

Maryia Martysevich
Essays and poems

The Men We Choose

I like men a lot, especially Belarusian ones. The reason of my fondness towards Belarusian men can be easily explained: throughout my entire life I have been non-pragmatically and irresistibly attracted to losers™. There is something ineffably touching in the way they muffle themselves up in their scarves, smiling guiltily, charmingly giving way to their inferiority complexes, hesitant to make the first step, stand up to their beliefs, find their place under the Sun. All this enchants me. It makes me think.

‘For I’m a muzhik, a stupid muzhik’¹. Ever since I was a child, I understood the word ‘muzhik’ in the refrain of this poem not as a class but as a gender definition. Somehow I don’t think that Yanka Kupala was urging his people to cast off the yoke of oppression. The same goes for authors of other classic texts which we had to learn by heart in order to pass exams in Belarusian literature; the texts which we still see in our restless, retrospective dreams. It seems to me that these authors merely presented their worldview and comprehended the truth that they had been pre-programmed for a failure in both their creative work and life.

The last 200 years have proven that Belarus is mission impossible. All the more so, one admires the heroes who believe and rise in spite of everything (‘What if something comes out of it?’). However, unlike Hollywood heroes, they do it in order to lose, and to die losing. The best men in our history are members of Vilnia² Belarusian gymnasium’s rugby team who, exhausted and covered with mud, fixing their broken pince-nez, are leaving the field where they have been smashed by the team from Eaton. The only thing we have left, sitting on the stands, is to be moved with this sad finale.

Chronologically, it was Pauliuk Bahrym³ who became the first loser of modern Belarusian literature. As an adolescent, he was recruited into the Russian army after someone found a notebook with his Belarusian-language poems. Later he became a taciturn blacksmith whose most successful project was a girandole. However, the model loser was described by Frantsishak Bahushevich⁴ in his poem, ‘Things Will Get Bad’. Considering the new cultural situation of that time the title appears to be highly emblematic. The poem’s main character, poor Alindarka, who happened to be born in March, saw this as a mystical reason for all his bad luck. A woman christened Alindarka in a river; his

¹ A quote from a popular poem by Yanka Kupala (1882 -1942), a prominent Belarusian poet, see more at <http://www.democraticbelarus.eu/node/5811> . ‘Muzhik’ is a Belarusian word which has two meanings – ‘peasant’ (old-fashioned) and ‘man’ (informal).

² Vilnia – traditional Belarusian name of Vilnius.

³ Pauliuk Bahrym – Belarusian poet, who was conscripted into the army as a convict-soldier for a term of twenty-five years. He was not heard of thereafter as a poet and died in 1891.

⁴ Frantsishak Bahushevich (1840 -1900) – Belarusian lawyer and poet, who published in Krakow his book of Belarusian-language poetry ‘Dudka belaruskaya’ in 1891.

strange name was given to him by misunderstanding; he committed no crime but landed in prison. The poem ends with the words “Thank God, he was released, the same day he was once christened”. A loser is a thread hero of the Belarusian socio-cultural space, beginning with Kastus Kalinouski⁵, who failed in everything. Some say the history is written by the winners. The history of Belarus is an exception, because it was written by the losers™ (its short version had been written by one of the cult losers, Vatslau Lastouski⁶. Our unofficial classics are all losers. These are sweet tubercular patients Maksim Bahdanovich⁷ and Ihnat Kancheuski⁸; Branislau Tarashkevich⁹, Maksim Haretski¹⁰, Frantsishak Aliahnovich¹¹ who died violent death; Uladzimir Dubouka¹², new Bahrym; Siarhey Hrahouiski, who was born in the village of Nobel but went through GULAG and never visited Stockholm; Jewish-Belarusian poet Arkadz Heine, who died in 1942 in the Holocaust, and a multitude of others who were losers to such an extent that nobody knows anything about their fate – those buried in Kurapaty¹³, the Belarusian Valhalla. However, the sum of their misfortunes has created the context of our existence, and this is their major success.

Well, here is the time we have to live in. Midday break in a school, only girls remain in the classroom. We shuffle aside chairs and tables in order to make space for a class disco, and, generally, think positive. The boys, pale-faced and red-cheeked, with their eyes like cornflowers and hair like flax, with their IQ potentially equal to 130, with flat-footedness, curvature of the spine, and other reasons to avoid obligatory military service, read about their general defeat from school readers. They take it for granted, the same way they learn from textbooks about their inborn lack of iodine; they absorb their failure with the first swallow of port wine in the school backyard. A Belarusian is a loser™, there is no escape. Loser™ is a universal karma of every man who bears the tax duty stamp

⁵ Kastus Kalinouski (1838 -1864) – leader of the 1863-1864 uprising against Russian rule on Belarusian lands. The uprising was crushed, Katus Kalinouski was hanged in Vilnius.

⁶ ‘A Short History of Belarus’ – one of the first popular books about Belarusian national history, written by Vatslau Lastouski (1883 - 1938), prominent member of national independence movement, who was murdered during Stalin’s purges.

⁷ Maksim Bahdanovich (1891 -1917) – Belarusian poet, read more about him at <http://www.democraticbelarus.eu/node/4528>

⁸ Ihnat Kancheuski (1896 -1923) – Belarusian philosopher and poet, author of the programmatic philosophical essay ‘Along the Eternal Road’.

⁹ Branislau Tarashkevich (1892 - 1938) – Belarusian politician and linguist, creator of the first modern Belarusian grammar (1918). Executed during Stalin’s purges.

¹⁰ Maksim Haretski (1893 - 1938)– prominent Belarusian prose writer and literary critic. Executed during Stalin’s purges.

¹¹ Frantsishak Aliahnovich (1883 - 1944), Belarusian writer, famous for his accounts of being arrested by Soviet secret services. Killed by an assassin in Vilnius.

¹² Uladzimir Dubouka (1900 - 1976), Belarusian poet. He spent 27 years in Stalin’s concentration camps and never published his original poems afterwards.

¹³ Kurapaty – site of mass executions during Stalin times near Minsk.

Belarus, it embraces the intellectual sphere as well as everyday life. While listening to their poems, cleaning up their socks scattered over the floor, or listening to their speeches during political campaigns, you understand that them being losers has a genetic cause.

I personally do not know any Belarusian man who would be perfect enough to earn his Creator a decent mark in a labour education class.

In the Belarusian language, the word ‘Svaboda’ (‘Freedom’) has a feminine gender. Moreover, its synonym – ‘Volya’ – is a popular woman’s name. On 20 March 2006, when Aliyaksandr Milinkevich¹⁴, another charming loser, had finished his speech on the October Square, the crowd was addressed by his wife, Ina Kulej. It became immediately clear who was the real master of their village house somewhere in the Shchuchyn region. ‘That’s a presidential candidate we needed!’, someone said. ‘Why don’t women run for president in our country anyways?’ Still, there will never be matriarchy in our country. It also means that there will never be a revolution in Belarus. One meets a pregnant friend, put a hand over her belly and asks her ‘Who are you expecting a girl or a loser?’

However, this incompleteness, this creative neglect of form and contents conceals some kind of bashful sexuality. It arouses the same kind of libido which can be described by a verb ‘shkadavatsi’ which in a Belarusian dialect means ‘to take pity’. In the post-war years, it took my grandfather Ihnat about twenty-four hours to walk fifty kilometers along the Palesse railroad after his work shift. At home, he collapsed into the hands of my grandmother Maryja. Another grandfather, Anton, was appointed to revive a collective farm somewhere in the Pastavy region after the war. There he had a love affair with a woman working as agronomist. This resulted in the grandfather’s expulsion from the Communist Party. Ashamed, he returned home, as a burden to my grandmother Zoya. When both grandfathers became old, they described their relationships with wives with the same phrase: “Her whole life she took pity of me”. Freudian logics of Belarusian women of all generations can be written upon local valentines as “I pity you, therefore I love you”. Today, when you meet him at home after work, this manager of wooden plough and scythe, you tousle his hair, kiss him into his mat, and tell him as usual: “Howdy, my dear loser!”

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Translated from the Belarusian by Ales Kudrytski

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Source: <http://democraticbelarus.eu/node/6545>

¹⁴ Aliaksandr Milinkevich (born in 1947), opposition candidate during the 2006 presidential elections.

Poets Never Survive

One summer, as a way of entertaining myself and keeping up my language skills, I signed up for a free course in English. The lessons were conducted by merry American Baptists. Ron from Georgia, our tutor, involved us into various “role games” in order to ensure that we had our share of *fun*. We learned American idioms and adopted American values during the course.

One lesson was dedicated to the Heart Game. “There are several people on the waiting list for receiving a heart transplant. A mother, of three children, 28 years old; a pregnant homeless girl, 19; a renowned poet, idol of millions, who made it to the Nobel Prize short-list, 52; a cardinal, who will probably become the next Pope, 60; a scientist, who declared that he was one step from discovering the miraculous anti-AIDS drug, 83. There is only one Heart. If you transplant it to one patient, the rest of them would inevitably die. You are members of the transplantation committee. Your task is to decide who would receive the Heart”. No purely medical considerations were allowed. Obviously, any drug addicted person had ultimately no chance to receive the transplant according to American laws, and an elderly person would hardly survive the surgery of such kind.

The discussion within our group of four young women immediately turned rather personal. One of us was a poet; another was pregnant; the third was a scientist; the fourth was a housewife and mother. The suggestions were radically different. Ron said that a unilateral opinion was a must. What the heck, I thought – the Nobels are usually given out to prose writers anyways – and voted for the mother of three kids with a quiet sigh.

It was time for the small groups to read out their verdicts.

The first group “rescued” the pregnant girl. The second one “rescued” the mother. Our group did the same. The fourth group “rescued” the scientist; however, one person from that group, an old lady, stood up and said “Young people may do what they want, but I would give the Heart to the future Pope, even though I am an Orthodox Christian”.

Ron the Baptist came up to the lady and shook her hand. “You are the first person in my course who has “rescued” the Pope”, he said. “I have been conducting English language courses in your country for almost ten years. The mother of three kids is the one who is rescued most often. The pregnant girl is catching up – even though she is obviously an anti-social type and likely a prostitute. Sometimes my students “rescue” the scientist. The poets, however, never survive”. “Why does the poet need to survive anyways?” the voices were raised. “If he is the idol of millions, he will live forever. In their Hearts”.

That moment I recalled that one Belarusian information website posted on its “Entertainment” section the news titled “Nil Hilevich, People’s Poet of Belarus, Brought to Critical Care Unit”. Numerous protests from internet users (me included) forced the editors to move the news into the more adequate section. However, after the Heart Game I thought that there might have been no mistake at all. A poet’s life, a poet’s ailments, and, especially, *a poet’s death*[™] is really *fun* for his reader. After having written brilliant pieces of literature and having become an idol of millions (of having failed to become one) the poet is simply obliged to die: from someone’s bullet piercing his belly (later they would write that it was his Heart), from his own bullet in his

mouth, from blood pouring out of his throat, from tuberculosis in Yalta, by stepping out of a window, by jumping from a bridge, from a drug overdose, in a puddle of drunk vomit or in the line of patients waiting for a heart transplant, after letting the mother of three children get her new heart before himself. In that case the death is a creative act as well, equal to publishing a book of verses or having a poetry reading. Or, perhaps, even more valuable than the latter. Rod was right: true poets never survive.

I belong to the 'nation of poets' as Belarusians like to say about themselves. At the same time I live in a country which would never let a poet get the Heart. This makes writing and translating poems here all the more exciting.

Translated from the Belarusian by Ales Kudrytski

Poems

The Sewing Machine of Truth

My name is Lt. Aldo Raine,
and I'm puttin together a special team.
And I need me eight soldiers.
Eight - Jewish - American - soldiers.(...)
We're gonna be dropped into France, dressed as civilians.
And once we're in enemy territory,
as a bushwackin, guerrilla army,
we're gonna be doin one thing,
and thing only, Killin Nazi's.(...)
Any and every son-of-a--bitch
we find wearin a Nazi uniform,
there gonna die. (...)
And the Germans, will be sickened by us.
And the Germans, will talk about us.
And the Germans, will fear us.(...)
When you join my command,
you take on debit.
A debit you owe me, personally.
Every man under my command owes me
one hundred nazi scalps.
And I want my scalps.
And all y'all will git me,
one hundred Nazi scalps,
taken from the heads of
one hundred dead Nazi's...
Or you will die trying.

Inglourious Basterds by Quentin Tarantino

the brand of the sewing machine
my parents bought me in childhood
from retired dora yusifauna
living in an apartment above the national bank is
VERITAS.

do you know what it means
in latin, bitches?
VERITAS means truth.
so – stretch out your hands

under the sewing machine of truth
with its foot-pedaled grudge.

i remember that day very well

dora yusifauna was the shit
dora yusifauna was packing to leave for israel
dora yusifauna was selling her furniture
dora yusifauna was stroking my head
dora yusifauna talked about surviving the ghetto
dora yusifauna taught me
what to say if my workshop teacher
told me the seams were crooked
dora yusifauna as a bonus
gave me a rope
from a trophy messerschmidt
and said that VERITAS is a brand-name
but nevertheless
have the rope

it's good

german

handy when the grudge comes to the throat

after eighteen years
the brand-name rope
is
worn
out

mon cher barbarossa
it's time for the new rope

according to the manual
the truth is told such:

raise the needle to its highest position
place a spool of white thread on the spool pin

pass the white thread through the designated threading points
on the top of the machine casing
then down toward the tension assembly
and back up through the next threading point at the top left of the machine

push the thread end through the lever
pull a few inches of thread through the eye of the needle
and pull the thread to your left
insert a wound bobbin with black thread into the machine
hold on to the thread and move the hand wheel
so the needle is once again at its highest position
as the needle rises a loop of black bobbin thread
will come up as well
according to the manual
the truth is ready to be used

truth

truth

truth

for those who aimed at milk
but got at me by accident

truth

truth

truth

for those who snagged my micro and macrocosm
(in particular my close buddies)

tell the truth tell the truth tell the truth tell the truth

pagan like propaganda

tell the truth tell the truth tell the truth tell the truth

until i'm out of thread

brush aside the nuances of good and evil
those weaklings
always walk together

truth is always alone
and it stands
in my room

truth is like paris – we'll always have it
truth is like black and white berlin – all the same
truth is like madrid and cloudless sky above
truth is injected into the body with blood
like pinocchio with nails
like piercing a watermelon with heels
like a needle into what would become
a little black dress
a huge white night gown
a carnival costume for a penguin
whatever i'm going to draw

wisdom with one who measures
courage with one who cuts
innocence with the one who tacks

truth is with the one who stitches
threads
the measured
the cut
the tacked
into one whole
underneath your fingers it threads black
above – white.

Midsummer Poem

The villagers of Northern Sweden
approach Midsummer most
seriously.
They believe in a fire
larger than their neighbor's,
in the largest fire in the neighborhood.
To make it happen they drag everything that burns
and pile it in the field.

If my grandmother's neighbor,
a certain Mishka
from Northern Belarus,
had had a chance to exchange some words
with guys from Northern Sweden,
he could have given them good advice:

“The key to any fire is tires,”
He would have said spitting under their feet
a chewed up piece of fat,
“Remember, dudes, you can never
have enough tires.
The more tires,
the better is midsummer.

The more tires
the truer.
With tires the fire is real.

In Damanava, they say if you have
as many tires as there are men in your village
you'll get laid for the whole year,
but we, in Zareccha, don't believe such rubbish –
anyway, many of ours go away to college.

Here's how you celebrate midsummer:
Pile up the tires
into a rubber anthill,
an awesome androcyte cake,
then add petroleum-soaked newspaper.
Where to get the tires? Anything goes.
Two years ago I busted all eight tires
of my uncle's tractor.
He had to ditch them.
How he swore, when he found out, -

he broke my rib and leg with a stool...
But believe me – that was the summer!”

That is what Mishka would have said
to the dudes from the Northern Sweden.
But such a ruckus
is unlikely to happen there.
Volvo tires are unlikely
to besmirch the low Swedish sky.

Still, I believe
that dudes from Sweden
do need to have such an experience.

Mishka doesn't speak English,
let alone Swedish
or Finnish.
If he had met with the dudes
from Northern Sweden,
first they would have had a fight,
then got drunk,
all the time silent,
or simultaneously gesticulating
without a clue that they have so much
to discuss.

That's why today
to honor the end of summer exams
right before the solstice
if you,
the powerful of my country,
think about how to make
our lives even better
(because you are always thinking about it)
I call to you:

For the sake of international understanding,
for the sake of divine harmony
educate our village
in foreign languages!

Translated from the Belarusian by Valzhyna Mort
