

Brisbane

Also by Eugene Vodolazkin

Solovyov and Larionov

Laurus

The Aviator

A History of the Island

A NOVEL
Brisbane

EUGENE VODOLAZKIN

Translated from the Russian by
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Plough

PLOUGH PUBLISHING HOUSE

*There is a reason to imagine that a continent,
or land of great extent, may be found to the southward
of the track of former navigators.*

— JAMES COOK, 1769

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Performing at Paris's Olympe, I can't play a tremolo. Or rather, I can, but not accurately, not cleanly – I play it like a beginning guitarist, producing a muffled gurgling, not notes. No one notices, and the Olympe explodes in ovations. Even I forget my failure, but as I get in the limo to my admirers' shouts, I catch myself making the characteristic finger movement. My right hand now performs the no longer needed tremolo, as if atoning for its mistake. My fingers move with incredible speed. Touch imaginary strings. The way a hairdresser's scissors break away from the hair for an instant and continue cutting the air. As we pull up to CDG, I tap the poorly played melody on the window – nothing difficult. How could I have stumbled in concert?

I'm flying from Paris to Petersburg to shoot a video. My seatmate is buckling his seatbelt. He turns his head and freezes. He's recognized me.

“Are you Gleb Yanovsky?”

I nod.

“Sergei Nesterov.” My neighbor extends his hand. “Writer. I publish under a pseudonym, Nestor.”

I half-heartedly shake Nestor's hand. Half-listening. Nestor, it turns out, is returning from the Salon du Livre in Paris. Judging from the smell coming from his mouth, the book fair presented more than just books. Not that this writer has a very Chekhovian look: jug ears, a saddle-shaped nose with large nostrils, nondescript rimless glasses. Nestor bestows his card on me. I stick it in my wallet and shut my eyes.

Nestor to the supposedly sleeping me:

“I doubt you know my things. . . .”

“Just one.” I don't open my eyes. “*Tale of the Interim Years.*”

He smiles.

“Oh my. That’s my best.”

I write, too, actually. A diary – not a diary – occasionally I jot down notes, evenings at home or in airports. Then I lose them. Recently I even lost them in an airport. Pages covered in Cyrillic. Who would return them? Should they even?

The plane taxis onto the runway and stops, but then the engine revs hard. Snarling and shaking with impatience, the plane picks up speed instantly. Like a predator on the hunt – trembling, twitching its tail. I don’t immediately remember which predator exactly. One of the cat family – maybe a cheetah. A fine image. A hunt over the distance between Paris and Petersburg. The airplane lifts off. Tilting a wing, it makes a farewell circle over Paris. I feel myself drifting off.

I wake up from a rattling accompanied by a turbulence announcement. A request for everyone to buckle their seatbelts. And I’d just unbuckled. I’d even loosened my own belt – too tight. The attendant approaches with a request to buckle up. I tell her I don’t like seatbelts – not in cars, not in planes. No kind of contraption for a free person. The young woman doesn’t believe me, chides me flirtatiously, and responds to all my arguments with a brief “wow.” She is sincerely sorry that such a marvelous artist is flying unbuckled.

To end the conversation, I turn demonstratively toward Nestor. I ask whether it’s hard to write books. Nestor (he’d been sleeping a drunkard’s sleep) mumbles that it’s no harder than playing the guitar. The attendant expresses not the slightest irritation, since it’s clear the star is just being capricious. Oh well, stars can get away with it. She wags her finger at me and goes away.

Watching her, Nestor suddenly says, “I just had a thought. I could write a book about you. You intrigue me.”

“Thank you.”

“You could tell me about yourself, and I could write it.”

I consider his proposal for a minute or two.

“I don’t know what to say. There already are a few books about me. Decent ones, in my opinion, but they miss the point somehow. No understanding.”

“Musical understanding?”

“Human, I’d say. I’d put it like this. There’s no understanding that the musical stems from the human.”

Nestor carefully considers what I’ve said. His conclusion is surprising.

“I think you’d like my book.”

An alcoholic exhale proposes I believe him.

That’s funny.

“Indeed? Why?”

“Because I’m a good writer. That’s immodest, of course. . . .”

“It is a little. On the other hand, why be modest if you’re good?” I tap out the tremolo on my armrest. “Go ahead. Write it.”

The rhythmic tapping reminds me of how more than forty years ago, in Kyiv, Fyodor, my father, tapped out a rhythm to test his son’s musical ear. Why shouldn’t that be the start of the book? I turn to Nestor and briefly tell him about my very first test, and even reproduce the test question proposed then. At the time, I failed. Nestor, smiling, taps his armrest. He fails too.

1971

The night before the first day of school, Gleb sat in front of Fyodor watching his long fingers, and attempted to reproduce the rhythm. Outside, streetcars clattered as they made the turn. The china in the sideboard clinked briefly in response. Then Fyodor sang something and asked Gleb to repeat it. He couldn’t repeat the melody, just the words: *paba-paba, paba-paba, paba-pa* . . . Pretty forgettable words – not exactly moving, and the only reason he remembered them was

because they sounded like “papa.” Actually, Fyodor had asked him to use the Ukrainian, *tato*. Hardly anyone in Kyiv called their father that. It had been several years since Fyodor had lived with his wife Irina and Gleb: Irina had left him. Or rather, Fyodor had left after Irina asked him to move out of their place in the family dormitory. Once driven out, he’d rented a room in another part of town, and since he had a diploma from the music institute, he got a job at a music school teaching violin. For a while after the divorce he drank, preferring cheap stuff like 72nd Port or Bouquet of Moldavia. He didn’t like hard liquor. If he did drink vodka, he’d fill a shot glass but wouldn’t drink it right away; he’d bring it up to his eyes and his mouth a few times. Exhale a few times. Then pinch his nose and pour the firewater into his gaping mouth. His former wife considered this drinking purely for show, inasmuch as it took place primarily in front of people who could tell Irina about it. In one of her rare conversations with her former husband, Irina called this behavior childish. Without switching to Russian, Fyodor objected that the definition did not hold up to criticism, since children, as far as he understood, don’t drink. Logic was on his side, but it didn’t help bring Irina back. Three or four years later, once it was quite clear to Fyodor that his wife wasn’t coming back, the drinking stopped. Irina allowed Gleb’s father parental visits but derived no joy from them. Strictly speaking, neither did Gleb himself. When Fyodor took the boy for a walk, he mostly was silent or recited poetry, which for Gleb was worse than silence in a way. Sometimes, when Gleb got tired at the end of their walk, Fyodor would pick him up. Their eyes were on a level then, and the son would examine his father with a child’s unblinking gaze. Under this gaze, tears would well up in Fyodor’s brown eyes. One after another, they would roll down his cheeks and disappear forever in his fluffy mustache. Despite his obvious sobriety at the beginning of their walk, by the end, in some inscrutable way, Fyodor would be tipsy. Sitting in his

father's arms, Gleb picked up the smell of cheap wine. In the boy's memory, his father's tears were firmly merged with this smell. Maybe they really did smell like that. Who has studied the smell of tears? When soon-to-be first grader Gleb announced his desire to learn to play the guitar, Irina herself brought him to Fyodor. She sat in the corner and silently watched Gleb fail to match the tones his father sang. "*Gleb . . .*" Fyodor poured himself half a glass of wine, drank it in three goes, and said, in Ukrainian, "*Gleb, my boy, you weren't made for music.*"¹ "Papa, don't drink," Gleb asked him in Russian. His father drank another half-glass. "*I drink because you weren't made for music – a first for the musical Yanovsky family.*" He noticed a heel of bread on the table and brought it to his nose: "*Prikro!*" "What's *preekro*?" Gleb asked. "*Preekro* means 'too bad,'" Irina said. "Yes, it's too bad," Fyodor confirmed. Without another word, the mother took her son by the hand and led him out of the room. The next day they went to enroll him in the nearest music school. There, Gleb was also asked to repeat a rhythmic phrase and a sung melody. Nervous, the boy performed even worse than the day before, but this didn't discourage anyone. Surprise caught Gleb in a different way: his hand turned out to be too small for the guitar's neck. So they suggested enrolling him in the school's four-string domra class – at least until his hand grew. Visibly distraught, Irina asked why they were talking about the four-string domra specifically. They told her that there was a three-string domra, of course, but typically the Ukrainian one (they replaced the guitar in Gleb's arms with a domra) was, after all, four-string. The boy's fingers gripped the domra neck without straining. Irina was also asked not to confuse the two domras with the Eastern dombra, and they were even about to explain the difference between them, but she didn't want to hear it. She wanted to ask why they didn't simply

1. Italics here and throughout the novel indicate a non-Russian language being spoken, in Fyodor's case, Ukrainian.–Trans.

choose a smaller guitar for Gleb, to ask whether they weren't trying to trick her son into going somewhere no one would go voluntarily – but she bit her tongue. She stood up and simply took Gleb by the hand. His other hand was still holding the domra. Irina indicated with a glance that he could put down the instrument, but Gleb didn't. "You want to play the four-string domra?" she asked. "Yes," the boy answered. That decided the matter because his mother was trying to spare him yet another no. They signed him up for the domra class. At the same time, Gleb started regular school. He always remembered the colors, smells, and sounds that came to him that September 1, 1971, because on that day his senses sharpened dramatically. The smell of his freshly ironed school uniform – brown, with knife creases in the trousers. Gleb thought it was the color and creases that made the smell. Exactly the same way the smell of his nylon jacket came from the material's waterproof qualities. At the first rain, the material turned out to be permeable, but this had no effect whatsoever on his memory of the smell. This was Gleb's first nylon jacket; up until then he'd only worn coats. The warm September day didn't call for a jacket, but the boy very much wanted to arrive wearing it, though his mother was opposed. Years later, examining his first school photograph, Gleb Yanovsky found the jacket quite shapeless. He never did understand what it was about this item he liked so much then. Maybe its smell intoxicated him, the way a carnivorous plant intoxicates insects. Whatever it was, on the first of September his mother met him halfway, as always. She helped him put on his jacket and satchel. She advised him at least not to button the jacket. The satchel smelled of leather, and also water and oil, and also his noxious plastic pencil case. When the boy moved calmly, the pens' and pencils' rattling was moderate, but when he broke into a run, the sound increased many times over. The precise rhythm he pounded out reminded him of a band's maraca. When he was a little older, the boy asked himself where

people studied the maraca. Could there really be a maraca class at the music school, like a violin or piano class? And he found no answer because there was no such class. So there it was, his satchel, his school. At his father's wish, Gleb was sent to a Ukrainian-language school. His mother didn't object. She almost never objected. Knowing her ability to reconcile herself to circumstances, it was a wonder she'd had the character to separate from her husband. The real wonder, though, was that she and Fyodor had ever gotten together in the first place. Fyodor was from Kamianets-Podilskyi, Irina from Vologda. At one time both studied at the Kyiv Civil Aviation Institute, both landing there randomly, Irina after a failed attempt to get into the theater institute and Fyodor the conservatory. That's why they were allowed to stay in the city. They had not the slightest interest in civil aviation. This was one of the few things they had in common. As for the rest, they spoke different languages in the literal and figurative sense. People think dissimilarity breeds attraction, and that's true – but only at the start. Yes, the dark-haired southerner Fyodor was drawn to the northern beauty Irina, whose beauty was like the fog in a brief morning calm, like the dream of a tsarevna all too tempting to interrupt, like the quiet pond one wishes ripples would form in. Fyodor's invariable pensiveness made an impression on Irina; it implied experience and wisdom. She enjoyed listening to the Ukrainian words he uttered and demanded a minute-to-minute translation. Over the course of time, though, what had stoked their feelings in the first years turned into its opposite in Irina's eyes. Fyodor's pensiveness came to seem like sullenness, his wisdom did not manifest itself with the frequency she'd been counting on, and the incomprehensible words of the beautiful but foreign language began to get on her nerves. She stopped asking for their translation, waiting for Fyodor to guess and do it himself. Irina could have insisted he switch to Russian (as he did in important instances), but Fyodor's pronunciation mangled her native language.

And in bed, hearing his Russian words, she would laugh as if she were being tickled, push him away, and ask him to speak only Ukrainian. And then she left. After he was grown, Gleb heard many times about another reason for the divorce: Irina's "frivolous" behavior. He may have been able to believe in his mother's frivolousness (whatever that involved), but he didn't connect the divorce to that. The reason for the divorce, it seemed to him, was deeper and in a way more tragic. Gleb ascribed what happened between his parents to the particular pensiveness his father fell into from time to time. It was a pensiveness his mother, a vivacious person, came to dread. Those moments made Gleb uncomfortable too. It was as if his father had fallen into a deep well and was contemplating the stars from there, stars only he could see – even in the daytime, such being the optics of wells. When Irina left, the violin felt the fullness of Fyodor's emotions. Usually he played when he was alone. Gleb had once heard this playing when, with his mother's permission, he'd spent the night at his father's. Early in the morning, so as not to wake the boy, Fyodor shut himself in the bathroom and played. Turning on the water as well, to muffle the violin's sounds. These sounds, mixed with the water's noise, shook Gleb to the core. In 2003, he wrote several compositions that laid the guitar over the sound of water. This was his memory of his father playing. When he was writing them down, he'd had another thought, that in fact his father had turned the water on then in order to hang himself in peace. When Gleb finished writing his rain compositions, people told him they bore traces of despair. Gleb didn't respond. He remembered the particular expression in his father's eyes, an expression that could only be defined as despair. What really happened then? Was Irina frivolous? More likely, she took everything lightheartedly, showing a marked preference for the sunny side of life. And was disinclined to delve particularly into its shadowy aspects. She often repeated that she'd like to live in Australia; for some reason, that country seemed

like the embodiment of the carefree life. Jokingly she would ask people to find her an Australian husband she could travel the world with. It was in one of those conversations that Gleb first heard the word “Brisbane.” Talking about the city of her dreams, his mother named Brisbane. When asked why that city specifically, she said simply: it sounds beautiful. Her answer seemed silly – to everyone but Gleb. Brisbane. He easily linked the city with Zurbagan, Gel-Gyu, and Lissa, which the boy had read about in Aleksandr Grin. At the time Gleb had asked his mother whether she was going to take him with her to Brisbane. Of course she was. His mother kissed his forehead. How could she not? The time would come and they would live in Brisbane. Years later, when Gleb was graduating from high school, Irina wanted to buy a trip to Australia with the money she’d saved up. She was called into the Party commission, which had to give its consent – or rather, as it turned out, not give its consent – for the trip. She wasn’t a member of the Communist Party, so it’s an open question why the Party committee had any say at all. They proposed she name the members of the Politburo, asked what was discussed at the last congress of the Communist Party, and had her list the basic advantages of the socialist over the capitalist system. She answered the first, the second, and even the third. The third was the hardest for her, but she managed that one, too, because she’d prepared in the most painstaking fashion. And then Irina was asked one last question – as unstoppable as tank fire. They asked her whether she’d already seen everything in the Soviet Union. This question could not be answered in the affirmative; the country she’d been born in was too big. A negative answer implied that Gleb’s mother should put off her trip to Australia until she’d fully gotten to know the Soviet Union – or so the commission members, at least, thought. She was denied permission. Actually, Irina took it lightly, as she did nearly everything. Maybe it was thanks to just this quality that soon after the divorce she got a

room in a communal apartment, given to her by the design office where she'd been assigned after her studies, as a young civil aviation specialist. Had she taken this job opportunity seriously, they probably wouldn't have had to give her anything. A lot changed in Gleb's life with the move from the dormitory to the communal apartment. First and foremost, his grandmother Antonina Pavlovna showed up. She came from Vologda to help out his mother, who frequently went off in different directions. His mother called her absences business trips; moreover, each one ended in a present for Gleb. The presents – plastic toys usually – were quietly placed on the sleeping boy's pillow. He didn't give much thought to why his mother liked those toys particularly, he simply accepted them with thanks. Like a dog trained to search, he would wake up from the faint plastic smell touching his nostrils, because this was the smell of joy. He'd open his eyes and see his mother. She'd be sitting on the stool by his bed and smiling. Sometimes she'd cry. Her return was never an ordinary event. "Why do you take so many business trips?" Gleb once asked. His mother blushed and didn't answer. She glanced at his grandmother, who pretended not to notice anything. His grandmother wiped her hands on her apron – her saving gesture. When his mother left for work, Gleb repeated his question to his grandmother. Antonina Pavlovna fell silent and pressed a finger to her lips. "Tss," she told Gleb, "you see, she needs a reliable man by her side, only where are you going to find one?" "And my papa," Gleb asked, "is he unreliable?" "Your papa . . ." His grandmother sighed and shrugged. Meanwhile, his papa was very glad that Gleb was playing a Ukrainian folk instrument, and especially that his son had chosen it himself. Fyodor no longer saw Gleb's lack of absolute pitch as an insurmountable obstacle. He even said as much, that you didn't need absolute pitch to play the domra. To play the violin, which has no frets, yes, it's desirable, but for instruments whose neck is divided by frets, that

requirement is superfluous. Not only that, in Fyodor's opinion, his ear could be developed (*to an extent*, he clarified). One day Fyodor took Gleb to the musical instruments store and offered to buy him a domra. The father demonstratively let his son choose; he considered assessing twelve-ruble instruments beneath his dignity. After running all over the store, Gleb settled on the darkest of all the domras and brought it to his father. Fyodor looked sternly at his son. "*It doesn't have any strings. Pay attention, son.*" After a slight hesitation, his father picked up one of the domras and ran his thumb over the strings. He frowned at the plywood sound, which reminded him of a toy balalaika's rattle. The other domra was the same, and so were all the rest. They chose the way Gleb had wanted to, by color – not as dark as the first, but with strings. When they got back, home smelled of a cooked dinner. "Will you stay for dinner?" Gleb asked his father. "*Ne. Ne zaproshue.*" "What does *ne zaproshue* mean?" the boy inquired. "No one's asked me," Irina explained, looking into Fyodor's eyes. His grandmother silently wiped her hands on her apron. It seemed to her that the man who not so long ago had been her daughter's husband should be asked.

JULY 18, 2012, KYIV

Arriving in Kyiv on tour, I visit my father. He receives me good-naturedly but without any special fuss.

"Hi there, Muscovite. What do you say?"

He smiles. I smile back.

"I say, join the empire!"

My father sprinkles tobacco on a cigarette paper, rolls it, and running his tongue along it, seals it.

This is something new.

"We can't do that."