TOLSTAIA KAPORTA



by VANECHKA

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Tulubaikaporia

Episode 4: about microcosmos & microchaos

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> "Love, in essence, arises in solitude when its object is not around, and it is directed not so much at the one or two people you love as at an image constructed by the mind, loosely connected to the original."
> –– "Chapaev And Void" by Victor Pelevin

There you are — trudge through the city
all around skyscrapers sprout.
Behind, ever so distant, lies Tulubaika.
Ahead, ever so near
— bloody hell knows what.

On and on the avenue winds, its endless venue astretch, bound to snap like an old string, slash your cheek raw and leave a scar beneath your eye (the sight's still there, thank you very much) so you'd torture your memory over that melody never mastered.
Primordial soup of concrete, metal, and glass fills the surrounding space of this chaotically ordered universe and takes shape as walls, ceilings,

floors, staircases, windows, benches, poles, stretches of tarmac.
Upwards it grows
downwards it burrows
  as wires and pipes and metro mole-tunnels.
outwards it swells and scatters
  to an infinity infinitely large
  until the little human within
  finally recognises himself as
    an infinity infinitely small.
The proportion of natural light shrinks with unnatural greed, cars move ever louder, yet slower, people walk ever denser, yet faster.
Hum, hubbub and hullabaloo, the noise of tyres and soles merges into the background — sea sound, wave roar, storm forest hour — a monolithic din beckoning one into trance.
No brain-squeezing fear remains, no anxiety lingers, no claustrophobia caused by the sheer quantity of everything; instead
  — awe before civilisation's new element:
    earth, water, air, fire, aether...
    city.

The ancients built pyramids for egoists; we raise them for thousands of souls to make birds envious, pharaohs dead jealous, and children of tomorrow marvel at our grandeur.

In that village of mine, rooftops are a hand's throw away; here you won't spot them without binoculars.
There void holds its reign

pure fields, grass unmown
pure sky, stars starving for glances
houses askew from sheer emptiness.

As for colours: late autumn, winter, early spring — mere shades of grey, no kaleidoscopes of carnivals, no all-intipsifying psychedelia, just dust, decay, and cavity, bubble, geode.

Yet, it's lovely at times:
dawn layers agately
night shimmers with amethyst
birchwood drowns in citrine
firmament glows with blue chalcedony.

In the metropolis, though, void has voided
collapsed fractally into itself
no room for it here no more
& ceaseless secretion fills all manner of vacuums.
Nature abhors a vacuum
& the nature of vacuum abhors
itself.

With bewilderment micros glow
— cosmos & chaos.

Wet asphalt and concrete shimmer in sungleam, once pale grey, now dark. Clouds are thin, have almost finished their cry, and the hopeful light penetrates them. It reflects in the countless cars' mirrors, in the buildings' glass, in protruding phone screens that balaclavaed cyclists in black snatch from hunched passersby who but shrug and keep shuffling

onwards, no umbrellas in hand, no bother for dripping warm drizzle, for a pleasant phenomenon, this mushroom rain, as my granddad would call it.

Soon, winds will lift human spores up in the air and disperse them around the city. They will rise in trainloads from under the ground, and their presence will flood over pavements, squares, roads, and streets, all those venues of avenues.

Lo and behold —

off they trot, some to their jobs
some to jobless affairs:
to museums, cinemas, galleries
theatres, bakeries, libraries
reading rooms, skating rinks
swimming pools, plazas and promenades
food halls, concert halls, dance floors
comedy clubs
  (or perhaps karaoke)
rooftop bars, kinky clubs
cosy corner cafes
observation decks, prayer rooms
botanical gardens, arcades
hidden speakeasies, markets and malls
parks and playgrounds
  — centres for everything
or simply to wander, you know
stretch their thoughts and restore

to their legs their original purpose.

— From Brandenburg Gate station tha rides to Tower Bridge station — there tha changes to t'grey-brown-raspberry line[1], and heads towards Brighton Beach till terminus. Take t'last carriage and t'moment tha hops off, leg it straight to t'exit. But don't get lost. Bloody 'ell it's packed there — can't squeeze a mouse through. Then half an hour on the movinn stairs and bob's your uncle. Easy, — says the navigator on my phone.

Sunwards I point my face, mightily I squeeze my eyes shut, all watery from fumes aloft and borrowed sleep.
(Debt collectors are on the way!)
The sun's reflection leaps off the glass building and floods the street with light.
The city throbs, breathes, digests its tenants, and gently mocks its guests.
Go on then, run along, no point standing there gawping — you'll catch a fly or some affliction of sorts.
Yet here I stand
arms spread wide, straight as a rod
alone in a meadow barren and broad.
Grumbling passersby jostle; gentle breeze; traffic noise sounds like wind through oats ripened for harvest.

O shall I leap upon my steed of two-wheeled pedal breed!
O shall I race along those roads
trailing dust and childhood yarns,

teenage fables, youth's swift whispers!
O shall the sun tousle my freckles
shall the wind shove my hair into my eyes
& shall the chain chew grease-stained trousers
& shall zoom onwards I.
O shan't I give a toss, or even "a fuck"
(as I'd say with my grown-up permission).

— Give me change! — a hoarse voice shouts to me. — Change, I beg you, urgent matter. Or I'll leave. But first I'll show you the entire intimate essence of mine! Oo! Oo-oo! — so he moans, hands reaching for his fly.
— Won't give any! — says I. — No change to give, nought to share: not a toss, not a fuck. And I always pay by card!
— Ah, card shark! May the govs torment you!
— Eh? — says I, playing the fool.
— Here's your carte blanche for my essence!
Oo! Oo-oo! Oo-oo!
— ¡No hablo inglés! — I yell back and hurry
to part ways with the stranger
my mind dismissing this most peculiar mishap.

I descend underground to tunnel away. Still I stand.
In my ears — Shostakovich, String Quartet No. 8, allegro molto, breakcore flip[2].
In my head — a bit of a do.
In my soul — the nobility of feelings ignoble.

In my eyes — local adverts: bits and bobs for home and body, this and that for business, everything from top to toe, from alpaca winter socks to lacy knickers, from Chekhovian theatre to torture by TikToks of feline brainrot

(oo ee ee ah ee oo ee ee ee ee ah ee)

from attempts to sell desires to secretly flog me some memecoins protected by nought but cryptography.

Here, underground lies half of the city, be it rail transport, car parks, or shopping malls going down and down

while in Tulubaika

— only the dead.

Here, I'll slip into another world in an hour

in Tulubaika

— into Tulubaika itself for the umpteenth time.

Here, the air's full of suspension

in Tulubaika...

Well, none of that's there, in fact, only clean air, pure water and pure starry sky, pure as the consciousness of a fresh victim of gnosis.

Inwards and outwards voices fuse: whispers from within meet the clamour of the crowd.

— Ey up, I'm done in, mate, proper done in. Laid me low, this influenza.

— All sorts of bubonic drebbeden[3] goinn round t'village nowadays. Mowinn down folk left and right, young uns and old uns alike, and they keep shufflinn about, breathinn in and out their miasmas!

Unbelievable!

— Tell me about it… Them city folk rabbitinn on…

— Put mask on then, tha shabootnous[4]? Get thy jab and all.

— Aye, reckon I might do just that!

— Aye, right then, do it then!

— Cough once and they eye thee like tha's broken loose from some leper colony.

— At home tha stay, don't walk away. Get on with t'times, t'stance, t'circumstance, t'happenstance. It is what it is. Autumn. Weak immunity. Muck and mire. Khondria[5]…

— Stop thy khonderinn then! Everyone's now a hypochondriac! Get thyself pumpkin latte.

— Eh up, pumpkin hodgepodge now? What young uns won't think of next, eh?

— … It's coffa[6] with milk, granny… "Latte" is Italian for "milk".

— Whatever keeps young uns happy. Long as it ain't henbane[7] latte.

— Undoubtedly, the characteristic patterns of urbanised environments, featuring high population density, intensive social interaction, and developed transport infrastructure, create favourable conditions for exponential growth in the transmission of infectious agents within the population.

— Just don't breathe then. Might solve all thy troubles with them acute respiratory viral agents and their sleeper agent network.

— Take thy vitamins, C and D, maybe Omega-3, might shift that flu of thee.

— Think I got no sense to spare? With all the wit I have to bear?… I can

tell a plum from pear, know what's foul or fair.[8]
— Pale as death on antibiotics, tha is.

Train arrives, empties its carriages, into its innards invites us. Rather stuffy inside, one must say. Rush-hourous travellers are stockpiled like sprats. Proper and pensive we stand, ears plugged, eyes on phones
(absolute suicide to be without one)
or on newspapers passed around unwanted, except to crack up at the latest debates between vegetarians and lotus-eaters. Hot — sweat gathers on my solar plexus, between my shoulder blades, deep in my armpits. Departure's announced, doors close, snatch my scarf, and the train, with the populace of several Tulubaikas, creaks and plunges into the depth of tenebrous tunnels. Our faces' reflections amuse us in windows convex. We breathe down each other's necks, nudge each other with backpacks, cough politely.
Time hovers, spirals, spins its wheel, threading through my ears and eyes, tickles my nostrils to sneezing point.
Tra-la-la
tru-la-la.
I never get bored
not ever, not I.
There's this tool against boredom that will bail you out without much faff — called "thinkering". One might languorously daydream, head in clouds, become an armchair philosopher, estimate the x's and y's of the world mathematics, become a professor in asymptotology or syllogismatics, sit at a round table with a king and a jester and other

facets of lyrical I to establish an anonymous society of knights, witnesses of solipsism, and wander from door to door, from one's own to another's, preaching that exact schizoid thinkering.
Thus it was, thus it shall be, from dawn till dusk, from dusk till dawn, till kingdom come.
Location matters not
— it's all in the noggin
not in the village or the city.

— Well... Never been fond of modern bookshops, if I'm honest... Don't want to pretend. Especially in the airports.
— Well... And why's that?
— Well... Just so. Can't stand the smell of new. They should smell of old: dust, yellowed paper, pressed flowers forgotten between pages. Not of factory glue.
— Well... Wouldn't have had any bookshops back in the village.
— Well... Suits me fine. Library was plenty enough, never had much use for a shop.
— Well... Libraries and graveyards are rather alike.

Somewhere there, beneath birch crowns old and dear
a lone comrade major[9] moonward howls his sorrow
longing for how far we've strayed.
O thou shalt not ask for papers no more
shalt not hit our door with thy boot
shalt not hit us with thy baton
shalt not huff and shalt not puff,

shalt not trace our IPs.
O we're out of range, unavailable. Leave thy message on Signal, not after it[10].

We're no longer "there" yet not quite "here"
just as "there" isn't quite there any more
& "here" isn't really here yet
— we wade through liminal bogs.

As you name your ship, so shall she sail.
Exile?
By no means.
Escape?
As they say, you can't flee from your planida...
Now, "mission"...
O "mission", that's a noble name.

Where spatiotemporal clothes once pinched the shoulders, these new ones from exodus-sale racks now embrace like a straitjacket — sleeves unbound, afloat.
— Mummy, dear mummy. I shan't wear this. What a frightful thing, what a cut!
— Stop moaning, give it a bit.
— But mummy... This seam's proper scratchy, like sandpaper it is.
— Sort it out we will, that seam.
— And this bit's all pokey.
— Wear it a while — it'll stop.

— It's so prickly! Like a rose bush, mummy, honest.
— Gets everyone, that. You'll manage.
— I don't want to! And this button inside keeps bothering me.
— Once we're home, we'll snip that button right off.
— Mummy, dear mummy, what if I grow up?
— Here's hoping you will, love.
— It won't fit then, will it?
— We'll get you new ones then, won't we?
— But mummy... still, is it really the time?

A "WAY OUT" sign, moving stairs, turnstile gates
until a ray of welcome light reveals our path.
Joyful we leave to see the lovely things which Heaven bears
& hail the op'ning glories of the stars.
Bit gloomy, this

— dense fog weaves patterns all around. In proper weather, a building tall would loom before me, but now I'm lucky to observe five storeys up. The view's absolutely smashing, they say, whole city served up on a proper plate

(indeed)

not just the city — the world itself, no vantage point higher there exists, and even the horizon watcher shall have libido satisfied.
Crowds bustle through the square. I squeeze between them, heading straight inside. I'm ready, building, ready to serve my sentence in the most dismal line.
It ends, the queue.

I flash my QR code to the attendant, then hop into a lift for twenty souls. And thus we stand in silence embraced by the sound of Satie mixed with crickets, musique d'ameublement.
& lo! One hundred and eight floors later, we are up top
  (before one dares to blink).
Now, prepare to greet me, elevation!
All yours, I'm here, take me!

Across the roof towards the wall of tempered glass
I walk and squash my cheek against it
eyes open wide with all their might.
& what do I see?
  The entire world spread out!
I never knew
  (yet I confess — expected)
    it would be only fog:
  no buildings tall, no peopleants
  no traffic jam in sight
  no Ararat with Fuji side by side
  no paints, no flowers
  no roofs, no pipes, no spires
  no birds, no towers,
  no bridges, no weather vanes gone mad
  no balloons, no pigeons
    (flying rats, more like)
  no colourful umbrellas

no sun in puddles, no cats on windowsills
no laundry flags, no mother's pastries
no chalk on asphalt, no "CLOSED" signs
no sparks from trams, no balaclavaed cyclists
no soap bubbles, no tunes from windows
no whiff of pumpkin spice
no wedding rings on traffic lights
no swings, no paper kites
no hankies waving last goodbyes
In a few words
— all proper grey
like homeland in winter.
& "here" isn't there
& "there" isn't here
only betweenherethereness.

& Thus we stand — daft tourists in a castle in the sky
trying to comprehend the zen of Fate's provision
(tickets gone to fuck).
But! Actually, no "buts" about it.
Time to descend.

Notes

1. "Grey-brown-raspberry" (серобуромалиновый) is a chromatic descriptor indigenous to Russian linguistic taxonomy. The term defies classical colour theory, belonging to a peculiar class of improbable compound adjectives deployed when precise hue

identification proves unnecessary or impossible. In its most elaborate folk iterations, you could find “серобуромалиновый в крапинку” (grey-brown-raspberry with spots) and some others, less appealing ones. The colour and its variations remain stubbornly resistant to RGB codification.

2. Shostakovich’s String Quartet No. 8 was composed in Dresden in 1960 over just three days under what historians politely describe as “intense emotional distress”. The allegro molto movement features the composer’s signature frantic intensity and is “already perfectly chaotic, thanks”. The breakcore rendition that can be found on the internet has slightly higher BPM which further turns the original piece into “anxiety incarnate”. Highly recommended.
3. “Drebbeden” (дребедень) in Russian is used to denote nonsensical trivialities. The translator took courage to directly introduce the word into English. Drebbeden means something in between “drivel”, “rigmarole”, and “balderdash”. The word has phonetic kinship with English “debris” and “drab”, plus semantic overlap with “codswallop”, and, we can say, preserves the onomatopoeic qualities of its dismissive sounds like that of the Russian original.
4. “Shabootnous” is an anglicisation of the Russian provincial and rural dialectism “шабутной” or “шебутной” (shabootnóy), someone erratically unpredictable yet endearingly so.
5. “Khondria” is an anglicisation of the Russian word “khandra” (хандра), a culturally specific word to describe melancholy or spleen. The translator decided to introduce it to English as well because of the unique connotation it carries, combining elements of ennui, world-weariness, physical sickness, and a specific form of existential gloom. Etymologically, “хандра” itself derives from Greek “hypochondria” (ὑποχόνδριος), creating a lovely linguistic circle as this anglicisation reconnects with its distant cousin in English. From “khondria” we can further create “to khonder” — experience and indulge in khondria at one’s own will.
6. Like the original “кофий / кохий”, simply a colloquial transformation of “coffee”, with a bit of a folksy / old-fashioned vibe.
7. “Belena” (белена) or henbane is a poisonous plant deeply embedded in Russian cultural consciousness as a symbol of madness and delirium. The Russian idiom “to overeat henbane” (объесться белены) describes someone behaving irrationally or insanely. The plant has hallucinogenic properties and folkloric associations with witchcraft. To the older generations, some modern trends might indeed be as questionable as medieval psychotropics.

8. “Think I got no sense to spare? With all the wit I have to bear?.. I can tell a plum from pear, know what’s foul or fair.” — This passage adapts lines from Leonid Filatov’s satirical poem “The Tale of Fedot the Strelets” (1985), well-known in post-Soviet space, “Нешто я да не пойму. При моем-то при уму?.. Чай, не лаптем щи хлебаю, соображаю, что к чему”. The original’s “не лаптем щи хлебаю” (lit. “I don’t slurp cabbage soup with a lapot”) is a folk saying indicating one isn’t uncultured. See also: lapti.
9. “Comrade Major” (товарищ майор) is a loaded Russian expression and a meme that transcends its literal military rank to function as cultural shorthand for state omnipresent monitoring of online communications (and offline, too). Russians invoke this phrase with ironic resignation when discussing potentially “sensitive” topics, acknowledging the hypothetical intelligence officer supposedly reading their messages at any given moment.
10. The original phrase works as a pun thanks to a linguistic coincidence: it simultaneously references the encrypted messaging app Signal and the common phrase “после сигнала” (after the beep/signal) from answering machine prompts. The translator decided to give up. “Untranslatable, to be honest,” he said.

Read next part

Episode 5: about letters & dreams

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