University of Oregon

In the spring of 1996, Marina and I toured along the West Coast, visiting our friends who lived there: the Tseitlins, Nilvs, Lemkhins, Shteinbergs, and the Greenbergs in California. Then we rented a car and headed towards the northwestern City of Eugene, where Sergey Yuzvinsky lived and worked as a professor of mathematics at the University of Oregon. In those days, Lev Losev lived in Eugene. The Marjorie Lindholm Foundation invited him to teach as a visiting professor for one term. It was Lev Losev who told me about this Foundation and promised that he would encourage them to invite me in the near future.

It turned out that Marjorie Lindholm, a local rich lady, was imbued with such an interest in Russian history and culture that she donated a hefty sum of money to the Slavic department, allowing them to invite Russian writers and literary critics to the University of Oregon. Since 1989, Ernst Neizvestnyi, Vladimir Voinovich, Tatiana Tolstaia, Ruth Zernova, Andrei Siniavskii, and Vladimir Uflliand had already visited the university as guest speakers.

At some point, Yuzvinskii introduced me to Mrs. Lindholm. After our departure, a behind-the-scenes campaign for Igor Efimov's invitation began rotating the wheels of an inaudible engine, rising and falling. In 2000, this campaign ended with an official invitation from the University Administration, offering me work as a visiting professor from April to June 2001.

The offer included a twenty-two-thousand-dollar salary, air ticket, and lodging. One would only dream of such success. I was later told that among the 2001 nominees were Vasilii Aksenov, John Bolt, Viktor Erofeev, Viacheslav Ivanov, and Mikhail Epstein. I was flattered of being amongst these strong rivals.

The invitation was accepted, and then began the meticulous correspondence discussing details: where the house would be, what kind of furniture would be there, plates, linens, television, who would pay for the telephone, if there would be medical insurance, who would buy the plane ticket, where to send my computer, and most importantly – which topics Professor Efimov would choose for the two courses he would be teaching. Alan Kimball, the director of the Russian program, had two suggestions: 1) "The Russian Novel: Literature and Ideology" and 2) "Post-Soviet Literature and Culture."

I was perfectly well-suited for the first topic, but the second one sowed a slight panic in my soul. You see, it would mean wading through the underbrush of early modernism in order to fill in the pages of the '90s Russian journalists: Sorokin, Pelevin, Limonov, Petsukh, and others. In a detailed letter to the director of the program, I explained that with only a month remaining, I simply could not successfully compile such an expansive mass of material, and even if I were successful, I would not be able to adequately convey it through the prism of the new culture, especially one in which I had no experience. Instead, I suggested a course entitled "Rehabilitation Literature," which included authors and poets who had been rediscovered and returned to Russian readers after 1990: from Merezhkovskii, Tsvetaeva, Nabokov to Mandelstam, Solzhenitsyn, Brodsky. My proposal was accepted, and soon posters and fliers with a description of the course appeared on the hallway walls of the Slavic department.

Sergey Yuzvinsky was on sabbatical, so he and his wife were traveling when I arrived in Eugene. Therefore, I was met at the airport by another colleague in the department—Yelaina Kripkova. She took me to my apartment and showed me the way to the necessary stores, pharmacy, bus station, and post office. In just three months, the Kripkovs house became for me not just an important friendly asylum, but also a gateway into the realm of world cinema: Yelaina's mother, Olga [Lvovna], had compiled a fantastic collection of films, and thanks to her I was able to enjoy the masterpieces of Antonini, Bergman, Bertolucci, Godard, Bunuel, Pazolini, Eric Rohmer, Truffaut, Fellini, and other European giants.

Remembering now that spring quarter of my Oregonian professorship, I try to extract from my memory some kind of critical moment, a painful collision, in order to give my story requisite dramatism. But I find myself decidedly unable to recall anything disreputable. The entire picture is bathed in light, and I am hopelessly taken away in some kind of optimistic socialist realism in the air of Laktionov's paintings, the music of Dunaevsky, films like "The Happy Children" or even "The Kuban Cossacks," and Mayakovsky's poem "Good!"

How wonderful it was, riding the bus in the morning, passing the green Oregon hills, to enter the auditorium and see in front of me young, animated faces, to enthrall them in the journey to the land of beloved books.

And after the lecture to go to the [Knight] Library and there burrow into its riches, like the Count of Monte Cristo burrowed in his cave.

How wonderful it was to climb into the car on Saturday, which was left for me by the Yuzvinskys, speeding away in the manual transmission – what a memory, what an obsession! – to the river with the unpronounceable name "Umpqua," where waves would suddenly fill the fishing rod with delightful trembling and small graylings would appear in a current of a powerful salmon.

How wonderful it was the next day to have one of my new friends over for ukha [Russia fish soup] followed by oven-baked turkey and other culinary delights.

Or, conversely, to set out to the Nemirovskys' house, where the hosts – mathematician Arkady and writer Julia – and their guests would listen with pleasure to the Visiting Phrasemonger while he poured out his stock of stories, yarns, and anecdotes for his new audience.

And on Thursdays – without fail – at the local bridge club, I was able to devote myself to my favorite passion and charge my adrenaline for the entire week.

But of course, there were sorrowful blemishes on this sunny scenery. It was discovered, for example, that the Slavic Department was paralyzed to a considerable extent due to a fateful quarrel between two important professors. Professor Albert Leong's "patrimony" was the figure and creation of Ernst Neizvestnyi, and at the time we even discussed the possibility of publishing his book about a notable sculpture in the "Hermitage" publishing house. James Rice's "patrimony" was the subject of Freud and Russian literature of the 20th century. The root of this

quarrel lurked in years past, and I did not understand on what exactly the Oregonian “Ivan Ivanovich” and “Ivan Nikifirovich” differed.

In the Mathematics Department there were quite a few representatives of the third wave. I became acquainted with several of them and would visit them at their homes. I was always on completely friendly terms with them, but with each other they got along very poorly. Sidelong glances, sarcastic phrases, condescending comments, and hidden struggles for prestige penetrated and encompassed everything.

At the end of the quarter the Yuzvinskys returned from their voyages and brought their medical afflictions with them. Twenty years ago, after having given birth to her son Tom, Alya Yuzvinskaya was diagnosed with cancer of the thyroid gland. Doctors gave her six months to live, on the condition that she would agree to amputate her shoulder and breast. “No,” Alya said. “I simply could not allow for my son to be raised without a mother.” Having a medical education, she sat down to her books and entered into obstinate warfare with her illness, trying one after another alternative treatments. Four years of war passed, victory alternating with defeat, but in the end she prevailed over her enemy. The doctor performed all of the requisite tests and with amazement explained that her cancer had vanished: she was cured.

“I know that you will not publicize this result to your colleagues or publish an article.” Alya told the doctor, “Because you did have some doubts about the diagnosis which you supplied to me four years ago. But listen, if my illness should happen to afflict someone close to you, please, share my experience with them.”

The doctor kept silent.

But now there is a mortal danger approaching her from a different direction. Slowly and steadily, this enemy named Alzheimer is extinguishing the fire of her consciousness, and it is as if her soul in her eyes is evaporating away from its charming, corporeal envelope.

Russian poets did not find their way into the program of the course, but one day when the discussion turned to Pushkin’s prose I shared my thoughts regarding the sorcery of poetry with my students. There is a particular metaphor, I said: “time is like a river.” Using this, we usually have in mind the kind of time which can be measured by our stopwatches, alarm clocks, calendars, and the dates of battles and revolutions. But there are still two other kinds of rivers for which we do not have a device to measure. In one of them, traditions and the language of one’s people are developed, morals are changed, religions are ripened, waters in the oceans agitate enmity, and marvelous creativities sparkle. And in the other one, still further from our ability to understand, are the crawling continents, the appearance of new species of trees, the lighting up of new stars, and the vanishing of the dinosaurs. The art of poetry, it seems to me, is composed of this: that the poet himself confusedly senses the interconnectedness of these three rivers and then through word play mixes them into one in a marvelous breakthrough, and this baptism in the water of these merged rivers bears in our soul the feeling to join in the miracle.

It is a set tradition that every lecture given by a Lindholm visitor be recorded by a camera. If only such technology had existed when Nabokov had given his lecture at Cornell, then Vera

Evseevna would not have had to sit for hours in the auditorium as his stenographer. Reviewing the film afterward, I mentally appealed to the lecturer on the screen, “Hey, professor, can’t you be livelier?!”

But it seems that the students did not feel the same way. Several of them even brought their friends to my lectures. The comments they left at the department were flattering, and my departure was warm. Many students asked me to give them a list of contemporary Russian authors that they should read.

Taking leave of director Kimball and other members of the Slavic Department, I earnestly recommended that in the near future they invite Vladimir Gandelman for a term, having noted his talent and teaching experience. But alas, soon after leaving I learned that Mrs. Lindholm had grown cold to the project and withdrawn financial support. Mikhail Epstein occupied my post after me, and then it was concluded.

A vain dream—the invariable and excusable weakness of every writer. There is no telling, maybe 100 years from now some graduate student will find the films of my lectures on a shelf of the Bakhmetevsky Archive at Columbia University, blow the dust off, and write a dissertation titled “Russian Classics in the Light of the Most Recent Metaphysics.” But in all seriousness, I dream of only one thing: that heartless Alzheimers will not be successful in reaching the film of my memory, on which is imprinted the blissful Oregon spring of 2001.

NB: Do not ask of joy “why me?” God is not a shyster.