RARITAN

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XXII:1 • Summer 2002 • $7.00

Moscow 9/11

MARY CAPPELLO

We were sitting at the far end of a long, empty room, and we turned to look out the window, which did not have much of a view. At noon on September 13th, the three of us—a Russian teacher, and two American professors on Fulbrights in Moscow—pulled our chairs out from our desks and stood to observe the moment of silence issued by President Putin, public recognition of the devastation to our homeland. The moment seemed both too long and too short. Tumult was swelling within us and outside us. We loved our teacher more than anyone. She was open and capable of laughter. Consider, too, that she had taught us the alphabet, as though she'd been holding our hands since we arrived in Moscow in August. Holding us from the start. But she was Russian and we were American. She was home and we were abroad. Into our silence came a stirring sound, a spoon pinging against glass? The neon lights stuttered, and we swayed slightly at the end of our moment, returning to this odd coterie of seats at one end of a too narrow room. We were no more than particles, really, poised together at the edge of a gulf that we could feel but not see.

The week before the attacks we had been to the Moscow circus where we laughed at the cruel spectacle of bears on skates, and gasped to see muscled men bedecked in white feathers free-fall into a safety net from the height of several stories. What do acrobats dream, I wondered, and our guide and host, the administrator from the dormitory where we were living, said, "You might ask them. They, too, live in the dorm. Our building is filled with these artists," and she proceeded to attach bodies to names in the interval of each new performance, until I recognized these fantastical creatures as my beautiful fellow lodgers. "He's the guy who was frying an egg in the communal kitchen! And that guy was peeling potatoes!"

"Terrorist act"/"Tower"/"I am afraid"/"I am afraid to fly in an airplane"/"I feel good, better, bad, worse"/"I feel better or worse than I did yesterday"/"Many people who are close to us live in New York, Philadelphia, Providence, and Boston"/"New York is a beautiful city"/ "We love New York. . ." Our Russian language lessons change to meet the moment, but the word for "feel" is multisyllabic and unpronounceable, so I simply cry instead. At so many unexpected moments almost daily since September 11th amid strangers in Moscow. Small movements, the proximity of bodies, untoward acts of politeness, my own self-consciously helpful gestures or those of a burly man with a stern face—the "normal" look of a person who has lived in harsh conditions at the end of a dark history—now make me cry. The doors to a subway car close, and what once was the benign vibration of steel and electricity transporting us through the underground now reverberates like the trembling of an airplane thrown devastatingly off course. Mounting metro stairs with hordes of Muscovites, I imagine the people trapped in the towers, encased by stairs that would save or destroy them. It's not so different, I suppose, than what Americans are feeling at home: going into the cabins, into the buildings, onto the ashen streets, into the minds of those many who were murdered; listening for the sound of my own breathing; facing/not facing the possibility of further calamity.

Prior to the attacks, my jubilance at discovering Moscow was laced with a different remorse. I was sorry, sad, angry even, that I had never known about the beauty and grandeur of this city. In early September, the sun seems to rise twice each day: once in the morning and again around eight at night when everything in the city reassembles itself, its most gorgeous features drawn out by new early evening light. One day the Moscow palette is bright blue wool against a sky of fast moving clouds. Another day it is gold domes against gray, or yellow leaves paint the base of a pink brick building. Indoors, cranberries float in vodka.

I had been reflecting on an epistemology of dolls nestled, windows cabinetted, churches scalloped by gables. At the Botanical

Gardens, a man and woman stand inside a shaded grove, almost hidden, except for their profiles playfully peering together into the mirror of her compact. I had experienced exhilaration in the metro's seriated hallways, each stop more breathtaking in its geologic splendor, its mosaics and friezes, than another. Each station indicative of a different kind of performance as though we were part of some ghostwork moving through what once were ballrooms, what once were work halls filled with living beings. Inside the trains, a quiet persists, the hushed attention of a reading room on wheels. Issued out through the doors, I feel mildly ecstatic at that moment when streams of bodies spill out of subway cars on either side of me while I walk forward, giddy with the feeling of life, of bodies in motion, almost meeting me, almost overcoming me.

I was told to expect otherwise. From various corners of my homeland, the voices warned of inedible food, untrustworthy friends, ungrateful students, thieves and kidnappers, a blighted wounded failed nation. I don't deny the half-dead dogs that lie for warmth atop the subway stairs, or the spindly children who must beg at the Arbat, or the degrees of disrepair that mark this city. But I'd been led to believe the Customs' lintel would bear the sign: "Abandon hope all ye who enter here"—which may be true without capital. We feasted on savory soup, bliny and red caviar, homemade jams, sharp cheese with dark bread, Armenian lodi, Georgian eggplant, a range of sweets and wines. Our Russian teacher invited us to her home where she offered us a separate education in Russian cinema. In their three-room apartment, her mother serves us a four-course meal during which we share Russian and American folk songs, all the while bumping lightly over a terrain of family tensions laid bare. We watch two, sometimes three films in a row, Soviet and post-Soviet, comedies, melodramas, literary adaptations, character studies, each and every word of which Tatiana has translated into English in advance for us. She wants us to teach Russian cinema in the States. "Most Americans," she says, "think we Russians are bears. I'm afraid they think we're bears, don't they? I want to let them see who we really are."

Back in our dorm, the refrigerator makes cricket sounds that wake rather than soothe me, or a car speeding out of control beneath my window fails to help a feeling of dislocation. My students remind me of what's real. After a guest lecture, a student approaches to offer a gift in reply to my lesson. She leads me to a piano, lifts the lid, nods to me—"please"—and begins to play Schubert. In classrooms at the literary institute named for Maxim Gorky where we teach, one student goes to the department chair to thank her for bringing me to them; one gives me a chocolate bar called "Inspiration"; another tells me that my colleague and I have brought life to the institute. One student, Helen Vorontsova, writes a poem in homage to Lucille Clifton. "I just never expected that an American poet would open my heart in this way," she says. "I never could have imagined it would happen." A line from Clifton's poetry echoes in her own: "She told me about the poem at the end of the world."

Prior to our departure to Moscow, the State Department offered to orient us. Historians and political analysts shared their knowledge of contemporary Russia. Metaphors of childhood and adolescence permeated the talks. Russia is a child, one historian explained, a child that needs to grow up and join NATO. Another quoted Gertrude Stein to make an un-Steinian point: that you can play all you want until you reach the age of twenty-nine and then, then, you have eventually to crash into the grim hard wall of reality. Russia, the speaker said, had now run into that wall and must face the consequences. They must grow up. They must face reality.

On the evening of September 11th, eight hours ahead of a New York morning, we were at a concert with my teacher and her daughter at a country estate outside of Moscow, one of the few aristocratic manors still standing here. It's hard not to think about the 200,000 serfs, no trace of whom survives, who served the lords at Kuskovo, though Tatiana tells me there's a literary masterwork that treats the age-old theme of lord and serf in love. The music is eighteenth century icing, the musicians, exact but uninspired, and I find myself more interested in the cords of love and envy, the thin blonde planks

that cross and recross the space between delicate mother and exquisite daughter, than in the concert. Twelve-year-old Olya would really prefer to walk in the gardens than hear this concert. Her mother's shoulder pressing against mine as she leans to translate the program makes me feel we're friends. Mother and daughter snap photos to mark the occasion. Should we embrace or leave our hands to fall by our sides?

When we return home, a group of students surrounds a TV set in the entryway to our dorm. On the screen, a building is on fire. We head upstairs not knowing what has happened, but the woman who administers our hallway is sobbing and gripping her stomach. She begins to scream through her tears at us, not a word that we understand except "New York." Her hair is dyed red. Her lipstick is redder. She is missing some teeth. A few others are gold. She irons our sheets and answers our phone calls. Her name is Ludmilla. She rarely has reason to smile at us; we can barely, after all, communicate. I can tell she is trying to tell me that I must face some reality that she has already faced. I still don't know exactly what has happened, but it is obvious she expects me to cry because she's sobbing and screaming "New York!. . .New York!" and the tone in her voice, high-pitched and breathless, hurts.

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Aggressive pigeon grazes an earlobe. . .White-black raven, plump and ruffled, fat and tattered. . .Stuffed bird, long-legged and dusty, painted beak like a claw (or a scythe?) in literature office: Charles Wilson Peale revisited. . .Woman feeding birds, yellow-necked, striped, tiny and friendly, right out of her hand at the Botanical Garden. . .Bird alighting on pumpkin seeds for sale in market, stealing some seeds. . .Man at circus, acrobat, dressed in white sparkles, headdress of white eagle, free-falls after hanging from toes into net. In the park near my dwelling what I thought was the cry of a bird was the cry of a boy.

Before the attacks, I had been instructing my Russian students in the necessity for keeping an observational notebook. Of practicing

seeing, of cultivating sight, but the question is always what do I look for? Where do I look? Seek out the periphery, I suggest. Don't look where you are trained to look, but make a collection out of a category that might even seem absurd or banal. Wallpaper, say, or overcoats. Maybe the truth we need isn't to be found in the center; maybe it emerges out of our assembled notes on looking-elsewhere. My own Moscow notebook had been made of birds, frames, and light. I stop keeping it after September 11th. On the night of the attacks, my partner and I huddle under blankets, feeling cold and sick, watching fragments of images on Russian television, understanding few words.

Russia gives me Bulgakov. Reading *The Heart of a Dog* offers me the hope of truth-telling in dark times. Has self-irony been a form beyond my countrymen's ken? My students give me aphorisms. One young poet, Eugeny Rekach, writes: "Having opened his eyes about eleven in the morning and staring at the washed out blueness of Thursday's sky, he thought: 'What can be fine when everything is bad?' But at that moment a second voice inside of him whispered: 'And what can be bad when everything's fine?'" And, "The matter is not what kind of dreams you see every night, but the way you tell about them to others."

As for nightmares, I wonder, how will we narrate this one? I abide by the necessity for reflection amid chaos—it's what prompted me to have my students make aphorisms—but a quiet space unmarked by the terror of a void is hard to find. On September 12th, Jean and I move through the city like forlorn ghosts in search of a phone card to make contact with home. Huddled, eyes trained downward now, we are approached by several people who ask us for directions. I'm not sure what has overcome our demeanors, how our body language has changed, what the light in our eyes now resembles to make us suddenly appear less strange. We are "fitting in" today, and yet we are more remote from our neighbors on the bus than ever. One guard in our building observes a respectful distance from us now. Usually smiling when he greets us, he shows only enough of his face now to reveal a shared sadness but doesn't make eye contact. The plumber pantomimes grief by pounding his chest, his hands are

fists, then he shakes his head, sighs, and wrings words between his hands before opening them to us. We don't know enough Russian to be aware of the form that conversation is taking in the street, and we feel dearly the lack of a public ritual to give shape to our grief.

"I've seen some American popular culture here in Russia, some American films and TV shows," a Russian student remarks. "And I have to say they were all very violent." "Tell me," she asks, "do you think American popular culture will be different now, now that Americans have been victims of violence?" Another student stays behind after class one day to tell me she has a solution for dealing with bin Laden. "He should be put in an insane asylum and treated," she says, "because he is abnormal, and this would show that he is abnormal and we are normal." "Are there any Russian words in English?" another student wants to know. "Because we have incorporated a lot of English words into Russian, and I wanted to know if Russian is influencing English in the same way."

My colleagues' responses reflect a range of opinion. "I thought Americans *liked* Muslims," one woman wryly demands. She's referring to our having driven the Soviets out of Afghanistan, having aided the forces, she says, that we now seek to destroy. Many seem to see the terrorist act as an opportunity for identification, friendship even, between the United States and Russia. They point to the monument in the metro station that we pass through every day to arrive at the institute. It was the site of a terrorist bombing last year in which numerous Russian citizens were killed and injured. On another occasion, entire apartment buildings were destroyed by terrorists. Most of the inhabitants died while they slept. "So you see, we know what it is like to live with terrorism. So maybe Americans will understand us better now. Maybe they will understand our war in Chechnya." My class discussion reaches a painful low when one student describes Chechnyans as "biologically different" from Russians, then struggles to take back her words. In the ensuing weeks, three hundred skinheads raid a metro station. Using bare hands and crowbars for weapons, they beat the life out of dark-skinned vendors working

there, immigrants from southern regions of the former Soviet Union and from Afghanistan.

Wandering past the monument to those killed by terrorists at the Pushkinskaya metro, I search for a store where I can photocopy essays on racism for my students to read. I'm returning in my mind to the metro ride back from Kuskovo to our dorm on September 11th. Passengers in these cars must have already heard the news from New York. Were they talking about it, and we didn't know it? If they heard us speaking English, wouldn't they have been compelled to speak to us or glance toward us? This feeling of knowledge out of range is haunting me. The woman next to me in the copy shop is photocopying an English book. Desperate to connect, I strike up a conversation with her. She is a Russian who teaches English as a Second Language. She visits friends in Texas every year for Christmas. "Will you fly this year?" I ask her, and she explains that she was steps away from the explosion in Pushkinskaya when the underground passageway exploded. She doesn't know why she didn't die; she cannot fear what she cannot know, she says, of course she is going to fly.

I really can't understand such an approach to life myself. Nor do I warm to the idea that Russians and Americans now have a common ground in catastrophe. I must be afraid that it means I will have to give up my capitalist advantage, what makes me able to visit Russia without, heaven forfend, having to *be* Russian.

Returning to the institute, my briefcase filled with papers, my head filled with incompatible narratives, I am greeted by the secretary of the Department of International Relations. Her name is Nina Alexandrovna, and, like many department secretaries, she is clearly the person one needs to know in order to accomplish anything. She holds it all together. We've spent whole days together on excursions to the historic Golden Ring outside of Moscow where she has accompanied us as the institute's representative, but we have barely ever understood each other because neither of us knows the other's language. We *have* talked to each other on numerous occasions, gibberish in two directions. She is a plump woman who wears a variation on

a housecoat and blue pointed sneakers to work. Her eyes always appear a bit distorted through heavy lenses, and she goes at the details of her job with apparent doggedness. This is the first time we have seen each other since the September 11th attacks. My head becomes buried in her expansive bosom as she kisses my cheeks again and again. It's as though I have just exited the World Trade Center and she is happy to see me alive. Her hugs and kisses make me weep. I am here to see our boss, the man who heads this department and who has been our main contact in establishing our presence as American teachers of literature, film, and creative writing at the institute. He is a dashing gentleman, a slender figure who projects finesse and charm, but today he looks gray and beaten. He apologizes for his appearance and explains that he has been suffering from insomnia. He hasn't mentioned the attacks, and, in fact, we had gone full steam into a discussion of all he would like for us to accomplish together in the coming semester with no mention of the world's being a-tilt. "No doubt you are upset by the attacks," I said. "No," he replied. "It's not that. It's these papers on my desk." He points to a stack of folders stuffed with grayish yellow paper, dense with handwritten scrawl. And then as if to offer an explanation, he describes how much respect he has for the United States, how he considers the nation a kind of "citadel," a protected horizon of hope. But the attacks weren't disturbing his sleep; rather, some more daily feeling having to do with insurmountable problems at the institute. He rubs his forehead.

Returning home that evening, Jean and I feel both more and less protected as Americans in Russia. A man in the subway plays "Roll Out the Barrel" on an accordion as we push ourselves as if through mud to the station platform. "Doesn't he know what's going on?" I think. We are insulated from the scene of the crime, whereas some of our friends have not only been part of the daily relief efforts in New York, but witnessed the act itself from their cars in New Jersey, or through the windows of their homes and workplaces in Manhattan, or, nakedly, looking up from street level. Weeks before the attacks, the guards in our dorm asked us to provide American flags to accompany the other flags that mark the entryway to the

building, each flag indicative of the international cast of residents in the hall. Now we fear that the flag will announce our presence as targets of attack. We don't remove the flag, but we stop speaking English in the metro. We try to become invisible, but it is impossible. On the elevator, a man immediately asks me in Russian where I am from. "SEE-SHA," I say, Russian for U.S.A., and his eyes light up like a child's who has seen Santa Claus in the flesh. All I know is that I feel vulnerable, a phantasm of national identity really, and now, oddly, a fascinating figure of abjection: American as victim. "Which state?! Which state?!" he yells after me, but I don't answer.

Teaching revives a feeling of wholeness, and our new Russian friends take us to the theater so as not to stall our education about the city, but of course nothing is unmarked by the disaster and now an impending war. In a Jewish musical, a character sings about the United States. I ask Annya, the daughter of Jewish filmmaker Galina Yevtushenko, to translate. "He's saying 'America,'" she says, "'Let us go to America: land of opportunity and hundred-story skyscrapers.'" On another evening, we attend a Belgian experimental dance performance. The stage is dark and tattered, the light is cavelike, the terrain the dancers move upon with enormous and erratic difficulty appears apocalyptic. Heavily weighted bags fall from the stage's sky, dead as the sound of a rope dropped from a sail, lashing the deck but not reaching survivors. Is it food or bombs? It's hard not to think this way though the dance was obviously choreographed long before the acts of these recent weeks. I think I need a place publicly to mourn, not a dark assault on my senses. People are fleeing the theater right and left before the performance ends. We stay, unfortunately, to the bitter end.

"You must come to our dacha this weekend," Tatiana, our teacher, insists. "My mother did not want me to ask because she says you will see that we live like homeless people. We have no plumbing. But it's very beautiful. You can get out of the city. Russians always think they must apologize to Americans before inviting them to our homes. But I don't care. Do you?" I could not have asked for such a show of splendor and serenity as this country house, and the way the

Russians moved within and without it, and their welcoming us to walk with them, mushrooming. I had been longing for home. If I were home, I fantasized, I could do what I know how to do: I could gather people together to study and reflect; I could prompt students to express the unspoken in inexpressible times; I could set a pot of spaghetti sauce to simmer. I would enjoy adjusting the flame to low and letting the admixture calibrate the hours of an afternoon.

Instead, I'm traveling in a dirty train with hard-bottomed seats to some place unknown to me, the Russian countryside. To the roads that trail behind the real, like a kite's tail. Along tilled ground, rich with purple dahlias or purple cabbage. Deep into the earth, beets turn, or carrots. Apples and plums cling to branches like small colorful birds hidden among their leaves. Tatiana's daughter, Olya, lets loose a kitten from her bag, unhappy in the city, returned to the country. Tatiana's daughter, we're told, last year "traded" her mother's watercolors, made in her youth on the crest of her becoming, for baseball cards to a visiting American. Nothing like this must ever happen again. Tatiana's mother, Nina, benign magician with difficult love in her eyes, pulls the cloth off of a covered table to reveal the porch place she has made for us, a table set with tea and sweets, raspberry jam and wine. We're reeling a little as we spill, at noon, into the adjoining dachas of their neighbors: Pavel picks cucumbers off the vine for us, and clips flowers. The cat watches us. Is it possible there is nothing here from which to run? We don't run at all. We walk. Or stand perfectly still after another neighbor takes us behind her house to see the sauna she and her husband have built. It's a two-part ritual: first sauna, then beer, she explains. But the truly enchanting egress is still ahead of us, as in a children's tale, the opening to the forest. We slip through the silence; birch leaves rain and we exclaim now and then to find, outward from the gray gravelly path, inward to green brown mulching of pine, red mushrooms, or bright yellow, a white powdery or gray brown mushroom, beautiful but poisonous. Then, Jean's discovery of choiceness, clumps of long-stemmed umbrellas, only the best grow from the sides of what once *was* a tree, the trunk's rings opened to air, opposed to nothing. Olya finds a natural post and

lintel, and we each pass beneath. I tread a path bordered by forget-me-nots, a bouquet for Babushka. Tatiana calls out to Misha, the dog of her childhood, she calls and pushes her glasses up to see him, pushes her finger into her lens. Do we all sense some bright but sleepy vein between us, the silent quest that pulls our bodies to wander, happy in this unexpected company?

At a dinner of wood-smoked meat, the fragrance of the fire still greeting us, Russian caponata, potatoes, and greens and watermelon, I make the mistake of thanking our hosts for helping me to forget. We make a silent toast to New York, and Nina quickly asserts that we must not ever forget. "Just to forget that horrible image of the plane crashing into the building," I want to say, "or the appalling report of a woman's torso happened upon on a New York street! Not amnesia, not the sleep of reason, not denial." Maybe my boss's "papers" are my "mushrooms"—preferring to meditate on them than to replay various scenarios of horror in my mind.

After dinner we go for another walk, this time with Tatiana and her husband, Alexi, and when we return to catch the train, Nina presents us with a bouquet of flowers nestled in hosta leaves. I've never thought of using hosta leaves in a bouquet. They work like a deep green collar for the orange and red flowers they hold. Then she hands us a basket filled with something that is covered with a broad leaf working as a cloth. She pulls back the leaf to show us a kilo of plums from a neighboring dacha. Then she says, "Pavel liked you," and she puts long stems of mint before us, harvested from his garden, for brewing tea.

In the days that follow, we cook some of the golden mushrooms gathered together on this glorious day. Tatiana's mother deposited a paper sack of them into our bags as we ran to catch the train, along with instructions for how to prepare them. With potatoes. "Yes," we said, "we understand!" And butter. "Yes, we understand." But we had not understood the words for "boil for one hour." Jean lightly fries the mushrooms, and we enjoy their subtle flavor while passing the phone across our tiny dinner table to talk to a friend in New York. He tries to share the mood there. He tells us of how his mother walked

home from work on the eleventh covered in ash, and of how he wants to erase the fear from his face for the sake of his four-year-old daughter but doesn't know how. When we hang up, I begin to feel sick. "I think that conversation upset my stomach," I tell Jean. "I shouldn't have been trying to eat and talk." Soon thereafter, Jean begins to feel ill as well, and we both spend the next twenty-four hours doubled up, or sprawled, moaning, bolting or waiting for the forest primeval to work its way through the too narrow paths it was now forced to travel. We recovered, not poisoned, only pained by our ignorance. Our teacher was beside herself with guilt—she didn't know her mother had given us mushrooms. "It was an accident," we answered her, "it was nobody's fault. It's our ignorance of Russian."

"Your systems are not used to this food. These mushrooms are extremely rich," she said. "It could have been dangerous. It could have been serious. There could have been microbes. Your systems, maybe, are too delicate."

Let me return again to what I know: so I try to make a long simmering sauce on the tilting burners of our communal stove. I'm stirring the onions and garlic, basil, parsley, and tomatoes over a slow flame when a man whose tea kettle is boiling nearby asks me where I am from. "Can I help him with his English?" he asks. "Do I know Russian?" "A little," I say, "I speak poorly," but I get my dictionary to help in places where he cannot imagine Russian equivalents for English words. He reads aloud a terribly technical paragraph from a textbook about Great Britain's climate, and humidity flows; about relations of rivers to ocean to air to crops, and how the birds fly south to Africa then back again to England. We look up "kind of," "a few," and "temperate." I pantomime with wrists and hands the phrase "leaves fall off the trees." "Your pronunciation is very good," I say, "but it's not ve-GAT-tables but vedgetabuls, and perhaps I can help you with 'TH.'"

"Place your tongue between your teeth and then breathe into your tongue to make it vibrate," I say: the, there, this, that, these. "It's a very important sound in English." He tries, and we laugh, he tries, but his lips are confused, his cheeks are quivering, he's inhaling when he should be exhaling until each "TH" is a balloon begun and then released to zigzag around the room. He tells me he is from the Caucuses. And I apprehend his body differently, knowing the prejudice Muscovites might hold toward him, or that he might expect from me. "I hear it's beautiful there," I say. "Yes," he says. "Mountains and sea." He tells me he is an acrobat. And I apprehend his body differently, a body that must move in extreme, defiant, or graceful ways. I feel embarrassed to have handled his tongue so rudely. I feel honored that he let me watch him stumble over sounds. I ask him if he's studying English at the institute, but, no, he's trying to teach himself with nothing but this textbook. "You need conversation," I say, "that textbook is not enough," but my pasta is well beyond al dente now, and I hurry away, laden with a tower of hot and slippery pots and pans.

The smell of McDonald's french fries mingles with acrid electrical fumes on the bus ride to the institute in the rain. I have been contemplating how to engage my students in an appreciation of American free verse. If a poet does not imitate classical forms, they refuse to consider his work poetry. Contemplate two seemingly contrary points, I suggest: "Poetry fetter'd/fetters the human race" (William Blake) and Michel Foucault's lesson that limits are productive. If you can enter the space between these poles, if you can balance along this tightrope all the while holding this opposition in your mind, you will find the ground for judging free verse and you might even come to enjoy its beauty. Free verse is not about freedom from form altogether, but from those forms we wish to break. There is no getting outside of form. There is no life without limit, beautiful enabling limits. "My body is a limit," I hear myself saying, and as the words pass from my tongue through my lips, I experience a momentary feeling of frightening disembodiment. My body is a limit between myself and you, myself and the world, it's a limit that enables me to experience the world as meaningful. Without limit, we have no consciousness; without definition, we cannot reach each other. No verse, free or otherwise, is formless. It's how the poet works and reworks form that gives the poem its force.

The metro ride home is becoming routine now. It sometimes seems that any original charm in light of this month's "events" is

grinding to powdery grit. Mushroom earth. Grime. Guts. The stuff of bodies. I shuffle with hundreds of fellow Muscovites up marble stairs, along deeply hewn corridors; we agree to babystep for the sake of order, our ankles are linked by an imaginary ball and chain. A man in Arab headdress stands a few feet from me in a fast moving car. Facing the glass doors, he is leaning into his index and middle finger in order to hold himself up. A voice, thin, its words writ large as a newspaper headline, murmurs within me: "He's going to try to stab me!" As the doors open, he turns his head barely into the tunnel's light to exit: his eye is bruised, his nose has obviously been recently broken; other parts of his face are stitched haphazardly to themselves.

Is there a lexicon in any language for the patterns of pain on this man's face? The doors close, and I am left with my own reflection: a small mouth appears to be sealed shut, no sign of a tongue to speak of or from.