

**STRINGS**

On Columbus and 106th opposite from a hotel on whose yellow neon sign a green monkey leaped and hung by its tail during the summer, near a burnt down cancer ward, I shared an apartment with three Juilliard students.

A French violinist slept on the floor in an Alpine sleeping bag. Whenever he woke up, he rubbed his sweaty and hairy chest with a thick towel, and his blood-shot eyes stared at us as though we were the Andean cannibals, cooking him for supper. As we had no air-conditioning, on hot days he woke up in puddles of his own sweat.

I slept on the carpet from a rich man's garbage heap. The only one of us who had a real bed was a Swiss cellist, who shaved twice a day and resentfully looked around him at the chaos the rest of us created from our clothes, papers, bread crumbs, utensils, shoe-shine boxes, toothpaste tubes, records. I easily got used to the bohemian atmosphere, and paid no thoughts to how different it all was from what I had expected my stay in America would be.

But as my roommates and I ran after a rat through our apartment, stumbling over ashtrays, beer cans, unwashed plates with dry and cracked yolks, it occurred to me: Is this the way to live? Where are the cats?

I didn't wish to chase the rodent; he looked like a veteran of many battles, and that he was in the predicament of having a crew of Juilliard musicians after him was no doubt a result of his observing us for a while, and correctly assessing us to be a bunch of wimps, whining day in and day out. He used to enter the kitchen at noon, charge the trash bag like a small boar, biting straight through the olive plastic for cheese crusts. We bought gourmet cheeses-since we snorted no coke, we had to have some wasteful recompense-which tasted the way cow dung, horse shit, a pigsty and freshly cut grass smelled: strange how you grow to like the foul taste, but the fouler, the tastier. The Frenchman scoffed at us for liking the cheeses, which, according to him, were bland. The stench of cheese must have thrown our rat back to his rural roots.

In the rat's first appearances, it was enough to set your foot in the kitchen, and he'd scurry off, squealing for life. But after he had heard us playing Schubert string quartets, his caution was gone. Now he languidly rummaged through our garbage, looking fat and well-established, and with an air of dignity, he strolled into the living room for the afternoon intermezzo.

Schubert moved him. I read somewhere that Bach moves plants. Schubert rooted our rat to the spot, making him tremble to the harmonics of minor keys, raising his hairs, so that he resembled a hedge-hog. Now and then he stood on his hind legs, put his paws together like a squirrel preying for a pistachio. Perhaps he would have clapped his paws but didn't dare out of piety for the music.

Der Tod and das Maedchen was his absolute favorite. We used to play it sometimes just to tease him. Then he'd come quite close to the cello, his little beady eyes shone with tears, his upper lips twitched, with his little incisors pinching his lower lip. If he hadn't been so scrawny, his ears so small, his tail so thin and wet, he could have passed for a squirrel and would have been quite likable. But Lord knows, he was not likable. Perhaps he wished to be. Perhaps he wished to make friends with us, and would have been proud of us. Perhaps he was proud of us. He may have even loved us. But we didn't appreciate him as the audience-after all, playing to entertain a rat is not what you'd call a lustrous career. Yet his listening always humored us and put a joie de vivre, otherwise so hard to come by, into the strings.

But we had to make a stop to his growing more and more brazen. Soon he would have been jumping on the table and dining with us. He would have grown so attached to us that he would have followed us on our dates, and certainly, he would have been unstoppable if he had known Schubert's Unfinished Symphony would caress the walls at the Avery Fisher Hall though I should think he'd have preferred it at Carnegie Hall, where walls, old and sandy, must be easier to bite your way through.

We discovered that he feared Bartok. I don't know why he feared Bartok; maybe he hadn't been educated well-enough to take the stresses of modernity in music, though he kept up with other modernities and post-modernities as a NYC rat. Though Bartok made him run helter-skelter for shelter, we couldn't keep playing Bartok just to keep a rat away.

Alone, none of us could have handled the little Ayatollah. But united-a Frenchman, a Yugoslav, ex-Soviet, and a Swiss-we dared to attack him. Actually, the Frenchman was away on a date with a woman from the fourth floor. He had preferred a woman from the second floor, but one floor of elevator time was not enough for him to let her pick him up-that's how he described it. Three floors of elevator time sufficed for a woman to pick him up. So, the three of us intervened, like United Nations Blue Helmets of sorts-and if the Swedish anti-communist and anti-feminist elite had given us a Nobel prize for peace, we could have done even better.

As the rat strolled into our bathroom, we exchanged conspiratorial looks. It was too much; now he would like to share our toilet! The ex-Soviet jumped and shut the bathroom door, swearing in Russian. The Swiss and I grabbed the table, the plates sliding and crashing on the floor. We barred the bathroom door with the platform of the table against it. Then we opened the door. Over the edge of the table we aimed blows at him with a broom-stick, a baseball bat (through which we had tried to Americanize ourselves), and an unscrewed table leg. Only two of us could fit in the door frame at a time, so we took turns. Mostly we missed. The Swiss struck him first with the broom-stick, despite its being thin-I guess, Swiss precision, but let's stay away from national stereo-types. The blow surprised the rat and incensed him. He shrieked gorily

and jumped toward us, nearly the full height of the fence. I got goose-bumps from the shrillness of his voice. We were almost ready to beat a retreat and sign a peace treaty, wherever, Geneva, if need be. But we were too ashamed to retreat.

The rat jumped again, right up to the edge of the table. As he was falling down, I struck him with the baseball bat, which brushed his back and squashed his tail on a tile. The tile breaking in half. Hardly a second later the table-leg struck him, blowing him off the floor; his body hit the heating pipe. Now he jumped without any order, like a panicky frog, in such high leaps that he could have jumped over the fence. He jumped left, and right, and then backward. He fell into the bath tub. He leaped but couldn't jump out of the slippery tub. We flung the table aside, the Swiss squealed Ya'ohl, and we all jumped forwards. From the side of the tub we aimed blows at the rat. Blood squirted. The enamel of the tub cracked in many places.

He was all torn and smashed but still twitched. Cats have nine lives, rats ten. When he was finally dead, instead of triumphant, we were ashamed; we didn't look into each other's eyes. Slowly we swept his remains onto a Sunday New York Times Magazine and put it all into three olive garbage bags. We threw the package into a large rusty iron box of garbage, in a somber, funeral mood. We washed the tub for days with all sorts of soaps, until it shone. We threw away the clubs; henceforth our table had only three legs. None of us took baths anymore, but only showers, which of their own accord changed from hot to cold to hot.

If we had hoped that after the assassination we would be rat-free, we were wrong. A chap similar to our murdered friend began to appear—so similar that it spooked us. But he didn't care for music. We bought rat poison and put it in cheese. Either it didn't kill him or another rat indistinguishable from him replaced him. At night there were constant noises coming from the walls: scuffling of rats in their love, work (tunnel and road construction), and debates in muffled squeals.

## ТЕКСТ ЗА ПРИБОД № 2

### NONFICTION DESERVES A NOBEL

When the bookmakers and the book writers are on the same page, it's a safe bet that the Nobel Prize in Literature is about to be announced. So it is—and Ladbrokes, the venerable British gambling establishment, is giving odds on forty-six writers. At the top of the list right this minute is Ngugi wa Thiong'o, with Haruki Murakami a tight second. But the really sensational news about this year's race, regardless of who wins, is the third-place candidate: Svetlana Alexievich. You could have knocked me over with a feather when I heard that Alexievich was on the list, and it could have been a very small downy feather when the word came that she was among the front-runners. Can you believe it? Alexievich? Don't they know that she's a reporter? Is it possible that the Nobel committee might finally reverse the ignoble treatment of what we call "nonfiction writing" and admit that it is literature?

It hasn't always been this bad. The second writer to win the Nobel, back in 1902, was Theodor Mommsen, the first of several historians and essayists to win the prize. Bertrand Russell was one; Winston Churchill was another. But it has been more than a half century since any such recognition—a half century that has seen an explosion of great documentary writing in all forms and lengths and styles, and yet there is a kind of lingering snobbery in the literary world that wants to exclude nonfiction from the classification of literature—to suggest that somehow it lacks artistry, or imagination, or invention by comparison to fiction. The mentality is akin to the prejudice that long held photography at bay in the visual-art world. Gay Talese summed up the experience of such snubbing in an interview with *The Paris Review* (labelled "The Art of Nonfiction") by saying, "Nonfiction writers are second-class citizens, the Ellis Island of literature. We just can't quite get in. And yes, it pisses me off." My colleague John McPhee, in his *Paris Review* interview (under the same rubric), said, "*Nonfiction*—what the hell, that just says, this is nongrapefruit we're having this morning. It doesn't mean anything."

Publishers and booksellers are complicit with other keepers of the canon in the philistine derogation of great documentary writing by reserving the label "literature" on book jackets and store shelves only for works of fancy. But deferring to categories and genres to adjudicate what is meaningful is antithetical to what the best literature does best, which is to respond to life and death with writing that—by its voice and its substance, its soul and its urgency, its truth and, above all, its wisdom—enlarges our understanding and experience of our world and our being.

Alexievich builds her narratives about Russian national traumas—the Soviet-Afghan war, for instance, or the Chernobyl nuclear catastrophe—by interviewing those who lived them, and immersing herself deeply in their testimonies. But her voice is much more than the sum of their voices. The first time many English readers may have encountered her was in the quarterly *Granta*, under the editorship of Bill Buford, where a piece called "Boys in Zinc" appeared in 1990. (An eponymous book soon followed.) The title is a reference to the zinc coffins in which the Soviet military returned its Afghan war dead to their mothers, and the piece, told from the mothers' point of view, made that war as all-encompassingly present and personal—as real—as any fictional account ever did for any other war, and with the same singularity and originality of style and passion, of political intelligence and tragic vision.

Every mode of expression has its formal demands. For writing that's not fictive, that means fidelity to documentable reality; yet the best of it can only be done when the writer has an imagination as free as any novelist, playwright, or poet. So perhaps, given the favorable odds at Ladbrokes for Alexievich, we may, before long, see novels routinely praised as having all the power and scope of nonfiction, rather than the other way around. And, as soon as the Nobel's nonfiction barrier is, at last, broken, the fact that it ever existed will come to seem absurd. Literature is just a fancy word for writing.