates by its own set of rules.

The film begins with several minutes of slow, silent shots: a stream in winter, ice. Leaves, twigs, trees. The character meanders, takes in the scenery. By the time the film is over, it has utilized the best scenes from Lem's novel and improved on their emotional tonality. It concludes with a shot much stranger and more poignant than anything the novel has to offer. The film is the novel refined, elevated.

Solaris shatters me with its palpable tragedy of this lost person whose most significant relationships are with facsimiles of those dear to him. I'm particularly struck by the open-ended scenes that invite the viewer to enter, participate, interpret. Odd images, thoughtful dialogues, tenderly rendered vulnerabilities—the film is unforgettable, even if there is much I don't understand after my first viewing.

The aura of compassion, fragility, the notion of mutual responsibility stay with me for days. I discuss it with everyone I know, going over the details with those who appreciate the film. A divide exists among the intelligentsia in relation to Tarkovsky. Some find themselves on his vibe, others, alienated by his slow shots and enigmatic plot moves. It's not a matter of intelligence, but of emotional sensibility.

I've experienced this powerful impact with some of my favorite books. Novellas by Ivan Turgenev full of unfulfilled expectations and damaged lives, seasoned with masterfully

rendered yearning. Anton Chekhov's stories, emotionally contemporary, applicable to any reader's personal history. Ernest Hemingway's tense prose, where everything happens under the surface and happiness is always just a step and a half away. Mikhail Lermontov's *A Hero of Our Time*, with its fatalist character struggling to feel *something*, anything, just like in our time. Ivan Bunin's late short prose, his sad exiles damaged by the Bolshevik coup.

I realize that for me, nothing is more significant than art. Human stories, presented lovingly and artistically, are the most compelling thing I know. Especially literature and film, the two art forms operating on a chronological scale and imbued with changing, accruing emotional states.

Although I'm on the path to becoming a mathematician or a physicist, a different conclusion seems evident. I need to dedicate my life to art. After all, why would I spend my years doing something less engaging?

The question of skill doesn't deter me. No one has any when they start out. I might not be in the position to pull it off as a filmmaker in the heavily ideological USSR, especially as a teenager—but I can certainly try writing.

I must sacrifice what I'm already good at—math and physics—for something that will take me decades, if not a lifetime, to get good at—literature.

My friends and I have been toying with the written word in the form of humorous pieces distributed at school. Influenced by Daniil Kharms, one of the Russian founders of the literature of the absurd, our irreverent creations are well received by fellow students and occasionally get us in trouble with the teachers.

To write a funny story, one merely needs a sense of humor and a grasp on their language of choice. Although sadly lacking in some, both are common commodities. To write a moving story or poem, one must enter different registers. I'm not sure yet what these registers are, but they must have to do with emotion more than intellect. I assume they are accessible to me because art, and language, affect me so extremely. A single sentence constructed *just so* can bring me to tears. An overheard conversation can change my day. I walk around with phantom dialogues running in my head, some involving me and those close to me, others belonging to fictional characters.

Does *Solaris* turn me into an aspiring artist or simply activate the built-in artist in me?

Poems are easy. Because the genre is so popular in the Soviet Union, most people I know readily rattle off rhymed verses and don't mind sharing their opinions. A broad range of poetic samples and approaches is already embedded in my brain. I'm disappointed by poetry that's too light—beautifully packaged emptiness, such as most verse by Alexander Pushkin, Russia's preeminent classic. I love Sergei Esenin's poems, the simple and elegant emotions he shares. I'm driven toward the literature of angst and discontent, the work that attempts inobtrusive metaphysical scrutiny.

Prose is much harder. If I'm going to write a short story, I need a story to tell.

I imagine myself in other people's shoes. Stories begin to arrive. One of the first is about an elderly drunk humiliated by schoolchildren who bombard him with snowballs and laugh when he collapses into the snow. Their brutal treatment of this harmless individual continues at some length.

"Why are you so sad?" my mother drops on me after reading the story, a deep concern on her face. "Your life seems to be okay. Everyone treats you well."

I'm shocked she puts the question this way.

"I'm not sad. My character is sad, even desperate, because of his son's death. That's where the story is. I was interested in that type of person. I saw something similar a while back, just outside. It wasn't as bad as I made it." I'm a little lost explaining this. "The story might *make* someone sad, but it doesn't mean the author is sad."

"No, I guess not." She looks relieved.

Through these early attempts at reading and writing fiction, I confirm: what interests me are existentially charged narratives, stories of people in search of one another, in search of meaning. Although humor is always a good thing, overt comedy and light drama are not my passion. The stories I want to read and write will deal with troubles and soul-searching, voids of empathy, failures of trust.

In terms of approach, life in the USSR pushes me in a particular aesthetic direction. For several years now, I have been aware of the dark realities hiding behind the Soviet Union's fake slogans. I live in a state where people are told what to think, warned what *not* to say. Consequently, I have developed an extreme allergy to obeying instructions and following conventions. My mother's character has contributed. The queen of overmanaging, she often tries to pressure me into choices I don't want to make. I resent that.

Anywhere I look, being different from others seems more honest and interesting than trying to assimilate. No wonder I'm eager to abandon familiar tropes in literature. I develop a fascination with the avant-garde and seek out stranger works: Franz Kafka's novels and aphorisms, Jorge Luis Borges's stories, films by Luis Buñuel, Bertrand Blier, Michelangelo Antonioni, and Peter Greenaway. When I see paintings by Salvador Dalí and René Magritte at a traveling exhibit from a private Swiss collection, my induction into modern sensibilities is complete.

I make up fanciful plots with metaphysical elements. Some of my stories are quasi sci-fi without much of the *sci*, others, impressionist meditations. A character dissolves in the bathwater, leaving her partner wrecked by guilt. Two love rivals are engaged in an imagined duel of will and thought, unable to tell reality from dreams and, ultimately, themself from the other. I'm preoccupied with guilt and responsibility, hope and loss, identity and its errors.

Something is off with most of this work, even if I like certain parts more than they deserve. It takes me two years to produce a piece that feels like a strong short story.

The narrator invites a friend to imagine himself as the Formula One driver on TV. When the driver dies in next day's race, the protagonist learns that the friend, too, has perished in a car crash. There is no doubt in the narrator's mind that he caused the friend's death. The story is wound up so it could be read at face value (the speaker mysteriously causes the friend's accident) or metaphorically (the accident is unrelated, employed by the narrator as a model for his guilt toward the late friend). The narrator may be merely deluded about his responsibility.

Unreliable narrators can be quite delightful. I'm only too happy to experiment with points of view and formal twists to facilitate this breadth of play.

I read Julio Cortázar, excited to find that the kind of plot building I've found intuitive has a precedent. We all swim in the same ocean of words. Cortázar's stories are full of intersections between the real and the metaphysical, one world and another—they bristle with detail and move with carefully handled emotion. Ray Bradbury achieves a similar effect in a different tone, small-town America versus Buenos Aires.

My stories are and will remain much less interesting than my theories behind them. There are no guarantees; there won't be any for years, if ever. Most importantly, at eighteen, I don't have the nuanced emotional experience required to create compelling narratives. I have to keep doing this to get better. I have to keep living my life.

To make matters worse, going to college for art and literature has a different connotation in the USSR than in the free world. Liberal arts are deeply tainted by ideology. It's hard to imagine learning anything valuable from these courses rooted in socialist realism.

As to learning by reading, the best contemporary Russian authors are unpublished, literary translations from other languages occasional. Even the rare books that have been translated are impossible to find outside the black market, although I manage to bring a few of them back from Chita, a city in Siberia where I serve in the Soviet military between 1986 and '88.

Occasionally, rare books are sold in exchange for paper recycling, a very peculiar Soviet tradition. Because most items offered in stores come without packaging, recycling adds up slowly. Some people subscribe to extra newspapers to turn them in for books.

My luckiest access to books is through Uncle Yura, one of my parents' dearest friends, who has been building a library for years. Uncle Yura is the kindest person I know; his thick glasses enlarge his eyes, always friendly, intently inquiring into the well-being of others. I'm not sure how he's amassed twenty bookcases in a country where good books are not available in stores. He lends his treasures generously to friends. He is also known for his beautiful singing voice and his mastery of the seven-string guitar.

Even so, Russia feels like a suffocating place to be an artist—increasingly so. The Soviet Union is disintegrating; I have no optimism about whatever kind of disaster the country is about to become.

My life doesn't belong to me—it belongs to the work I must do. I need to ensure a future where I can execute my responsibility to be a writer while making a living.

* * *

In 1990, emigration breaks my life—I break it to rebuild it. It's a sacrifice I must make.

In the United States, I'm scared of the unknown but

excited about all the books I have access to—and the books I'll write. More than anything, I'm delighted to be among non-Soviet people.

An erudite video store clerk in Albany, New York, helps me connect the films I already know to other brilliant work. I finally get my eyes on *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Philip Kaufman's effervescent film, sold out when friends and I attended the Moscow Film Festival in 1989. This emotionally nuanced story affects me because of the harsh choices the characters face. I'm especially moved by the flashback ending, rivaled only by Atom Egoyan's conclusion of *Exotica*. This deconstruction of time, how marvelous and full of opportunities. New to me, the discovery of the decade! Breaks in narrative chronology break me into pieces, make me rethink my work. Time is a gift, an enemy, a friend. A gap in time is a collision of emotional tectonic plates.

I read Milan Kundera's novel, where the flashback ending originates, and fall in love with his work: the carefully constructed predicaments, the clever and moving ways in which the meta layer helps the main narrative instead of fighting it.

In 1993, I buy my first computer, a tool I've dreamed of since reading somewhere that Gabriel García Márquez used one. For the first time, I've been able to afford a purchase exceeding $1,000. It's an X386 with 2 MB of RAM. I love the luxury of being able to save a draft, edit it, print it, save it again. It's a new relationship with text. I abandon the Russian typewriter I brought with me. Carbon paper slides into the past, its shining black surface fading from disuse.

I'm twenty-five. It's time to write a novel. My understanding of fiction is enmeshed with the notion that innovation must be achieved through strangeness. Compelling nonlinear elements must be used as bricks for complex novels. Authors like Alain Robbe-Grillet with his logical loops and Paul Auster with his imaginative premises seem to support this direction.

For a couple of years, I've been writing in Russian and translating into English. This is time-consuming. It becomes clear that sticking with Russian is absurd. I live in an English-speaking country—what good will it do to be bound by the language of the dying Soviet empire? I've already given it up by moving away. My future as a Russian writer ends here, even if I may have accumulated excellent skills.

It's an odd sacrifice: giving up my native language so I can remain a writer. I struggle for synonyms, a thesaurus on my desk. I pore over each sentence until its words merge into a single undecipherable unit and I can no longer tell if the grammar is right, if the word order is functional.

I've studied English since the age of seven at a pace of about thirty lessons per year. A private tutor, the elderly Maria Phillipovna, arrived on most Mondays to give lessons to me and my dad. As a teenager, I tried to learn the language by reading in English. By the time I moved to the States, I had a good understanding of grammar but a somewhat limited vocabulary. F. Scott Fitzgerald's *Tender Is the Night* exceeded it. Since then, I've spent much of my time speaking, reading, and watching films in English.

This is not as sad as it seems: eventually I will conclude that English is a far superior language. It has three times as many words and an abundance of tools for controlling the sentence: its sound, its length, its voice. Often, it brings more beauty to the same statement.

My work at a local deli provides plenty of practice. I speak English so much more than Russian that most of my dreams are in English. When I write, the sentences arrive in this language, unless a specific nuance I'm trying to convey sends me searching for a Russian expression I must then translate.

Because in Russian the word order is typically flexible while in English the *subject-verb-object* prescription dominates, I have to grant my subject a higher priority. It's an intriguing process of thinking and writing and rethinking. I'm delighted when patterns available in both languages match. The apple doesn't fall far from the tree in either language. Many words derived from Latin sound similar. *No one is home* and *Nikovo net doma* end with a noun that has morphed into an adverbial role. Of course, there are plenty of differences: the double negatives typical in Russian, the preponderance of prepositions in English to compensate for the lack of conjunctions.

I enjoy my bilingual opportunities to compare and contrast the conventions used in meaning making, in part due to whims of history. The same situation can be described, quite literally, with different words, different sounds, different symbols on paper. This helps me see literature as an intangible, subjective beast.

The first draft of my novel takes nine months. To ensure progress, I introduce a rule: I must write at least one single-spaced page a day.

The reality of working on an experimental novel without a plot as such is less exciting than it may sound. I can't rely on the natural flow of a long narrative. Each day, I must come up with something different. I use a shared tonality and shared characters, assuming each bit will connect and contribute to a greater whole. It takes some effort to overcome inertia and start typing, especially after a night working at a busy deli. Every now and then I find my eyes closing.

Discipline is discipline; I sit there until a sufficient bundle of words lands on that page. I make coffee if I need it. It's better if I can whip up some inspiration—the words may flow faster and then I can finally go to bed. A number of things help—a hit of the poor and stinky East Coast weed, a glass of wine, a poem I love, a film that moves me, a meaningful plot twist or conversation in my own writing that raises emotional stakes.

My novel will never be published—it doesn't deserve to be, despite the many drafts. Still, it helps my resolve and my English. Some of my issues are the same most Americans struggle with: *its* versus *it's*, *lie* versus *lay*, *you and me* versus *you and I*. Others are common to Russian-born speakers: forgetting the article, *a* or *the*, because no such thing exists in Russian. A few are personal idiosyncrasies. For years, I can't seem to remember the word *sheet*; I replace my characters' sheets with towels.

In U.S. poetry, I'm excited to see that rhyming has become *mostly* a thing of the past. The Russians still rhyme like rabbits, but Walt Whitman opened America to free verse and freer thinking a century and a half ago.

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I write another experimental novel that remains unpublished, then another, then three collaborative novels with my friend Scott. The two of us revisit my alternate passion, film. We spend hours with a video camera and, thanks to the generosity of a local TV channel in Albany, edit together a fancy (and probably too long) experimental short, *Glass Air*, based on our poetry. It's aired once or twice. After moving to San Francisco in February 1996, we follow up with five shorter shorts.

We meet fascinating musicians. Before too long, I'm involved in several CD projects—first as a group, Discord Aggregate, then on my own. I love drums of all kinds and end up with a home office packed with them. The sound of the Armenian duduk on Peter Gabriel's *Passion* enchants me immediately. I build a small duduk collection. I'm not a great player, but I can improvise.

These art forms are immensely rewarding but tremendously time-consuming. A minute of edited footage can take days of work if we get into quick cuts, especially if audio is involved. Directing a film with a crew and a budget would be different. Working with music, too, sucks vast amounts of time out of life because of the infinite options, from arrangement to volume to panning to sound effects on each track, each measure.

Our full-time jobs turn days of film and music projects into months. I remind myself to keep writing.

* * *

In the new millennium, my essential commitment has clarified. I must keep shaping my life to be the best instrument of art I can make it. I also intend to live a moral life. Everything else is secondary; most things that don't help accomplish these goals are expendable. I could be in a relationship, or I could not be—but one helps with nuance building and with secondary goals like happiness. I could have friends or live as a recluse for years, but friends expand my scope and bring the joy of interaction.

Laurie and I meet in 2007. We've been going out for a few months when she suggests that I need peers to discuss literature. She can't be my only source of opinions; it's too much effort and responsibility.

The challenge threatens my sense of balance; my feelings are hurt. I'm still working fifty to sixty hours a week in my software consulting business; there are too many bills and taxes and credit card debts to pay. I squeeze out an hour a day on literature. How can I find time to socialize with other writers?

A bit of hubris is there too. I've gotten so good at ignoring my Russian friends' habitual ridicules that I don't realize my work has plenty of blind spots. It's not nearly the best it could be.

I think about it. Laurie is right. Her dissertation, connecting the Holocaust; the works of Kafka, Paul Celan, and

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 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.

* * *

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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