

**Winning translation of the Rossica Young Translators Award
Translator – Leo Shtutin, Oxford**

Letter-Book (extract)
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I haven't told you about this, have I, Sashenka.

When he collapsed in the lesson, I rushed over to him, to our dear Shikra, to save him, but I couldn't find his pills anywhere. By the time they were finally given to him it was too late. I am not to blame here, I know, but even today I have to rationalize this fact to myself again and again.

You know, I was very fond of him, and it upset me to hear him called Shikra. At breaktimes I enjoyed popping in to see him on some trifling pretext, I just loved all those glass cases with butterflies inside, those old cabinets stocked with *naturalia*: giant ostrich eggs, starfish, stuffed animals and birds.

I still remember how he turned up to botany class with cotton wool-lined boxes full of wax models of different sorts of apples. How I hankered for a little bite—they looked so good, so juicy, so real!

When summer came around he set us the task of collecting herbaria—oh, what an effort I made! But I found picking plants in ravines and drying them out in volumes of the Brockhaus Encyclopaedia less enjoyable than adding neat annotations to specimens afterwards: “Dandelion, *Taraxacum*”, or “Ribwort, *Plantago*”. I found it remarkable that an ordinary ribwort could be such a weighty, such a beautiful word—*Plantago*. These words seemed to captivate me more than the boring dry leaves themselves.

When Viktor Sergejevich began teaching zoology, I started taking what I believed to be a serious interest in ornithology, so much so that, eating a chicken leg at lunch, I would fit the well-picked little bones together, testing out the workings of the joint, the functions performed by this bone or that bit of cartilage.

To tell you the truth, I don't know whether I cared for any of this—for plants, for birds—before I met him. I don't think I paid any attention to it at all. But through his love I grew to love all these living things myself.

Or was it to make him take notice of my efforts, to elicit his praise?

Though even before I started gymnasium there were times when my love for birds shone through. I remember finding a nest with three baby jackdaws in a birch tree at our dacha—I climbed up there several times a day, dropped bits of meatball down their throats and watered them out of an old thimble I'd wheedled from Grandma.

But the real test of my love for nature came a couple of years later, once again taking place at the dacha and also involving a nestling. The boy from next door ran over to me, sobbing noisily. Choking back tears, he just couldn't explain what had happened. I ran after him. What I saw on the path leading to their porch was truly not for children's eyes. A baby bird had fallen out of its nest and landed, unlucky wretch, right next to an ants' nest: smothered with ants, it writhed about silently, and I was at a loss of what to do. The nestling was past saving, but I couldn't just stand there and watch it suffering either.

You know, Sashenka, I think it was at that moment that I really began to grow up. I understood that I had to summon up the courage to do good. And at that moment to do good meant to put an end to these sufferings as quickly as possible. I took a shovel, told the boy to go back into the house, went up to the nestling, which had now become a living black ball of ants, and cut it in two with the blade of the shovel. Both halves continued to writhe—or maybe it seemed that way because of the ants. I took these ant-clumps over to

the fence and buried them there. The boy saw everything from the terrace window, got upset at me and couldn't bring himself to forgive what I'd done.

Another thing I liked about Viktor Sergeevich was the way he could make the familiar seem strange. In literature class, for instance, we chuckled at the caustic report written by the young Pushkin while on an inspection tour of locust damage:

A locust host in flight
 Condescended to alight,
 Gobbled everything in sight
 And once again took flight.

Amusing, isn't it? But Viktor Sergeevich saw it completely differently. An official for special missions, the energetic, sharp-witted Pushkin was sent on assignment to deal with an important matter. People had fallen on misfortune and, deprived of their livelihoods, expected help from the government.

I think my teacher just took offence at such a haughty attitude to insects, which, in his eyes, were no less important, complex and alive than us humans.

In gymnasium everyone made fun of him, even other teachers, which pained me a great deal to see. But what could I do?

I could only learn to share his love for plants and birds. Later, after his death, my enthusiasm for all those gymnosperms, neognaths and ecarinates waned, of course, but their names stayed with me—and how wonderful it was not simply to go walking in the forest, but to be able to say, This is lovage, here's some costmary, that's an orchis, and over there's some pigweed. You're strolling down the trail, and you're surrounded by buckthorns, helleborines, wood-sorrels, widow flowers! And look: marsh marigolds, sow-thistles, centauries! And the birds! Here we have a chiffchaff, over there's a black woodpecker, and this one's a gannet!

How wonderful to stroll down the trail and be able to appreciate why willowherb likes burnt ground!

And all this instilled in me the astonishing sensation of life without end.

After his death I began giving serious thought to my own for the first time.

You know, of course, that all adolescents go through these bouts of horror, these paroxysms of fear, and of course you're right—there's nothing out of the ordinary about it. And I understood all this perfectly well myself. But that didn't make things any easier.

My mother often used to tell the story of how, aged five, I overheard the grownups talking about somebody's death, and asked, trepidation in my voice, "Will I die too?" "No," she replied. And I was relieved.

Playing at war with buttons as a child, I imagined myself amongst them on the battlefield, only now they were real, so you could launch into an attack, shout "hurrah"—and fall slain to the ground, arms outspread. You'd lie still for a moment, jump up again and charge onwards, none the worse for wear and itching for hand-to-hand combat. Slash, hit, stab!

One time I got so engrossed in the game that I didn't notice my mother standing in the doorway, looking at me.

"You know," she said, "every one of those buttons you've killed has a mummy too, who's waiting at home for it and crying."

I didn't understand what she meant then.

After Grandma died, I remember, I tried to imagine myself dead—I lay down on the sofa, folded my arms on my chest, relaxed all my muscles, screwed up my eyes and tried holding my breath for as long as possible. For a brief second I even thought that I had managed to still the beating of my heart. The result? Only that I felt incredibly alive. Some kind of force, whose existence within me I had never recognised before that moment, compelled me to breathe. My will was as nothing against it. I had come not even an inch closer to an

understanding of death—instead I had acquired a keen sense of what it was to be alive. Life was breath. And breath was my master.

I did not like my body and had despised it, I think, ever since the moment when, as a teen, I suddenly realized that I was not entirely it, and that it was entirely other than myself. It was strange to think that, at my draft-board medical examination, my weight, height and teeth were once again of interest for someone, just as they had been for my mother when I was a child, and that all these figures which essentially had nothing to do with me were being duly noted down. What's the point of all that? What use could it be to anyone?

You know what got me scared for the first time? I was fourteen or fifteen when it suddenly dawned on me: my body was dragging me into the grave. With every passing day, every passing second. With every breath in, every breath out.

Surely that alone is reason enough to detest it!

I was lying on my sofa, I remember, and as my gaze slid over the dissected innards of the ship on the wall, it occurred to me that this huge vessel would sink instantly if only it was aware of the bottomless abyss beneath it.

My body came into an awareness of this abyss.

And I'd always be finding new reasons for detesting it. Now, along came the time to start shaving. You know what my skin's like—rough, horrible to look at, riddled with boils and acne. When I shaved I'd keep cutting myself till I bled. I tried growing a beard, but nothing doing—this was no beard, it was one big disaster. And I remember, I was shaving, I cut myself yet again, and suddenly I was paralysed by the thought that even now, at this very moment, as I dabbed at the cut with a bit of newspaper, this vile skin-sack, heaving with entrails, was sinking into the deep and dragging me down with it. And that it would continue to sink all the years of my life, before finally drowning.

Everything was becoming unbearable. As if conniving against me, ordinary objects were all repeating the same refrain: here's a three-kopeck piece, it will continue to be when I'm no more, here's a door handle, people will continue to turn it, here's an icicle outside the window, and an icicle it will remain even in three hundred years, glistening and opalescing in the midday March sun.

And at dawn the mirror would metamorphose from a harmless object into what it really was—the jaws of time. Glance at it in just a minute—and already it will have devoured that minute. And my life will have become a minute shorter.

It also made me despondent to see everyone around me so confident in their own existence, while I appeared unreal to myself at times and lacked even the slightest self-knowledge. And if you have no confidence in yourself, how can you be confident in anything else? Maybe I didn't even exist. Maybe somebody had dreamt me up—just as I used to dream up little men for the ship—and was now tormenting me.

I was plunging into a black bottomless deep, I was disappearing, ceasing to exist. I needed evidence for my existence. There was none. The mirror reflected something back to me, but—and in this we were alike—it had no conception of what I was. It could only devour indiscriminately.

I couldn't occupy myself with anything, and all those pursuits I normally found diverting or pleasurable—even books—could no longer keep me afloat. Everything was smeared with a greasy, clammy meaninglessness.

Especially irritating was the blind man. I would lie in my little room, wedged into the corner of the sofa, buried under a pillow, trembling in horror at the darkness and emptiness, and he'd be whistling away, shuffling up and down the hallway, living a full life, which, in spite of his blindness, did not seem in the least dark or empty to him! What was it those blind eyes of his could see that mine did not? What sort of invisible world?

My mother got the worst of it. I'd lock myself in my room and refused to come out, refused to eat, refused to talk to anyone.

It was no good trying to talk to her, of course. She thought I was having *episodes* characteristic of my age. I heard her explaining about me to a lady friend of hers:

“He’s had his visual-arts episode, now it’s the meaning-of-life episode. It’ll be fine! At least his head’s not been turned by some touch-me-not! You know what they’re like these days!”

I was terribly afraid of girls. Or not afraid, exactly, but so shy that being around them would send me into a panic. On the tram once, a girl with extraordinary hair—a cascade of chestnut waves, and how fragrant, too!—sat down in the seat in front of me. From time to time she scooped her hair up with her palms and tossed it back over her shoulders. I felt such an urge to touch it! I saw that nobody was looking and reached out for a feel. I thought she wouldn’t notice. But she did—and threw me a sideways glance laced with derision. I was so mortified I bolted like a shot out of the tram.

You can only despise yourself even more after that!

It seems ridiculous looking back on it now, but my mother was so afraid for me that she’d go through my things on the sly—what if I had some poison hidden away, or perhaps I’d managed to get hold of a revolver somewhere?

One day I heard whispering outside my door, she was pleading with her blind man:

“Please, Pavlusha, try talking to him—you’re a man, there’s more of a chance you two will understand each other!”

He shuffles over, knocks.

“Everyone leave me alone!” I shout in reply.

You pick up a book by some hermit-sage, hoping you’ll discover, if not an answer, then at least a properly formulated question, but all hermit-sages call upon you with one voice to live in the present, to revel in the transient, in the ephemeral.

That, however, is a skill in itself!

How can you take pleasure in the present when it’s needless and useless? When everything makes you feel sick—the wallpaper, the ceiling, the curtains, the city outside the window, all these *not-I*s. When you, a *not-I* just like everything else, make yourself feel sick. Sickening, too, is the meagre, squalid past, consisting as it does of inanities and humiliations. But especially sickening is the future. Especially the future—for it is the road to that stinking hole in the cemetery bog-house.

And everything that comes before that hole—what’s the point of it all? What did I choose for myself? My flesh? My time? My place? I chose nothing, I was invited nowhere.

And when things really hit rock bottom, when I seriously considered going to the bathroom and taking the blind man’s razor, when I was suffocated by the impossibility of living through another breath in, then a breath out, and then yet another breath in and once again a breath out, when my skin was covered with sweat, my heart hurt and I shook all over—it was then that a remarkable vibration would suddenly begin somewhere in the tips of my fingers.

From somewhere within my depths rose a discordant yet steady buzzing. It swelled into a wave. Forced me to leap up, dash around the room, tear open the window, noisily ripping the strips of paper it had been sealed with for winter, and inhale the outside. The buzzing grew louder and stronger, welling up inside me. And finally the unfathomable, devastating wave scooped me up from the very bottom and hoisted me to the surface, skywards. I was overflowing with words.

This cannot be explained, Sashenka, it can only be lived through.

The fear dissolved, melted away. The vanished world was restored to wholeness. The invisible became visible.

All these *not-I*s began to respond, to buzz in return, to acknowledge me as their own. You understand what I’m getting at, don’t you? Everything around me was becoming mine, joyous, edible! The wallpaper, the ceiling, the curtains, the city outside the window—I

yearned to touch them all over, to take in their smell, to feel their taste on my tongue! The *not-I*s were becoming me.

I lived only in those moments. I looked about me and couldn't understand how other people could get by without this. Was it really possible to live without it?

But then the words would go away, the buzzing disappeared, and the bouts of emptiness began anew. These were real attacks—shivering and shaking, I lolled about on my sofa for days without leaving the house: I just couldn't explain the point of going out to myself. Who needs to go out? What does it mean *to go out*? What does *I* mean? And what is *what*?

And the scariest thought was, what if the words never came back?

At some moment I became acutely aware of the connection: the frozen, all-embracing void out of which I was powerless to extricate myself could be filled only by the wondrous buzzing, rustling, rumbling, swashing of words. Which meant that only when it was filtered through the prism of words did the immediate and the transient become joyous and meaningful. Everything in the present was entirely inconsequential, entirely useless, unless it served as a conduit for words, and they for it. Words alone somehow vindicated the existence of reality, imbued the evanescent with meaning, rendered the unreal real, made me myself.

You see, Sashenka, I lived a stranger to life. I had been sundered from the world by a wall of letters. I had only a word's-eye view of what was happening to me—can I take this with me onto the page, or not, I'd always ask. I now knew what to retort to the long putrefied sages: the transient acquires meaning if it is caught on the wing. Hey, sages, where are you? Where's the world you see? Where's your transience? You don't know? Well, I do.

I believed that the truth had been revealed to me. I suddenly felt powerful. Not just powerful, but all-powerful. Laugh if you must, Sashka, but I felt omnipotent. Something the uninitiated could not fathom had been revealed to me. It was the power of the word. At least that's the way it seemed at that time. I had become the final link in that vitally important chain, perhaps the most important of all, which stretched from the real-life individual—and no matter whether he was prone to sweating, bad-breathed, left-handed, right-handed, plagued by heartburn, he was no less real than you or me—who once wrote, "In the beginning was the word." And his words have endured, and he has endured within them—they have become his body. And that is the only true immortality. There is no other. Everything else belongs in a pit full of cemeterial excrements.

By way of words something had been conveyed from that individual to me that was more powerful than either life or death, especially if you realise that they are one and the same.

You can imagine with what astonishment I observed those around me. How could they be? Why did they fail to fall, despite not being suspended above death by that chain? What was holding them up?

It was obvious to me that the most ancient proto-substance—was ink.

Silver-tongues of all ages and nations would have you believe that the written word knows no mortality, and believe them I did—it is, after all, the only means of communication between the dead, the living and the as yet unborn.

I was convinced that my words would be what remained once all things transitory and ephemeral had been thrown into the cesspit at Grandma's cemetery—and that my writing, therefore, was the most important, most essential part of me.

I believed that words were my surrogate body.

No doubt it was unhealthy to love words so much. I loved them beyond all reason. And they were winking and sniggering behind my back.

They were mocking me!

The more of myself I relinquished to words, the more palpable my inability to express anything in words became. Or, to put it more precisely, words can create something of their own, but you cannot transfigure yourself into words. Words are fraudsters. They promise to

take you to sea with them, only to move out under full sail when your head is turned, leaving you behind on the shore.

Most importantly, no words can truly encompass reality. Reality strikes you dumb. Everything of any significance in life exists beyond words.

At some point you come to understand that if what you've experienced can be put into words, it means you've experienced nothing.

All this probably sounds very convoluted, Sashenka, but I must say what I have to say nonetheless. And I know that you will understand me no matter how convoluted I make things.

It is the futility of words of which I speak. If you don't feel the futility of words, you evidently haven't the least understanding of them. I suddenly understood their futility.

Let me try to explain it like this: if you remember, I wrote you how, having read about the way medieval jesters used to exasperate their blockheaded seigneurs with captious questions, I was inspired one breaktime to poke some fun at my tormentor from one of the years above, only for him to cuff me over the ears as per usual, without even listening to the whole of my ornate sentence. Now, silver-tongues, with their hopes of self-perpetuation, are just silly well-read little boys, no different from me—they spend their whole lives trying to exorcise death with their ornate speechifying, but in the end death will still cuff them over the ears without hearing them out.

Do you remember, I could never quite convince you that all books are lies, if only by virtue of having a beginning and an end. It is dishonest to put the final full stop, to write *The End*—and not to die. I believed words to be the highest truth. But they turned out to be nothing but trickery and fraud, unreal and unworthy.

I gave my word to write no more. I believed that was the worthy thing to do.

And no one can ever explain this, Sashenka, at some inopportune moment it just becomes obvious all of a sudden that there's no answer to the question *who am I?*, because you cannot know that answer, only be it.

You see, I wanted to be.

I was not myself. Words would come—and I felt strong, but I couldn't bid them to come! And they left me feeling empty, worthless, manipulated, discarded.

I hated myself for being weak and wanted to be strong—but what I should be was determined for me by words.

You must understand, Sashenka, that I could not go on like this! You kept thinking you were responsible—you were not!

I had to free myself from them. Feel liberated. Feel—*alive*. I had to prove that I existed in my own right, beyond words. I needed evidence for my existence.

I burnt everything I'd written—and didn't regret it for a minute. You scolded me for this, but you shouldn't have. Please, my darling, don't scold me! I needed to change, to become different, to understand what was obvious to everyone but me, to see what was clear to any blind man!

After I die I shall not be reborn as someone else—I have this life and no other. And I must make myself real while there is still time.

And you know what the strange thing is—those notebooks have long since turned to ash, but it is only here and now that I am beginning to commit my other, past self to the flames.

I was the blind one, you know. I saw words, but I couldn't see through them. Which is like looking at the window glass rather than out into the street. All that is actual and ephemeral reflects light. This light passes through words as it does through the glass. Words exist as conduits for light.

This will make you smile: it's so like me, isn't it—I gave my word never to write again, yet now I'm thinking I might write a book when I return. Or I might not. It doesn't matter.

What I'm experiencing now is far more significant than hundreds—thousands of words. Tell me, how can I express in words the eagerness for life which overfills me?

My dear Sashenka! Never before have I felt so alive!

I looked outside for a moment—the night was moonlit, the sky was bright, full of stars and looking very much like happiness. I went for a stroll, rubbing my tired fingers.

A magnificent night. What a moon—bright enough to read by. Glinting off the bayonets. The tents aglow with moonlight.

Wonderful silence, not a sound to be heard.

Or rather, sound to be heard from all around, but so serene, so lovely—the clip-clop of horses' hooves, snoring from a nearby tent, somebody yawning in the sick quarters, the chirr of cicadas in the poplars.

I stand here, gazing at the Milky Way. Now I'm always quick to see that it sunders the universe aslant.

I stand here, under this universe, I breathe and I think: so the moon alone, it turns out, can be enough to make you happy. And I'd spent so many years in search of evidence for my own existence!

What an insufferable fool I am, Sashka!

To hell with the moon! To hell with evidence!

My darling Sashka! What further evidence for my existence do I need if I can take delight in the fact that you are there, that you love me, that you are reading these lines now!

I know that the letter set down in writing will reach you one way or another, while the unwritten one will disappear without a trace. And so I'm writing you, my dear Sashenka!