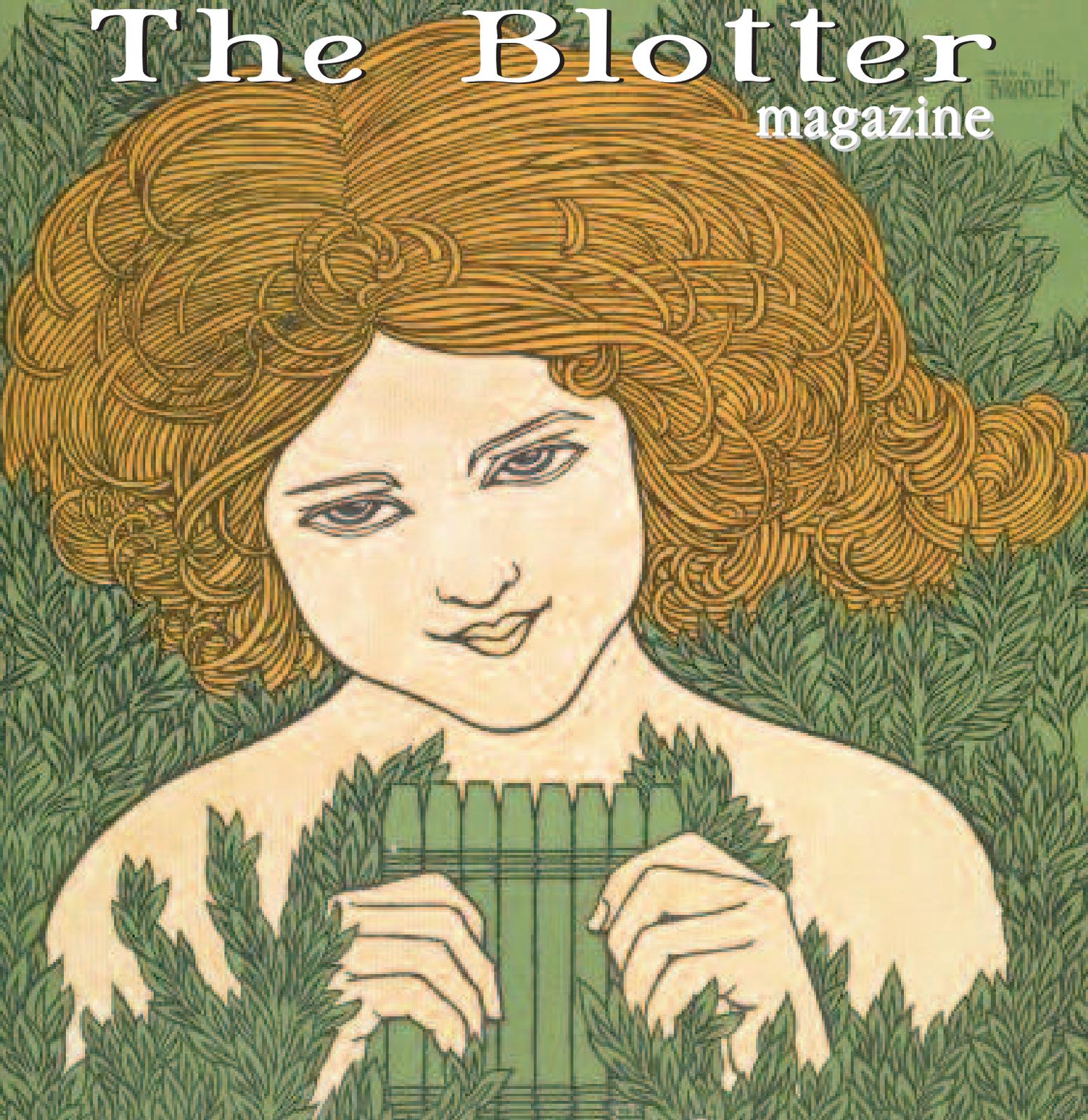


July 2022

The Blotter

magazine



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Olivia Somers..Social Media and Art Director
T.J. Garrett.....Staff Photographer

Subscriptions Contact:
Martin K. Smith
M_K_Smith@yahoo.com
919.286.7760

Advertisers Contact:
Martin K. Smith
M_K_Smith@yahoo.com
919.286.7760

Submissions and Editorial Business to:
Jenny Haniver
mermaid@blotterrag.com

Garrison Somers, Editor-in-Chief
chief@blotterrag.com

919.869.7110 (business hours only! – call for
information about snail-mail submissions)

Marketing & Public Relations Contact:
Marilyn Fontenot
marilyngfontenot@gmail.com

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“Why write if no one reads what you’re writing?”

This particular question recently passed my radar on social media, and nagged at me a little bit. Firstly, because I think I misunderstood the direction of the question. I thought they meant “if I never get published, and therefore don’t have a *readership*.” But it turned out after some investigation that they literally meant no one. Not one reader, ever – not a friend who is interested in the things you do, no family member who peeks over your shoulder while you’re typing, no significant other who wonders what happens to you after dinner when you’re at the computer. No one.

And that made me both sad on the one hand, and quite certain that this is the wrong question on the other. The correct wording should be “for whom are you writing?” because if you think no one is reading, well, think again. Who is your audience? Not, “who do you want your audience to be?” or, “how can I / why can’t I sell more books?” Those questions are fun, all-consuming in our thoughts, but they are not part of the existential angst that we bring on ourselves in the act of writing.

You are your first audience, your first reader. You’re the alpha reader. You have to be the reason you write; your enjoyment of the tale, the verse, the connection between people, the places you have or haven’t been. And I feel like further explanation for this conclusion is both necessary and pointless. Unless you’re Jack Nicholson typing *all work and no play* in an empty hotel in the dead of winter, then of course you’re reading what you write. You are judging your work. You are enjoying the telling and the tale, and you have the unique luxury of being able to fix the things you don’t like (or at least mark them immediately for later).

We need to have a personal reason for scribbling (or so I believe) and it ought to be (in my opinion) because we enjoy reading. Love writing because you love reading. Appreciate it. Stick to it. Improve it, by reading. Reading almost everything, consuming words like all the meals we ever imagined, bad and good. And then read our own work and see if the flavors you create are something in that...palette. Hopefully, something we like, but if it’s something we don’t like, then we’re ready to make progress.

If it is hateful, miserable, boring to do this, well...there are a myriad of

things to do to fix those moods, including reading more of those things you enjoy. So pull over into those lanes and have more fun at this. After all, it's a game. It's just a game.

There are a plethora of aphorisms I could plug in here, but you've heard them all before, and they aren't always helpful to repeat. Be gracious when you hear them from someone other than me, though. Your people mean well. And I'm not your cheerleader, your critic nor your coach. I'm just another slob out here – typing, typing. I don't really know any more than you already do, and I have no more good sense than you, because I, too, picked up a pencil and started to look for a piece of paper to tell a story, once upon a time. For good or bad.

Garry - chief@blotterrag.com

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The Blotter Magazine, Inc. (again, a 501(c)3 non-profit) is an education concern. Our primary interest is the furthering of creative writing and fine arts, with the magazine being a means to that end. We publish in the first half of each month and enjoy a free circulation throughout the Southeast and some other places, too. Submissions are always welcome, as are ad inquiries.

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CAUTION

I know a boat you can

An Interview with Dr. Victor Pogostin, author of *Russian Roulette*

Editor's Note: It is a practice of The Blotter Magazine that we take an apolitical position - non-partisan if you will. This is not always an easy stance, even for a simple literary rag like this one.

There is no denying, however, (but of course, even that word – deny – has been muddled of late by the divisiveness in our own hemisphere of this world) that everyone thinks that they maintain a position on Russia. Even the name Russia conjures up something with a historical/socio-political bent to it. And most folks are certain that their position is based on solid, defensible ground; knowledge they acquired from school, experience, the news.

So, when we reached out to Dr. Victor Pogostin - born and raised in the Soviet Union, now a long-time expat in Canada - and the author of our recently published story collection "Russian Roulette," for an interview, we suggested that recent events in Ukraine might or might not be on the table, so to speak, but that we would respect his choice of direction. It was probable, if not just possible, that his answers to questions would be...socially relevant and that certainly his stories were providing education to most western readers

if not just entertainment.

He was, as ever, gracious and honest.

The Blotter Magazine: Victor – What was it like for you growing up in the Soviet Union? From your “school stories” it feels very much like Hollywood paints England – boarding schools, busy parents, a child on his own trying to fit in with the school environment. Or was there always the pressure of knowing what came next – having to find a role as an adult?

Victor Pogostin: Let's start with the similarities between life in Russia with how Hollywood painted life in England. First no boarding schools, not on my watch, except perhaps for some special education or trade schools for kids with deviant behavior and military, army and navy, schools originally designed for the orphans of the war. Busy parents - yes, a child on his own trying to fit in with the school environment – yes. The pressure of knowing of what came next or I'd rather describe it as the subliminal anxiety of what comes next – yes.

That anxiety, dormant during my school and university years, sharp-

ened closer to the graduation time when I knew I'd have to deal with government personnel departments. The sickening fear that your future opportunities and choices in life could be impeded by your ethnicity had sunk in. Was there anything I could have done to overcome those challenges? I tried and I think I've described it in my stories.

Blotter: Did you sense at some point that you would be a writer? Was it a natural “attachment” to being a translator? Did you have a breakthrough moment where translation led you to wanting to tell original stories?

VP: I wanted to be a writer as early as my adolescence. I was twelve when I wrote my first story about the World Festival of Youth and Students held in Moscow in the summer of 1957. No one asked me to write it, I just felt overwhelmed with impressions. My father showed the story to his friend, a Soviet writer, author of patriotic novels about famous revolutionaries and he said to me “keep writing, you've got something.”

A few years later my nonfiction

story about the 8th graders sent to a collective farm to harvest beets, potatoes and clean silo pits won the 2nd prize in the literary contest held among Moscow high school students. The prize was a book “Scarlet Sails” by Alexander Green. I remember the adjudicator of the contest when presenting the award whispered in my ear “we’d give you the 1st prize, but your stories lack Komsomol (The Young Communists League) enthusiasm.” The adjudicator got it right, all my stories, including the nonfiction sequel about the student team sent to Kazakhstan “to bring the virgin lands to the plough” published in the newspaper “The Soviet Student” lacked the patent Komsomol enthusiasm, simply because I never felt one. That was exactly why I realized that my stories would never be accepted by the communist magazines and that was when my translation skills came in very handy.

Translating fiction and nonfiction works of great western authors provided me with the much-desired sense of creative process. Western authors were exempt from sprinkling their works with the communist syrup. The requirements for their works to be accepted for publication in the Soviet national media were rather simple – they had to be critical of the bourgeois society and most great American writers were, no anti-Communist or anti-Soviet content and no erotica.

Sometimes though the Soviet cen-

sors made unusual demands. For example, in 1988 when I translated Hemingway’s “The Garden of Eden”, the editor in chief of the “Progress” publishing house insisted that I removed Hemingway’s masterful description of culinary delights in French restaurants. Reason - “We have food shortages, and his food passages are very undue.”

Blotter: The juxtaposition of happy stories (looking for the “underground,”) and the pathos of lack in the old Soviet Union is beautifully blended in your book. Here in the West, even thirty-odd years later, we know so little about what went on in Russia during the Cold War years – Other than the hyperbole of movies about submarines and the constant threat of Nuclear Armageddon, we in the West imagined that all Russians are athletes, soldiers, chess players and ballet aficionados, not by choice but because that is all there was. What was the corresponding perspective you were taught about the West?

VP: First, let me note that your observation “not by choice but because that is all there was” is very true. As for how the Soviets’ perspective on the Americans, that really depended on one’s background and education. To people who figuratively speaking were, “on the same bookshelf” with me, intellectuals and not only the Americans

were folks like us, only more ingenious because they did not have in their cultural intelligence the experience of living and finding its way in the system riddled with ideological lies, “the pathos of lack” and total government control. As for the official propaganda, all Americans were and still are (!) portrayed as warmongers whose foremost desire is to conquer and enslave “Mother Russia” and steal its riches, golden calf worshipers and at best cowboys in the ironic interpretation of the term.

Blotter: Growing up, I recall being told a story of the city mouse and the country mouse – the country mouse visits his city cousin and is terrified by the noise and traffic and hectic urban pace, and the return visit by the city mouse to the country has similar issues like almost being stepped on by farm animals or being chased by a fox. Some of your adventures – the confrontation with the other “Volga” for example - seem very...brave considering what we think the ramifications of getting in trouble would be. Were you more concerned at the time that you might get into trouble and reflecting back in the stories those “sharp edges” have smoothed out, or was it always a matter of knowing what can and cannot be done in one’s cultural environment?

VP: I guess it is the combination of

The Blotter

both. I never tolerated any shit attitude or bullying. However, when I look back at what I did or did not do at the time I think subconsciously I acted in consideration with what can or cannot be done in the given cultural environment. That understanding comes with life experience and often with “your mother’s milk.” For me the integration into the North American life was relatively smooth. My education at the Institute for Foreign Languages School of Translators included besides an intensive language training the regional studies, in my case the United States and to a lesser degree Canada and Britain. That alone plus the ability to read books, especially non-fiction in the original language, years of translation work that required thorough research of the Author’s country culture and finally many years of working as an interpreter with representatives of various socio-economic groups, again in my case mostly literary and scientific, contributed to the process.

In 1979 the American Sociological Association (ASA) invited a group of Soviet sociologists to visit a select group of the American universities. The Director of the Institute of Sociology included me in the group as the translator/sociologist. Moscow, at the time, had no night life and the only two neon advertisements on one of the downtown buildings encouraged Muscovites to “Drink tomato juice” and “Fly Aeroflot” It was early night when

Aeroflot landed our loaded with tomato juice and a bit of vodka group in La Guardia airport. On the way to the hotel our American team leader suggested we get the birds eye view of New York and took us straight to the Empire State building observation deck. For about twenty minutes we stood like your “farm mice” frozen like the neighboring griffins stupefied by the live streams of yellowish head and red taillights running along the shimmering Times Square, Brooklyn Bridge, Central Park and on and on towards the New York Harbour.

On a funny note, let me give you an example of the importance of knowing what can or cannot be done in a different cultural environment. My son George was twelve when we came to Canada. His English at the time was insufficient to adequately explain himself. One day he came from school earlier than usual. He was upset. His teacher asked him to leave the class and wanted to talk to his father. I went to school. The teacher, a young woman, looked very concerned. After the lunch break, she saw how George went to one of his classmates and deliberately stepped on his foot. I asked George to tell me what happened and started laughing. Now the teacher looked even more concerned. I explained what actually happened. In Russia, like anywhere else, there are many superstitions. For instance, if somebody unintentionally steps on your foot, to avoid a quarrel you

should do the same to that person. Apparently, his buddy stepped on George’s foot when they were playing ball during the break. Now, the teacher laughed with me. The international incident was resolved.

Blotter: One senses that there are parts of the book that make it impossible to “forgive” and someday return to the land of your birth. I also think that popular culture swings back and forth between “nationality” and “adaptability” in our thinking. When/if you think about yourself – your personality – are you the person you grew up being, be that Russian, an intellectual, a writer, someone who has been in the military and understands how that works, a husband and father, an expatriate, Canadian, or some blending of all or some of those, or any additional characteristics? Are there parts of your life experience that you feel you had to “jettison” because they just don’t work anymore?

VP: It is a good question. There are parts in what I now call “the other life” back in the USSR, like ethnic discrimination, that are unforgivable. But, even if, as some folks assume, those policies were now in the past, and I doubt it, the gradual slide of the present regime (sic!) into the worst form of totalitarianism rules out the prospects of return. Any attempts to jettison one’s past is a vagrant show. That

is why in my book I, as a person I grew up being, a father, an expatriate (now Canadian) tried to recreate for my son, my grandchildren, and any curious readers the countenance of the time that would help to understand my generation that lived through an important period of history in the country that some gurus refer to as one-sixth of the Earth's land surface.

Blotter: You very politely explained to me that you are not an expert on foreign affairs, particularly with regards to the situation taking place at the time of this writing in Ukraine. And yet you also said that you have an opinion on the subject. Would you be willing to share that opinion with us?

VP: Well, I guess what I meant was that I am not very versed in the art of intrigues, cooking up conspiracy theories and the Aesopian language of the Russian foreign relations today. Let me just say that I fully agree with what Ernest Hemingway, said about the war and these words in my humble opinion adequately describe Russian policy today: *"The first panacea for a mismanaged nation is inflation of the currency; the second is war... Both bring a temporary prosperity; both bring a permanent ruin. But both are the refuge of political and economic opportunists."*

Editor's Final Note – one of the questions we asked Victor was a playful query with regards to his use of the English idiomatic term "buddy" between characters in his stories. It was just a bit of curiosity on our part, because in so-called American English there are seem to be no perfect terms of affection and acceptance that display that same non-ironic closeness between people as seems to be portrayed by his use of "buddy" and we wondered what the original Russian word was that he was thinking. Victor mentioned that he preferred that this question be left out of the interview because, as he stated "to answer it, I'd have to write a lengthy linguistic article."

He did, however, offer the following marvelous explanation (one that brings to mind a certain terrific novel we should have all read in college):

VP: Brief answer - to keep their positivity, the average citizen would use the following words: "Приятель" - closest to pal, or if a closer friend – "друг" (droog), or to express joyful affection "дружище" (droozhishe). Bosom pal, "старик / старина" – literally "old man" – was an affectionate address to a friend used by men. ❖

“Clusterfuck” - an excerpt from the collection *Russian Roulette* by Victor Pogostin

Part Six - Charlie Foxtrot

“He who has served in the army does not laugh at the circus” (old Russian saying)

Clusterfuck

My odyssey in the Red Army was conceived in Egypt. Something went wrong in the land of the Pharaohs and in 1972, Anwar Sadat packed off the Soviet military advisors back to their land. At the time, military translators were drafted and sent to Egypt to work with the military advisors. The returnees settled in the cushy jobs in Moscow military institutions pushing their freshly drafted brethren to the far corners of the country.

I'd have thought that there was no more need to worry about the draft and I could return to my civil life. No such luck. A Colonel from the Draft Board explained that the Minister of Defense had signed the Draft Order and, in short, there was no turning back. “Congrats my Lieutenant!” He said and handed me my officer's ID Card.

The next day I appeared before the Medical Evaluation Board. A Duty Officer ushered me to a room where my evaluation was to begin. Bewildered I looked around. There was a rotary chair for vestibular tests and two men with white lab coats over their uniforms. I was told to make myself

comfortable in the chair. One of the men put a blindfold on me and strapped me into the chair.

The chair spun first right then left and then in circles. Finally, it stopped abruptly, the blindfold was quickly removed, straps unfastened, and I heard the command, “Open your eyes, get up and walk.”

I couldn't even stand. The room was spinning, and I felt like I was flying towards the wall and would smash my head against the cast iron radiator. I gripped the armrests, but the radiator was approaching with an alarming speed. The men grabbed me and held tightly in the chair.

My bewilderment changed to sluggishness, and in that state-of-my-once-alert-mind, I was told to strip down to my underwear and ushered into the next room. Four or five physicians waited for me at their desks. Three of them I won't forget.

A hearing doctor, a babushka with a large head mirror was first. She examined my ears, ordered me to step a few feet back, and turn my back to her.

“Thirty-five,” she whispered.

“Thirty-five,” I whispered back submissively.

“What? Louder!” she yelled.

I returned to the table and repeated loudly:

“Thirty-five.”

“Good. See, you can do it when you want.”

She scribbled something in her log and waved me off.

A surgeon quickly checked all my limbs, ran his fingers down my spine and commanded: “Show me your heels.”

“Both?”

“Yes.”

I stood up on my tiptoes.

“Are you nuts?” he said.

“You said both,” I retorted.

“One after another, dummy...”

The next doctor was a sturdy looking redhead. She ordered me to turn around a few times, examined my skin all over and said: “Show me your head.”

I obediently bent my head forward.

She gave me a dirty look and hissed angrily:

“Peel back your dick, idiot.”

“Speak proper Russian,” I snapped at her, did as requested, and left.

Long story short, my medical reports recommendation was *Fit for military service in all branches except Navy and Air Force*. And of course, my assignment order was to appear for appointment to the Personnel Department of the Northern Fleet HQ.

A week later, on a cold September morning a train with the distinctive name “Arctica”, dropped

me off at the Murmansk railway station. It poured. The handle on my suitcase broke. There were no cabs and I walked about a mile to the Military Commandant Office using my suitcase like an umbrella.

The Duty Officer studied my papers and shrugged in disappointment. “Wrong place, buddy. Go to the main bus terminal and take an express up north to the Navy HQ.”

I grabbed my suitcase and raised it over my head prepared to step in the rain.

“Hey, pirate.” The officer handed me a roll of tape. “Make a handle for your chest.”

It was late afternoon when I finally reported to the Navy HQ Personnel Department was sent to the Officers’ Hostel. At dusk I walked to the shore to watch sunset.

A narrow path winding through the rocky shoreline led me up to a cliff. Down below, a ragged submarine was bouncing on small waves. Shreds of rubber were hanging all over its carcass. It resembled a tired killer whale that had washed ashore and was waiting for a complete overhaul or a scrap dock. Somehow the sad-looking sub put me in a romantic mood.

After all, so be it, I thought.

Falling asleep I imagined myself smoking a pipe and marveling at the bright stars on the upper deck of a sailing vessel gliding in the far seas or listening to “no shit, this really happened” tales of exotic ports in the officer’s wardroom.

In the morning, my dreams of

long nights under the polar or tropical stars were ruthlessly grounded.

The floors in the Personnel Department office squeaked like the deck of an old frigate. A grey-haired Captain 2nd Rank studied my file and said:

“Want a career in the Navy?”

“Why not. Sounds kind of romantic.”

“Tell you what... the ships you’ll be on do not enter ports. You’ll need binoculars to see the land. For six months you’ll be hanging out at sea, eating canned

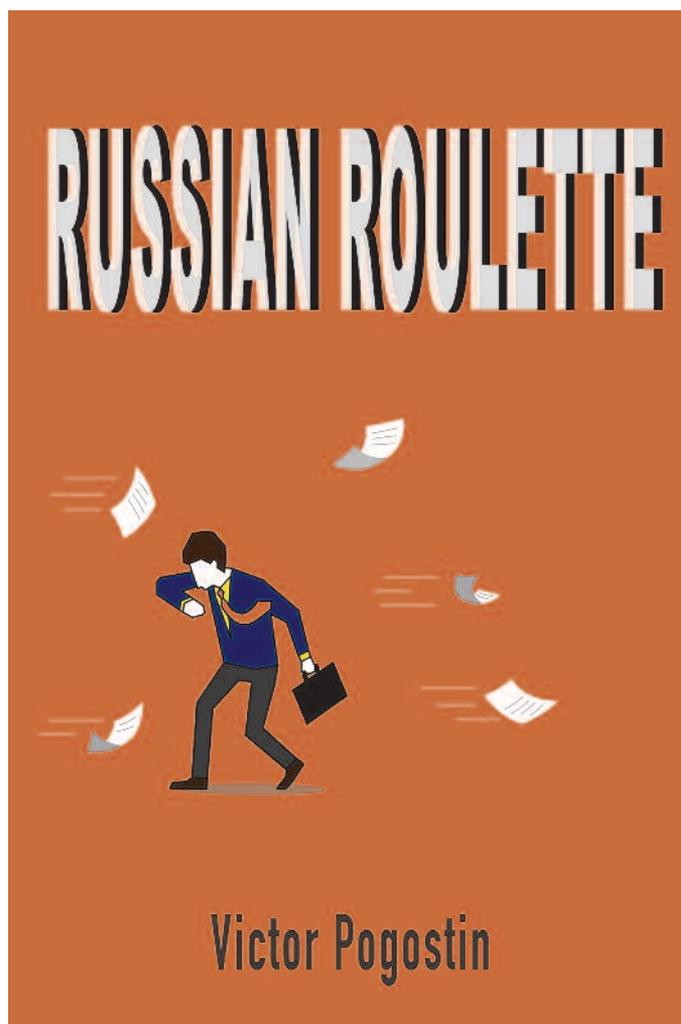
bread, drinking *shilo* (Russian naval slang for spirit diluted with water) and puking overboard.”

“What are my choices?”

“I have a request from Long-Range Reconnaissance Aviation. It’s closer to your home and will save you a year of service. Then you’ll decide.”

“Sign me up,” I said.

The loop closed. I was fit for service in all branches except navy and aviation and wound up in naval aviation. ❖



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Something profound has slightly changed. Or else something small has profoundly changed. Here's the thing: I'm not sure that I believe in a "subconscious" anymore. The invasion of reality into my dreams has put paid to that, for the time being. Perhaps when I get older and less real myself, reality can have that kind of maybe-maybe not feeling without being so troubling to me. I will accept what happens when I sleep in the same way that our ancestors, just recently learning the secret of causing and keeping fire and beginning their generations long trek north into that "place which is colder," started to be able to differentiate between what they saw with their open eyes and what they saw behind them when they were shut.

For me it is the sounds of thunder outside that become the explosions in buildings, which ones I do not know but still – is there ever a building that needs to be exploded? – and something that is pure and natural becomes frightening and tainted. Or a door closing in another room. Or even a car door beneath my bedroom window. All of this clatter of being awake is filtered, edited, altered by my sleeping brain into things that they aren't.

I resent that. And I'll tell you why.

I don't need any additional grim reality. I don't require the extra hours of stressful input, when I'm supposed to be resting and recharging for another day.

Explaining my situation to a friend, I get that sort-of smile, the one that tells me I am being unreasonable without them saying it, which is unfair that there is even such a thing. Anyone who judges without risk is guilty of being cowardly. I ask if they have dreams like this, ones with "leaks" back into the world. No. In fact, Oh, goodness, no. They don't remember any of their dreams, I am told. They must not dream most nights.

Now sleep experts – whatever that means – tell us that everyone dreams every night. At least if they get a certain amount of uninterrupted sleep. And we are also told that dreaming is necessary in order to maintain sanity. Or is that an "old wives' tale?" I don't know anymore. It would explain so much about my friend who claims they don't dream. But I would never say that aloud – so does that make me guilty of cowardice as well?

I have tried changing my sleep habits. Leaving a night light on, like I'm four years old. I've tried having one of those noise machines – the ones that try to create a sleep mood with recordings of the ocean waves washing on a beach or the crickets and such in a forest. Something to prepare my brain for dreaming, I think of this, but it may only be creating a sensitivity that I already am trou-

bled by. An auditory hole in my subconscious.

One result of this is that I find myself trying to connect the dots between the dreams I recall immediately after waking with any events during my sleep. Was there a storm? Did the air conditioner make a rattling noise or did a neighbor . . . I don't know, use a leaf-blower at an ungodly hour? Dogs barking, toilets flushing, airplanes using my place as a flyover, all are suspect. Or I need earplugs, in the hopes that the reduction of sound will not be replaced by any tactile change caused by foam touching the sensitive parts of my head. Who knows?

OC - cyberspace

"Tequila"

by Ethan Cunningham

añejo, friend, agave lover in pale
quiet amber of oaken scent, my scotch,
your heart stands stronger than grapes, petty ale,
upon lambs and wolves, O spearhead, deepest notch

“sunday, car wash”

By Ethan Cunningham

sunday

car wash

first

in two years

hot

106

dry as dust

in the Valley

European man

blasts orders

into his phone

Alpha

no doubt

familiar

“Kristof”

his name

like

wife’s lover

now ex

(cheater)

3,000 miles distant

he doesn't know me
we stand together
twin pillars
facing the spray
of handwashed cars
I could punch him
but
he's twice my size
besides
they don't fuck
anymore

he drives
black stretch limo
aggregates into traffic
ignorant
as dung

a good thing
I would have killed him

two by John Grey

"A Couple on the Bank of the Lake"

In the sallow light of sunset,
silence took up stillness,
spread to every limb,
alerting senses on the way.

Through poplar, by stream,
perdurability in question.
allowed the anomaly
of people in its path.

Last rays entered
our personal ground,
alight upon a cheek, a brow,
to serenely dissipate.

Like the last page of fable,
we found courage to be
happy ever after,
in will, if not in substance.

“Fill Your Heart”

Don't wedge that chair under your heart's doorknob.
Or double bolt your window eyes.
This is not some cheap motel you're holed up in.
It's who you are. It's your life.

And don't mistake the hand for a hunting knife.
Or the expression as an executioner's glare.
A good man is reaching out to you.
So don't feel as if you've already seen this movie.

It's not cinema. It's just two people.
I am speaking. I'm not acting out somebody else's lines.
And, if it was a film, it wouldn't be “Nightmare On Elm Street.”
It'd be “Fill Your Heart” and it is only playing here.

Contributors

Victor Pogostin was born in Moscow. He graduated from The School of Translators of the Moscow State Institute for Foreign Languages, worked as translator for the Soviet Trade Mission in India, taught Russian Language and Culture course at the Aligarh Muslim University, served in the Long Range Naval Reconnaissance Aviation of the Northern Fleet. After his return from military service he defended his PhD dissertation on Ernest Hemingway's Nonfiction. For many years he worked in the Institute of Sociology of the USSR Academy of Sciences, while working as a freelance author/translator for national newspapers and literary magazines throughout the former Soviet Union. In addition to translating fiction and nonfiction into Russian, he has compiled, edited, and written introductions and commentaries for over a dozen books by North American authors, including the works of Ernest Hemingway and John Steinbeck. In 1993 he relocated to Canada with his wife and son. In Canada he worked in senior executive positions for companies doing business in Russia and for the past seventeen years in the conference production industry.

Ethan Cunningham is a writer, photographer, and humanist, although he prefers to wander the spectrum of artistic expression rather than remaining confined to mere labels. His poetry appears most recently in *Fixator Press*, *HASH Journal*, and *Terse*. He lives in California.

John Grey is an Australian poet, US resident, recently published in *Sheepshead Review*, *Stand*, *Poetry Salzburg Review* and *Hollins Critic*. Latest books, “Leaves On Pages” “Memory Outside The Head” and “Guest Of Myself” are available through Amazon. Work upcoming in *Ellipsis*, *Blueline* and *International Poetry Review*.

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