



VIKTORIA PEITCHEV

EXILE IN ORBIT

PERMANENT

I did not write most of you because I did not find time. What I realized how little time there is I wanted to put down these recollections without knowing how far I could go.

I read these words you left behind... a pang of sadness and regret. You didn't get to finish telling your story. While I sit in silence, the fear of losing time to write starts to rise.

Your death has exposed the insignificance of my creative struggle. It's questions to hand back out of curiosity and self-doubt, your story will disappear. Now that you can't read it or ask me to do so, who will? Paradoxically, I had to lose you — one of my greatest supporters — to claim my voice. By sifting through your writing — a mass of notes, poems, and fragmented memories — I've been able to try to put your passion and talent into perspective, to piece together your personal history otherwise lost.

Exile in Orbit

You lived in just two lives. *FOR MY FATHER, WITH MY FATHER* makes deeply unknown to me.

Viktoria Peitchev & Velitchko Peitchev

Before I was born, you fled from the communist regime in Bulgaria, giving up your life's possessions, your former identity, what amounted, in truth, to a new life of giving up. You renounced your right to be an individual and saved your dear family from the prison of dictatorship. It was radical transformation: rejection for the sake of redemption, hope stirred to hope rooted back to now.

I knew you so deeply but so incompletely. Our emotions and passions were intertwined, our experiences and stories shared. We acted and dreamed together under the same roof. You were, I would connect or depart. Your wish, thriving through your life and writing, was to create home. I share your wish, even more so now that I can't come home to you. This is where we remain. Perhaps in the future, as I edit your manuscripts.

I: FIRMAMENT

I did not write until now because I did not find time. When I realized how little time there is, I rushed to put down these recollections without knowing how far I could go.

I read these words you left behind... a pang of sadness and regret. You didn't get to finish telling your story. While I sit in silence, the fear of losing time to write eats at me.

*

Your death has exposed the insignificance of my creative struggle. If I continue to hold back out of timidity and self-doubt, your story will disappear. Now that you can't tell it or ask me to, no one else will. Paradoxically, I had to lose you — one of my greatest supporters — to claim my voice. By sifting through your writing — a trove of notes, poems, and fragmented memoirs — I've been able to stay in your presence and extend our conversation; to piece together your personal history, otherwise lost.

You lived at least two lives. The first — the Bulgarian one — remains almost entirely unknown to me.

Before I was born, you fled from the communist regime in Bulgaria, giving up your life's possessions, your former identity, your homeland. In truth, it was the opposite of giving up. You restored your right to be an individual and saved your first family from the prison of dictatorship. It was radical transformation; rejection for the sake of redemption; love turned to hate turned back to love.

I knew you so deeply but so incompletely. Our emotions and processes were entwined; our experiences and stories disparate. We ached and yearned quietly under the same roof. You wrote, I wrote; connected and apart. Your wish, running through your life and writing, was to come home. I share your wish, even more so now that I can't come home to you. This is where we reunite. Pastpresentfuture converge as I mine your manuscripts.

Here is an excerpt from your Foreword to a planned autobiography, *America Is So Far Away*, typed in 1992:

So many things, like an unexpected and unavoidable surgery, may collide with my biographical ambitions. Vanity apart, I have other reasons to leave these messages. I am father of two small children, Viktoria and Georg. They do not know me well. They have few ideas of my background. Probably they would like to learn more about me. Ingrid may join them for some sequences she is not tired of listening to. And there are friends who might be interested as well. My mother? She is too old to learn English. Who would bother to translate heaps of remembrances back into Bulgarian?

It's overwhelming, so many years later, to read your "messages," which were intended primarily for us, your children. When we were young, we couldn't fathom all you contained, but you knew we would one day wonder what shaped you. My need to find out all I can about your unknown past has crested. It has been building over decades, waiting to be released from your writing and flowing into mine. Your death has been a slow catalyst, introducing a sudden separation that I've only gradually dared to bridge, as I work up the courage to dive below the surface.

The timeline of grief, discovery, and reunion has its own surprising logic. Coincidentally, as I compile this book, so long in the making, I'm awaiting the arrival of my first child, your grandson. He was not the reason I set out to gather our writing, but he nudges me forward, swimming in the dark like me, swimming toward life and light. He will bring part of you back to me, and he will know you through everything I pass on to him.

You didn't write this in Bulgarian because you wanted to be sure Georg and I would understand. Also, I suspect you would have looked over your shoulder even more than you already did, afraid of being watched. You regarded your mother tongue highly, but you had to dissociate from it in order to reassemble yourself. Of all the languages you spoke, English was the melody you chose for these conflicted reminiscences. It represented liberty and possibility; just like America (your long-sought adoptive homeland) stood for the democratic values and ideals you couldn't live without. Nonetheless, I feel you reaching — in English and in your other languages — for that elusive mark: emotional accuracy. The bull's eye, perfect pitch, a home for the mind's lonely wanderings.

You admired Gustave Flaubert for his ability to sift truth and beauty from language. I remember you referring to him in conversation, quoting in French (formative remnants from your days at the French Collège in Sofia, especially dear to you for implying your early defiance of communism in attending a worldly school and reading "Western" literature). Your Foreword tells me you carried his words around with you.

One of Flaubert's sentences was considered the best balanced piece of Gallic prose. I kept it in my diary notebooks. They were confiscated by the communist secret police when, in 1973, I fled from Bulgaria to personal safety and freedom in the West.

Like a fool, I scour the internet in hopes of recognizing your favorite Flaubert line. Instead, I unearth my own discovery, surely a different gem among multitudes, but appropriate to our dilemma: The accomplished writer acknowledging humanity's striving for — and falling short of — linguistic transcendence. Suitably, it's a marbled beauty, shimmering in translation; metamorphosis:

"Human speech is like a cracked kettle on which we tap crude rhythms for bears to dance to, while we long to make music that will melt the stars."

*

You lamented your limitations in all of your languages, no matter how proficient you were, never coming close enough to the perfection and ease you aspired to (unattainable concepts in combination). You wanted words to be your second skin; instead they threatened to expose you as a foreigner. I can't help but think this frustration was compounded by the decision to stray from your mother tongue. And here I am, enacting the same departure; English our desired destination. German will always be my native language, but you and Mama sent us to an English-speaking international school. Once I started writing in English, it became our shared realm of expressive striving; a place where we converged. Despite your perceived linguistic homelessness and its existential disappointments, you could always return to the page — a reassuring consolation and a compulsive seeking I inherited. You were proud of, and enriched by, your life of forked tongues and roads.

I set foot in more than 40 countries around the world. I stayed longer in places like Sofia, London, Paris, New York, Geneva, Rome, and finally Munich. I received political asylum in Italy. There, my first wife and our son Peter left me. I got U.S. citizenship after waiting for it for 41 years. I found my peace of mind and my second family in Bavaria. We now live in a small village, near a lake, at the foot of the Alps. Before I close my eyes, I can see part of the beech woods that surround our house. It is a setting fit for the Hansel and Gretel fairy tale, fascinating during all seasons, and mysterious at night.

Your list of cities belies the significance some of these places held in your imagination. Sofia, Rome, New York, and Munich comprised the four pillars of your story, the house you built in the sky: a house I will attempt and fail to resurrect. The house you built on the ground, in Germany, is the only one I really know. (Its solidity was the greatest reassurance to you.) And yet: you remind me of the novelty and uncertainty that lurked around its edges. The woods and the darkness. Grimm's fairy tales. How real was this home to you? What lingered in the unseen? Rather than the crouching figures of old German tales, wasn't it your unsettled past encroaching on your precarious refuge?

You were tempted by the storybook version of Bavaria, infatuated with the idea of your new home. Over time, you had to concede to the realities of this charmed place — like any other — and acknowledge the invisible baggage you brought. The challenges of settling opened up space for a truer love. You had to accept that the iconic sheltering woods would one day disintegrate, that you would lose everything and slip into the shadows.

*

I've been paralyzed by the lasting void of your physical absence and the excess and insufficiency of writing that stands in for you. How do I begin to digest this material, burden and boon?

*

All of a sudden, I start to write again. It comes in fits and starts, poems and stream-of-consciousness notes that crack your narrative open, freed of the constraints of form and the orderliness of time. My poems are born of the moment, attached to lived details and associative images I capture and frame; tokens that unexpectedly fold into your past; incisions from which blood springs like a secret kept too long. My notes unlock a space in which I can talk to you and wonder, stringing splinters of your stories and pieces of my process together. Early one morning, late in my mourning, I break into dialogue with you.

Chaos of Night / Daybreak

Dear Papa,

Six in the morning
bathed in orange sunrise
I am jet-lagged, dizzy
from the wild orbit of my thoughts,

not used to unleashing constellations
from my mind's dark matter.
Here my voice unfurls
in fragments, explosions and bursts of light,
hear your voice blending
to melt my stars,
writing feverishly
connecting the dots without drawing lines
between fact/fiction, yours/mine.

I tilt my head back and
stand vertiginous under the brilliant mess
of firmament. Unmoored and cradled
in the immensity of our private universe
no place to begin but the middle, we bumble
toward those distant gleaming pinpoints
through humming, pregnant space.¹

¹ Writing, this age-old madness I have continually suppressed (with greater and lesser success) over the years of my yet youngish life, has broken through at last, my reluctance to release the words fighting to get out gradually giving way to more urgent needs. I've denied the impulse for years because I'm afraid of its staggering, consuming influence, but the only thing worse than writing is not writing. Rather than stifling the voice in my head, I've finally let it spiral out and out. After all, your deepest wish — which must have inscribed itself in my DNA — was to be free. Conversely, I have also inherited your deepest fears: censorship, imprisonment, and recurring loss (irrational and unlikely in my case), which I have preemptively practiced upon myself.

Grief has drawn me out of my self-imposed — perhaps inherited — linguistic paralysis and exile. I share your yearning for refuge: a resting place for our errant thoughts and a point of connection; communion with you. Through love, through language, we could bridge the gap of place and time, longing and loss.

Although I've memorized a few facts about your past, I'm far from comprehending the weight of their meaning. If anything, I've carried your refugee's baggage like the naive Western child I am, not without fascination and pride for its incomprehensible foreignness. Your previous life may have seemed remote, but in our shared life I saw you up close, learning through immediate consequence: *Mama holding the phone, your furious flashing eyes commanding her to hang up, cut the cord to yesterday's friends, today's enemies. We, your family, don't know why, but questioning you would turn us into enemies, too. You require our unconditional trust in your mistrust, your brow furrowed by illegible marks.*

Can my knowledge of you teach me to read backwards, to travel to a time before I was born? Can I trace the path of the sun in reverse, from west to east? What if your story, like the earth's rotation, is circular? You spent your life chasing a brighter future in the West, attempting to escape your shadow. Inevitably, you would always be bound to what lay behind you.

Writing was your way out — and your way back. Before you escaped Bulgaria physically, you escaped mentally, in words of defiance. Once you were free, you never returned in person, but your mind did, perpetually. This was the spiral you were caught in: orbit of escape and orbit of entrapment. On paper, you could be where you belonged, but it was neither here nor there, the happiest and the saddest place.

Closing Circles

I dig into the past, but I find no desire to go back to Bulgaria. Why? I do not know exactly. Maybe because the hangmen and the fighters are still in place there. I can't forget, I can't forget, I can't reverse. I can only stay away.

Why "Closing Circles"? Rather than indicating a sense of closure or completion, the title attached to this fragment speaks to me of feeling enclosed; of being unable to outrun the vicious cycle of your thoughts. You articulate this unambiguously here:

So the circle of my thoughts is now complete. Now, as a refugee, I know there is no refuge. There is just the opportunity to fight on, to keep danger and destruction at a distance. Now I know I should never lower my guard or cease to grin aggressively at anyone in sight. No, there is no refuge, there is just an endless fight...

Your past is a night sky, lighting up briefly with the writing I find. Moments like torches: flashes of understanding swallowed by darkness. I need to lean into my grief and let go, to give up my sense of order and chronology as I discover the words you left, too many and too few. Occasionally, over breakfast, you would share a poem or a passage you wrote. Most of your work is buried in dusty folders and hidden in obsolete computers. Excavating your archives intimidates me — I have to overcome the barriers of jurassic technology and the fear of confronting a stranger: my father. How much did you intend to reveal to me? What would you include in your autobiography? You were so private, so cautious to disguise and protect your personal affairs and your family. Inadvertently, you taught me the art — and curse — of keeping secrets. The Bulgarian language and the ghostland that haunted you are beyond my reach, a phantom I can't confront. You weren't finished and I've barely begun.

You were convinced I would one day write a book — a statement I vehemently rejected for its weighty expectation and bold presumption. I have resisted long enough, spent enough of my own time on earth gazing out and being overwhelmed by that vastness above my smallness, the gravity of responsibility and choice. If we have only one life, this is mine, and I want to accept my inherited past and carry it forward.

II: LAND

Seven years after your death, I cross the threshold into your past and visit Bulgaria for the first time; the place where your ethereal youth sleeps. Whom will I wake?

*

Pembe: a name I come across in your writing, a name invested with mystery and allure. It's attached to a paragraph that refers to the time of your abhorred mandatory military training in Bulgaria, when you yearned for distraction in the soft thrills of romance. The document is saved as "Pembe," but the name does not resurface elsewhere:

The shallow Ossum River curved around a hill at the foot of Momini Gurdi, after leaving the gorge where the gypsy Katun had spread out its tents.

From there I could hear what was happening in the Katun, I could see both the Monastery and the flat sandy banks where the waters of the Ossum slowed down to laze in the pools, where the Auxiliary Platoon washed their horses.

I rested my feet, ailing from the roughly cut hard leather boots and swollen from the heat. There I caught fish in the whirl pools, I gathered thin, flat pebbles, I rolled in the tall grass of the sloping meadow. There she surprised me while I tried to catch fish with bare hands. There I found the pink pebble I gave to her. She did not take it at first. She said it was just a piece of ceramic. I convinced her it was a chip of pink marble tumbling down the river for so long that it became a smooth pebble. One day she came wearing it on a white string hanging on her sun-tanned neck. We called this bend of the river "our spot." We met often there. Even more often, I just dreamt of the frivolity of her violet eyes and waited, waited in vain.

My mind triangulates: didn't you talk to me about this captivating young woman? Have I found corresponding evidence or am I misremembering? Maybe I'm helping you spin a tale that never was. A romance of the imagination. Infatuation, perfect in its incompleteness. Her wild, nomadic soul represented all you wanted: the world, unbound. Anywhere but this country. She sang her siren song, daring you to drown in a dangerous wish.

I'm adrift in your flotsam of uncertainties. The anecdotes I recall you telling; the notes I retrieve from your writing studio and pore over; those still waiting to be discovered — or overlooked. It's impossible to reconcile fact and fiction.

Pembe... Was that her name? Did she really exist? It doesn't seem to matter — you kept looking for her essence: figment of perfect freedom, departure and destination rolled into one. Now she is mine to find.

*

I catch a short, cheap flight with Mama, your wife, and Sam, my husband, the love of my life, who you met briefly at the end of yours. None of us has set foot in this country before, so close and so far away.

Landing

We spiral down slowly
over Sofia. The surrounding land agrarian
almost Bavarian: farms, yellow
fields, hay bales, red rooftops.
Mount Vitosha looms
enduring, gentle guardian.

The city proper asserts itself
with jutting man-made shapes
of questionable function and Soviet
apartment blocks. Yet green patches
amidst the concrete: stubborn life rises
from the confines of its past.

On the ground in a little rental car
we exit the airport,
pass through a Roma settlement
curious eyes glinting
through missing windowpanes. I am reminded
of your tale about Pembe:
a young nomadic woman with violet
eyes, barely real
held fleetingly, longed for
into old age.

In the Oborishte neighborhood at night
branches are down
leaves litter the street, surrendered
by imposing trees
to last night's ravaging hailstorm.
We unload our suitcases
into the graffiti'd entrance
of a utilitarian building, glancing
over our shoulders
at shadows and silhouettes.
Finally, a tiny elevator
delivers us to the fourth floor:
an airy apartment, huge
windows glassy black, armored
and blind to the outside, our eyes
wide in the dark
waiting for morning, waiting
for the veil to lift over Sofia.²

Undeclared

*I drowned in my green Rhodopes,
within my green Perushtitsa
within the village church
when it was filled knee-deep
with the blood of my own children,
stabbed by the bashibozuks,
the Ottoman irregulars of 1876...*

*A hundred summers later,
the unleashed tugs of Lenin, Stalin,
Molotov, Dzerzhinski,
and Beria, Vyshinsky,
Khrushchev and Brezhnev,
Andropov and Chernenko
infested my Bulgaria.*

*I left my home
"defecting" (what an ugly word!)
from what was maybe
the ugliest of all dictators:
a pigmy of a monster-dwarf
(a paranoid serf of other monsters),
his nose a hook,
a village crook
in town clothes.
A party partisan in hiding...*

*And now he's gone, kicked out
(and yet unpunished,
because of age!),
decayed, decaying
in his cage
of logic biological.*

*His masters and their gangs,
the headless, heartless
plunderers of nations
are finally dispersed.
As blood-red rascals they are
still roaming restless
with stolen treasures of my land!*

*What shall I do now?
Bury my bow and arrows?
Walk down the hill
and take the long way home?
But where is my home?
I went so far in chasing the imposters,
defeating empires yet undefeated,
I lost my bearings
and cannot find my soul.³*

² Bulgaria: nebulous, unknowable, entrancing. Immediately, I love her fiercely, blindly. I am transfixed by a figure that dances in front of everything I see. This place is at once poignantly haunted and startlingly new, only just found and already lost. I try to recover what you deserted and ached for, snatching at air for a fistful of dreams.

³ The specter of your past sweeps me up and keels me over, your absence a stark presence. I am stunned by the physical reality of this place: its softness and grit under my nails, yet somehow untouchable. She laughs. Your history colors everything I approach, but I have to paint it anew, afraid of blotting out what truth remains. I want the blueprint of your Bulgaria, not the slapdash facades I describe and interpret. With every step I take and every word I write, I realize I'm remaking it all. You provide the impetus and disappear, though I sense you watching from across the street. My writing leads me; rhythms, sounds, and images transform ordinary stones into marble. Like father like daughter. It hits me: The place you inhabited vanished with you, a myth of your creation that survives only in your writing.

I feel so close to everything that shaped you, all you held dear and despised. Surging nostalgia, muddled by misgivings. The weight of your experience hangs around my neck, but knowledge eludes me.



Presenza di Spirito

P. Rionimus

1972

⁴ "Presenza di Spirito", [P. Rionimus?] 1972

As far as I know, you were given this painting by the artist, your friend, one year before you escaped Bulgaria. You always thought of the silhouette as yourself. You kept it in your writing studio, one of the few mementos you brought with you.

Graves in the Jungle

Zornitsa, your second cousin, draws
the skeleton of our lineage on paper.
I have trouble following her rattle
through generations.
We visit their graves,
photographs stained with lipstick kisses.
Grief makes an intruder of me.

Standing before your father's headstone
I am older than he ever was. My grandfather.

There are taboos: certain stories
get repeated, others buried.
I've heard it said
your uncle worried himself to death
after you escaped to the West
disappearing without a word
of warning. Reproach is closely guarded
hushed and amplified over time.
His wife, your aunt Stefka, harbors
a quiet opinion about your mother:
she was different — различен —
but won't tell me how.
We light thin yellow candles
that won't stand
and scatter flowers
from the roadside stall.
The cemetery is overgrown with weeds:
a jungle, Stefka says.
Her stockings catch on twigs.

Metodi, her younger brother,
sweet old man
who reminds me of you,
drags grass and dirt on his soles.
This pilgrimage wears
even on veteran mourners.
I swallow the impulse to help them clean up,
afraid of crossing lines.

They take us to the church their father built.
Metodi looks up in awe at the frescoes
hands clasped behind his back
childlike, fatherlike
mud-caked boots on marble.
He distributes coins
for us to light more candles
for the dead.

Weak flames and religious iconography
waver in my watery vision:
lives lived devastatingly
out of reach.⁵

⁵ My long-delayed encounters with our Bulgarian relatives and ancestors are unspeakably charged. A gulf of unrelatable hardship and cultural difference separates us, but we are bound by blood and instinctive affinity. Distance has not obscured the love and basic trust underlying the relationships to your family — my family.

We're embraced joyfully and wholeheartedly. Nonetheless, there are secrets and mysteries that cannot be lifted or broached. Whenever I muster the courage to press Stefka on a contentious point, she shakes her head stoically and indicates we've come to an impasse. I don't buy that it's a language barrier.

Mountains You Cursed

In this mountain meadow
teeming with wildflowers
a Soviet rocket
juts into the sky:
rusty playground slide
abandoned to decay
lasting symbol
of communist exploits
and child's play.

Zornitsa parts the high grasses
like seas, driven
by a secret scheme
cell phone hot against her ear.
She brought us here
to hike and eat
but clearly her mission
has evolved. It's hard to tell
if she wants to draw us in
or shake us off.
I've learned her moods
turn rapidly
and after all we are relative strangers:
strange relatives from Germany.
She waves frantically
for us to follow
plowing a path
toward a boxy house watching us
through half-closed shutters:
a presence I suspected.
The back door opens
and a man emerges from seclusion.
Zornitsa shrieks and leans in
to greet him, unleashing
a flurry of flirtatious
words and gestures.

His surprise shows.
Who are they, he must wonder,
and why did she bring them
to my private hideaway?
We wonder the same.

Zornitsa leaves no room
for questions, fills the space
with the thrill
of owning this coincidence.
She is the man's dentist and he
the father of our lovely host
found on Airbnb!
It's a small world,
Bulgaria
and the red
carpet is rolled out for us,
another small world.
Bring on the slivova
— to hell with it — American whisky!
Sip and smile
try to keep up
with their charged banter,
amenable but alert.
Something of your mistrust
lingers, mixed
into these potent
shots of hospitality.
The man suggests we follow him,
drive in tow
along the winding mountain road.
Eventually we stop, step out
to admire the view
from an unfinished terrace.

IV: ELECTRICITY

The first portent of your declining health was a bout of Transient Global Amnesia: a severe state of forgetfulness that felt like a temporary departure from your life on earth. You recognized us, your family, but your short-term memory couldn't keep up with moments as they unfolded. Repeatedly you asked the same questions: *What date is it? Where are we going?*, unable to retain the answers for even a minute. Chilled to our bones, we drove you to the hospital. Several long hours later, you came back, aware of the enigmatic darkness that had befallen you and hungry for explanations. You wanted to know everything that had happened while you were gone, and you wanted to hear it from me, because you insisted I understood you best. This assertion made me uneasy, based as it was on the assumption that you understood me in the same way, which is to say completely. From the sentimental fortress of retrospection, I'm willing to make that concession... But even in the landlocked moment of the present, I secretly knew you were right: we were as interdependent as magnetic planets, dancing around each other but always connected.

*

About half a year later, just after New Year's, you suffered a supposedly harmless stroke. You were visiting Darmstadt with Mama for her sister's birthday. Uncannily, I was involved in a minor car accident the same day in Rome. The next day, back in Pöcking, I found you nearly mute, terrified of speaking because your words evaded and deceived you. You and Mama had hurried home to seek help at our local hospital.

Synapse

The air is dense with particles
waiting to wreak havoc.

From the car, I crane my neck
at the Roman bookshop
by the roadside when the driver
careens. I don't know
what hits me.

Time snaps: here and now. The crash moves
up my spine before the brain registers.
Slowly more neurons fire
dispersing the message
throughout my solar system.

I rise from the front seat as if from a dream
and step into the street.
From an unnatural height I look down at the car
its glossy black surface dented:
a shape once sleek.

We get away without a scrape.
Two friends who love to yell "shotgun!"
sit quietly in the back, huddled
in the lucky corner
the free space taken, punched in.

That moment far away you enter orbit
and I feel the ground shift.
Outside sparks fly like dying stars
but more than metal collides.
Our minds reel in awe.

On the sidewalk
shards glint and speak
of celestial rearrangement.
I will return home
to find you on your way.⁹

On the second day in the hospital, your words came back. You returned with a strange dream:
part creative fiction, part metaphysical revelation. It was a "story" you said, and your eyes
glittered as the words tumbled from your lips. You recounted it playfully, but I sensed a feverish
conviction. In a notebook I discovered later, you had captured the main analogy of your vision,
scrawled out three times:

*I am like an astronaut in outer space
with an oxygen mask but without a spacesuit and spaceship,
destined to orbit forever and ever
preserved in a block of ice.*

The memory of your white, padded hospital bed and its attendant images of space voyage stayed
with me, accumulating symbolic power over the years. Eventually, I turned it into a poem for
you.

⁹ At the time, I was stunned by shock, unable to express my thoughts. I strained for meaning — even fate — in the
surprising coincidences that precipitated your mental slip. Images and magical associations whirled through my mind.
This poem was the first written response to rise slowly to the surface, over the course of many months.

Astronaut

Frozen in a block of blue
you see yourself preserved
orbiting the earth
holding an invisible string
to us, your kin.
You shine at night,
an astronaut of love.

From your sickbed, you ask me
with smiling eyes
blinking back the sting
if this story is insane
and I shake my head.

Eight years later
your metaphor returns
like the man in orbit
with redoubled significance
circles drawn
around a shared center.
The age rings of a tree
sing like vinyl
if you let a needle
skim their grooves.
Our record player spins
a gravelly voice across the room.
“It’s so hard to tell where I end
and my father begins...”

I look down at my hands, your hands
writing these words.
The shape of our fingers
and their distinctive prints
legacy of skin and ink.¹⁰

¹⁰ You were six years old when you lost your father. I came across your “Letter to my father” only after writing “Astronaut,” and I was astonished by the shared resonance. Despite your dad’s early death, you and your mother maintained an unbreakable connection to him, like I do to you.

We still love you. I think our love is your immortality. Love is one of the shapes of eternity. Love is the essence of life. Love is the best of life. Indifference is death. Peace and death. Peace and death embracing each other. I am approaching death, a death severed from indifference. And as I do so, I think of you as my father, of you as the giver of a handful of eternity to me, because I, too, became a father.

To Niko

your ends-of-the earth stare
allows me to fall farther
than I dreamt
and be caught
by soft blue infinity

in thoughtful thoughtless
coos, you speak to me
receiving and returning,
the love pulled taut
between us

my hand on your solid
little rib cage buzzes
as your voice resounds
with contentment
unbound

then, joy like surprise
lightning flashes
across your iris
sky ignites
a smile

eclipsing all,
welling from a source
so deep and pure
I couldn’t find it
without you¹¹

¹¹ Now, after the birth of my son, I identify even more with your conception of expanding through an eternal, eternalizing love. You anticipated death much earlier than it came to pass, but your role as a father assured you that you would always be connected to us and therefore immortal.

According to Mama, you wanted to fall like a tree at the end of your life. You illustrated this with a gesture, letting your elevated forearm collapse on the table: sudden and final. A wish you were not granted.

A second stroke, two weeks after the first, delivered the ultimate blow. It hit your cerebellum (Latin for "little brain") and affected, among other things, your language capabilities. For someone as invested in words as you were, this was the cruelest kind of punishment. A winter storm struck Bavaria just as you experienced your stroke. Implausibly, it was given the Bulgarian name "Kyrill."

Over the course of six months in the hospital, the storm raged on in you and wreaked havoc. You fought for life and clarity, but the circuits had been cut, spraying sparks of chaotic verbal fireworks. Your electricity remained abuzz, but the wires were hopelessly tangled. You must have known, because the light behind your eyes burned with the same intensity, now desperate, as you fumbled through the once-familiar forest of seven languages, trying to communicate, coming up with nothing but incoherent scraps.

*

After your drawn-out, tortuous decline and eventual death, I left our home in the woods in Pöcking with my boyfriend Sam. Our glowing, fresh relationship was a merciful counterbalance in these dark sorrowful months. Together, we sought renewal in the sprawling city of London.

Ark

Curled up in this square of a room —
my new home because I fill it
with valuable trinkets and cheap furniture
brew tea and make love
but it takes conviction.

I walk in my sleep
claw the floor boards, grasp for roots.
"Let me fall like a tree," you say.

I rub my eyes raw,
mourn broken branches.

*

Cracked and spent, my new love lifts me
off the floor. That table that shelf that lamp —
they are strangers, solid and angular
props in this afterlife
I am living step by step
slow motion prisoner.

He's leading me out
my teeth crunching the gravel — no, my feet —
through the iron gate onto the street.
I've rounded this corner
swayed between these margins — curbs —
countless times slipping through the landscape
of my neighborhood a foreign country
grasping for sign posts and chimneys
balancing on ledges and rooftops gravity gone
time the current that bears me

as my knuckles drag along the hidden riverbed
turning stones. He carries me;
urban flotsam drifts by
and my limbs dangle and trail
among the wreck.

So this is my Ark, my Noah.

*

When I open my eyes I'm back
on firm ground
with the animals. I blink
at the big scowling pig
put my hand on her bristled back
feel beneath a crust of mud
her coursing blood and pounding heart.
The donkey's felt ears
twitch, absorb my signals
and he rests his flour-dipped muzzle
in my palm. With clacking hooves
the goat locks me in a yellow stare:
irregular pupils the keyholes
of an ancient door.

They rouse me from my underwater coma,
their bulky breathing shapes
in the pens of this city farm
an ode to survival.¹²

¹² Without conscious intention, I was drawn to the very same places that were significant landmarks on your long road to freedom. By coincidence, I happened to be in Rome when you had your first stroke; overwhelmed, I fled to London after your death to study (just as you had during the summer of 1960, while still under communist surveillance and travel restrictions); then, unexpectedly, I set out for America because Sam's father was dying there. Aghast and aching, we were bound tighter.

V: WATER

Salmon Run

The air was a gentle antidote, the people in the street harmless fish passing in a stream. I evaporated. I let myself be carried by invisible currents to the India Street pier. Stepping out onto the planks I crossed a threshold into the realm of the river. The atmosphere was still, serene, but set apart. Here is nature's refusal:

a grey zone
between the skinny island of towers and Brooklyn's industrial fringe.
Despite the aggressive human activity on the East River, it asserted its otherness.
The tangy seaweed smell that penetrates even this polluted body of water transported me to a freer place.

I return to the shore and sit on a bench in the soft evening light. The balmy thick of the air makes everything one element. I too am a fish, and it doesn't really matter what is on my mind, because I move with the stream, lack self-consciousness and reflection. I dart and laze. Am I at home?

I am in moments
dipping into the chance to be peaceful, as one.
I have been granted permission to stay. Or go.

Go, fish, go! Go fish! Fish for life in this wilderness of opportunity.¹³

¹³ Sam and I ended up in New York, your city of promise. I immersed myself in reading and studying English Literature, and he pursued a degree in Creative Writing, like his father. That swaying haven of language rocked and buoyed us all.

Five years in — after what felt like a tense period of waiting for me (child's play compared to your patient and arduous efforts) — I was approved as a temporary resident of the United States of America. Closing circles.

As I make your places my own, I imagine drawing you down to the ground from your exile in the sky.

Overflow

(Lately the air is different;
I can see eddies and currents,
read the field of color leaking
from skin into space.)

Maybe it's my imagination

flooding the brim. The man
skimming a book by McCarren pool
seems to notice. (Manhattan gleams
in the distance like a mirage.)
Propped up on one elbow
his long legs stretched out:
the neatly stacked ankles touchingly
fragile, akin to the angularity
of an Egyptian cat
and/or you.
(My bones.)

As I pass
he inclines his head and smiles.
It's not a smile
that hopes or initiates
but one that rests
in recognition, something
like kinship but neutral.

He has a childish heart
tattoo on his calf
and the outline of a small crab
on his upper arm, superficial signs
obscuring the resemblance to you
who preferred ink on paper.
I nod at this tender irony,
my petty doubt.

But why would I see you
in bright daylight and red bathing shorts,
young and human?
Wouldn't you return as an eagle-owl,
a cypress tree?

You could not have slipped
into this young person
too old to hold your soul,
a body so foreign
and so similar.

Unless I make room
for the space that is mystery or madness,
intuition or magic, religion
or superstition. The overflow
of being, that uncharted region
where eyelashes trembling are
mountains colliding, where
tectonic plates shift
under your soles.

Maybe the soul once untethered
and formless passes like air
from being to being, breathing
through open windows, dancing
in noses and lungs. Or maybe
it takes shape briefly: a dragonfly
alighting on a warm shoulder,
its quivering wings
illuminating what is invisible;
solid and unearthly, here
then gone.¹⁴

¹⁴ Although New York was a favorite haunt of yours, your lingering presence has surprised me in unlikely moments. I am still not immune to poetic fancies and fantasies, flights of the imagination. Settling hasn't been easy for me, but after years of searching and struggling in place, I'm starting to make peace with my surroundings. The images I associate with you are no longer celestial; you are returned to the earth.

Crickets

Our bikes are crickets in the night
the whirl of spokes like wings
singing. Where we came from and where
we're going bleed
into one city lights flying by.
This place is where
I want to be, suspended in between:
an ordinary wanderer
spinning gravel and
grazing stars.¹⁵

¹⁵ On occasion, I have touched the dream we shared of being at home in a state of flux. On the move, inspiration kisses my cheek as I catch a busker's tune, the scent of someone's supper, the shivers of fall. Pembe is no longer a stranger to me. She is everywhere and nowhere; infatuation absolved of greater reward; fugitive delight, perfect in its transience. New York, that changeable beast of promise, gives me glimpses of being just where I want to be.

My perspective becomes oblique and softens. I am enough. The truth is fluid like water, with plenty of space to flow around the mysteries. I recognize there is meaning and stop looking for cosmic order. Stardust rains down and washes away, mingling with new life in ancient rivers.

VI: WIND

Compiling this retroactive dialogue, I am astonished by its inherent echoes and parallels. I discovered most of your writing after drafting mine. Many of our preoccupations and patterns mirror each other. Of course, you expressed everything long before I grew aware, but my writing seems to rise out of a shared vocabulary, a preexisting correspondence. Without knowing it, we channeled the same feelings and conjured the same metaphors. In this last set of poems, I answer your call directly.

Farewell, Viktoria

*Don't bury me!
Burn me!*

*My soul is to expire
in bursts of fire,
my atoms must flare
up in the air,
mingle with the storms
that shape the weather
and the world.*

*I want to blow forever
and fly in the wind,
and rustle in the trees
high over the house,
the trees you saved from felling.*

*I want to linger in our creek
and jingle
with the rushing sound
of foaming waters
when our brook is swelling
in the icy floods of spring.*

*I want to ring
in your ears
with the crackling ice
on the crystal lake
when you glide over
like a bird.*

*So I may stay forever
in the snow and the rain
and be with you
again
until you shrug me off
with the sky blue grace
of your eyes
as you smile at the sun
and the clouds
that carry me
to be there
where
you are.*

We Become Wind

The slow swirl
that has been churning within
gathers force, becomes the storm
shaking the leaves.

I recognize their tremble
as my own, am inseparable
from the oak
leaning over the ravine
of my childhood. I recall
some lines you wrote:
wishing your presence could
linger forever
in our creek, or be carried
by the clouds
to where I am.

I am transported by the wind,
united with your spirit.

It is a moment
like an arc, reaching
forward and back.

Broken open, I see
the shores of past and present
from above, the whole of time
an archipelago of accidents
and intentions,
a map mirrored in the mystery
of star-splattered darkness.

Acknowledgments

Thank you to the minds and hearts behind ND/SA. None of this would have been possible without Jen Hyde of Small Anchor Press, who championed my writing and generously guided me through the making of this chapbook. Her brilliant and insightful editing led me to expand the project well beyond its initial bounds. Thank you to Emily Brandt and Alex Cuff of No, Dear Magazine, for their vision and support. Thanks to Patrick Delorey for his design expertise and making it all look good!

Thank you to my teachers, the participants of my writing group, readers, friends, and family, who have encouraged and advised me, past to present. Special shout-outs to: Axel Wilhite and Amy Bonnaffons of 7x7 for their friendly nudges to write and publish; Priscilla Becker for helping me find my voice in poetry; Jen Pitt for her continuous appreciation of my writing; Lionel Muzira Makenga for taking the time to read an early draft; Penny Beebe and Richard McCarthy for being a delightful living room audience eager to help me widen my circles; Meggie Smith for her soulful friendship, artistic understanding, and inspiring creative exchanges; Melanie Breiter for her enthusiastic reception of the fledgling manuscript and her belief in me; Nina Eichinger, Erika Peters, and Jenny York, for our formative history and for having my back whatever I do.

Thank you to my Bulgarian relatives, Stefka Tasseva, Metodi, Vasil, and Kiril Spassov, and Zornitsa Lazova, for their hospitality, kindness, and willingness to talk to me about our family and Bulgaria. My life is deeply enriched by these stories and relationships. Metodi, you are missed and remembered fondly.

I'm eternally grateful to Galabina Peitcheva, my devoted grandmother, who determined my formative impressions of Bulgarian-ness and instilled a sense of familiarity with, and affection for, the culture; my brother, Georg Peitchev, who has walked beside me and gets me without words; and my parents, Ingrid Hesse-Peitchev and Villy Peitchev, for their limitless love and unwavering support, which laid the foundation for everything. Papa, you are with me in these pages and forever. Mama, deine Liebe ist meine größte Inspiration. Finally, I wish to thank Sam Beebe, for being my number one: reader, editor, and partner in love and ink. You are the greatest thing that has ever happened to me—you, and Niko. This book is for you, Neeks, so that you may know your grandfather. Thank you for being my sweetest joy.

Bio

Viktoria Peitchev grew up outside of Munich, Germany, where she attended an international school. She received a BA in Sociology from the University of York and an MA in English Literature from Brooklyn College. She has taught elementary school, given private German lessons, and worked as a personal and editorial assistant. She makes her home in Brooklyn, NY, with Sam Beebe, and their son, Niko. *Exile in Orbit* is her first publication.

No, Dear and Small Anchor Press are based in Brooklyn. More information about their projects and publications can be found at nodearmagazine.com.

The cover image is by Patrick Delorey.

This chapbook was printed in April 2018 in an edition of 100.

This is copy 12 of 100.

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