TOLSTAIA KAPORTA



by VANECHKA

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Tulubaikaporia

Episode 15: about dragonfly's retinal structure

nova-nevedoma.com/dragonflys-retinal-structure/

> "His mind is engaged in a rapt contemplation
> Of the thought, of the thought, of the thought of his name:
> His ineffable effable
> Effanineffable
> Deep and inscrutable singular Name."
> — "The Naming of Cats" by T. S. Eliot

A river's backwater, the sun with an absence of mercy, young Saveliy with a net. The air seems charged, in the air dawns sadness. No, not that... something else, a feeling akin, yet different, delicate, lacy, semi-transparent, like dragonfly wings; at rest—visible, in flight—gone. Boredom? No, not boredom either. Young Saveliy doesn't even know what it is, though he's caught the word from adults. At his age, boredom is like alcohol, not sold without ID, not poured at the table, and they don't even let you sniff the cap, so one must dig trenches between dictionary lines and build towers from tomes of encyclopaedias to the very ceiling of the room or planet, to understand what this quirky little phenomenon is that so agitates some of those around. Even if he

knew, Young Saveliy would have no time for it. He sits with his net, thoughts darting inside, dragonflies outside — now hovering over duckweed, now poking their bottoms into it. That's how they lay their larvae, murmured the insect atlas to him at night under the duvet, to which Saveliy only nodded and kept mum, as always, but not on purpose, just so, naturally, in his Saveliy way.

What feeling is it then? Melancholia? There are as many types of it as there are dragonflies. Perhaps nostalgic? Saveliy's too young for that. Azure or existential? Too complex. Seasonal or emerald? Romantic, perchance? ("Oh no, let those pigtailed girls flit about and squeal on their own.") Or maybe it's the melancholia of change or even cosmic melancholia? All amiss, all askew — Saveliy hasn't reached them yet, they're somewhere yonder, further along the road, round the bend, past the crossroads where Saveliy will turn left, for according to the map, there one ought to go straight. No matter — the time shall come, he'll catch them too, spread their gossamer wings on paper, leave them in the merciless sun to dry, and then, having assigned them a place in his personal collection, he'll gently fold them into the insect atlas with the other dragonflies. Perchance he'll arrange a silent dragonfly exhibition at school without any explanations ("They'll figure it out, it's all clear anyway...") gather a gawking corridor of classmates, youngsters senior and junior, importantly nodding teachers, proudly straightened parents, a couple of "excellent" marks in biology, a diploma for triumph in the regional contest, a handshake from the governor, universal approval and the silent sorrow of dried dragonflies. Perchance he'll show it to none

and tuck the swollen atlas far into the sub-bed obscurity, to dust, lava, monsters, notebooks with F's for disobedience, self-glued books about the spy life of giant anthropomorphic dragonflies. Or maybe he'll release them, uncap the jar, wave his hand, the little dragonflies will flutter out in a swarm, say thank you, and, right after their wings do so — vanish into the distance, against the summer wind. Or maybe not.

— Tulubaika, — says the father of a youthfuled Saveliy, carving butter and smearing it on fresh bread. The slice's still on the plate, yet already crunching in the mouth with reverberations from the future.

— Tulubaika... — Saveliy's mum adds irritably and passes the orange and gooseberry jam jar to dad. The jar's straight from the cellar, sealed firmly, mum can't open it herself. Dad-the-rescuer threatens the jar with a knife, the lid pops, opens dolefully, the jam leaps onto the knife with zeal and aroma, and with a couple of deft movements they amicably cover the buttered expanse of the sandwich with a thick layer.

Saveliy is silent, scowling at the sandwich, shifting his whim-embroidered gaze to his parents.

— Tulubaika? — asks dad.

— Tu-lu-bai-ka... — mumbles son.

With a heavy sigh, dad takes the incorrect sandwich from Saveliy, bites into it and starts spreading the right one—jam first, only then butter.

— Tulubaika? — dad asks again. Saveliy doesn't answer, for there's no

time to dither — the right sandwich shan't wait.

They live either in a village, or in a city in a family of four people, perhaps with a cat, one or a couple, a big dog on a chain, a budgie (better a parakeet, preferably from Australia) in a cage, so the cat doesn't eat it, or better two, because if there's only one, that incomprehensible feeling will swell, soar, bloom, decay in black hues, become a gnawing ennui, toska[1]. From it — be it people, cats, dogs, or budgies — they plague out. So the budgie's strident melody will dissolve in the aether, cat Dusya will be left with no potential food, will therefore grow sad, stop purring. ("Well, who would want to be in such a situation?") Then, in honour of those fallen in battles with existentia, Saveliy's less young sister, called Kitty, Kathryn on her passport ("Enviable... Passported already"), will stand on a little chair in the living room and play an elegy on her violin ("Very talented..."). Legions of guests, friends, relatives, friends of friends, relatives of relatives, friends of relatives, relatives of friends, all together, to the point of calluses, sincerely, sprinkling each other with tears, will clap their hands like they'll never clap for dried dragonflies, neither with their hands nor on the shoulder.

— Tulubaika! — the guests will chant.

— Tulubaika! — the stadium will roar. — Tulubaika! Tulubaika! Tulubaika!

Kitty's cheeks will flush guelder-rose red, she'll smile, take a bow, adjust the bows on her twin-tailed plaits and begin to play "Flight of the

Bumblebee" ("Again..."). As it happens, Savelushka doesn't like them, bumblebees, they're not convenient to dry, they make the pages of the insect atlas bulge and then everything falls out, just as young Saveliy's eardrums bulge and everything seems to fall out of his head too, so much so that it can't be found again till morning.

Sensing the presence of the feeling, hanging over him like a pompous chandelier, he'll sit mutely sans visage, sans any expression, gazing not outward, but inward, into the depths where another (still young) Saveliy walks along the river with a little net and jar to catch multicoloured dragonflies. They, the goggle-eyed twigs, seem to jump in the air, eluding the attacks, leaps, and net swings of the young odonatologist. And lo and behold, the jar is full, and the net is torn, and the knees are bloodied, hands all scratched up, the sun retreats in pity, the sky is purple, stars like lanterns, a sickle without a hammer, sweet sleep after a couple of dozen pages. Savelushka dreams, sees how somewhere betwixt the years forthcoming, he sprints after the dragonfliest of the dragonflies, body like the trunk of an old tree, oak, sequoia, or even baobab, glass wings sparkling in the air, the hum befitting them too, like a helicopter. Anax imperator, face, as per the old testaments of pareidolia, resembling an ancient deity, with a mad smile, either from paralysis or by nature, waving a paw ("Rather a pawest of paws, of course...") — hop on, it seems to say, hop on. He approaches the azure transport, but, as he's about to throw his leg over, the dream up and ends.

— Tulubaika, — mum says sternly, opening the door to Saveliy's

sleeping chambers. Ere he can unstick his eyes, he nods tacitly, slides off the bed, from pyjamas straight into school attire, and with the feeling ("That very one...") sighs meaningfully.

Teeth, breakfast, rucksack, half an hour's walk to school with his sister, breaks, breaks, breaks, breaks, copious breaks, and a few lessons betwixt them. Younglings play, quarrel, whilst Saveliy drifts somewhere alone (but not lonely), now running from the feeling, now trying to catch it, as if playing tag, or hide-and-seek or football, wherein it's unclear who's the player and who's the ball. Everyone has it but their own, not common, personal, hanging from the ear, but not akin to noodles, unlike anything else, with its own intensity, with different cracking of the meter used by special scientists and professors ("Or professeurs?") to measure it, the best minds of humanity, smashing their occiputs and foreheads bloody, donating hair for wigs, washing elbows with household soap before nibbling. Saveliy's meter seems to be off the charts, but only almost, always waltzing on the periphery of the permissible. The allure of the feeling is that it, just like zero, is squeezed between two infinities: minus below, and plus above—no matter how you count it, you'll wear your tongue out.

— Tulubaika? — someone tugs at Saveliy's shoulder, yanking him from his mental veil. — Tulubaika?

Young Saveliy stays mum, shrugs his shoulders. Maybe it's "Tulubaika", and maybe it's not.

— Tulubaika-tulubaika! — the assemblage guffaws.

— Tu-lu-tu-lu-tu-lubai-ka! — they further tease.

A faceless lad drags Saveliy by the sleeve behind him, just as that faceless lad would drag girls by their pigtails, or years later would drag his unruly little son to school, or a bag of banned books to the recycling, or a stubborn donkey by the reins to Jerusalem, but Saveliy doesn't go, jerks his arm, turns around and walks away along the path of tattered linoleum ("You lot got it too..." Savelushka concludes to himself). This feeling is thinner than wings, but stronger than diamond, but the main thing is not to get tangled in it like a kitten in a polythene bag, lest one accidentally snuff it. This feeling has a ubiquitous presence: it's on the gentle autumn wind, sticks to leaves on trees, falls with them into a heap of rot, today smells of gooseberries, tomorrow — of silage, creeps into books, into holes in letters, into dots above "і"[2], into wrinkles of pages, bookmarks, granddad and granny's foreheads, unironed sheets, into music, into scratches on Shostakovich's records, into dust on the stylus needle, into the darkness of dad's out-of-tune guitar, into mum's out-of-tune head, into the intricacies of musical notation, into the tornado raised by a bumblebee's flight, into cassette tapes, into the lyrical voice of a foreign performer, hammering tirelessly "Tulubaika, Akiabulut, Tulubaika..." until the tape tears or a vein tears in the brain, into films, notably black and white ones, notably 4:3, notably with a cheerful plot and sad music, into cartoons, a small part of them, mainly Soviet ones, into old photographs, rarely into new ones ("They have a thin layer of time..."), into drawings drying by felt-tip pen, into ink blots on a shirt ("The pen leaked on its own... Not my fault..."), into

paintings, into the reproduction of Repin's "Dragonfly" ("Which, for some reason, has a girl drawn in it and not a dragonfly...")[3], into the smell of fresh paper, burnt plastic, heated dust and phosphorus, mushroom soup, the aroma of mother's perfume, the stench of grown-up sister's perfume, into explosions and gunshots on TV, into the black stripe on Pikachu's tail, into meteors falling in batches, asteroids, planes, leaves and snow, into watercolours spreading across the table, into the eyelashes of a broken brush, into eyelashes covered with snow in winter, into black ice, into freezing cold, into melting snow, into melting ice cream ("Better pistachio..."), spilled into a backpack that's flown off a cliff behind the schoolyard into an open field, into fields of ruins of ancient empires and fields of solar panels, into the first day of September, into the last stamp in a passport, into the first kiss on the cheek, into the last five seconds before midnight on the doomsday clock, into vacuum, dad's bald spot, dog's mange, the stench of boiled eggs, corn, into a parade of crop-dusters for the 9th of May, into wafts of poppy seed buns, with cinnamon, with custard ("With pistachios..."), the fragrance of dandelions, nettle soup, sour sorrel, bitter cough syrup, rumble of thunder, the last lullaby, into rain and slush, everywhere and anywhere, in screams, in laughter, in silence, in tears and their concealment, in words and their absence, in explaining the inexplicable, in darkness, at dusk, and in light, be it sun or moon, in thoughts by day, in dreams at night, and in sickness and in health, and for richer, for poorer, till death do us part.

Lo and behold, Savelushka, tiny tot, seemingly just born, not even three

years old, and already turned blue, his heartie slowed down, eyes round, no strength to cry. Behold them bringing him in an emergency to the village znakharess, a healer, a holy misfit. He lies on the table on a goose feather pillow in her minuscule kitchen, where in the nook, in lieu of an icon, hangs the Black Square[4], not to shield oneself from the saint's countenance, not to unlock some extrasensory chakra, and not even out of love for Russian avant-garde, but because she's blind — whatever she looks at, in essence it's all just a black square. Behold the babushka's shrivelled paws pour herbal elixir from a spoon into his mouth, rub his pallid little hands and feet with a stinging liquid, whilst her wrinkled lips and tongue gibber somewhat in her own old village cant.

— Tu-lu-bai-ka... Tu-lu-bai-ka... — that's all one can hear, she grunts, showering mantras. — Tu-lu-bai-ka... Tu-lu-bai-ka...

And thus it goes on repeat, whilst tiny Savelushka lies on the pillow, shivering, afraid to blink, pupils hiding in the irises, examining with childish gazes the worried adult countenances and the Black Square hanging above them. It smells of spirits, linden, dog-rose, mustiness, a handful of the past, mountains of the future. You, Saveliy, hang in there, it's alright, you shall thaw out, erupt in tears, slumber serenely ("Tu... tulubaika?").

After all, you've got your whole life ahead. You'll mount the emperor dragonfly, grip tightly its azure body. Your transport will drone like a helicopter, wings aflutter, and lo, the entire world lies beneath you: ant hills of metropolises, hamlets, barely visible rivulets, the shimmer of

reservoir surfaces, endless expanses of oats, the burning September[5], the gold of birch groves — all will run breathlessly into the distance trying to catch up with you. The wind will ruffle your hair, tickle your cheeks, nip at your squinting eyes. Clouds will drench you with rain, pelt you with hail. The sun will blind you, burn you with fire. But you, brave rider, will care not a jot. You'll return home, salute the dragonfly farewell. It's off lakeward to its children, you're homeward to tackle arithmetics, and the world — somewhere on the back burner. The feeling will clear up anew, dawn, settle cosily in your head. There's no word that could express its elusiveness, except, perhaps, one... ("Oh, and did you know? Dragonfly eyes are like magic! They're made up of lots and lots of tiny peepholes, all stuck together like a big puzzle. Each little peephole shows the dragonfly a picture, so it's as if the dragonfly has thousands of itty-bitty windows in its eyes! That's why dragonflies can see everything so clearly, even the teeniest, tiniest bugs flitting about. It's like they have the sharpest eyes in the whole wide insectverse!")

Notes

1. Nabokov famously noted that the Russian word "toska" is one of the untranslatable words, at least into English. In his translation of Pushkin's "Eugene Onegin", Nabokov describes it as "a sensation of great spiritual anguish, often without any specific cause... a dull ache of the soul, a longing with nothing to long for, a sick pining, a vague restlessness." The word eludes English's desperate taxonomic attempts, forcing translators to deploy unwieldy parades of near-synonyms (melancholy, yearning, ennui) that circle the concept without ever penetrating its essence (rather like Western tourists wandering Moscow convinced they are experiencing the "real Russia"). Of course, Russian "toska" isn't that unique. There's the Portuguese "saudade", the Welsh "hiraeth", the Finnish "kaiho", and

likely others.

2. The idiom in Russian also uses “i”, but the original text here uses “ë”, the letter famously left undotted on many occasions when written or typed, becoming a part of the debate on linguistic purism and aesthetics.
3. Ilya Repin’s “Dragonfly” (1884) depicts his twelve-year-old daughter Vera perched on an unstable wooden crossbar with sky behind her, which creates the impression she might take flight at any moment, capturing not her resemblance to the insect but rather her restless, fidgety nature, which “dragonfly” can idiomatically refer to in Russian. Repin himself suggested this title when selling the painting to Pavel Tretyakov, writing that “both in colour, movement, and position she fits this name.”
4. Malevich’s “Black Square” (1915) debuted at the legendary “0.10” exhibition in Petrograd not merely as another canvas among many but occupying the “красный уголъ” (red corner) that was traditionally reserved for Orthodox icons in Russian homes of believers. Suspended high across the room’s corner with deliberate iconoclastic intent, the black void gazed down upon visitors like a proto-suprematist deity. This placement reflected Malevich’s manifesto declaring the painting “the zero of form”, representing reality with pure geometric abstractions. So, it is, in fact, the most unholy of icons.
5. “September burns” is a Russian internet meme originating from the 2007 emo anthem “Сентябрь” by the band Stigmata. The unaware Western reader might see burning September as a poetic metaphor for autumn’s fiery foliage but in Russian internet folklore it’s a nostalghic reference to a song and the glorious times of 2007 when things were rather better (much better, almost perfect even). The phrase exploded beyond its emo subculture origins in the mid-2010s, and posting memes about it became a nationwide September tradition alongside honouring Shufutinsky’s “the 3rd of September” (won’t explain).

Read next part

Episode 16: about hardships of awakening

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