

Laurynas KATKUS

Poetry and prose

Aunt Janė

Aunt Janė came out of the photo of a volleyball team.

She would never err when counting.

Aunt Janė learned German by heart.

She would often type something on the typewriter.

Aunt Janė escaped the soldiers by running over the roofs.

Her lonely husband ran through the woods in a burning shirt.

They found him by the Bible she had given him.

Aunt Janė came back, lived on. Nothing else to do.

Aunt Janė liked riddles, and inscriptions on tombstones,
according to my cousin.

When perfumed oils were running down my forehead,

a shiny ruble fell from her hand into my pocket.

Later, relatives stole Aunt Janė's memory.

In revenge, she began to rave, and disappeared.

Now there she lays, returned to her motherland.

We don't know what to do, and are crying.

Bootleg Copy

He is renting a flat behind the highway
in the 80s.

He sleeps under the threadbare snowflakes of the nappy blankets
which once snowed on the seaside dunes.

The shelves of the cupboard are weighted down with monitors, processors,
floppies, and hard discs.

His body is lead-like, behind the eyelids only an occasional
swish of turbid eyeballs.

Rows of numbers, flashes, multiple and commanding movements:
these are chips whispering in the dark.

Overloaded, discordant, infected with viruses, they suffer a cruel slavery.

Every second in this city they are touched by the hands of barbarians.

Only you can save us, Vygis, says the Mother Board, cut a window to freedom.

Only you, because people don't understand anymore what you are saying, why you
suddenly turn off, throw down the receiver.

Your languages are different from one another.

Come to us, and you will be the most pliant, most perfect algorithm!

In the system, which never freezes, where there's no weariness,
hunger, pornographic sites!

Where only thought-about possibilities appear, where there're all colors and speeds, Vygis,
we will be together till the end!

Above the bluff, the orange meter of the moon is flagging.
On the benches the places will soon be taken

By the eaters of sunflower seeds, and construction workers shouting to their wives,
wives with dish-water hands.

Wires will swing and spark when the trolleybuses peep out from the end station.

A hard-boiled egg waits for you in the kitchen with its cracked walls, empty,
not a component in sight.

Moving

Taking part in the festive procession from lift
to car, are albums, jewelry cases, flower pots, vases,
and blankets. Today we celebrate
the chronic disease of two patients –

a recognition of the footfalls on the stairs, widening pupils,
a momentary mingling of dreams. Only one remedy:
the moving of passion – with the roots, without anesthesia –
to the grounds of another address.

Bundles of books tied up with twine STOP,
sour northern grapes. Their pulp and pits
you will taste under the twinkling firmament
until an epiphany comes, a child, or a coma.
The car trunk shakes.

Fuzz-cut children with a football in the world of games.
Through the window family members gaze at
the steel-blue coupling clouds. The lock snaps shut
like split-wood, but your subconscious forgets the gloves,
and the emigration is postponed a few more minutes.

High, high up the floors, the Persian carpet of the lift,
the transparent walls, doors without locks:
I'll say – let's fall into bed where generations change,
let's exchange bacilli, harmless to others,
till in the loft the white skeleton of the dove starts to coo!

And so I live with cobwebs and ficuses,
dictionaries, comic strips, and a heart
which taps at the outskirts of night

I live with parcels and emails,
Prussia and Žvėrynas, moonshine and wine
When the air gets colder, the breathing slower

In dreams I talk with statues and poets
whom I like and whom I cannot stand
clearly pronouncing the consonants

I cut my nails, repair the shower,
confess and overlook in silence, drive the car
because nobody suggested I do so.

Outside in patches of melting snow
I observe a hare sitting in a copse
and let him into my consciousness

I jump I jump, strike something, I freeze –
How humid it is all around
How steamy above the earth

Covered with space, rarely seen,
listening to the ever-stronger beat of my heart

ХЛЕБ, 1972

It smells of gas and yeast.
Diagonally across the pavement,
Vans: diagonal letters,
red teats on the underbelly.

Smoldering people
unload
one more generation of the newborn,
curse solemnly.

Black, blind bricks
don't give away
when the blockade will be over –
abruptly, like an odor.

It's half past five. In the gardens
in the outskirts, it's drizzling,
and along the avenue, caraway seeds
scattering.

Half past five. Half-gods,
we're deep in the bread,
not yet risen, as yet untouched
by the palms of steel and sun.

Raising of Spirits

For Jurgis Kunčinas

Looking down, lips pressed. Bulbous nose like a waterdrop, bristly cheeks. It's you.

You return from the well, the snow crunches under your shoes. At the doorway you turn around, wry smile, contentment or amusement. Without a doubt, it's you.

A bit delayed, as if from the cellar, your voice. You talk about rambling about, sleeping in haystacks, work as a male nurse on Vasaros Street. Articulating clearly, savoring each exact stress. Oy, that voice.

You walk slowly, stooped, but with assurance. With every movement you part the impervious, you shred the hostile patch of the sky.

You put out your hand and point with thick finger: here's the workroom, the table, and here on the wall – my reliquary of fetishes. Some roguish force emanates from you.

No, not your friend, not a follower. Curious latecomer, watching from a corner. Yes, what a scamp, your never-ending erotic adventures. Yes, white pennon of the minstrel. How could dreamy-eyed striplings not have a look.

Gradually, Vilnius opens up, worn to the bone. Cement and dust; black body of a loaf of rye in the window of the "Grocers". Above checkered coats, the blossoming faces of girls, shy and beautiful.

All that burnt out theatre, Jurgis. Unhappy time, unfulfilled time. One wants to cry, cry without tears. To rip the clothes, and fall to earth like a stone.

I'm standing in a circle, arms outstretched toward the toward the circling film. A circle of bearded men, and women with swarms of silver bracelets on bony wrists.

Speak, give some advice – somebody says with a hoarse voice – everything passes so quickly, in Spring I don't recognize my street, my mouth barely opened and the words already old, going, going, that one gone too...

but you don't respond; you sit in the boat, fading away, singing: opening your eyes – the Merkys flows on, you close your eyes – the Merkys flows on...

Fade out.

On The Sixth Floor (Mažvydas Library)

An elevator, murmuring quietly,
Lifts us into a sky of books.
Eyes closed, you twist your hair around your finger:
Slumber is a soft and warm cocoon.
It will tear, when you step into the labyrinth of shelves.
When you hang your I.D. around your neck.

In the nearby prison's yellow cages, they read the script
Another way, with the whole body. On Iron Wolf Street
The cars race, competing toward success.
Here only twilight, hours on end, twilight...
At lunch you'll drink juice from a wine glass.
The pungence sticking to the corner of your lips.

You'll wander down the aisles, not even searching
For the beginning or end of the letters.
As if saying goodbye, you'll touch the spines of the books.
For you know, how one waits for a sign. Just a stirring.
How on understanding, everything shines.
How the shelves are endless.

The door opens onto the dim corridor.
But my electricity
Has grazed your hair.
Not moving, not paying any attention,
You stand and drink your image,
Which duplicates itself in the elevator's mirrors.

Money

For Elke Erb

You wake up – later than usual – dress and grab
a shopping bag.
You look in your wallet – flat broke.
Open the coffer – only bills and receipts.
Go through the drawers, check out the secret places – nothing.
You call your parents – all week they've been
fasting on tinned meat and jam.
After twelve rings a sleepy voice responds – no,
not a cent to spare, short of cash himself.

You go out to the hall; the neighbor's washing the steps
and, cocking her head, asks –
could mister lend her a bit of change?
At the intersection you don't even dare get near
the chap with the cell phone;
the kiosk of an ex-classmate's locked up.
You race down a few side streets. You examine your shoes
on a bench – the left sole has a hole.
Curtains torn, the sheets – walls splotched,
huge ants commandeering the kitchen
and the last slurp of milk in your mouth gone sour. Milk...

A woman in a yellow coat turns into a secluded courtyard.
No hesitation, you go for her, grab her handbag.
She doesn't struggle. You shake everything
onto the ground – a compact, notebook, a comb –
no purse, no money.
Bending over her your lips falter into a shout –
money, any money? – and you hear her fading voice –
What? Money? What money? –

You wake up gasping. For some time
you toss and turn, counting something, then get dressed
and take your bag from the peg.

Later On

...later, Autumn. We walked into the street.
A sudden gust of freshness: chests relaxed,
briefcases lighter. Hearts of cars were beating
faster than ours. A small, bearable dose
of anarchy.

Later, we moved toward the pure grocery
of the universe. Robertas suggested his place.
We disappeared into large armchairs,
intoxicated even before we drank, outrageous
with our joking, suddenly not recognizing
each other. Later the alcohol swam
in our brains.

We were smoking cheap cigars and seeing who
could howl the longest, no cheating –
to waken the dark yard, stir up the natural forces,
overcome the phobia of matchbox housing, the Fabijoniškės syndrome...
I saw drops of sweat on your forehead,
and the neighbor who died yesterday
knocked at the door.

It snowed in the TV. Some folks were gone.
Laughter hoarsened. Guzas fell asleep in his armchair.
At the cockcrow of the polar dawn,
I put my arms around you and whispered:
if we don't start everything anew,
Sophia, we are lost.

Translated from the Lithuanian by Kerry Shawn Keys

From: Planet of the Teenagers (Songs of the Punk Era)

The rules were strict at our school's disco nights. Perestroika was in full swing, but we were still going to dances in our uniforms. We had already come of age and received our red Soviet passports, but we still had to shut down the disco at nine. The teacher on duty would turn on the light in the hall and tell the students, whose eyes would be blinking from the light, to disperse. When you wanted to organize a dance you had to enter into long negotiations with the administration, and, right up to the last minute, even if you put up an 'approved announcement', it remained unclear as to whether official permission might still be withdrawn. It was old custom that a poster was just an allusion; we could only get more trustworthy information from the oldest form of media, word of mouth via the privileged few who knew the disco organisers, or from the distant thunder that followed each lightning bolt of a decision by the leadership. A number of factors could lead to an unfavourable decision: a smoky lavatory or a visitor from another school who had managed to sneak in. In this morally slippery zone we all had to answer for the misdeeds of one person. And when reasons were in short supply they were invented: the hosts of the disco nights were accused of having hidden non-existent speakers (our school didn't have its own equipment) – expensive state property – or it was announced that the disco nights consumed too much electricity! The living symbol of this order was the school's headmaster – a stout older man who walked with a limp. He was rumoured to have been a Soviet partisan during the war; however now he seemed more like a Protestant pastor. He wore the same suit every day, pedantically ironed and buttoned up; he was always freshly shaved and the pronounced wrinkles on his face had a bluish tint. The headmaster's appearances at the school had something hieratical about them – his figure slowly limping along the corridor was reminiscent of a statue of a god being carried around an ancient city.

The headmaster's one true religion was pedagogy. Nobody had ever seen him relax or have fun (his fits of good cheer were so tumultuous that they scared you just as much as being scolded); no one, not even the teachers, knew what his extracurricular hobbies were. He rarely attended school festivities, not to mention disco nights, though there was no doubt it was he who created the 'rules of conduct'. When the director spoke at the school assembly hall it seemed as though Lenin's words, 'Learn, learn, and one more time, learn', like the caption on some poster, came directly from his mouth. He stoked this fire tirelessly even though our school was highly ranked in terms of the percentage of graduates who went on to pursue higher education. (I fear that it ranked highly in other categories too – the number of students who transferred to other schools, and also of those who went on to develop psychological disorders, but such statistics were, understandably, not recorded.) However, the headmaster's attention was focused greatest on the morality of his pupils. Forcing them to study well, to listen to teachers, and to play sports would have been too dull and minimal a programme. Our leader wanted to achieve more, so he focused on questions of personal morality. At almost every school assembly he couldn't wait to tell us a story that turned out to be a lesson about

immorality and its consequences. Listening to him, it seemed that any communication between the sexes that didn't occur in the classroom hid the seeds of evil. One time, by accident (was it really by accident?) having espied pupils on a balcony who appeared to be talking, and who also appeared to be kissing, he stormed into their flat and informed their parents, then afterwards he yelled at them during assembly telling them in front of everyone that they were degenerates.

Oh what a strange mood would come over us when on the crowded, pulsating dance floor we heard the echoing chords of a guitar and a saxophone breathed life into a sleepy, dreamy melody; this was a sign that the next stage of the disco was beginning – the slow dance. Couples would hesitate, listening to the rhythm to see if it would speed up or not, and then make their decision. A few girls, heads hung low, left the dance floor. Everyone else would get close and embrace, starting their first experience with the anatomy of the opposite sex.

Oh those short minutes; the slowly swaying pine-tree-like patterns on the parquet floor, the warmth of another body – you hadn't felt this close to anyone since childhood, since your mother's embrace! Her softness pressed up against your chest, because you are a lot taller than she is. The bra strap on her back... Standing like boxers in a clinch, her hands around my neck, and no referee could break us up; we barely move during the entire dance, that punk-like foxtrot. How could this be? Where is the hundred-eyed deity of pedagogy looking? Has she fallen asleep?

You hold this familiar but incomprehensible body like a glass vase, sometimes exchanging short phrases. Your senses are heightened, registering data. She breathes (her breasts rise), she moves her hand, she laughs. Her school uniform lies beneath the mist of a black pinafore with buttons down the front. A few minutes more and you'd begin to disassemble her like a toy.

Slow dances, dubbed 'trees die standing up', were not played often, maybe three or four times in an evening, and perhaps this phenomenon held some sort of evidence? In response to their friend's requests the deejays would select the longest songs – slow, rough metal ballads. In the panoptical new neighbourhoods where we lived there were too many windows and too few hidden corners, so the disco was perhaps the most convenient place for the examination of new dimensions of experience.

And how we craved that experience! Surrounded by silence and vigilance, it seemed like a drink that when imbibed transformed your daily life into tropical colours, a tonic for all ills that was right beside you, within reach. How even the most innocent of allusions electrified us! Joseph Brodsky wrote that in his youth he was tormented by one detail of the painting *Admission to the Komsomol*: a few centimetres of the upper leg of a blonde woman. And since we were living during the peak of Socialism there were even more of those sparks of arousal. The air raid sirens took on the voices of divas like Madonna and Sandra. There were comic books trading hands illustrated by Bidstrup, an old Danish communist, which in a few places alluringly depicted erotic escapades; some private libraries even held Latvian sexology guides. However, this was all just an allusion, just a reflection in the mirror, and Eros would nonetheless pounce with the same primordial power. I remember one of my early epiphanies: a phrase from a spy story published in a popular magazine (the name, author and plot of which I have forgotten, if I knew it at all). It bore witness to the temptations faced by the hero

in a capitalist country: 'Jazz music was played, and the young people began to shake their behinds.' The chapter ended with that sentence but you didn't need to read any further because it called to mind an image of dancing bodies and of the decadent Western atmosphere, and that was intoxicating because we could not attain such wholeness of experience.

During the Soviet period, eroticism – especially of the teenage variety – had a similar status as homosexual relations in Cavafy's Alexandria. Of course this enhanced its appeal, and our curiosity, a hundred times over. And since it was never talked about in 'good' schools or by families who 'served the government', most often rumours reached us from courtyard lore, jokes, and, a little later on, videos. Sometimes a group of drunks would stumble into our courtyard; they would find a spot behind the bushes, drink a bottle, and do whatever crazy things came to mind. This silence around sexuality forced us to create our own theories, which often crossed over into the realm of science fiction. And though while in conversation erotic quests took on unusual proportions, most often they were limited to a few minutes in a dark stairwell. That said, we never would have admitted this: to us it seemed that being two-faced was an inseparable part of the game.

Gradually, we started to think it was sexuality that was precisely the meaning of life for adults. Otherwise, why would they have had to hide it? And, after all, in what way were they different from us? They were part of the same system, perhaps even more so, because they had not only to obey instructions but also identify with them. (Who could fail to notice the drips of sweat on the forehead of an elderly teacher when he explained the essence of the new Soviet peace initiative?) They were even more dependent on the institutions because they couldn't justify any misbehaviour on the basis of youthful indiscretion. It began to seem to us as though the measure of maturity was found not in the freedom to make decisions, or in independence, but in knowing all about those sexual mysteries. We were still watched over by puritans, Tsarist boarding-school disciplinarians, and the followers of Makarenko, all standing hand-in-hand. A strange and two-faced nineteenth century still existed in this part of the continent, and in truth we were the last graduates of that century.

Translated from the Lithuanian by Jayde Will
