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How to love a homeland



Oxana Timofeeva

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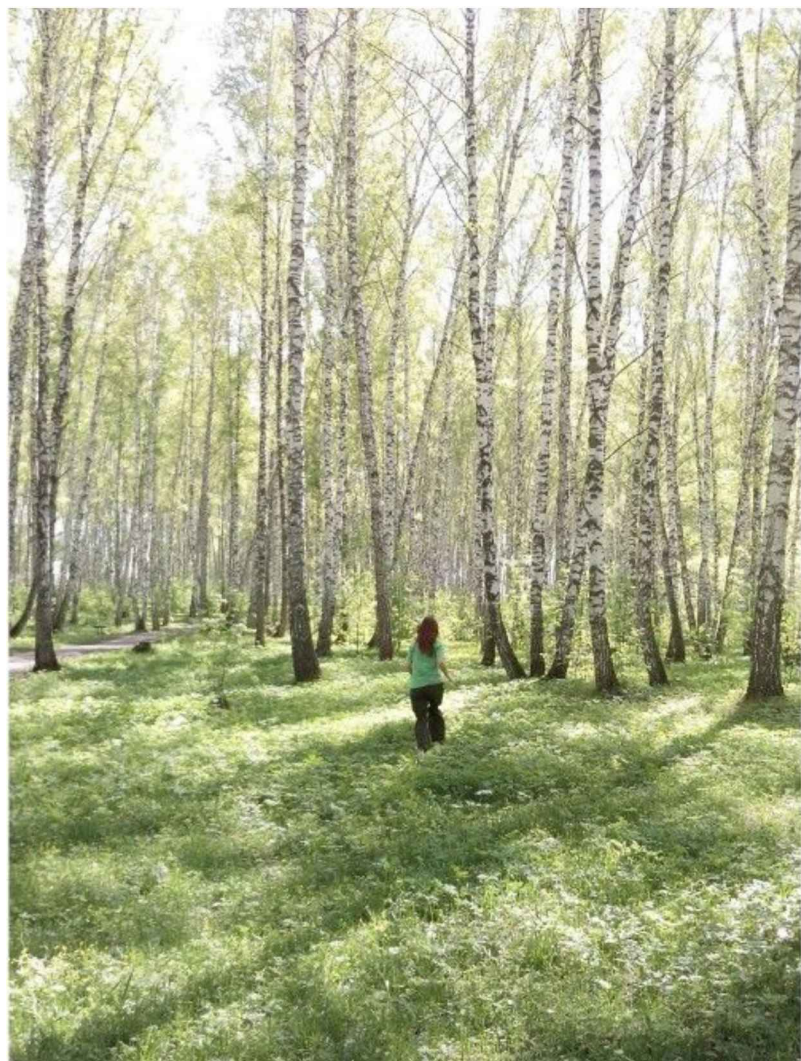
Acknowledgments

Colophon

To my mother

*Recently I stayed in a wondrous country.
There the reefs are bathing in the amber waves.
In the shaded gardens, time has stopped.
And flamingo-colored clouds are drifting across the sky.
In the emerald hills the river is glittering,
It's wonderful as a fairy tale, and deep as a dream. And with its golden
foamy waves,
It tries to reach the brilliant moon.
You'll understand me,
A better country you won't find!
You'll understand me,
A better country you won't find!
—Zhanna Aguzarova¹*

KOZHEVNIKOV



I am from Kozhevnikovo—a Siberian village on the Ob River. This is where my parents met and where I was born. A year later, my family moved to Kazakhstan, so I don't have any memories of Kozhevnikovo. I never thought about this place, never tried to find it on a map. Kozhevnikovo village in the Tomsk region has always been nothing more to me than a line in my passport stating my place of birth. I never even knew for sure if it still existed. Even before the Soviet Union collapsed, many Siberian villages were abandoned and became forests.

But I do remember Siberia. My family comes from there. My great-grandmother Nastya lived in a village just outside the town of Kemerovo. During the Russian Civil War, she aided Communist guerrillas fighting against Kolchak's army. Once, the White Army ordered the villagers to line up and rat out who had been taking food into the woods. The peasants grouped in such a way that Nastya was shielded by the crowd and could escape. She ran until she saw a haystack and burrowed into it to hide. The Whites chased after her, and once the haystack caught their eye, they started sticking bayonets and pitchforks into it. Motionless, Nastya hid in the hay, the tips of the White Guardsmen's bayonets missing her skin by a hair. But the haystack shrank and protected my great-grandma—it was on the guerrillas' side, too.

When she turned thirteen, my mother left the village and settled in town to finish school, entering Tomsk University after graduating. It was there that she met her first husband, with whom she had my sister Lena, and there that she soon divorced. Next she moved to Kozhevnikovo and found a job as a reporter for a rural newspaper. As a child I visited Tomsk, but mostly while passing through. I believe it was the first town I had ever been to in my life. Sometime around the year 1984, we stayed there for a few days and I saw grey ice moving down the river. Before that, we had only passed Tomsk while on the train to the small village of Balagachevo to visit my grandparents. They lived in a wooden izba² with a large stove, grew vegetables and flowers, and had a huge pigeon-grey cow called Malyshka. In the morning all the village cows went to graze, and at sunset my grandma would call loudly, "Malyshka, Malyshka!"³ In the evening, after going to the *banya*,⁴ my grandma would set a large iron mug of fresh cow's milk in front of me.

Once a day, a train from Tomsk to Bely Yar passed the Balagachevo station cutting through a thick dark-green wall of forest. Kilometers

of impassable taiga. Unbelievably tall trees, almost reaching the sky. Later, in adulthood, I had an idea that, most probably, Siberian trees must have seemed so tall to me because I myself had been small at the time—but this hypothesis proved to be false. The trees there really are remarkably tall.

I saw it for myself when coming back to the area for a short working visit for the first time since 1985. In 2016, Hannah Hurtzig, a German artist and curator, invited me to Novosibirsk to take part in a large-scale performance work supported by the local Goethe-Institut. The project, “Dialogues from the Darkroom: An Apparatus to Animate Lost and Blackened-Out Texts,” gathered a group of people from different fields to discuss unusual topics in unusual formats. These gatherings were like the Russian tradition of “kitchen talks” where people gather around the table to drink vodka or tea or both, and discuss politics, art, and other important things—or like a lecture for one person, with the lecturer not knowing in advance who will be the audience. I was invited to read a philosophical lecture about the zombie-apocalypse. Igor Chubarov, an old friend and colleague of mine, was also invited to Novosibirsk.

Not long before the trip, we met at a conference in Moscow. Igor told me that after the performance he was going to Tomsk by car together with his friend Volodya. I agreed to join them and had a look at the map. The distance between Tomsk and Novosibirsk is 300 kilometers. By Siberian standards, it’s practically nothing. If you take the old road going through Kolyvan, after three hours of driving, the car will pass through Kozhevnikovo, the village specified in my passport as my place of birth—my homeland.

In Novosibirsk, preparing for the upcoming trip I became agitated and fidgety like a little girl. The performance went crazy in a positive sense. After two days of public kitchen talks and lectures for one person only, we hitched a ride from Novosibirsk. The woman behind the steering wheel kindly agreed to drive us on the old, longer road. I couldn’t remember the road, but I knew for sure that I had travelled this way in 1978, the year of my birth. At that time, the new road didn’t yet exist, and the way to get to Kozhevnikovo was on the bus from Tomsk to Novosibirsk or in the opposite direction. Like all the roads in Siberia, this one was in bad condition, so we had to drive slowly. The closer we got to Tomsk, the taller the trees became. Stretches of forest were interspersed with bright, blooming meadows and freshly plowed black fields with hawks circling above them. Here

and there on the side of the road, people in rubber boots were selling birch sap.

As we approached Kozhevnikovo, the pastoral scenery exploded with sunlight. All of a sudden, the emerald taiga gave way to an enormous, light birch grove. My forgotten, unrecognized homeland struck me. The extremely tall, frequent white trunks seemed transparent. No pines, no firs, no oaks—only birches flaunting their luxurious May foliage. I'm not making it up when I write that the tops of the trees completely disappeared somewhere at the very edge of the sky. The grove grew around a large Russian village. On the corner, there was a slogan that must have been put there around the time I was born: *"Here, on the Ob, on the best lands of Siberia, we are building a garden city and invite you to contribute!"*.

I called my mother in St. Petersburg and asked if she remembered what our address in Kozhevnikovo had been. Mom was confused; she didn't remember either the street name or the house number, but she told me that there was a single five-storey building in the village; behind it, there were either sheds or animal stalls, and a two-storey house standing right by the grove.

We asked passers-by for directions to the five-storey house and soon found it a bit off the main road. Here it was, and behind it, we indeed saw some dilapidated wooden stalls, and a grey two-storey house with red stripes, 13 Komarova Street, stretching out in the back. There were several people sitting at the entrance to the house. I spoke to them, but no one remembered our family.

Right behind the building, the grove spread out into the continuation of a park with very old, partially rusted fairground rides, and posters that read *"People, please, be civilized! Throw garbage in the bins only!"* and *"Even the hare knows: riding through the park hampers municipal improvement!"*. Among the amusement rides, I discovered the symbolic and endearing Soviet swing boats. Miraculously, they still functioned; I climbed into one of them and re-lived the childhood joy of flying. Afterward, we followed the paths that lead among the rusty swings and white birches. The May grove was so full of light, shining and solemn: it was as if all this time I had been trying to remember something that didn't exist—and now I had gotten hold of it.

CHU



I am from Chu. It's a small town in southern Kazakhstan, a junction station on the Turk–Sib Railway connecting the cities of Almaty and Taraz. These days, it's known by the Kazakh name Shu, but in the Soviet times it used to be the Chu station, on the Chu River, in the Chu Valley of the Jambyl Region. This city was famous throughout the Soviet Union for the wild hemp, which the locals call *anasha* or *Shaitan's grass*—but I remember quite different things. In May, the steppe blooms with yellow tulips and scarlet poppies, and the sky above is turquoise. You wouldn't see this shade of blue anywhere else—only there. The Chu Valley is an oasis full of roses, cherries, grapes and, of course, watermelons. The Chu watermelons are the best on earth. Once, someone brought my mother a whole truck of watermelons from the plantation as a present. They filled up a whole room, and every day we would roll one out.

When we lived there, we used to see donkeys pulling carts on the streets. Sometimes gypsies would pass on horses shouting, “*Bottle! Bottle!*”. They collected empty bottles, and in return they gave children a candy rooster, a lollipop common in the USSR. Shepherds would head into the steppe with large flocks of sheep. In the summer, the air smelled of roses, anasha, donkey droppings, boortsog,⁵ and cottonseed oil; it was burning hot, and I would fall down in a faint.

We used newspapers to cover the windows because the sun would beat down like crazy. In the evenings the sun would roll down like an enormous bright red ball. I remember a little earthquake that happened once: my sister was playing Oginski's polonaise on the piano when suddenly everything in the room began to shake and, frightened, father came running from the balcony, which he thought was about to collapse.

My childhood home on Engels Street was on the edge of the town. The windows of our apartment on the third floor faced the steppe: hundreds of kilometers without a single settlement. I loved looking out the window. Between the infinite steppe and the infinite sky stretched a blue strip of horizon. One of my earliest memories, most likely from 1981 or 1982 was of my mother holding me in her arms and pointing out the window saying that far away, beyond the steppe, lay Afghanistan (there was a war there).⁶ In winter the steppe was grey and in spring, it would turn pale yellow with all the tulips, which my mom and I would pick, bringing an armful home and placing the flowers in three-liter jars.

There was a strange pond in the steppe. We called it the Ponura River, though of course it wasn't a river—just sewage water filled with some viscous, violet and black waste oil. Throw a match into the water and the Ponura would light up. Just like in the children's poem by Korney Chukovsky that we all had to learn by heart: "*And the foxes took the matches and headed for the blue sea, and set the blue sea on fire.*" Maybe it wasn't even about the matches; could the foxes really have come this close to the fiery water and thrown a match into it? Maybe the Ponura caught fire because of the heat. But the fact remains: it burned like oil, in a big way, and high above the flame, clouds of dense, thick pitch-black smoke spread out, covering the sky. Our apartment had two rooms with windows overlooking the steppe, and there were children's swings hanging in the doorframe connecting the rooms. Swinging back and forth, I enjoyed the ride and watched the disastrous spectacle from one window and then from the other.

My parents were "distributed" to Kazakhstan, which at the time was one of the fifteen Soviet Republics. Distribution (*raspredelenije*) was the term for the centralized Soviet system of job placement for the young. Employment was universal and obligatory, and the state was responsible for it, so it found jobs for people in various parts of the USSR. There were all sorts of people living in Chu: Kazakhs, Russians, Germans, Uighurs, Romani, Kurds, Jews, the Kyrgyz, and the list goes on. If it had been up to us, we would never have left. No one wanted to leave Chu. But in 1985, when perestroika⁷ began, nationalism gained momentum: Russians were persecuted and it was dangerous to stay. Seizing on the first advertisement of an apartment exchange we came across, we fled to the North and burned the ships.

Now, nothing connected us to Kazakhstan, except memories—the steppe, burning hot air, the Ponura River in flames, and flowers. I haven't seen poppies since then. Well actually, I saw them once in Tenerife, but only very briefly from the bus window. On the other hand, modest bouquets of yellow tulips that I would see here and there caused great excitement: they had the same effect on me as the Madeleine cake had on Proust—a trifle with incredible power to instantly revive feelings from the past. In 1991, the Soviet Union ceased to exist and Kazakhstan declared independence. In a flash, a border emerged in space and time, separating me from my roots in two blows: the state where I was born didn't exist anymore, while the place I considered my homeland turned into a foreign country.

All my life, I missed Chu but never thought I'd be able to go there

again; it seemed like a pipe dream. Something changed when I turned 38.

I realized that I was a grown woman, and being an adult means doing whatever you want—not what you just believe you want, but what you really desire and dream about. I began to wonder what dreams I had at all and, after scrutinizing them, separated the real from the fake. Fake or quasi-dreams are narcissistic fantasies and ambitious plans. These fantasies revolve around me—or rather not me but instead a gallery of ideal versions of me. In these dreams, I am beautiful, adored by everyone, accepted, respected, desirable, slim, famous, and sometimes even rich. All these fantasies can be blown away like dust. And in reality, they are dust. As for real dreams, they are our deepest desires, ones that don't have anything to do with success or recognition. These dreams are not about one's own self; at their core, they always have something fundamental that transcends and absorbs me, and my own persona disappears from sight. Such as, for example, a dream of the sea, space, or home.

My most vivid dream turned out to be the one of homeland—it never went away and always stayed with me. But covered by the dust of narcissistic fantasies, its presence was barely discernible.

Was there anything at all that would really prevent me from making this dream come true? I was surprised to find out that there wasn't. Shortly before that, I made friends with the Kazakhstan philosopher Kulshat Medeuova, who invited me to give a lecture in Astana and organized my visit to Almaty. She also helped me buy my tickets for Chu, came to meet me, and accompanied me throughout my weeklong trip to Kazakhstan in May 2016. (The trip to Kozhevnikovo also took place in May, so in just one month I got to visit two of my homelands.)

In Astana, I gave a lecture entitled “The Owl and the Angel.” I was comparing the two flying creatures—the owl of Minerva from Hegel's philosophy, and the angel of history, introduced by Walter Benjamin. Both are arriving, in a way, always already too late, when everything has already happened and nothing can be changed. Both the Hegelian owl and the Benjaminian angel look back at the past; they are the animals of retrospection. The Hegelian is rational, wise, whereas the Benjaminian is rather emotional, sensual. The first wants to understand, to grasp the time in the notion; the second—to awaken the dead. These two figures might look melancholic, but in fact they

are not; there is actually a kind of very unobvious happiness or enjoyment that can be traced in their psychic portraits. There was one well-known Kazakhstan philosopher, Zhabaikhhan Abdildin, from an old generation of Soviet scholars, who came to my lecture. He was very sympathetic and replied to my talk with a short speech inviting students to read Hegel. If you understand Hegel, he said, you will understand everything.

The train from Astana was arriving in Chu early in the morning. Having woken up three hours before arrival, I was looking out the window at the grey, empty steppe, hills, and the long Lake Balkhash. We used to swim in the Balkhash. I remember a summer when my mother worked in the Department of Culture of the Chu District Trade Union of Railway Workers and was instructed to take charge of the so-called coach-club. It was a blue railcar equipped with a cinema inside which could be coupled to any train. We spent the whole summer travelling on it, stopping at the lake or in remote Kazakh auls⁸ to show Soviet movies to its infrequent inhabitants. Auls were full of sand, and the Balkhash water was the color of the sky.

The train rolled past the Chiganak station without stopping. This is where my family moved from Siberia in 1979: to the construction site of the South-Kazakh power station in the South. It was only after this that we moved to Chu. In Chiganak, we lived in a BAM house (this is what they called hastily built wooden barracks for those who came to the undeveloped lands at large Soviet construction sites). We ate saiga antelopes that my father hunted down in the steppe and sun-dried fish from the Balkhash. We took water from the lake, cleaned it from rubbish, and then left it for some time to purify before drinking. In this place, there was nothing apart from the lake and the grey hills. I don't remember Chiganak, but my elder sister does, and she says it is very similar to the Burrany railway stop described by the famous Soviet writer Chinghiz Aitmatov, although the Burrany is located in a different place, in the Northeastern part of Kazakhstan. However, in the novel *The Scaffold*, Aitmatov describes the Chu steppe, which the train was about to approach.

It takes more than two hours to get to Chu from Chiganak. I spent all that time looking out the window at the monotonous grey landscape. And suddenly it changed dramatically. The steppe burst with patches of scarlet. It took me some time to realize that these were poppies. I was peering at them and couldn't believe my eyes. A valley stretched under the turquoise sky; there was an olive-colored river, pyramidal

poplars, and some low silvery trees that caused my heart to beat faster. I had seen them only there in my childhood, and had never seen them anywhere again, and never even thought about them. I don't know what they are called.

My homeland met me with the same sweet smell that I had tried to recall for over thirty years but had always confused with something else. At nine in the morning, the sun was already dazzling us. In the station bathroom, there were no partitions, only holes in the floor over which women sat in a row, exchanging jokes and laughing. Kulshat and I went out into the town. The streets had been renamed, and now I could only wonder where Engels Street was. I tried hard to listen to my gut instinct: did I still have some inner feeling? Where was I supposed to go? It was as if the smell of home brought back memories of my body as a child that knew how to navigate this space. My mom and I had often walked home from the station. So it must be a bit to the left and then straight, I thought to myself, through the park. Right, here's the Railroader's Park, flooded with tea roses. "Don't walk through it, it is full of drug addicts!" my mom warns me on the phone.

We turned onto Konaev Street. I didn't yet recognize the road but felt like we were heading the right way. Low, dilapidated urban buildings gradually replaced simple rural houses. The area was quite green. There must be a red brick house somewhere here where we lived before moving to the North, I mused. It wasn't the first one facing the steppe, but the second one on the same street. My mother and I had moved into that house when my father left us; we were in need of money and had had to exchange a three-bedroom apartment for a small two-bedroom one with a surcharge. Turns out it had four storeys instead of five, like I remembered.

Our first house on Engels Street 2 also turned out to be a four-storey, although I had been absolutely sure it had five storeys. It was very close by, just one building away. Actually, everything was close in that town. I entered the stairwell but didn't dare to knock on the door of our apartment. On the window, covered with paint to reduce the heat from the sun, someone had drawn flowers and written, "*comrades, smoke, litter and smash the glass at your homes.*" There were poppies growing in the yard. Kulshat noticed a picture drawn on the wall at the side of the house: big, black, man-sized angel wings with a halo. I stood against the wall so that the halo was over my head and the wings were where they were supposed to be and took a picture.

This was my angel. For the first time, I felt so immensely happy that I nearly cried.

Behind the house, as expected, the steppe stretched out, but you couldn't see it because of a mound where horses were grazing. Not daring to go further, we returned to Konaev Street. The passers-by were few but very friendly; they asked us what we were searching for. Isn't there a school across the street? Of course, there is one, the Makarenko School.⁹ They wondered where we were from. "*I AM FROM HERE.*" "*From Chu?*" "*Yes.*"

We headed for the school where my mother used to teach. Teaching was one of her jobs; we were poor, and she had to have more than one. Sometimes she would bring me to class. I sat in the back of the classroom, chewing on a huge ripe tomato and admiring the eighth graders in their school uniforms. Amazingly, all of a sudden, a group of kids wearing the exact same Soviet uniforms appeared walking towards Kulshat and me. Only the girls' aprons were not black, as on weekdays, but a festive white. It was like we had gotten hold of a time machine and travelled back to 1984. The students were marching and singing "Katyusha."¹⁰ I also used to sing this song with the other children in the kindergarten, which was somewhere behind the school. This turned out to be a performance: the school was preparing a show for Victory Day on May 9th. A boy came up to us asking whether we were going camping (we carried backpacks). Our next stop was a noisy open-air market where I bought a bright *korpeshka*¹¹ and a small, old tea bowl with red ornamentation, something from Chu that will always stay with me—material objects as irrefutable proof of the fact that this day happened for real. You can never be completely sure of your memories being genuine, I know that. But material objects create a channel of communication with the past that activates when we look at these things or touch them. For instance, when we sit in St. Petersburg in 2019, drinking tea from a small Chu bowl from Soviet times.

After visiting the market, we went to the neighboring village of Novotroitskoe (now called Tole Bi aul), where my mother worked in the newspaper *The Chu Valley*. The newspaper does not exist anymore, and we didn't find the building of the editorial office but at least walked down the new Alley of Fame, laid out to commemorate the victory in WWII. The alley reached the Chu River. On the opposite bank, there were children bathing in the water, and on this one, a huge flock of sheep and goats were grazing. I got too close, and

the animals followed me till the shepherd on a horse turned them back.

Then we headed to the other side of the railway. My mother and I had probably never been to these places. A wonderful, magical valley! In one of the yurts by the road, they served fresh mare's milk. We roamed the steppe, red with poppies. Some very thin plants and little white flowers also grew there, but through this web of rare greenery, you could clearly see how dry and cracked the soil there was. I touched it and said to myself, this is my land. Although, of course, strictly speaking, I cannot call it mine. According to my passport, my land is Russia, and this is the Kazakh land. The border between the two lands runs not only through the steppe. It goes through my whole life, dividing it into two halves. The first half is here, where I am now, and the second will always be there, among the flowers.



SURGUT



I am from Surgut. It's an oil city not quite above the Arctic Circle, but within the permafrost zone. Like Kozhevnikovo, it is located on the Ob River, but much further north. We moved there from Kazakhstan in 1985; I was seven at the time. My mother and I travelled through the whole of Kazakhstan by train and then across Siberia, from the South to the North. For a long time, the grey steppe and the horizon outside the window tried to run away from us, until they finally disappeared from sight.

Surgut met us with a severe landscape of the taiga turning into the tundra. The bare, twisted dwarf pines growing in the yellow peat bogs were the strangest; they seemed to have petrified in the middle of a shamanic trance. It was June. After the exuberant blossoming happening at that time in the sun-drenched Chu oasis, the North seemed wild and dull, especially in the period of white nights. The nights are indeed white there. No sun, no moon, just a perfectly white sky—that's how I remember it. We had left everything we had in Kazakhstan and had come here with nothing. We didn't even have curtains and in the beginning, had no money to buy them.

The four of us (my mother, my sister, my father who left shortly after, and I) lay in the only room of our new tiny apartment in a bachelorette-building at 50 Let VLKSM Street,¹² staring into the unusual whiteness of the night and not able to sleep because of the mosquitoes.

I spent all my school years living in this miserable grey house without balconies. Through our windows, you could see a building exactly the same as ours and a rubbish dump, which poor and homeless people rummaged through in search of food. If you looked out of the window, you might have seen a person, unclear whether dead or drunk, lying by the huge dumpster. There was generally very little food, even in rich households, especially in the late 80s and early 90s. But my mother always managed to get something: meat, butter, sugar, pickled sweet peppers, cherry juice, or condensed milk. Right after moving to Surgut, she started working in a newspaper called *To the Victory of Communism* and made many new friends. (Several years later, when the power changed hands and the word communism became seen as almost a swear word, the paper was renamed *The Surgut Tribune*.)

In August, we would head to the forest to pick blueberries, or a bit later to look for cowberries, and in September, with the first snow, we

set out for the swamps to search for cranberries. Cranberries grow in such a peculiar way, as if someone scattered them over the wet yellow moss. So you sit down and pick the red beads off the mound, gradually becoming stupefied by the smell of marsh tea. At home, we covered the berries with a layer of sugar and put them in a wooden box hanging outside the window, which in winter served as a freezer. In Chu it barely ever snowed (the only exception was the abnormally cold winter of 1984 when the city got snowed in and the radiators burst from the cold). In Surgut it would start snowing as early as September, and the snow wouldn't melt before May. In the winter months, the thermometer sometimes would read up to 48 C below zero. On such days because of the thick fog there was zero visibility, and school classes were canceled.

It didn't take me long to get used to the long, dark and frosty winters and to wearing two pairs of warm trousers at once. First, I became a Little Octobrist and then a Young Pioneer.¹³ I wore a scarlet tie, which I ironed with a spluttering iron every morning before going to school. I didn't like the Soviet Pioneers' uniform: a white shirt and a knee-length grey skirt. I wanted to wear the modern-looking, fashionable, very short barrel skirt, which you saw singers wear on the TV. I had two of those. My mom made me one out of some old jeans, and I sewed the other one myself—in manual training class at school, in the sixth grade. In August 1991, I donned this self-made skirt to visit a school friend who also lived at 50 Let VLKSM Street. My friend wasn't at home, and as for me, I wasn't lucky that night: I got raped. I came back home late, all in tears.

My mother filed a police report—the man was soon found and arrested, and my little skirt was put into a special bag for evidence.

Ten days after this incident, the Soviet coup d'état attempt—or the so-called August coup—happened in Moscow, immediately followed by Gorbachev's resignation, the abolishment of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, and the final dissolution of the USSR. On August 22, instead of the red Soviet flag, the new tricolor flag of Russia was raised over the White House in Moscow.

In September, school started again, but the Pioneers' uniform was gone. We were now living in a new country. Somehow these two events—the personal and the political—together became for me a point of no return. The Soviet childhood ended at once, as if a blank wall suddenly emerged out of nowhere, burying the past full of hopes,

expectations, and questions forever.

The early 90s in Surgut were a scary time. Violence, death, drugs, alcohol—all these things became for me an ordinary, everyday experience. The years from the age of 13 to 15 blended for me in a ball of anxiety, from which I somehow had to find a way out. I managed to do it in the end, but not completely. Some sinister creature without a face and name appeared in this period of time and started to eat me away from within. I suffered from anxiety attacks; roughly, it felt like the creature's yellow tentacle teeth were clenching right at my chest, and it was my own madness and cruelty. I left Surgut in the summer of 1995, right after graduating from high school. Together with a classmate of mine, I set out for Moscow. Our mothers came to the train station to see us off and waved from the platform for a long time after the train began to pull away. I felt relief and decided that I would never go back there.

Of course, I did go back later, but only for a while, not to live permanently. I would visit during the holidays and get a summer job on the radio where my sister worked, or join my mother in the Gasworker newspaper. After a time, my mother also moved to Moscow, and this was the end of my trips to Surgut. But the grey gloomy house in 50 Let VLKSM Street wouldn't let me go. In my recurring nightmares, again and again, I found myself in that house. I was opening doors to the darkness of the horrifying apartment, looking down the stairwell, or flying up and down the stairs. There was no way out from the staircase.

On the first floor, there was another apartment—not ours, but horrifying nevertheless—whereas downstairs, in the depth of the stairwell the basement became discernible. I might have seen, or it might just seem to me that in this cavity, there were naked drunk bodies pottering about, two male and one female. In my nightmares though, there was always just a black hole and, like in the entire staircase, nobody alive—just a sheer terrifying presence in which everything gets bogged down. This was my presence. **THIS WAS ME.**

I had been to Surgut twenty years ago, until recently when, in the summer of 2018, I was invited to a summer school in Tyumen. It's 800 kilometers from Tyumen to Surgut—a distance that can be covered by train in a day, so I thought, why not. First, I have a sister living in Surgut. Second, you can't do away with the past easily; you

have to deal with it and learn how to be on close terms with it. This is what I decided for myself. Third, if I think about it, I still have more good memories from this place than bad ones. The memories of the bad and the terrifying, of death and guilt are fragmentary. Although some scenes still stand before my eyes, I mostly repressed them. But the good ones remain on the surface. It's because of the memories of the unusual, the things I missed for twenty years, that when questioned about my origins, I would answer that I am from Surgut.

In addition to the twisted pines, I missed the heavy Northern sky, hanging so low that on the cloudiest days it seemed about to fall on my head. My mom would say that the sky was "pressing down on us," whereas I loved how close the clouds seemed. Northerners walk looking at their feet because, as the sky is so low, the sun is not above you but almost dead ahead, even though it's not bright at all. Most of the time, it's a small, barely distinguishable dim white ball. At night, the sky turns crimson from the multiple flare stacks burning petroleum gas at the nearby oil fields. In the evenings, guests would gather in our cramped apartment and sit wherever they could. My sister played the guitar and sang, "I carried my misery over the spring ice," and we would sing along.

Mother often went on work trips around the area and took me along. We would get up early in the morning, while it was still dark, arrive at the heliport, get into the helicopter together with shift workers and fly to some gas compressor plant, a cattle camp, or to the national village of reindeer herders. Surgut is built on marshland; there are few roads—and so helicopters were used most often for travelling around the area. Taking us on board to places that were hard to reach, the helicopters didn't stop the blades, and you had to do your best to hold on, bending to the ground, so as not to get blown away by the wind—especially in winter, standing on the ice. The roar was so loud that you could feel the veins beating at your temples. As we climbed the small ladder, we wrote down our names in a special notebook in case of an accident. We even took our cat with us when there was no one to leave it with; the cat sat patiently in my mother's arms, with its eyes rolled out and its ears pressed back. Flying slightly higher than bird's-eye view, I clung to the round porthole and watched the bright yellow and blue peatlands of the boundless North.

Sometimes I imagined how I would talk to some guy from Moscow about Surgut. He wouldn't believe me of course, because it was all so unreal. Even I myself doubted all of it; everything seemed surreal to

me, including the pale opaque sun, the barely audible hum of unknown source, as if it was coming from the flaring sky and, surely, the oil. I thought that oil came from dinosaurs, and I imagined the reverse process: the long, thick, totally black neck of a prehistoric monster with a tiny head growing out of an oil swamp. I saw oil spills and the scorched black earth around: black tree trunks, black moss, black cowberry bushes.

A boy I was in love with in primary school became an oil worker and died after falling off an oil derrick.

People from Surgut referred to the non-northern territories of Russia as the Mainland. Youth, love and playing the guitar in the yard—yes, everything must have been for real over there. Instead, here reigned loneliness and permafrost, oil and swamps; you had no solid ground beneath your feet; there were no borders. Where the forest ends, the tundra begins, and beyond lies an impassable swamp, then a former Gulag camp, a snow field, the Gulf of Ob, and then the End of the World; the grey and cold Arctic ocean (I've never seen it but could feel its proximity).

A land of no law, no rules, no support nor hope—nothing. There's something about it that suits me well.

It was during the summer school on contemporary philosophy, I was teaching the stream on new ontologies, and I had decided to talk about oil—something perhaps crazy; I related it to the unconscious, to our ancestral past, to something deeply forgotten. The black substance became an embodiment of the repressed memories of the Earth. When school ended, I got on the train in Tyumen that was heading north. This route was very familiar; there is only one railway leading from the Mainland to our region, and its final stop is Novy Urengoy. The names of the stations are a mix of Soviet and old Ostyak words: Komsomol Youth, Demyanka, Salym, Kuty Yakh, Pyaty Yakh, Ult Yagun, Kogalym, Noyabrsk, Purpe. In 1985, we arrived in Surgut on the same train, and later I would go there and back many more times, making this three-day journey alone from Moscow as a student.

The main section of the road is the railway bridge over the Ob on the way to Surgut. When I saw it for the first time as a child, I was stunned. In this place, the river is wide as a sea, and you cannot see the banks. For a long while, the train loudly tears along the bridge over the water. It's important not to miss the mysterious island in the middle. Drinking a strong black tea from a faceted glass with a glass

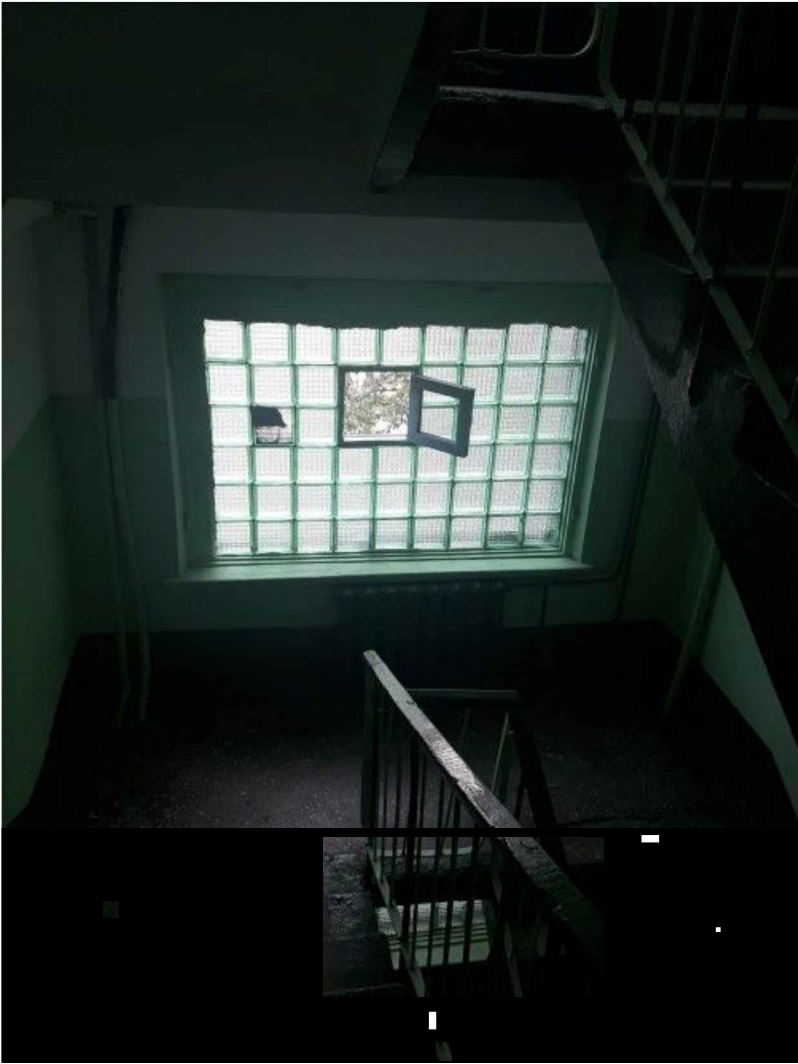
holder, I'm looking out the window. And sure enough, the island is where it used to be. The river sea is as breathtaking as it always was. Also, over the years that I had been away, a new cable-stayed road bridge was built right next to the railway, one of the longest in Russia: the Surgut Bridge, over two kilometers long. When I was young, there was no road transport connection with the mainland; the only way was to cross the river by ferry in summer and on the ice in winter. It's gotten completely dark already; my sister is on her way to meet me at the station. The train is approaching the city, which is surrounded by a ring of flambeau lights burning in the dark.

Surgut has become quite modern. Multi-storey buildings have replaced optimistic and laconic Soviet architecture, and behind the Oilmen's Park, a ring road emerged where there used to be a forest I loved, which led you nowhere as if forming a portal from the city center into eternity. But the city is still beautiful; some things remain unchanged. My sister took me to the Botanical Garden across the Saima River. When I lived here, instead of the Botanical Garden there was merely a wild area with a forest, where everyone went for a walk. Now it has been spruced up and fitted with walking paths. A caring person and a social activist, my sister fought for a long time to ensure this place would not be asphalted.

50 Let VLKSM Street is situated close to the center of the Builders quarter where there used to be a big shop, a culture house, a sports complex with a swimming pool, and a restaurant. Having found all these reference points in their places, I took the road that I remembered very well. In the yard, to the right, there was a small children's library where I once asked for the book *Dingo the Wild Dog*,¹⁴ but they didn't give it to me because I was too young. My old school was to the left. And straight ahead—there were grey houses full of tiny apartments. I found mine. The street door was now an iron one with a combination lock. I waited on the porch (in the past, there used to be a bench, which was now gone) until someone entered the building, looking at me suspiciously, and I followed them in. Inside, the staircase was all green, with green walls and green glass block windows letting in magical green light. Going up the stairs that led to the terrifying apartment, I held on to the rail, my legs were shaking, my head dizzy. On my way up to the fifth floor, I checked all the flights of stairs without finding any real evidence of the nightmares that had tormented me all those years.

I'm not afraid anymore. This is my past, my home. It has substance;

the dark evil force that dwells in it belongs to me and comes from me and not from the house with its green windows. It is as native as the blood pulsing through my body. Every little thing can be good and bad, very good and very bad.



HOW TO BE FROM HERE

In Soviet times, we were taught at school that every person has two homelands: the large one and the small one. The small homeland is one's hometown or village of origin, and the large one is the country. The small and large homelands indicate two different levels; at the first level, as living beings we are attached to a certain settlement; at the second, as citizens, we are symbolically bound to a certain territorial whole. Both the form and content of this whole can change, the border can be shifted or reshaped, but the patriotic machine continues working non-stop. When the USSR collapsed, my large homeland disappeared and forcefully took the smaller one with it. Our schools began to teach children how to love Russia, their new country. This didactic tension wasn't left unnoticed by conceptual artists. In 2005, Dmitry A. Prigov, together with Iraida Yusupova and Alexander Dolgin, recorded a media-opera in which, accompanied by meditation music with elements of Russian folklore, Prigov attempts to convince a cat to repeat after him and say "Russia." The cat resists and tries to flee, but the artist patiently puts it back and continues to teach it. I think I was like that cat. I can say "Russia," but this word came to my language from somewhere else.

In Russian culture, the idea of "teaching how to love one's homeland" is perceived as a threat. The first associations that come to mind are violence, hazing, and torture in prison colonies and detention facilities. The closer the war—in Ukraine, in Syria, in Georgia, in Chechnya, and in other wars and military conflicts where Russia is engaged—the more talks there are about patriotic education. In such moments, the large homeland becomes a generic name for an ideological narrative bringing heterogeneous elements together into a single complex of affective tuning of both the territory and the people. It mobilizes the population and calls it to rise as one against a real or imaginary enemy. According to Irina Sandomirskaya, in the pantheon of the Soviet ideology' Motherland was one of the main deities that required human sacrifice. As part of this narrative, death in war was presented as a sacred gift.¹⁵ The same rhetoric can be observed in other states when they transition into the state of military mobilization.

"When a state sends people to death, it calls itself Motherland." This quote is accredited to different authors, including Bertolt Brecht. In 1916, still in his teenage years, he was asked to write an essay at school, for which the topic was taken from Horace: *Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori* (It is sweet and honorable to die for the fatherland).

In the essay Brecht wrote:

The claim that dying is supposedly sweet and honourable can only be seen as a form of cheap propaganda for a specific purpose. Parting with one's life is always hard, both in bed and on the battlefield, and even more so for young people in their prime. Only empty-headed chumps can be so vain as to say that it is easy to slip through these dark gates, and even then, only while they are sure that their last hour is still far away.¹⁶

For this, he almost got expelled from school.

If we had not known who Brecht was, we could easily arrive at a wrong conclusion and interpret these statements of the young playwright as an expression of his indifference or a complete lack of patriotism (regardless of our stance on it). However, Brecht was a highly engaged author, a communist and an antifascist. It is not that his non-acceptance of the patriotic officialdom and militarist ideology, which at the time was gaining momentum in Germany, is based on the belief that homeland is merely a myth invented by propagandists in need of cannon fodder. Simply, a homeland is not the same as a state or even a territory, upon which the official representatives of the state (or oppressors, in Brecht's terms) laid their hands. Homeland is neither a state nor a führer. The regime unfairly appropriates its name, identifies itself with the homeland, turning the land into landowning and people into a population. The machine of oppression and violence engages in high-flown false rhetoric meant to turn people into fools, jingoists, and Nazis. To love a homeland in spite of this ideological machine means to take the risk and call things

by their proper names, i.e. to peel off the rhetoric from the subject itself.

In 1933, addressing his fellow German antifascists from exile, Brecht wrote a pamphlet called "Five Difficulties in Writing the Truth." The pamphlet was a guide for those who made a decision to tell the truth in a world ruled by lies. "Today anyone who wants to fight lies and ignorance and to write the truth has to overcome at least five difficulties. He must have the courage to write the truth, even though it is suppressed everywhere; the cleverness to recognise it, even though it is disguised everywhere; the skill to make it fit for use as a weapon; the judgment to select those in whose hands it will become effective; the cunning to spread it amongst them. These difficulties are great for those who write under Fascism, but they also exist for those who were driven out or have fled, indeed, even for those who write in the lands

of bourgeois freedom.”¹⁷ Brecht especially stressed the importance of the fifth element, which is the cunning: one has to write in such a way that the truth reads between the lines.

Ziffel and Kalle, two characters from his play *Conversations in Exile*, discuss the notions of homeland and patriotism. Over a cup of coffee, they exchange extremely skeptical remarks. One of them confesses that it has always seemed strange to him to have to love the country where one pays taxes. The other suggests it can be explained by the lack of choice: “It’s as if you loved the woman you married, rather than marrying the woman you loved. Me, I’d like to have a choice. Let’s say I’m shown a bit of France, a yard of England, two Swiss mountains and a Norwegian fjord. I’d point and say ‘I’ll take that as a country.’ And I’d love it. But the way things are now, loving your country is like loving the window you’ve been thrown out of.”¹⁸ This is, of course, quite a cunning play.

Russians say, “one does not choose a homeland,” and then throw themselves out of the window. How many waves of migration from Russia have there been? One, two, three—it is now the fourth one that is taking place. People leave for another country to obtain a new passport and start a new life. At the new place, first they unpack their suitcases and then their hearts, and within their hearts they find their homeland that does not look anything like an imposed top-down and officially documented unity of the government and the people from which they fled. Thus, Brecht was born in the German city of Augsburg and spent fifteen years—between 1933 and 1948—outside his home country. He called emigration *the higher school of dialectics*, and wrote the following about his homeland:

I, Bertolt Brecht, come from the black forests.
My mother carried me into the cities
While I lay in her body. And the coldness of the forests
Will stay in me until I die.¹⁹

Entering a relationship of mutual negation with the homeland, emigration recreates it through itself in the new place, reestablishing its locus—such is the dialectics of exile. Homeland does not exist without its people, but it can move freely with them around the world. The coldness of our forests, the breadth of our steppes is always with us. Unpacking on new planets, just like now, we will continue to take out and put on a prominent spot our small Chu bowls from Earth.

It was always hard for me to register myself, to answer the question of

where I came from. Which one is my large homeland: Russia, the USSR, or Kazakhstan? There isn't much clarity with the small one either. If I am constantly moving from one place to another, how can I decide which of them and on what grounds should I call one my homeland—the village where I was born, the steppe (which is associated with the very first, joyful and intimate memories of my childhood), or the city where I spent all my school years? I have lived in Moscow for the longest part of my life—for fifteen years in total—but I cannot bring myself to say I am from Moscow. Moscow does not allow anyone to take root; native Muscovites are a separate, closed, privileged group, to which you are supposed to belong or not by the right of birth, and we remain the newcomers in this imperious city forever. But if one really wants to, they can consider Moscow as their homeland, as well as any other place that you would love with all your soul.

What does it mean for a place to be loved with all of one's soul? Here, a brief introduction into the theory of soul is needed. Aristotle taught that there are three types of soul: the vegetative, or nutritive soul; the animal, or sensible; and the rational one. The soul for him was not what flies to heaven after death but what makes the living alive. A plant only has a nutritive soul; an animal both nutritive and sensible; and a human being, according to Aristotle, has all three kinds of soul. At least the first two of them (nutritive and sensible) are inseparable from the body. The vegetative soul is responsible for nutrition and reproduction; the animal, for sensations and movement; and the rational, for thinking. Hegel (as well as many others, but I chose Hegel's take on this, because it would have been most appreciated by Brecht) singled out movement as the main principle of distinction between the life of plants and animals: while plants are bound to certain places thanks to their root systems, the first thing animals do is to lift off and leave their place. Hegel called this the power of negation. This is how, according to him, the self-sufficiency and subjectivity of the animal is manifested, as it freely determines itself in choosing a place to be and a place to go. The animal never coincides with itself; it has to be not only here but also there.²⁰

If we combine the Aristotelian idea of the three souls with the Hegelian definition of the plant through attachment to—and the animal through disconnection from—the earth, then the coexistence of the animal and the vegetative souls in the human being can be represented as a dialectical contradiction between the desire to get

there (expansion), and the will to stay here (to settle down and take root). It is not inaction or inertia but precisely an expression of will; the plant in its own way expresses its stubbornness of existence and persistence through time, which Spinoza called *conatus essendi*. When I say that any place that you would love with all your soul can become your homeland, I think about the process of taking root. For a homeland to be loved with the fullness of one's soul means it has touched not only the sensible, but also the most intimate, the vegetative part of the soul. This is the part that makes us attached to the land we came to love—but our attachment is not absolute. If we detach, a part of the nutritive soul that once took root in the place will not die off; it will travel with us as a memory of the homeland, even if it is a memory of something completely forgotten, which does not keep any representation but only the form of the plant's sensuality, something like a kernel with no further determination.

Let us suppose that the content of the rational part of the soul is determined by the way of synchronizing the oscillations of the animal and the plant, which is unique to every human being. We take off, depart, and attach to other places—and then take off again to come back to the previous ones. In the book *What Is Philosophy?* Deleuze and Guattari call such movements the formation of territories, deterritorialization (taking off), and reterritorialization (attaching to the new place):

We already know the importance in animals of those activities that consist in forming territories, in abandoning or leaving them, and even in re-creating territory on something of a different nature (ethologists say that an animal's partner or friend is the "equivalent of a home" or that the family is a "mobile territory"). All the more so for the hominid: from its act of birth, it deterritorializes its front paw, wrests it from the earth to turn it into a hand, and reterritorializes it on branches and tools. A stick is, in turn, a deterritorialized branch. We need to see how everyone, at every age, in the smallest things as in the greatest challenges, seeks a territory, tolerates or carries out deterritorializations, and is reterritorialized on almost anything—memory, fetish, or dream. Refrains express these powerful dynamisms: my cabin in Canada ... farewell, I am leaving ... yes, it's me; I had to come back...²¹

One very interesting detail here is that Deleuze and Guattari do not talk about taking root. For them, territory, deterritorialization, and reterritorialization determine in the first place the animal's life—

although these concepts can concern anything at all, as they play a key role in the social anthropology of power and society and in the analysis of the relationship between a polis and a clan, empire and indigenous people, settlement and nomadism, labour and capital. What matters are the three types of movement that differentiate territory from land in the animal's life. We mark our territory, equip the dwelling, put up boundary posts, and then it is us again who go beyond them towards a new no-man's land (deterritorialization), which perhaps we will call our own (reterritorialization).

The animal is a metaphor, a conceptual character, a performer of their own peculiar refrain (one of such characters is, for instance, Brecht's refugee, but it can also pertain to a whole nation). The concept of refrain is very important here: Deleuze and Guattari use it to designate a form of relation of the animal to the land. Every animal has its own song that shapes or designates its territory and, generally speaking, its place; this is their refrain of the home, which in fact can be anything—this steppe covered with poppies can be my homeland, or my home; this tree can be my home; you can be my home, and I might sing "I love you" many times. In my understanding, to love means to attach the soul (plant, animal, human, or other) to anything. In Deleuze's vocabulary, in this particular case, this will be territorialisation and reterritorialization: you settle here, you touch the soil, and you sing a song—this is my land. Yes, it is from the animals' rites of securing their territory that art emerges:

Perhaps art begins with the animal, at least with the animal that carves out a territory and constructs a house (both are correlative, or even one and the same, in what is called a habitat). The territory-house system transforms a number of organic functions—sexuality, procreation, aggression, feeding. But this transformation does not explain the appearance of the territory and the house; rather it is the other way around: the territory implies the emergence of pure sensory qualities, of sensibilia that cease to be merely functional and become expressive features, making possible a transformation of functions. No doubt this expressiveness is already diffused in life, and the simple field of lilies might be said to celebrate the glory of the skies. But with the territory and the house it becomes constructive and erects ritual monuments of an animal mass that celebrates qualities before extracting new casualties and finalities from them. This emergence of pure sensory qualities is already art, not only in the treatment of external

materials but in the body's postures and colors, in the songs and cries that mark out the territory.²²

In order to illustrate the emergence of art from the animal's territorial self-identification through a refrain, Deleuze and Guattari provide a touching example:

Every morning the *Scenopoetes dentirostris*, a bird of the Australian rainforests, cuts leaves, makes them fall to the ground, and turns them over so that the paler, internal side contrasts with the earth. In this way, it constructs a stage for itself like a ready-made; and directly above, on a creeper or a branch, while fluffing out the feathers beneath its beak to reveal their yellow roots, it sings a complex song made up from its own notes and, at intervals, those of other birds that it imitates: it is a complete artist. This is not synesthesia in the flesh but blocks of sensations in the territory—colors, postures, and sounds that sketch out a total work of art. These sonorous blocs are refrains; but there are also refrains of posture and color, and postures and colors are always being introduced into refrains: bowing low, straightening up, dancing in a circle and lines of colors. The whole of the refrain is the being of sensation. Monuments are refrains. In this respect art is continually haunted by the animal.²³

It is not only art but also philosophy that Deleuze and Guattari define through refrains:

What is the Fatherland or Homeland invoked by the thinker, by the philosopher or artist? Philosophy is inseparable from a Homeland to which the a priori, the innate, or the memory equally attest. But why is this fatherland unknown, lost, or forgotten, turning the thinker into an Exile? What will restore an equivalent of territory, valid as a home? What will be philosophical refrains? What is thought's relationship with the earth?²⁴

Philosophy is aimed at finding the origin or the source, the place where we came from. A priori, the innate or the memory are considered trophies (like my tea bowl from Chu) that connect us to this place, whatever it may be. In Plato, for instance, it is Hades, the afterlife. As Socrates explained to friends and disciples on the eve of his execution, it is from there that the soul arrives with all the memories that are given to us as the eternal ideas: the good, the just, etc.²⁵ The soul in the living body is an envoy of death, no less.

Believing that we have an origin that has been lost or forgotten again

and again, moves philosophy into the register of the nostalgic. It looks back, toward the home that it might have never had. Of course, when Deleuze and Guattari mention the philosophical refrains of home, they don't think as much about Plato as Heidegger, who quotes Novalis in his book *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude*: "Philosophy is really homesickness, an urge to be at home everywhere."²⁶

"To be at home everywhere—what does that mean?" wonders Heidegger.

Not merely here or there, nor even simply in every place, in all places taken together one after the other. Rather, to be at home everywhere means to be at once and at all times within the whole. We name this "within the whole" and its character of wholeness the world. We are, and to the extent that we are, we are always waiting for something. We are always called upon by something as a whole. This "as a whole" is the world. We are asking: What is that—world? This is where we are driven in our homesickness: to being as a whole. Our very being is this restlessness. We have somehow always already departed toward this whole, or better, we are always already on the way to it. But we are driven on, i.e., we are somehow simultaneously torn back by something, resting in a gravity that draws us downward. We are underway to this "as a whole." We ourselves are this underway, this transition, this "neither the one nor the other." What is this oscillating to and from between this neither/nor? Not the one and likewise not the other, this indeed, and yet not, and yet indeed.²⁷

The trouble with Heidegger, according to Deleuze and Guattari, is that he unsuccessfully "reterritorialized on Nazism." Nostalgia for the source made him lose his way:

He wanted to rejoin the Greeks through the Germans, at the worst moment in their history: is there anything worse, said Nietzsche, than to find oneself facing a German when one was expecting a Greek? How could Heidegger's concepts not be intrinsically sullied by an abject reterritorialization? Unless all concepts include this gray zone and indiscernibility where for a moment the combatants on the ground are confused, and the thinker's tired eye mistakes one for the other—not only the German for a Greek but the fascist for a creator of existence and freedom.²⁸

Reterritorialization in itself is natural and not erroneous in any way: everyone reterritorializes whatever suits them. But in Heidegger's

case, this action results in a wrong choice: “He got the wrong people, earth, and blood,”²⁹ got the wrong homeland and origin. It turns out that one actually can choose a homeland. A person can also choose the people, earth, and blood for themselves. The question of how one can love their homeland without becoming a fascist or a nationalist is directly linked to the question of how to choose one’s people, earth, and blood.

Building upon Heidegger’s negative case, Deleuze and Guattari propose their version of reterritorialization. One should side, not with a triumphant People, on whose behalf the government with a führer at the helm speaks, but instead with a small people, with the oppressed and excluded: “For the race summoned forth by art or philosophy is not the one that claims to be pure but rather an oppressed, bastard, lower, anarchical, nomadic, and irremediably minor race.”³⁰ It does not necessarily have to be a human race. The Deleuzian thinker declares an endangered species or a persecuted tribe his homeland:

... becomes Indian, and never stops becoming so—perhaps ‘so that’ the Indian who is himself Indian becomes something else and tears himself away from his own agony. We think and write for animals themselves. We become animal so that the animal also becomes something else ... Becoming is always double, and it is this double becoming that constitutes the people to come and the new earth.³¹

Thus, Deleuze and Guattari believe that the right, true reterritorialization is the one in utopia—though not a utopia but the utopia of the future, as opposed to the one of the past. We declare our homeland a people or land that does not yet exist. It is perhaps not about finding them but more about inventing (just like Kafka invents the mouse folk: the writer’s becoming a mouse is needed in order to engage the mouse in becoming something else). This land is invented for those who are excluded from the fascist-like unity of the victorious people with the state and the government or for those who voluntarily left the territory marked with the flags of such a unity.

Even though these people do not yet exist, one could imagine a nomadic tribe of exiles of all kinds. Thus, Andrey Platonov gathers such people in his novel *Soul*:

Turkmen, Karakalpaks, a few Uzbeks, Kazakhs, Persians, Kurds, Baluchis, and people who had forgotten who they were ... runaways and orphans from everywhere, and old, exhausted slaves

who had been cast out. There were women who had betrayed their husbands and then vanished ... young girls who came and never left because they loved men who had suddenly died and they didn't want to marry anyone else. And people who didn't know God, people who mocked the world. There were criminals.³²

When the character of the book recognizes his own folk in this description and says that he was born there, the utopian people become real. Literature can indeed be powerful enough to do something like this.

It is important to note that, with regard to the double movement of de- and reterritorialization, we cannot say which one is primary: "perhaps every territory presupposes a prior deterritorialization, or everything happens at the same time."³³

That is, the movement may precede the source, the origin, or even produce it. For Deleuze and Guattari's criticism of Freud and Lacan's psychoanalysis, this statement brings territory and deterritorialization closer to the idea of repression, hand in hand with the return of the repressed: prior to repression, the repressed itself might not exist; together with repression, the repressed immediately returns—not from somewhere but from nowhere, from its non-being. There is no original unconscious matter to be repressed. The unconscious, our animal soul, is inscribed into the circle of the retroactivity of the origin—it emerges after, *après coup*.

Plants work differently, so it can be very confusing. So let it be. The fact is that the plant's life cycle does not involve moving from its place. A flower does not have a refrain, even if it "celebrates the glory of the skies." It never leaves its place; it is attached directly to the earth without the mediation of territory, which it would have to secure. The animal has a completely different relationship with the origin. Finding its place in a certain territory has nothing to do with growing from the earth. We can say that the animal's life form implies a retroactive source; the animal has to leave in order to come back here or somewhere else. Every time we animals come back to a new place (and if we come back to the same one, it is already renewed by our return, like Berlin in Kierkegaard's *Repetition*).

Deleuze and Guattari restrict the notions of earth and territory to the animal movement without considering the plants in this regard at all. This is, surely, justified, as it is exactly the metaphor of the plant—the initial attachment to the place, taking root—that serves as a foundation for the nostalgic vision of the large and small homelands.

The far-right ideology, conservatism, and nationalism are based on the image of a man-plant rooted deep in the ground, an image which was taken too literally. If it were to happen in reality, it would turn out to be absolutely unviable. The only place to which we are initially attached is the placenta. Our lives as separate beings begin with cutting the umbilical cord. At first, humans are still dependent and helpless, while other mammals begin to move actively as soon as they leave the mother's body. Therefore, the refrains of home and lost paradise, including the search for the forgotten origin of the philosophical truth, are translated in the language of psychoanalysis as the nostalgia for the mother's womb, which in the end coincides with the death drive. If we translate it back to the language of philosophy, Heidegger defines the homesickness through finitude and being-toward-death. We want the mother-land to take us back into the womb.

The notion of the animal helps Deleuze and Guattari to block fascist-like trends of thought. The logic of taking off and settling in a certain territory is the foundation of the new geophilosophy, for which the transfer of utopia from the past to the future is fundamental. However, I feel concerned about the plant part of our soul, which takes root here and there. It is as if it were denied the right to exist. We are becoming transnational, like capital; we take planes, we sleep in hotels, cross borders, and wander everywhere like tourists. It is as if there is no homeland, and there should not be one. Thus, Sandomirskaya dismantles the narrative of both the large and the small homelands as a dangerous myth by reconstructing traditional Soviet refrains:

The character's childhood takes place in a small space, which is most often a village. This small space is home/shelter, the parents' house/the fold, village of origin, place of origin. This space is inhabited by family and relatives, mother, father. It is protected by the house. The character is surrounded by the familiar: voices, faces, customs he is used to. At home, he is surrounded by nature he knows: familiar Russian birches, familiar forests and fields. High above, wherever you look, there is the familiar sky, the boundless native land where he freely breathes the native air. All of it is native land, the small homeland. The character grows up and leaves his home. He is attracted by the new life, new opportunities, and the childhood world seems too small. He moves to the city and begins his new life in a world where everything is unfamiliar

and unknown. However, in his thoughts he constantly comes back to childhood memories. The homeland pulls/draws him back. Having moved to the city, he broke off from the roots, lost connection with the earth and cannot take root; like a plant, he has been transplanted into the new soil and is withering.³⁴

Sandomirskaya calls the described figure tumbleweed (which in Russian also means a rolling stone). However, this metaphor is not completely accurate. Strictly speaking, tumbleweed does not wither when it detaches from its root. Large balls tumbling away in the wind across a steppe or a field are formed when the plant dies. Dry stems break away from the root or start moving together with the root, catching other plants and dispersing seeds as they roll. This is an active undead life form. It does not have a longing for its roots and cannot have one. Breaking off, tumbleweed transitions to a new form of existence. It is dead as a plant, but at the same time it moves and reproduces on the fly, like a peculiar animal.

This complex image serves a very simple purpose: indicating that the basic model of the journey of human life as breaking off from the roots is present in culture—not only in Soviet culture but also in the world—as well as underlining the related idea of being able to return to the roots, to press oneself to them and even reattach to them. But the idea that a human being has genuine, authentic roots that precede any movement in reality does not correspond to anything.

However, it does not mean that the tradition of refrains for a small homeland should be discarded. It is quite the opposite. Homeland was sold out too hastily to those who are always ready to grab it, mark it as their own, build a wall, and start a war. They also appropriated the principle of rootedness, linking it with the alleged authenticity of origin as what was here before us: someone has already declared this land their territory, and we can only grow into it as dead bodies.

In fact, we do not yet understand what the plant, the nutritive soul, is and what it is capable of. Very few people talk about the politics of plants. One of them is Michael Marder who dedicated a great number of works to the plant form of life. In his essay *Resist Like A Plant!* he gives an example of environmental activists tying themselves to trees that are about to be cut down. In a sense, these activists recreate the form of existence of these trees: stubbornness, attachment to a place. The same direct transfer of the plant form of resistance into politics is done by the Occupy movement and similar forms of protest

occupation of territories. “And when protesters pitch tents in parks or on city squares, they reinvent the strange modern rootedness in the uprooted world of the metropolis, existentially signifying their discontent by merely being there.”³⁵ Workers who oust their bosses and occupy the factory or students seizing the university building make a decision of staying here instead of leaving for somewhere else. In Shiyes, Arkhangelsk region, Russian authorities decided to destroy many kilometers of forests and swamps and transform this territory into a huge waste deposit. They met with strong resistance, however. People from the region stood up for their land and said that they would not leave. And they hadn’t. Almost every day, they were being arrested and beaten but, paradoxically, their number was growing. More and more people arrived from other parts of Russia and joined their struggle, which became plant-like, in the sense that not only stubbornness and persistence characterize a plant soul, but also its capacity to expand, to grow. People were growing in place of the forest that the government came to cut down, the forest they loved.

Indeed, this form of politics has its limitations, because what is really *rooted* is not the people, but the system of oppression against which they rose. Russians could say: *If you tie yourself to the tree, they will simply cut you down together with the tree.* In this struggle, all means are good enough; if you cannot love your homeland as a human being, if the enemy pushes you out, love it like a plant—stay, resist; or love it like a beast—run, attack, or escape, but whatever you do, don’t leave them your homeland; pack it in your heart and take it with you wherever you go.

Love your homeland in such a way that the soil and plants with their roots are on our side. Like it happens in guerrilla wars—when it is not only the people but also the forest, the grass and the animals that rise together to fight fascism. These are our people. Such a war is not similar in any way to the one that the state wages on the neighbor; the guerrilla war is not declared by the government but by the people that are not at all identical with it and that comprise all human and non-human beings—plants, animals, fungi, hay, stones, etc.—inhabiting this land. The haystack will hide my great-grandmother, the tree will stand in the way, the beast will terrify the enemy, and the swamp will drag down those who came here to kill. Apart from the guerrilla resistance, there is also the invisible, quiet resistance of civilians, those who do not leave their place when someone fights on their land. In Russian, the word “civilians,” as opposed to “militaries,” translates

literally as “those who live in peace;” they live in peace precisely when there is war, despite the war. They cannot and do not want to leave; they have their house here, their cow, their dog, the garden that no one will water if they take off and become refugees. Civilians stay here because they take root.

As Brecht proposed, one has to fight for one’s homeland with cunning and truth. Our initial animal rootlessness and homelessness makes the inner black forest or steppe that we carry with us ever more valuable. To love means not merely to (re)territorialize like an animal but also to take root like a plant. It does not have to be our own root; we can create an artistic alliance of the animal and the vegetative and plant flowers all over the land that we love with all our soul. Across all states’ borders tying us to a certain territory by protocol, the love for homeland must be free, so that every time, coming back to a new, unprecedented place, every one of us can say:

I am from here.

Saint-Petersburg—Berlin, 2019

Acknowledgments

I am thankful to Ala Younis and Maha Maamoun for encouraging me to write this text, Sami Khatib for discussing the ideas with me, Bulat Khanov for reading the draft, Kulshat Medeuova for my trip to Kazakhstan, Hannah Hurzig for bringing me to Siberia, Igor Chubarov and Vladimir Welminski for travelling with me to Kozhevnikovo, my mother Galina Bobrovskaya and my sister Elena Goncharova for sharing with me the past and the present, and my husband Andriy Zmeul for his love and care.

Endnotes

1. Translation of the song in <https://lyricstranslate.com/de/chudesnaya-strana-чудесная-страна-wonderful-country.html>
2. Izba - a Russian traditional log house.
3. Malyshka - "a little one" (Rus.).
4. Banya - a Russian wooden bathhouse.
5. Boorsoq, bauyrsaq, baursak – a local fried dessert.
6. Soviet troops stayed in Afghanistan from 1979 to 1989.
7. Perestroika - a process of political reformation, democratization, and demilitarization of the Soviet Union during the 1980s, initiated by Mikhail Gorbachev, which ended with the de-communisation and the dissolution of the State in 1991.
8. Aul – a village in Central Asia.
9. The school was named after Anton Makarenko (1888-1939), a famous Soviet educator.
10. Katyusha – a popular Soviet song from WWII.
11. Kurak korpe - a traditional Kazakh patchwork quilt.
12. 50 let VLKSM – "50 years of Komsomol" (a Soviet political organization for young people from 14 to 28 years of age).
13. Little Octobrists – a Soviet youth organization for children between 7 and 9 years of age; Young Pioneers – for children between 9 and 15.
14. *Dingo The Wild Dog* (1939) – a Soviet novel on the first love, by Ruvim Frayerman.
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28. *What Is Philosophy?* pp. 108-109.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 109.
30. *Ibid.*
31. *Ibid.*
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33. *What Is Philosophy?*, p. 68.
34. *Kniga o rodine*, p. 53.
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Colophon

How to love a homeland
by Oxana Timofeeva

This publication is the eighth in the Kayfa ta series. The text was originally authored in Russian.

Commissioning editors
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Design template
Julie Peeters

Publisher
Kayfa ta
www.kayfa-ta.com

Cover artwork by Jumana Emil Abboud

Images are courtesy of Oxana Timofeeva.

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Kayfa ta is an independent publishing initiative founded in 2012 by Maha Maamoun and Ala Younis.

Russians could say: If you tie yourself to the tree, they will simply cut you down together with the tree. At this struggle, all means are good enough: if you cannot love your homeland as a human being, if the enemy pushes you out, love it like a plant – stay, resist; or love it like a beast – run, attack, or escape, but don't leave them your homeland; just pack it in your heart and take it with you wherever you go.

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