

IV

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translation: Frank Perry

IV[1]:1

STOCKHOLM, April 2003

you might find it interesting to stay there, says the woman at the travel agency. once she had changed the hotel. leningrad she calls it, the area. i hear as she puts down the phone. talking to someone else. interesting for you to watch the bridges go up and down. people always gather there then

IV[1]:2

i didn't hear him call. i was brushing my teeth. i didn't get to the phone before he had hung up. i wasn't up to ringing back. in the night i felt i should have done. aren't you jealous? he had asked. previously. i thought about the phrase it's paranoia. they kept using it when commenting on each other's words, stories. or hindering them, in a short-circuit. it's paranoia

IV[1]:3

how am i going to deal with all this difference i was thinking while looking at the russian youth in front of me in the passport queue? the way he wore his jeans hanging low down across his hips. so particular. so instantly recognisable. so cool only in Petersburg?

IV[2]:1

for joy's sake

PETERSBURG, April 2003

i saw him go into the toilets in the arrivals hall. his coat was flapping. he wore a scarf in some bold colour. i didn't run after him. my whole body was shaking. at the sight. the movements. his

IV[2]: 2

from my hands

a single note. two voices. *important. exstatic*

his breath smelt of vodka. that might have been why he was going into the toilets. to have a drink. he hung his scarf around me. we took the bus into town. the road was still bad. full of holes the bus dodged by swinging back and forth across the road and then quickly getting out of the way of the oncoming cars. he talked about a film with leonardo di caprio he'd just seen. 1920s america. the mafia. and how his newspaper was busy interviewing people about their memories of the city with the tercentenary coming up. and how the city would be cordoned off. you wouldn't even be able to move around in some parts of the centre. in a bookshop he showed me a book that had just been published. with collections of photographs of the siege during the war. it was forbidden to take photographs, he said. no one had the slightest idea any photographs existed. the city was doomed, he said. mines laid in certain spots. in case it should fall. i was sitting. he stood. in the bus. the suitcase was huge, heavy. something physically uneasy about the situation. i was wearing my orange denim jacket. without anything underneath. a Swedish businessman had sat next to me on the plane and talked about his russian wife. a child he had acquired into the bargain as he put it. she had been his secretary. or something of that sort. he kept glancing furtively at my cleavage. russian men are dirty. in my experience, he said. not in mine, i replied. trying to end the conversation

IV[2]:4

and some sun

he looks so surprised as he looks up. *you sent me into a long dream*

IV[2]:5

as persephone's bees told us

white and covered in birthmarks. his eyes are, in fact, blue after all

homo sovjeticus, haven't you heard that mentioned, he says

the skin, the light

why are you speaking about trust, he asks, while speaking about desire?

IV[2]:6

not to be freed

i'm just emptying you of your images. i say. of me. women from the west

and repeating them. and repeating them

you're sad

it's a sad situation

the tears are burning. but not flowing. there is a fire in the churchyard on the other side of the alexander nevsky bridge. huge piles of leaves in the park

a window in the café is blown open by the wind. everything on the window ledge falls very fast, hard onto the floor. bottles smashing. the sound so ominous.

we go to a concert towards evening. some friends of his are playing at the pushinskaya. we go out with them afterwards. they will be taking the night train to moscow for a performance the next day. we leave them near the station. walk the streets. come with me, i say, to the hotel. and what if they won't let me in? he replies. saying he saw a sign there that only hotel guests are allowed inside. let's try, i say. i'll say i bought you. what? he asks. bought you, i reply and cuddle up to him. he stops an unlicensed taxi. we arrive at the hotel. i ask for the key at reception. walk towards the lift. no one stops us

he fills in the form for breakfast the next morning. for two. he ticks the box that we want it in our room, puts the form on the floor outside the door. i wake up early next morning. long before him. i open the window. see a man washing a car down in the courtyard. i hear the heavy traffic on the bridge. the smell of coal comes into the room with the cold

i would prefer not to as our predecessor would have said. he replied in an email. about writing about the city together. how it would be like sinking. *into the same death stream.* how it would be narcissistic. like writing about your own apartment. that the jubilee turned the very idea into kitsch. *i would prefer not to.* not that difficult to guess, I replied. that he's your predecessor. but he's definitely not mine. if I had one, it would be the hunger artist. send it, i wrote, and i will shred it. and try to eat. i can't find it now. he wrote, it seems as if it took bartleby's words literally. maybe the marshes swallowed it, i replied

he wrote that he had had to spend a long time searching for it, he had been obliged to cut it out of a larger body of written material. the essay about the city that had changed name three or four times within a century. during his lifetime. he played with the etymologies. the sounds. the names. lethe. to lift. to forget. lettersburg

IV[4]:1

not to be silenced

funny shoes, he says when i tie the laces, before we go out

violent and a little bit nervous. he says. do you know that poem by majakovsky?

IV[4]:2

life's dark terrors

the surge towards the gullet. the swamps. the amalgamed world

IV[4]:3

now we only have kisses

it so impressive, i say about the neva. i never thought it was so wide

we arrive at the railway station. i record sounds on the stairs. he talks about the poem. mandelstam's poem. concert at a railway station. about his friend, vasily. about the shadow. the shadow on the stairs. or else i got that mixed up. i wasn't listening that carefully. not carefully enough. the station. the waiting room. the tracks. the female workers. the loud engine noise. the welding flames. the booking-office window. the glass ceiling. was it a glass ceiling? in the poem? in the poem as well? the station in the poem?

something inside me shivers as though from fear as we draw closer. on our way from the station. when i realise we've been there before. the park. the park where we talked. about shame. the difficulty of writing. the shame of being human. he changed his mind during the conversation. perhaps it's not shame. perhaps it's fear. it feels as if I am entering a field unknown to me. of repetition. oblivion. continuation. of that which is not for the first time

we walk to a bar. a café. afterwards. look at the design, he says. the bar counter. it looks like the bottom of a pool. the mosaic. the lighting design. two per cent middle class. he says. that segment. it is growing. just looking out the window is better. he says. than writing. he tells a joke about that window. what is the difference between – the word he taught me in the bathtub – and life? life is harder. he laughs wildly

IV[4]:7

in the dense forests of taygetos

i ask him on the street. after the station. pressing my body against his. after the station.
something in his face. he turns away. as though he was close to tears

IV[4]:8

time feeds them

it's not a joke, he says, was that your sole purpose, to come here and ask me this question?

i'm late. it's frightening. i'm in a dream. he taps the papers while we are in bed and he recites a Mandelstam poem into the tape recorder. it doesn't work, he says. and reads the lines aloud, furiously almost, in russian. by heart. which he had said he couldn't do any more. with any poem. that's how it sounds, he says. read it again, i ask him, in Russian. and he repeats *pavlini kriik*

i saw a child die today, i say on the phone from the hotel. he falls silent. i tell him about a car in the next lane. in the queue in front of the red light. the child was completely white. it lay absolutely still, lifeless in its mother's lap. in the back seat. it was as though the mother had discovered it just a moment ago. she was shaking the little body. trying to undress it. to get it to drink some water. when it failed to react she ended up sitting absolutely still. her movements frozen. with the white body stretched out across her knees. the arms hung straight out, down. the tears ran down her cheeks. the father was trying to extricate himself from the queue. blowing the horn. in the dense traffic. the light stayed red. for a long time. the car got nowhere. he waved, gesticulated. he tried to move into a different lane. he got caught between two. the light turned green at last and the car could turn round. i saw it disappear from my field of vision. gone. sometimes it's not good to be so watchful, he says. i wondered about that choice of words. so. what he thinks i am doing. why he should say so. so. what so means

IV[4]:10

for joy's sake

good luck with your revolution, i say on the phone. no pasarán, he replies

IV[5]:7

the band that played at pushinskaya is back from moscow. they are going to play on one of the smaller stages. we are headed there, all four of us, having talked and drunk vodka and juice, equal amounts, in equally large plastic glasses. on the way there we go into one of the other venues. where they have fashion shows. supposed to show futuristic clothes Natasha really wants to see. it is a catwalk. the clothes are made of leather. a man strikes a whip, chasing the female models to the front of the stage. once there they encounter another man with another whip. the gestures are theatrical, exaggerated. there is fear in the women's eyes. i go out. in a rush almost. why? he asks, following me, why? a little later kirill comes out, too. he describes an opening they were at that ended with a pornographic live show being mounted in the basement. it was late. it went on for a long time. finally kirill said, i want to go home now, and dragged natascha, who had almost fallen asleep from exhaustion, all the work, the child care, away with him. i can't tell if this is heaven or hell, a Swede says when i encounter him on one of the landings of the gigantic staircase. he is drunk. kirill and natascha ask him later that evening if they can borrow money from him for their trip to berlin. he sends a text message. asking if we could split it. shore i write. preoccupied with something else. i've actually forgotten how to spell. the next time we meet he asks me what i meant. or just says. you wrote shore. as though he wanted to know if it was a codeword for something. or the place perhaps. that he did not understand. where I found myself. between heaven and hell. or just longing for. it to exist. come into being.

IV[5]:10

a watery streak of the new moon in the dream. outside the death room in the dream. empty.
it meant something when dad was here, i say to my mother and my sister in the dream. to us.
i say. now it's empty. look

IV[6]:1

one foreigner one human he translates the words he'd just said to the women at the museum ticket desk. she laughs reluctantly. unaccustomedly. the difference is huge. in the price, the entrance

on the up escalator in the metro he talks about a peculiarity of the russian language. about slang. used very artistically. you make it sound as though it was a very special human quality. to be able to speak russian. i say. yes, he laughs, yes

IV[6]:2

a wave of pain passes through me as we walk up the stairs in the museum. the creation of eve. vibrating in the light of the white nights, somewhere deep in awareness. we walk slowly through the halls. i see the square. malevitch. the dramatic hang. furthest away in the most distant rooms. right in your field of vision when you turn the corner. the blackness strangely pulsating

IV[6]:3

are you sure it's not only because of your russian roots? he asks while pärt's piece plays on the tape-recorder and we are home in his room. he took me there with him again. as a kind of gesture i'm not sure which, desperate, tender . it was a vertigo you know, he says, when we met in the summer. i heard the violins at the top of their register. your jewish russian roots? he adds. do you have any idea how many people have asked me that. i reply. he smiles. at the diversion perhaps. if it was one. i am thinking about the summer night sky on one of the last nights my father was alive. about the fear of sinking. about the fear of not doing it

IV[6]:4

i told him and the others who were in the room the summer before. about the letters my grandfather received from his sister or sister-in-law in moscow. olga. during the thirties and forties. how i had only heard them mentioned, how i had asked about them a lot. but finally gave up on ever finding them. at the word censorship he looked up. looking at me intently. i asked them if they knew what it looked like. in real terms. physically. from the other side. it was holes. holes in the letters. i say. phrases, words, parts of the letter had been cut out entirely. i said i had always imagined my father looking at his father, from below, from a child's height, through the holes in the letters. how i imagined that some parts of his face, while he was reading, were covered by the letter, others exposed. i held my hand in front of my face. as though it was the sheet of paper

IV[6]:5

i said that my grandfather had travelled to odessa in 1935, that he had searched for his family. that he had a Swedish passport, which is why he got in. out. the same year both his parents died according to the records. the great famine. the revolt against collectivisation. that I'd always wondered what he had seen during the trip. what he had done afterwards when he got back with that sight

i didn't tell them that the letters had reached my grandfather in prison. långholmen. malmö. härlanda. that he was shuttled between them. applied for a pardon. release on probation. remission. reduction of sentence. for a fire he did not consider himself guilty of

IV[6]:6

he smiles. at the diversion. at me perhaps. the long silence. how i still respond that way. it may be the fourth time he asks me. i am defending myself against something. against the repetition perhaps. his former girlfriend's. what she was looking for. her story. against the whiteness most of all. the holes in the letters. against being a repetition in his life. against not being able to be one in my own

i can't speak and feel at the same time, i answer ultimately. i know, he says, i know

IV[7]:1

i ask him about his day-to-day life, at a restaurant near the nevsy. the last morning. if he cooks. or if marina does it for him. he talks about the kitchen. the large saucepan. the soup he usually makes. for a whole week. the long cooking time. the ingredients. onions. celery. a few potatoes. i hear him say

there are bells in the air when we come out onto the street. a few demonstrators are unfurling their banners. which war, i ask

IV[7]:2

my eyes are not cold, i say as we go down the escalator. no, he shakes his head, not cold. it was another word. warm. hot actually

IV[7]:3

he retrieves a book from his backpack the last night in the hotel room. he gives it to me. about filonov. the painter whose pictures we'd seen at the museum. the suppressed avant-gardiste. now being shown for the first time. the colours are pale. the print. i move my fingertips across the surface of the picture. a multitude of shapes. prisms more than cubes. dissolved. connected. interwoven. a concept of the image. other. close to that of the icon. cosmos. formula of cosmos. the outsiders. in the moment they appear. high, low, visible, invisible. in transformation.

IV[7]:4

don't go. did he say that? did I hear right? was that his voice among the pillows

IV[7]:5

there is no future

he almost shouts

then if there's no future this is our last night

then why waste time with speaking?

IV[7]:6

an image deep within consciousness. deep within the body. i stretch my throat my neck back
far across the pillow. bodies folded naked. deep within awareness. folded. in white heat. deep
within language. folded around each other. deep within the pictorial worlds

IV[7]:7

let's not be so emotional, he says

you are crying inside you, he says, i can feel it

IV[7]:8

he answers the telephone in the hotel room. i ask him to. what did she say? i ask. hurry up it's time? yes

IV[7]:9

one of the cars will stop soon, I feel, in the onrushing traffic. if it has to happen, it will. i think.
for your revolution, i say and put all the money i have in his pocket. and get in the car