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Conversation in the Mountains

> There they stand, the cousins, on a road in the mountains, the stick silent, the stones silent, and the silence no silence at all. No word has come to an end and no phrase, it is nothing but a pause, an empty space between the words, a blank—you see all the syllables stand around, waiting.
>
> **—Paul Celan, *Conversation in the Mountains***

I've never thought of photographing the landscape that unfolds from the top of a mountain. The panorama, the chiseled clarity of the depths, the beyond and the just-now fixed on the film: better to escape it. That's why you leave the house before dawn and climb the slope as the day begins. You aren't there or then anymore. The point of reference: here and now.

But look: the point of reference is gone. The slope can't stay still. It's crawling down toward the valley, into the green and blue depths. The rocks are running down like gray mice, disappearing into the gaping mouth with an endless hiss. They like to move as a herd. Below is dissolving into a swarm: rocks, the path, buttercups, bellflowers, and in particular rocks and more rocks, and on their heels, imminently: my fall.

In the mountains, the now is won bit by bit. It's in the details that appear in a close-up: rock, path. The chalice of a buttercup or a bellflower, which bloom later here than in the valley.

Колоколы-балаболы, Колоколы-балаболы, Накололи, намололи, Дале боле, дале боле…Накололи, намололи, Колоколы-балаболы.

While hiking up, you save your breath, you don't talk, you content yourself with the words that roll around inside your head without fuel—thirst, buttercup, beyond, I'm straying too far from the others, bellflowers—a

mishmash of words without French or Russian wrapping, words outside language.

Barely brushed, the words fall and free the mountain from their trembling noise, leaving it to the dry and silent duo of rock and foot and to the miserable guests of this steep and sun-scorched land; these shrimpy mountain plants called "immortals" in Russian and in French for the good reason that nothing ever seems to overcome their ascetic transparency, their blandness floating in the eye of vastness. They fall, humble and consenting, these words from my languages—from behind language, not wandering but marching along at their own pace. Bellflower: my eyelashes flutter, the word blinks at the edge of my vision without the time to fall into my mouth—blue scent, that's it. No need to know which side of the word—Russian or French—sticks in the pupil of the language-eye. No need to pick it up. The words roll down smoothly, draped in their unpronounced Russian or French petals. Now that the summit seems to be within arms' reach, the path is no more than a sliding mirage. The rocks crumble under my feet, they crumble under my fingers.

A word that hasn't been chewed, or bitten off, that hasn't crossed the threshold of the throat is a word in limbo, pure image, a thin glow above it like the halo around the depiction of a saint. Curled up in its shell, like energy sleeping in ore while waiting to be extracted, this verbal shadow isn't duplicated in Russian and French syllables any more than the outlines of things we see are split up. Somewhere at the periphery of our vision, we see double—each pupil sneakily takes its own photo, our field of view is bordered by two noses—but officially, our two eyes roam hand-in-hand. As long as a word remains unpronounced, its image is whole.

Imagine then the moment when the rocky treadmill begins to roll under your feet. There is nothing else but the ground and your feet, the moving ground and your groundless feet, terrified.

In that wavering moment, another grounding is needed: that of sounds and syllables. Brutally thrust back into their languages, the names have seized power. These kings are ready to leave the shadows, insisting on being carried in their sonorous litters. Two monarchs per word. Each one wished to be pampered, proclaimed. Each says, "Say my name in both languages!" Each bit of the mountain demanded to be named in two languages.

How do you say bellflower in Russian? Kolokol'chik, little bell. (Колоколы-балаболы, Колоколы-балаболы). How do you say "scree" in Russian? How do you name this kind of grass in one language, in the other? How do you say immobility, crumbling, the summit whisked away, unattainable? Each stem, each twig demanded imperiously to be named—in

both languages. The immortals, these high-altitude survivors, in both languages. Chaos, capsizing, *shelest*— "rumbling."

As long as I can keep an eye on the rapidly shuttling words, as long as I track their flow from one world to the other, from the world in Russian toward the world in French and vice versa, I won't fall. They give me an infinitesimal but ungraspable refuge: the refuge of passage. In this interstitial space, warding off everything plummeting around me, the clattering of the scree—but how do you say scree in Russian, for heaven's sake?—I'll hold on and I won't fall—won't fall.

Help finally comes. Leaving the group, which had taken another path, one of the hikers comes over to me and gives me a hand, and soon the crumbling of the mountain and the frantic circulation of words stop.

When you're on loose rock, you have to set your feet on a flat surface, he tells me.

So that's it: to avoid skidding off the mountain, you must have both feet in the same language.

However, since I haven't fallen, it's certainly because there was, between the two shuttling languages, a small immortality to hold on to. Salvation wasn't in the names, those eternal migrants, but in their losing hold, their disintegration from language to language, from one world to the other.

Hölderlin: "Mais au lieu du péril croît aussi ce qui sauve." But where there is danger, the rescue grows as well.

A Republic of Two Versions

The body takes root not at the feet but in the throat. Sagittal slices through the speech organs, used in phonetics class to show the pathways of sounds in language, look like geological cross-sections to me: the larynx (which contains an animal name: lynx), the pharynx (pax) and the vocal cords. Intended to show the origins of sounds, the different varieties (not of plants but sounds)—labial, dental, guttural or hissing, even fricative or approximant—that grow from my body, that are nourished by myself and that sink their airy roots into me—form colorful strata, the geological layers of my terrain, of my *res publica* where two versions of the world live.

In this one, *pax* usually reigns. The sounds of my two kingdoms don't clash any more than those of far-flung provinces. At rest, bilingualism is no more noticeable than a part of the body that doesn't hurt. On waking, you rediscover the world without noticing that it's split in two—that would be like noticing, "Oh! I have teeth." When we examine our bilingualism, it

turns its back on us, because we examine it in one language or the other, not both. It's impossible to look at it directly. It can present itself as a non-experience: nothing happens.

Heidegger says that man must have a homeland. The homeland is the "nothing" that happens: the interstitial space. I'd like to sketch its physical geography. Draw up a soil map. Show the "horizons" of bilingualism—this is the name for the parallel slices that make up the "profile" of a soil.

Tools

Bilingualism is waiting for its chronicler, someone down-to-earth who will follow each step of the bodily clues to the constantly shifting center. This is the task that I've given myself: to track the physical signs and the palpable traces from this reciprocal inhabitation.

It's a kind of report. The material that I'm trying to describe is the same that I'm using to describe it. It's like telling the story of a flood with water or the story of a fire with flames.

The musician will tell you about his instrument, and so will the tailor, the furniture-maker, the shoemaker, the gardener, the sailor—all of them have stories to tell about their tools and the materials that they work with. For the writer, the tool and the material are one and the same. Language works with language. The writer fashions her own tools. The writer's tool is bolted fast to her body—to talk about it is to display the body that writes. Bilinguals who write—a category I belong to—use double-edged tools. The goal of this book is to show them at work. There is a time in one's life when one feels the need to talk about her profession: for me, it's the concrete experience of living inside language—being inhabited by language—and in duplicate.

I said "tool." Of course, this is an optical illusion. We say that we "use" language like we say that the sun orbits the earth. In reality, language uses us in order to live and evolve. We are its instrument and it shapes us by letting us shape it. We are the material that it works over while it lets itself be worked on. What ideas does language have for bilinguals, and what instruments has it set aside for us?

When you devote your life to questioning words, you must at some point make space for the body they create: language itself. This book isn't a reflection, but a cross-section.

Physics of Bilingualism

To live in a language other than one's native language shouldn't be perceived as a loss or abandonment. No more than an amputation or atrophy. It's the physical experience of toggling back and forth. Inside and outside. Physics is a science that teaches us that things are not as they seem. In a world where almost everyone wields a second language, where half of the planet is on the road while the other half tries desperately to put up roadblocks, sketching out physics of bilingualism seems almost medically necessary. Not because I see pathology there, but because I see a singularity called on to expand. Each case of bilingualism is probably unique—the languages we come from and the languages we moved towards are different and our minds evolve in different worlds. But our bodies are identical, and physiologically there's something in this experience that transcends individual cases and rings true for every language.

Examining bilingualism unveils a truth familiar to linguistic expats: the language that we call our native, that we spoke as children with our parents, will always be something of a language of the past, even if we don't have another one. Unable to confine us under house arrest, it confines us to where we come from. We return to it as archaeologists investigating ourselves.

If I was writing in Russian, I'd use the verb *vyrasti* to express this idea. *Vyrasti*, from the root *rasti*, to grow or get bigger, and the verbal prefix *vy-*, which means "outside of" but also "starting from." When a piece of clothing gets too small, we say *vyrasti iz*: to have grown toward the outside. We grew starting from our native language, and we've grown toward the outside of it.

But I'm not writing this text in Russian. I'm not observing myself bilingually—that would be like watching myself sleep.

Twins

When I'm in Moscow—never for more than ten days at a time—I can smoke, drink, and stay up all night. Not without damaging my body, but it's my-body-there that's damaged and not my-body-here. So there are no consequences for "me." Elsewhere in Russia, like in Siberia, that's no longer the case. I'm traveling, like when I go to the United States. This natural law is purely local and only applies in the city where I was born. There, a possible body is at risk, the one I could have had: invulnerable.

Let bilingualism speak: make it talk about what living between two languages does to the body, the twinned body dressed differently.

This is the tale of a transplant. The story of a transplant. A whole body has been invisibly grafted onto yours. The graft is so successful that no one can tell which body is the original. You have duplicates of every limb and organ. You have a head and a *golova*, two legs and two *nogi*, a heart and a *serdtse*. All of this seems to occupy the same space. Anyhow, when other people see you, they don't pinch themselves, make the sign of the cross, brandish heads of garlic, vow to stop drinking, or call up their eye doctor. They only see one of your hypostases, the one that appears in the field of their own language. (Language is an organ of sight, too.) For them, there's only one version of you, as there should be. Even when they know. A Russian friend said to me recently, "It's strange to think that you live your whole life outside yourself, somewhere else." But it's not somewhere else! There are two "heres," two "insides." A bilingual person can't be seen in entirety by others. I extend either a Russian or French hand, never both at the same time. I don't speak "bilingual" except with myself. I'm never seen in 3D. Never head-on, always in profile. One of the two bodies is always an "astral body" that I take along but can't make visible. I can only talk about it or mime it. And the inhabited body is always ready to withdraw and fade into immateriality to make way for the other one.

These bodies are a little different. A *golova* is never exactly the same thing as a head. A *noga* is never exactly the same as a leg, not least because it's both leg and foot. In Russian, when you "fly with your own wings," you stand on your own *nogi*. A hand is not exactly the same thing as a *ruka*, which is both hand and arm, and wearing your heart on your sleeve is "having your heart on your palm"; the palm, crisscrossed by fate lines, is present in all the gestures I make, whereas in French, it's just the inside of the hand, but in French, rivers also have arms—while in Russian they have sleeves—and arm is masculine, so by definition different from *ruka*, which is the extension of the hand (feminine) and not the other way around, and when saying *ruka* I think "hand" before thinking "arm," because hands write and do everything in life, and in French the hand is the extension of the arm, because you carry something "with arms held up," you take someone in your arms, and so in French I have more strength in my arms than in Russian.

The languages aren't born from the same part of the body. To use a somewhat archaic vocabulary, they can be carried in the "bosom" or the "womb." It depends.

The bodies of each language move differently in space. We—"she" and "I"—don't have the same *schéma corporel*. We don't have the same body image. We don't take up the same space in the universe.

We gesture differently. Facial expressions change too. The set of my shoulders, the incline of my head, my pace. My gaze. My breathing.

It starts as soon as you pick up the phone: "Allô!" In French, the *o* is closed and drawn out a bit, as if leading to a secret that we're going to share. An *allô* that stretches out the moment before the speaker identifies himself—but I'm not revealing myself yet, I'm hiding under the hat of the ô.

In Russian: a wide-open *o* verging almost on *a*—"alloa!" sometimes tacked down at the beginning by an *e*: allioooa.

In French: *l'accueil*, welcome—the *a* at the beginning followed by a curtain dropping down. In Russian: a wide-open, waiting door. Fear of intrusion in the former—and fear of no one showing up in the latter.

If, when picking up the phone, I don't know who the speaker is, I never say "allô" the Russian way. It would be like opening the door to a stranger while in a dressing gown and slippers.

Showing my French side is being "dressed up."

In Russia, when you return home, you put on your dressing gown (for my generation and those above) or your "home clothes" (for the younger people). If it's hot, men might strip down to their underwear.

One hot morning in September, my father was doing some work on the counter in my kitchen in Paris when the doorbell rang. He was alone in the apartment and was only wearing bright red boxer shorts. He went to open the door and saw a woman with her arms full of shopping bags. It was my mother, who had decided that day to bring my children some raspberries from the market. My father said, "Vera, why are you carrying such heavy bags?" My mother retorted, "And why are you in your underwear?" They hadn't seen each other in more than forty years.

In 1988, on the Paris-Moscow line that took me back to my birth country, at the first small squeak of the wheels—the Gare du Nord falling away in the distance—keys began to click in luggage locks: everyone on the train took out their dressing gowns. The corridor filled with colors like a field scattered with flowers: the ladies left their compartments to look out the windows. I didn't have a luggage lock or a dressing gown. Just my arms, hugging my ribs, clinging to my French armor.

When I arrived in Paris, I spoke French with a bit of an accent. People asked me where I came from. I threw myself into losing the accent so no one would ever ask me that again. I choose who gets to know where I come from.

The French are perpetually astonished that someone can learn their language. I've often received the question, "How is it that you speak French with no accent?"

Keeping your accent is like never being able to close the door of your room all the way: anyone can barge in. I insist on the ability to keep the door closed.

Rabinovich from the well-known Jewish joke takes the name Dupont, then changes it to Durand to be able to answer the question "What was your name before?" I don't want anyone to ask me, "What language did you speak before?"

My Russian body is my "home" body. Parading it outside (for example, when with Russian friends in Paris) is like going out in pajamas, a nightmare that everyone is familiar with.

If I spoke French in the streets of Moscow, it would be like wearing a suit to a meeting where everyone else was in jeans.

(Don't take this example too literally. These days, Muscovites are much more elegant than Parisians.)

But if I return home in Moscow and speak French there, it's back to the dressing gown.

In Russian, I almost never say the word "body." If I was writing this book in Russian, I wouldn't talk about the body but about physiology, flesh, silhouette, and muscles. The body, in Russian, at the time when I left, was either a corpse or the counterpart to the mind, or the transfigured body from the Gospel. Since the borders opened, which coincided with changes in translation practices as well as in hygiene, the body arrived in Russia: these days, people take care of it. That means two showers per day and not a weekly bath, an updated version of the well-known Russian *bania* (sauna). The word "body" made its way into Russian via television series translated with the same toneless voiceover for every character, which reproduced the original dialogue almost word-for-word. But also via theoretical works from Western researchers that were translated literally as well. The word is a calque. To me, it still sounds like a body made of transparent paper.

The body in Russian provokes more pity than the body in French.

In Russian, I walk more slowly. I inherited the pace from the era when Russians had eternity before them, because the simple act of living took an unimaginable amount of time. They stopped constantly to contemplate life, as if in front of a shop window. They brought a healthy supply of atemporality to Paris with them. Having friends over was like a journey to the

country of hours lost, and I remember the sensation of thick, viscous time trickling through my veins whenever I walked with a Russian in Paris. Try running in water!

In Moscow, my time, which is already naturally sped-up, becomes even more dense. My accelerated time squeezes even more tightly together. There are no more pauses between moments. In a week, I live through several lives and when I come back, the air seems rarefied and I float weightlessly—a little like when you walk after running.

It's strange to think today that everything I said or thought before June 1, 1975—that is, before I was seventeen—was said and thought in Russian.

That was my past life. It's as strange as saying, "I used to be a blonde."

My childhood has been translated (relived?) in French.

"I" and "She." But rather "I" and "You"—reversible up to infinity.

The Third-to-Last

Starting in 1998, I began to travel to Moscow regularly.

Each time, it was more like a passage to another world than a return home. (This had nothing to do with the huge Russian financial crisis that struck the day before my arrival in Moscow on August 17. Not even the young woman at the exchange office knew the value of the ruble.) A first-person subject makes the return trip; and yet (besides) I have to call the person who arrives there "she." About the "I" in Russian, I can only say "she" in French. A twin body narrated differently.

The RER stops on the way to the airport become stops for nothingness. Drancy, Aulnay-sous-Bois, Aubervilliers: names of nothing.

What's out there, anyway? Absolutely nothing. The Lord has some tricks up his sleeve, though, to make up for the empty names. For example, as you approach Sevran-Beaudottes, you see two cranes rising over a hill, two elegant red-and-white marvels, one a little bigger than the other like an older sister, both transparent, as if made of words. Smack in the middle of a landscape of lines and hills where construction seems reluctant to emerge, the two birds are wholly devoted to their silent flight. But they're there, although there's truly nothing in Sevran-Beaudottes. The land there is made of a unique substance, like the lakes and hills that you spot from an airplane and that reveal themselves to be nothing more than convolutions of clouds, sometimes sluggish, sometimes suddenly piling up. Sevran-Beaudottes could be lacking even this strange substance, which isn't white but greenish or rusty or tawny. Sevran-Beaudottes might be just a ripple in the eye that, not expecting to see nothing, draws shapes behind the name; it might be the mental shape of the *an* in Sevran, the *ot* in Beaudottes, its imprint on the retina drawn from the reserve of images that our eyes use to compensate for the lack of things—like a sensible girl who always has a sewing kit in her bag in case something rips.

When you close your eyes, strange shapes start to move on the inside of your eyelids. They slide down slowly, cross the dark pool at the edges of your vision and disappear. But the slightest movement, an involuntary

twitch of the eye, brings them back to the beginning of their journey like board game players who've landed on an unlucky square. The eye doesn't know how to stay silent, and when it has nothing to say, it speaks to us only in commas. The involuntary speech of the eye. Ponge called these creatures "shrimp." Through their movements, they reveal a frail anatomy: they are made of tiny segments. Similar segments make up the crane jibs that you see near Sevran-Beaudottes, and yet these red and white cranes surely exist. Maybe they are there simply to mark the limits of the eye's kingdom, where something ends and nothing begins, where eye-creatures lend some of their substance to things but don't completely replace them as is the case in Sevran-Beaudottes where there is truly nothing.

Saying "I" in the Third Person

This image was promoted by the darkness that still covered the suburb when the train passed by early in the morning. Sevran-Beaudottes wasn't the last stop before the airport, but it was the third-to-last syllable of my departure, the line I crossed to enter an in-between state. No longer Paris, not yet Moscow. At the next stop, the game was up. My distress left me, and I had moved outside the walls, beyond the walls of my two bodies, suspended.

In the airplane, between "I" and "she," between "she" and "I," which language is mine?

I know that there are borders in the sky too: you do hear, "A plane was shot down in the airspace of...." I know that planes are an extension of the land. When a baby is born on a flight, regulations dictate that he claims the nationality of the country where the plane is registered (future mamas, always fly SWISS!) or the nationality of the country that the plane is flying over when he is born (a Serbian child could thus become Bosnian if his mama was flying to Switzerland to give birth). Falling short of these possible births and within their potential, within every possibility imaginable, I fly over these unhappened things like a pure stream of words, and words start to come to me in one language or the other as they wish. Words falling from the sky.

As soon as you fall asleep, you forget about the sky. Sleep is an archaic state; it brings you back to earth. Dreams demand something more concrete than a fantastical airplane. The humming of the engine and the slight vibration of the floor become the sensations of a train ride. The engine chugs and makes a landscape appear through the window. A sudden jolt into

wakefulness—and the mechanism of these sensations of the landscape, the distance, and the engine falls to pieces. In a plane, the humming doesn't make the sky scroll by. Another calculation takes place. Muscles count up immobility and you measure the distance by their numbness. Inside you is the same mechanism held within all train passengers throughout history, and in an instant, it's thrown off-kilter. Our ancestral motor has failed: we're going to crash. Did train passengers in 1850 feel the same way when they fell asleep and their body started to count the miles or *versts* as if on horseback?

In my family's memory, trains bring grief. Trains took the ones who couldn't ever come back, and trains returned empty of the people who had been seen leaving. Airplanes are blank slates with regard to pain. My mother and grandmother had never taken a plane before we left Moscow permanently for Vienna in March 1975. Airports are filled with the scent of spring, of fuel and makeup, of voluntary departures. But train stations smell like the rusty metal of boxcars ferrying crowds of "them" to hazy destinations.

Sevran-Beaudottes is just a city outside Paris, so you can't see it on a world map. But it was powerful enough to swallow up infinity. Although "Sevran" left a tiny possibility of salvation, "Beaudottes" closed the door on you for sure. Sevran was a peak to climb, Beaudottes was a black hole. Instead of seeing the "beau" and the "dot," I could only see the hollowness of the two *o*s.

I couldn't pinpoint the moment when I crossed. At a certain point, I realized that I was "severed" from the world and that my distress had left me, that's all. Neither "I" nor "she": an in-between.

The *O*'s

I'm thinking of a poem by Tsvetaeva dedicated to the White Army.

> Who survived—will die, who died—will rise up.
> And then the descendants remembering the past: "Where were you?" The question will peal like thunder.
> The answer will peal like thunder:
> "On the Don!"
>
> "What did you do?" —We suffered,
> Then got tired and lay down to sleep. —
> And in the dictionary the pensive grandsons
> Will write after the word "Duty," the word "Don."

When Tsvetaeva read her poems on the White Army to soldiers from the Red Army, they applauded and cheered for her. She concluded that what the listener takes away from a poem isn't its content, but its rhythm. The soldiers heard the abyssal *o*'s that threatened to engulf Reds and Whites alike. *O*: both death and memory. In French, these two words have similar sounds. In "commémoration" there is also "mort."

In French, the Don River, the "remembrance place" of the Russian Civil War, is twinned with Nabokov's *Le Don (*Russian *Dar,* English *The Gift)*. The *don* (gift) of writing as a place of passage: Berlin, the ephemeral refuge of Russian émigrés. The narration in this novel switches imperceptibly from first person to third person and back again. The Styx is crossed in both directions: as a character on the way there and as an author on the way back.

Streets and Courtyards

In 1981, the year when my first book came out (in French), my mother tongue tried to reclaim me. It was during a trip to the United States. I had never left Europe: the change in urban scenery broke down the mental walls separating my languages. The issue was the spaces between the buildings.

In Paris, the street is sealed shut. The buildings are sandwiched together tightly enough to protect you from the idea that a world beyond could snatch you up at any moment. The "within" is sheltered from the outside, and vice versa. Chaos won't infiltrate the inside, while private life won't spread outside. Outside: sidewalks, roads, gutters. Inside: an elevator cage, a little courtyard—we call it a "well" in Russian. In Paris, the beyond is muzzled.

In Moscow, the street is just an idea. A fiction. You say "such-and-such street" but it's really more like a direction, a shape, or a datum of consciousness. For drivers, there is certainly a road with intersections and red lights (however rare): passing through so quickly shrinks the gaps so that the city unfolds continuously, as if on a screen. Moscow is like this book: it takes an observer in motion to give it a sense of continuity. In Paris, when someone gives you an address, you're sure to get there. A street is already a destination. In Moscow, it's an abstraction. People tend to say, "I live near such-and-such movie theater," or store, or park, or embassy, rather than, "I live on such-and-such street." In Moscow, it can take half a day to walk from one end of a street to the other. A building number doesn't mean anything, because it usually refers to several buildings.

(In Irkutsk, I've even spotted a cluster of buildings with no numbers at all. I was looking for an Internet café and I had the address, on Lenin Street if I remember correctly. However, on this street, there was a whole stretch of numberless houses. I asked, "How do you get your mail?" It turned out that the houses had hidden numbers that corresponded to the cross-streets.)

To find the building you want, you have to walk between two apartment blocks or under an archway to get to the courtyard. It's not a "well." The courtyards are never closed off. In Moscow, between the city and the home, the courtyard serves as an intermediary world. Everything happens in this in-between space. Here, there are stores, children's playgrounds, publishing houses, bars, and travel agencies. Dog walkers and dominoes players. Lovers and alcoholics. A city within the city—hidden and exposed at the same time, like the tails side of a coin.

When I was a child, this is where we learned to swear, smoke, and cook potatoes in the ashes of fire. This is where we hid our little treasures and shared what we knew about the mysteries of procreation. There's a concept in Russia that doesn't exist in Western cities: going for a stroll. When a child says he's going for a stroll, it doesn't mean he's going out with his parents or babysitter. It means he's going down to the courtyard. I remember that a French cousin who came to visit Moscow was horrified by the idea that the children were supposed to fend for themselves (in reality, their parents kept an eye on them from the upstairs window). "In Paris, children never 'go for a stroll'!" he told me. "Then it's a dog's life!" I retorted. I couldn't shake the idea of all of the city's children shut up in apartments, but in Paris, even being a dog would have made me happy.

(Moscow's courtyards did more to civilize me than any other space did. Streets and building fronts were for other people. In Moscow, the old buildings all have a servants' door that leads to the courtyard, called the "black door," and a guests' door that leads to the street, called the "great door." There have been times in history when the existence of a black door [or black exit, rather] could save your life.)

In Moscow, you never go straight where you're going, you cut through the courtyards. No matter where you're going, there's always a shortcut.

The Haussmannian perspective and the tight seal of Parisian walls limit your gaze—but these limits are shattered in New York. Here, in this discord, among the staggered buildings, the city-up-high—cloaked in alien

transparencies that firefighters' ladders puncture like probes sent into the future—is superimposed on the city-on-the-ground, with its human scale, brick-footed buildings and shards of our little Europe, our shared Troy. Here is where my mother tongue rose up to give voice to a need for something shapeless and uncontrollable.

There are compact cities—Paris, London, Vienna, Amsterdam—and cities with holes in them—Moscow, Berlin, New York, Chicago. There are fully mature cities whose past becomes richer with each transformation, where every innovation immediately becomes history. And there are cities that are irremediably unfinished, intended for an unattainable future. Cities for the "always-already" and others for the "not-yet." Architecture has its own language, visual and in 3D like sign language. The language of architecture has a "timeline" perpendicular to the observer: the past is behind him, the present at the same level as him and the future ahead. In Moscow, places only exist ahead of you. What's behind you has disappeared. The city is in front of you—forever. In Paris, the landscape behind you doesn't wait for a gesture to cue its appearance. It sticks to your shoulder blades.

From Paris, Moscow is inconceivable. I can only imagine it by removing Paris from my mental map and vice versa. In one of these spots—Paris or Moscow—the map stays silent. A blank spot.

Seen from the United States, Moscow is believable. I'm not talking about Moscow as the large village it was in the nineteenth century and at the beginning of the twentieth, but as the city it is today, where successive waves of destruction have shaped a quirky modernity. Moscow not only sculpted a face turned toward America (since the 1920s); she intended to compete with the New World as the capital of the *Novy mir* (New World).

However, New York and Chicago have sought to manage the observer's gaze. The skyscrapers, all sporting different caps, reflect each other. A symphony of colors. These places think of a city as a single organism, a whole being. Moscow laughs in the face of this idea. She is a cruelly ironic city.

The chattering colors, escaping their structure in a redeeming halo, console humans about their fate. Little crumbs lost in space, we're not abandoning you, we're sparkling just for you, we're putting on an enchanting show to make you forget, a show for you who are swarming below; to make you forget what we know, we whose heads are up in the clouds: humanity will soon disappear.

In Moscow, redemption is anachronistic and always commented on via voiceover by one Ivan Karamazov, who "returns his ticket" to God.

(You'll tell me that I'm not being fair and you're right. There are certainly places in Moscow where people feel "saved," or at least that they've been allowed to borrow time. However, if you get settled in, you expect a man in uniform to yank you out of your dream and show you his badge… It's a metaphor, of course.)

In 1981, in New York, I wanted to leave French and that boxed-in gaze, I wanted to conquer the outrageousness and inhumanity of piling words up ever higher and instead give them some texture and unharmonious curves. What I wrote in Russian at that time got lost and scattered over intersections in New York streets. It probably served no other purpose than to sketch a distance and locate the view of the language.

In Russian, there are only three verb tenses: past, present, and future. There is no particular way to express anteriority. No "I had been," no "I will have finished," even less "when he had finished writing," no "going," no subjunctive. There's a conditional form, but sometimes, plausibility is expressed in the future tense. In Russian, there is not always a distinction between what is real and what is not.

In Russian, the past doesn't want to pass away. You will hear stories told in the present tense to make them easier to visualize or to "replay the film" in a way.

Verb tenses are as simple as could be. Why do people say that Russian is hard? Beginners rejoice. And then a chasm opens under their feet. The past and the future each split into two: the perfect and the imperfect. In Russian, the language carries the idea of "unfinishedness" with it permanently—and here students start hitting their heads against the wall and yelling in the perfect tense: I will do! I will act! I will be fulfilled!

Brodsky and Bruno Schulz

In New York, I feel nostalgic for "unfinishedness."

So I call the poet Joseph Brodsky, soon a Nobel prizewinner and already the god of poetry in Russians' eyes. He's a little reluctant to invite me over, since young writers are already overwhelming him with copies of their work, but he has nothing to fear from me. And I have nothing to fear from his judgment either. I'm bringing him a mute book, in French.

(When it was published, a French journalist claimed to detect a voice similar to Bruno Schulz's, but I hadn't yet read any of his work at the time. Someone had given me *The Street of Crocodiles,* which I didn't open until I returned from New York.)

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