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Excavating

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EXCAVATING

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
The Low Residency Program in Creative Writing

by

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Table of Contents

Preface.....	1
On Writing Poems from Magazine Photos	9
<i>The Graveyards</i>	
Science of the Suburbs.....	12
Julia J	13
Dear John:	14
Jemima	15
Letter to Edwin	16
What They Left Out of My Obituary	17
<i>The Dacha</i>	
Etymology of My Lenin.....	19
Lenin on the Sealed Train	22
Nadya to Stalin, 1925.....	25
Purging the Aunties.....	27
From Maria's Diary	29
Stalin in Aruba	31
<i>The Suburbs</i>	
Torch.....	34
Cutaway	36
The Art of Settling	37
Why Old Women Cry at Weddings	38
The Fat Woman.....	39
<i>The Eastern Forests</i>	
Wars	42
Names: for the Insomniac	43
Whiskey and Soda.....	44
The Outhouse	45
Until Ohio	46
Gypsies in Seven Parts.....	47
The Mummies	50
Notes on the Poems.....	52
Vita.....	54

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PREFACE

I.

The guiding principle for the composition and presentation of these poems is *excavation*, the process by which archeologists gather information. Two nineteenth-century artifacts served as the impetus and conceptual framework for this manuscript; a headstone and an old photograph led me to two different women, a nineteenth-century planter's daughter and my own great-grandmother. I wanted to use language as one uses trowels, picks, shovels, tweezers, and backhoes to learn more about and *imagine* their lives through poetry.

In doing so, I wanted to be sensitive to all of the dimensions of excavation. From an etymological perspective, *excavate* shares the same Latin root with *cave*. *Excavate* comes from the Latin *excavatus*, the past participle of *excavare*, which means "to hollow out." And excavation does create a hollow, a space in what was once solid and intact. But thinking about excavation this way also calls up some of its most negative implications, including the gender bias inherent in constructing history as a negative space to be penetrated. Excavation can be seen as an attempt at physical and figurative mastery—the penetration of the earth in the name of science, the penetration of older cultures for political or economic benefit. One might also think of excavation in its aesthetic dimension—the ethics of mining other literary works, other artists and cultures, for inspiration.

One can also choose to focus on the positive aspects of excavation and its power to recover and transform. When I do so, I am guided by the words of Canadian writer Peg Tittle, who was once accused of appropriating Native traditions. Her feisty and memorable self-defense:

The 'no appropriation' perspective doesn't seem to recognize that there are people whose awareness doesn't go very deep...[who are] not reflective, not analytic. Or they may be all that but not very articulate. And there are others whose research is thorough, whose imagination is rich, and who are articulate to boot...one's imagination can exceed

another's awareness. But it's not really 'just' imagination, it's informed imagination— it's empathy.¹

Tittle identifies the ability to imagine another's experience, to walk in another's shoes, as crucial to empathizing with and connecting to others. I operate under the same assumption— exploring and reconstructing other lives is an exercise in empathy. Each poem in this collection appropriates an artifact— whether a word, a headstone inscription, a diary, a blurb in a history textbook, or a sepia photograph. However, I have been careful to make sure my reconstructions are both imaginative and informed.

II.

One of the basic concepts of archeology is the belief in the importance of *context*. Accordingly, archeologists never base their conclusions upon a single artifact. Rather, they interpret artifacts only with others from the same site. I hope that each poem in this collection is illuminated by the others that influenced its composition. Accordingly, I have organized this manuscript around four excavation sites— a small family graveyard, the country home of a Soviet dictator, a suburban neighborhood, and a Slovakian forest.

The Graveyard

I grew up in a housing development built on old tobacco plantations. Up the street from my suburban rancher home, a landscaped island divided the street, offering tilting-tree shade, moss, bugs and bird feathers. The family graveyard of one of the founding families of Maryland sat on this island, a recognized historic site developers still can't pave over. By the time I had my training wheels off and could pedal up to the island alone, only one headstone hadn't been pushed over by the older kids in the neighborhood. I remember it as a single white tooth jutting up. I knelt behind that headstone during hide-

¹ Tittle, Peg. "Appropriation or Imagination." *Humanist in Canada*. Spring 1998. 1 June 2004. <http://humanists.net/tittle/appropriation_or_imagination.htm>

and-see and spied on older kids from its shadow. It belonged to Annie Linthicum, a nineteenth-century planter's daughter. Ten miles up the road was the town of Linthicum, named after her family.

Scattered across my home state of Maryland are dozens of similar graveyards, parish and plantation plots encroached upon by suburban sprawl. Some are in the cul-de-sacs of housing developments, some are just off the side of the highway, and some are fenced in next to new shopping plazas. These graveyards serve not only as a metaphor for our culture's complicated relationship with the past, but as a poignant reminder of the lives layered underneath our feet, in constant danger of being paved over. While I haven't yet written Annie Linthicum's life, in this section I have reconstructed the lives behind other headstone inscriptions— a woman who died in childbirth, a former slave, a doctor's wife, two young brothers, and an elderly priest.

The Dacha

If my first understanding of historical difference came from my encounter with Annie Linthicum's headstone, my first understanding of political difference was gained in history class. I clung to explanations about the Iron Curtain in an attempt to find out more about the family members behind it. This curiosity ripened into a desire to understand the two men I saw portrayed in my schoolbooks as the masterminds of this great imprisonment— Lenin and Stalin.

This section, inspired by the release of suppressed artifacts after the fall of the Soviet Union, continues the work of *The Graveyard* by allowing women on the periphery of the Russian Revolution and the Red Terror to speak, intimately and directly, to the reader. Other poems in this section ask the reader to identify with a speaker who temporarily identifies with Lenin or Stalin, men previously constructed as two-dimensional monsters or heroes who suddenly gain another face. We now know, for example, that Stalin had such a beautiful tenor voice he could've chosen to be a professional singer instead of a dictator, that he loved arias from *Rigoletto*, and that his wife constantly scolded him for spoiling the children. Perhaps these details are superfluous gossip, but they may also give us glimpses into the intersection between these supposedly monstrous lives and our own.

The Suburbs

The excavation site now moves much closer to my childhood home, back to the suburbs, back to the place where “nothing is allowed to die.” Here I dig, so to speak, in my own backyard. This section is a resting point halfway through the manuscript, a return home to examine the ethical implications of the work done so far. These are poems of conception that try to tackle how the archeologist is influenced by conceptions of the Other, whether etymological, visual, philosophical, or aesthetic. These more abstract poems try to mine the competing discourses of middle-class suburban life – those of popular media, the sciences, the community, and the nation. Here I examine contemporary artifacts, whether a suicide bomber’s sound bite on the news, someone else’s wedding song, or a *National Geographic* photograph (à la Bishop’s “In the Waiting Room”).

The Eastern Forests

I grew up in a suburban development on old plantation land, but I started somewhere across the ocean, in a place of apple orchards, animal dung, furrowed dirt, and incessant chickens. Two years ago, I finally went back to the village where my father was born, in the eastern forests of Slovakia. I spent the night on the sofa in my great-aunt’s living room and awoke to sunlight slanting in, curtains frothy with breeze, crocheted blankets smelling of basement damp and talcum powder. I wanted to write about the family artifacts surrounding me— hand-woven doilies and tablecloths, shaky signatures in family Bibles, black-and-white wedding portraits. But the artifact that shook me most was a faded Polaroid of myself, a baby picture my grandmother had mailed back to Czechoslovakia so her own mother could see one of the American grandchildren. There I was, the “foreign” relative. To literally *see* myself, a much younger version of myself, in such an unexpected context was disorienting.

Trying to write about this sense of dislocation was considerably complicated by the sort of historical work I had been doing, which I saw as a turn away from the solipsism of the “notable

confessional strain”² in contemporary American poetry. However, even if the term is currently used more as a pejorative than a form of praise, there is no clear consensus about what the label *confessional* means. Regan Good, in *FENCE* magazine, argues that while *confessional* used to refer to “the Freudian models of Lowell, Berryman and Plath,” today it often refers to another model, one she classifies as “an artless retelling of personal material capped off with a tidy epiphany” (45).³ Another poet, Joan Aleshire, thinks the label is applied arbitrarily to any work featuring autobiographical details, “without trying to distinguish whether the intent of the poems is self-display, or an argument with the self or the world with which the reader may identify” (14).⁴

That the Self is layered, and thus open to excavation, seems to be the assumption that Lowell, Plath, and other post-war Confessional poets adopted when using autobiographical subject matter. And of course, the major Confessionalists did not only write autobiographically—Lowell, Berryman and Plath all frequently wrote persona poems (Lowell’s Jonathan Edwards monologues and Plath’s “Lady Lazarus” immediately come to mind). When the Confessionals did confess, their aim was not solely “self-display”; instead, they were participating in an ongoing debate about the relationship between the Self and the Other. In discussing the work of Robert Lowell, critic Helen Vendler observes that “the aim of the Freudian lyric is primarily analytic, not confessional” (50).⁵ The unconscious Self was not used to dodge the Other; the unconscious Self *was* the Other.

Although these poems don’t subscribe to the classic Freudian model of libido repression as the cause of all anxiety, they are poems of anxiety. They specifically focus upon the individual as a social being and her opposing fears—the fear of separation from the group and the fear of consumption by the group. In doing so, these poems strive to go beyond self-display and untransformed confession. In their awkward longing, their paralyzing self-consciousness, I hope these poems make an argument for the

² Graham, David and Kate Sontag. Introduction. *After Confession: Poetry as Autobiography*. Saint Paul, Minnesota: Graywolf Press, 2001: 3-8.

³ Good, Regan. “CONFESSIONAL POETRY: My Eyes Have Seen What My Hand Did.” *FENCE* Fall/Winter 1998: 45-53.

⁴ Aleshire, Joan. “Staying News: A Defense of the Lyric.” *After Confession: Poetry as Autobiography*. Saint Paul, Minnesota: Graywolf Press, 2001: 14–37.

⁵ Vendler, Helen. *The Given and the Made: Strategies of Poetic Redefinition*. Harvard UP, 1996.

continued excavation of the Self.

III.

In attempting to excavate these four sites, I have been guided by two major modes of composition. To speak in the voice of the dead, poems in the first half of this manuscript often use the form of the dramatic monologue, a form that gives readers a chance to participate in the subject position of the Other. I have been influenced by Robert Browning and Lord Alfred Tennyson's use of the form, as well as Ai's contemporary dramatic monologues. I have also been influenced by the dramatic monologues of many contemporary poets, most notably Juliana Baggott's "Mary Todd on Her Deathbed," Carol Ann Duffy's collection *The World's Wife*, Elizabeth Spires' "Salem, Massachusetts: 1692" and "Exhumation," and Rebecca Stilling's Sissy monologues. One advantage of the form is that its combination of intimate address and historical distance invites ambivalence. And yet, as critic Robert Langbaum puts it: "The sympathy which we give the speaker for the sake of the poem and apart from judgment makes it possible for the reader to participate in a position, to see what it feels like to believe that way, without finally having to agree" (105).⁶ The point of the dramatic monologue is not epiphany or moral truth, but the experience of, if only for a short time, occupying the position of the Other.

Other poems, particularly in the latter two sections of the manuscript, are governed by the archeological concept of *stratigraphy*, or the belief in endless strata in the earth's crust. The work of an archeologist is painstakingly slow, as she must scrape off each layer of dirt in neat horizontal strips, a layer at a time, scrutinizing one before she moves to the next. I try to present some of my poems themselves as stratified sites through the technique of layering. I use the term *layering* loosely, to include both the simple juxtaposition of two scenes, such as in "Purging the Aunties" or "From Maria's Diary," and the more complex layering of competing discourses, such as the historical, social, etymological, and political in poems like "Torch," "Etymology of My Lenin," and "Lenin on the Sealed Train." In poems

⁶ Langbaum, Robert W. *The Poetry of Experience: the Dramatic Monologue in Modern Literary Tradition*. U of Chicago P, 1986.

with autobiographical subject matter, such as the poems about my Eastern European roots or my suburban childhood, I try to excavate how the speaking “I” constructs herself by layering personal, family, and cultural narratives, such as in “Gypsies in Seven Parts.” Whatever the specific techniques employed, excavation is the principle behind the composition of all of these poems— these are acts of imagination, of identification. In linking my singular life with the lives of others, I hope to tap into the common human yearning, to paraphrase my poem “The Fat Woman,” to be swallowed up by something, anything, bigger than ourselves.

*

On Writing Poems From Magazine Photos

After a 2001 National Geographic photo of a Roma ghetto in Hermanovce, Slovakia

1.

In the foreground, a topless Chevette
on cinderblocks. Two boys, beaming over
the steering wheel, pretend to be going
somewhere. You slice open the envelope
of their dusty clothes, pull out their almond bodies,
smooth down their oily hair. But then
you set them aside like unripe fruit.
It is the woman in the background, dodging
the camera, you really want to write about—
thin, hooked, hunched, a flannel knotted
around her waist, men's oxfords on her feet.

*A corrupt premise, writing poems from magazine photos,
an Irish poet interrupts. You say you're sorry.
Every time her life intersects with the West, she's appropriated,
and now you presume to have the authority too?*

Caught shoplifting again, your cheeks flame,
your stomach bubbles. Indignant, you compare his tweed,
tenure, and dry handshake to your cheap sandals
coming unglued on cobblestones, sweat mustaching your lip.

But maybe he is genuinely worried
that photos are no more here than we are,
and poems are even less so when privilege
intersects with someone's else grief.

2.

At these endless intersections
someone is always the victim.
Even the people who don't want
any part of it, who are willing to walk
away unheard, end up the topic
of someone else's argument.

No one could call you the victim:
you own five pairs of cheap sandals,
hide only from telemarketers,
complain only of redneck neighbors
with a rowboat in their front yard.

Yet you keep writing about what
you know least, hoping that the line
can snap around on itself, like a chain
of children playing Crack-
the-Whip and you can

catch up, fall in line
behind her, your breath jogging in time
to the gravel crunching
under her borrowed shoes.

The Graveyards

The Science of the Suburbs

1.

Except for the three Civil War headstones
in the curbed island dividing the street,
there's no sign this land was ever anything
but suburbs. It was once plantation land,
so surely it's haunted, but not in the same
way as the city, where under each
narrow street rests another street, even narrower,
and buried under each building is another
building and under that, bones.

2.

In suburbia, nothing is allowed to die,
not the ornamental grasses, not the purebred
labradors, not even families, who are frozen,
reconstituted, then replaced
by a nice foreign family
with a nine-year-old in college.
Children ride bicycles over
the curbed island and use the headstones
as home base for flashlight tag. Fathers
stay up late, bent over rolltop desks,
bent over equations, prescriptions, lists,
making multi-syllabic words—
dysthymia, acanthopis turtor,
systemic failure— to remove us even further
from the single syllable, *dead*.

3.

Before science is the city and after it,
only places further out, where people go
for hours without words,
watching trees bend, scarlet to brown,
watching the road ribbon off
into the woods, until they must
get out of the car and walk, sneakers
on leaves like the sound at the back
of an animal's throat.

Julia J.

After a headstone for a woman who died April 1, 1900, aged 29 years, 7 months

This is how I die: mouth slack,
staring up into the glint off the filling
in the doctor's mouth.
After the days of cramping labor,
I lay wrung out like the washcloths.
The unfinished baby still bloats me.
He slides down
into the gap between centuries.

Stuck in the whitewashed upstairs bedroom,
I feel this farmhouse lean into the wind
like I did, corseted too tightly.
Voices drift up. The women neighbors
clang my copper in the kitchen, urge
my husband to eat, to drink, something.
My sister recites the Rosary ferociously
as she scrubs my blood
out of the good family towels.

No one believed I saw my baby in my sleep
and he didn't look right, all rosy
and translucent, like a jellyfish.
No one believed, even when I did nothing.
I didn't knit new booties, blankets, hats.
I heard him struggle and stir
and I didn't will him to grow, will him to live.
I pretended to sleep, I pretended not
to hear his heartbeat dim.

Someone towels off my thighs, folds my arms,
tents my hands. The doctor clangs forceps
back into his bag, snaps the clasp shut.
He asks if my husband will want
to baptize the baby, bury him separately.
But he does not mention all the things
I will not see: cars, airplanes, lightbulbs,
the first wrinkles tunneling around my eyes.

And yet, I have seen enough—
this is the same ceiling crack
I have traced with my tongue
on the roof of my mouth,
waiting for morning,
waiting for sleep, waiting for his body
to stop digging into me.

Dear John:

After a headstone for Dr. John C. H— and his seven-year-old daughter Ellen, buried together, both deceased December 1814 of scarlet fever

I cannot bring flowers to my only daughter
without kneeling before you too.
Everyone said you were a good man—
only the occasional brandy,
whistling while you polished
the buttery black medical bag
(the clasp like teeth snapping shut).

You cut off men's feet and legs
to save the rest. You cut babies out
of my friends' bellies. Grateful,
they were, as I was grateful— you bargained
with death for all of us. Even if it meant
your mouth stretched thin
and you pulled away from me (spotted, spreading)
to gather her up (smaller, unscathed).
Even if it meant you followed her
around on her errands (conquering trees,
catching baby rabbits), swallowing her
bare blistered heels in the shadow
of your stride. Even if it meant you crushed
her thin fingers around the chalk, helping her
trace *ELLEN, Ellen, Ellen* on the old slate.

Afterwards, I read through your big book
(with the spine snapped),
your medical journals. They said
the fever flies from mouths,
perches on fingertips, scrambles
into eyes. Yet once you had
the fever, you only clasped her closer,
flushing her face with the heat
from your furnace of coughs.

I tried to untwine you two. But she
clawed at me— *I want Papa. Only Papa.*
You laughed, not in your own voice,
but one almost threadbare. And I left.
Later that night, I found her
dozing in your arms, still clasped against
your rash-red chest. (You were already gone.)

Jemima

For a woman buried in the G—family plot: “Jemima R---, died at Roslin, Baltimore Co., January 21, 1881, aged about 90 years. For nearly half a century inmate in the house, and faithful friend of the family of Dr. David S. G---.”

Alive, they kept me busy
with the waking,
the washing,
the list-making and ear-cleaning.
It was me who scrubbed the evidence
out of Alice’s drawers
when, just ten,
womanhood leaked through.

Dead, I’m busy still. I keep watch
over the children
still, for Varina. A doctor’s wife,
she says, must heal
the sick with her visits, sweetbreads,
and dancing. So she rushes on
ahead of herself, from one
life to the next, not having the bent
even to watch
her grandchildren,
Alice’s children, scatter flowers
on our plot, leaving that
to me, same as the suckling
of those four children, given
to me wet and mewling
still, to silence my screaming
nipples.

Letter to Edwin

After two headstones for the only children of Edward and Agnes T—: Oscar H. (September 21, 1881 – February 28, 1884) and Edwin E. (November 11, 1886 - October 22, 1887)

Edwin E., the orange moss of these hills
has filled in the few words
your mother Agnes paid for, shuddering,
with coins from the Mason jar, wrapped in a rag.
Her eyes not yet ringed in black,
Agnes still dreamed of small soft hands
when she ordered the inscription for your older brother:
*'Tis hard to give our darling up, But we must be resigned;
To Him who is too wise to err, Too good to be unkind.*
Edwin, you managed only nine months,
unlike your brother, who stuck it out three years.
By the time she lost you too,
Edwin, what was left to write?

She hoped you were a comfort to each other.
Do you comfort each other
still— your bodies ripening, bursting
underground? She imagined termites
crumbled your pine boxes to soil,
imagined you two together. Do your small
fingerbones, even now,
seek each other out?

Edwin, did you feel how your mother
would dive to the ground, here,
pounding her flat palms, hoping
her fingers could dig and plunge like roots
underneath even the night, and retrieve
a lock of Oscar's irrepressible curls,
or one of your booties, Edwin, that she'd sewn
herself, the suede sole arching away
from your curled foot?

What They Left Out of My Obituary:

Father Pritikin, Dead at 85

You've heard of me: when I was seventeen
I threw a perfect seventy-yard pass, breaking
the school record. Those who saw me
said the pigskin seemed to arch back into the sun,
but I saw nothing, that same sun spinning spots
in front of my eyes while
my breath's smoke pawed at the cold.

You wouldn't have heard
I spent my twenty-first birthday
in a hut in Guatemala, shivering
with heat, browned women
crowding me, muttering *padre, padre*,
making me drink hot tea.
The sun dappled nothing that year.

Or that at seven, I found
my mother's razor on the ledge
of her bathtub. When I ran
my finger across it I felt nothing,
none of its metallic precision, even if
my finger spilled blood and
in my head, I could hear dead leaves crisp underfoot.

When I was conceived, it was winter.
That spring, the snow never melted,
just crusted into ice. My mother
walked carefully, toe-heel, toe-heel,
once her stomach started to swell.
Or maybe she ran as fast as she could, hoping
for something hard and jarring to shake me loose.
Even then, the sky pressed down on my head.

But at fourteen I discovered
light flat freckles across the clavicle
of one girl on the field hockey team,
constellations spilling across her bare shoulders and
the trees pulsed green.

The Dacha

Etymology of My Lenin

1.

History books will tell our grandchildren
how iron-fisted men held not just virgins
and villages captive, but a century—
humans herded into camps, stuffed
behind walls, in gulags, at the bottoms

of unmarked graves— Hitler, Mussolini, Mao,
Stalin, all derive from the same root,
the first thoroughly modern totalitarian, origin
of gates and gas chambers, variation of murder,

Lenin. But what to call him? A small matter,
mere trifle, after the fact? A footnote?
My own history teacher called him a monster,
and I believed. It made sense.

I could not leave my bed at night because—
in the closet, under the bed— monsters.
The rest of the family, for the same reason,
could not depart from Czechoslovakia.

2.

Monster shares one syllable with
 monitor,
 one who cautions,
 keeps close watch, supervises,
 admonish,
 to counsel, to caution,
 to remind of something forgotten, disregarded,
and *premonition*,
 a foreboding, a forewarning.

All derive from the same root, the older Latin verb
 monere,
 to warn.

3.

Fifteen years after the Soviet Union's collapse,
stone statues of Lenin still stand in Russia,
glowering over Archangel, Minsk, Moscow,
and St. Petersburg.

He still watches over downtown Hanoi,
a hotel in Ulanbaatov, Mongolia,

and oddly enough, Cavriago, Italy;
Belfast; Potsdam; Harare, Zimbabwe—
because the locals love kitsch, or

forgot to tear him down. Forgotten, then,

how can Lenin warn us? Before he was
a statue, he was a young almond-eyed
lawyer, a political in exile with a plodding wife

and a fire-eyed French mistress,
a man no different from other men
who love ideas (their empty rooms,
arching ceilings) more than people,

men who obsess over trifles— computers,
golf scores, stock portfolios—
men who forget to eat,
who roam office buildings

in rumpled trousers, eyes
hollowed, middles thickening.

4.

Monster,
from the Middle English *monstre*,

meant, at first, a malformed animal
or baby, but by 1556, a man
of unimaginable wickedness,

which meant many such men
even then were running around,
needing a name.

Both of these, the deformed and the cruel,
derive from the Latin *monstrum*,
an omen, sign, portent.

5.

Dying, Lenin was even more ordinary—
strokes stiffening up his mouth,
scalpel scars lacing his abdomen,
occupied with trifles, snippets
overheard between his sisters and his wife—
heated discussions about how many visitors
he ought to see, about whether to wake him
or let him be.

Lenin saw the signs, knew he had made
more monsters. *Comrade Stalin*,
he wrote in his will near the end,
has concentrated an enormous power in his hands.
I propose the comrades find a way
to remove him. This request is not a trifle,

*or it is such a trifle as may acquire
a decisive significance.*

6.

After death,
like so many formaldehyde fetuses, purple and
slithering on medical school shelves,
Lenin was pickled and jarred, kept

as an omen for all of us
of what can go wrong.
Outside a farmer's market in Seattle,
behind a McDonald's in Dallas, Texas,

because no one knows who he was,
or what he used to mean,
Lenin still keeps vigil.

My own history teacher thought him unnatural,
made of different stuff than the rest of us.
And I believed.

Lenin on the Sealed Train

1.

The nuns made my mother pray for Stalin's death.
They said it started with Lenin,

yet here he is in my textbook:
fist pointing up, beard pointing down.

His eyes slit in the sun. The kid before me
has drawn devil's horns on either side of his head.

I read: *April 1917, Lenin and thirty-one other exiles head back to Russia,
through wartime Germany, on a sealed train.*

I imagine the train— a windowless silver bullet,
grave-eyed people hermetically sealed inside.

I ride this sealed train— sit with eyes closed,
rocking my couch cushion, making engine sounds with my mouth.

No breeze gets in, all sun stays out.

2.

But Lenin's sealed train is not
a windowless silver bullet scuttling
across the gray mud of the German countryside.

Not even a whole train, but
a single green carriage hooked
up to other trains, stuck engineless

in one station, then another.
And Lenin's carriage has windows
and Lenin hoists one up to watch

village after village, curved roofs cloistered
around a little church, ever-higher hills.
Then the Baden plains— bare, open, flat.

3.

At home when the air conditioner is on,
our house is supposed to be sealed shut,

but I hoist my window up to watch
aluminum siding blur by.

My sisters flap around the couch.
They want to ride the sealed train too.

I tell them if they board, the train might explode.

They shriek their protests. *Quiet, girls,*

my mother says, *for once, be quiet!*
All three of you can fit on that couch.

4.

The sealed train is not full
of silent silhouettes wavering in hothouse
air, their hearts jumping out of their skins.

A boy tumbles down the corridor,
his mother in pursuit. Young men hoot
revolution, sing and swill vodka.

A woman shrills at their jokes, until Lenin,
trying to write in the compartment next door,
stalks in, his brow sweaty under the lights.

5.

It's too hot for my sisters to go outside,
so my mother turns the television on.

The nuns said Lenin started the evil empire.
The television says it again— *an evil empire lurks—*

no, they lurk, my sisters, waiting
to topple my secret, my sealed

train. They spring! They crush me
into my corner of the couch. I ward one off

with my knee, wondering what it takes
to make the knee on her chest hands

around her neck. *Girls!*
my mother shouts, *cut it out! Get off of her!*

Each of you, stay on your own side!
I wonder how to make hands

around her neck rewind back to my knee,
just my knee on her chest.

6.

Not a sealed train, really.
Just two German soldiers
wedged in the back of Third Class

to make sure no one gets off, no one
gets on. A white chalk line,

drawn crookedly across the corridor floor
as though for a children's sidewalk game,
protects Lenin from the tarnish of the enemy.

Only the one Swiss man, Fritz Platten, can cross
the white chalk line, whisper with the Germans,

cross back to the Russian side. Lenin hasn't crossed
many lines yet, although exactly one year later,
he will hang, in neat rows of ten,

one hundred kulaks so *people might see*,
tremble,
know, shout.

These three days, he contains himself

by a chalk line, the same chalk line
I draw, panting and red-faced,
across a brown tweed cushion,

to mark my side of the couch.

Nadya to Stalin, 1925

Otherwise, I will tell the world who was really Lenin's wife—

Stalin threatens Nadya Krupskaya, Lenin's widow, that he will reveal Lenin's affair with Inessa Armand if she speaks out against him. Alone at her dressing table before bed, Nadya prepares her response.

Still, the sleep comes, the good sleep, Soso.
Still, I am still here, waving, watching.
I will sleep still. I need nothing,

no one. But you need a widow,
no? for your pickled pear
in your marble mausoleum.

Still thinking how to disappear me too? Hah!
You need me. Like Ilyich needed me. Needed both of us.
It can still be done, I know, but isn't it so much easier

to keep me? And I will go kicking, Soso. You should know that.
The not being in love, the always almost—
he did need both of us, the tug and the pull.

But in those days, I needed nothing.
Bellies soft, jaws slack, lashes beating
still -- I got to hear her three young ones snuffle in their sleep.

Our children, I thought of them then. Oh, if only I'd had my own.
I'd stay behind with the children, her children,
in the window, waving, watching.

Her cheeks flamed and still I'd stay.
Heads tented, mouths making theory,
they would go striding off on those long walks,

not to be in love, but almost.
And he said no. He needed to work, he needed—
I offered, you know, to leave him, three times.

It had always been quiet between us.
But she made that go away.
Indeed, I may have loved her more than he did.

You may think we were pecking eyes the whole time. No.
True, she was thin and fair and *française*, and I was scorned.
But I wasn't always fat, Soso. You may think because I'm ugly—

but you only like your women green. As if I was never young—
your own wife was your typist first. She was barely sixteen, no?
and you already going gray. So what's a wife anyway?

Why else Inessa's direct line to the Kremlin, his white face,
his white wreath on her coffin? What of it?
Who, Soso, who will you tell? Everyone already knows—

Purging the Aunties

In 1932, after Stalin's second wife committed suicide, female relatives and friends helped care for Stalin and his children. Beginning in March 1937, Stalin would begin systematically liquidating these women.

From the diary of Maria Svanidze, Stalin's sister-in-law: "J. doesn't like women visiting him."

December 21, 1934 -- *Stalin's 55th birthday party*

But still they come,
stamping off the snowy alleyways,
bearing brandy and armfuls of orchids,
kohl running ringlets around their eyes,
lips dark and slick.
Little Svetlana flies up into their arms.
Vasily, new fuzz above his lip,
hangs back— too big to be kissed.
The aunties have arrived.

Cabbage soup for dinner.
Then a cake, single-layer, iced white.
Once Stalin gets out the gramophone
and begins winding it up,
the aunties scatter from the table.

Swaying over the slow stretches,
stamping through the fast,
he swings each around the table.
They hear the rustle of his trousers,
the groan of his coat buttons,
the *stritch* of his boot soles
on the stone floor.

One at a time, each feels
the wet of his breath,
the bristle of his waxed moustache,
the curved finger of his pipe
bobbing against her face.

Next, they pose together
for the birthday photo,
letting him, of course, sit in the center.
Behind his head, the half-moons
of Maria's breasts. To his right,
Mariko, mouth folded tight.
Then the other Maria, leaning in. On the left,
willowy Polina, her arching neck polished pearl.
Then haughty Dora, all in black.
Zhenya, like a dimpled milkmaid, brims at his feet.

Bronka is cropped out.

*

2 years later, February 28, 1937 -- *Svetlana's 11th birthday party*

The knowledge starts somewhere behind their eyes,
where they know one perfume from another,
can pick out the scent of their offspring
in a room full of overcoated children.

He doesn't show up.
At first they think
he will send his apologies—
oil prices up again,
an unexpected German diplomat,
an enemy of the state
unmasked. They laugh

as loud as they know how,
blinking sleep. Mariko
can't stop hiccupping. Dora
lets Zhenya coax her into
a two-step around the table.

Time for the photograph
after the dance:
in afternoon frocks and cream-colored furs,
streamers tickling
the backs of their necks,
ringed around an untouched cake—
three-layer, impossibly pink.

From Maria's Diary

Stalin kept the diary of his sister-in-law Maria Svanidze, after he ordered her arrest in 1937.

21.12.34. We celebrated the Boss's birthday. We gathered at the nearer dacha around 9... He has changed greatly after his two heavy losses. He has become gentler, kinder, more human.

J. has been so busy,
threats from within and
without, who can blame him if he snaps
when we bring the wrong brandy?
But I brought the right brandy tonight,
and orchids, rouged my lips dark and slick.
My décolleté? My sister said it was a bit much
for a Bolshevik, but who else has a bosom
that deserves a dress like this? Besides,
Alyosha has been promoted,
so now I am the wife of the Vice Chairman
of the State Bank.
Should I not dress as such?

Cabbage soup for dinner. I was
hoping, maybe, for a bit of a roast
or pressed duck, but there was a cake,
single-layer iced white.
We sat at the table till 1 A.M., then
songs after that, sun starting up.
His face knotted when he toasted
our departed comrades,
his breath ragged like a draft horse's—

Tonight I pressed his hand
to my breast, told him I think of him
always, will be here always
to look after the boys and little Svetlana,
always, and he looked at me so oddly,
overcome by my kindness.

He could only say, *Be patient, be vigilant.*
The enemy comes from within.

Men, when they're wounded,
scab up inside.
They never say the right things.

*

5.3.37: I firmly believe that we are advancing toward a great and radiant future.... This nest of treachery and filth terrified me. Now all is light again, all the evil has been swept away ... and everything will get better and better.

I think, with all of us at the dacha,
he might have telephoned,
or sent one of the staff over
to explain, but J. has been so busy,
who can blame him? Besides,
the only normal people anymore
are Alyosha, Zhenya and me—
no wonder he didn't rush right over.

He must've shown up late, after we left.
Likely he will send word tomorrow.
The others— crazy Olga, idiot Fyodor,
imbecilic Pavel, narrow-minded Stan,
lazy Vasya, soppy Yasha— were nervous,
kept chattering it meant something,
someone had said something—
but he's always late, especially,
well, especially recently—

Why be afraid?
Wife of the Vice Chairman
of the State Bank, sister-in-law
to the very man
who will bring the West to its knees,
how could I take
a single step, speak a single
word, write a single line,
or have a single thought
I need to conceal?

Not afraid, but grateful—
every day history rushes by me.
It has flapped the curtains, chilled my feet,
as I wait in his dacha—
patient, vigilant.

Stalin in Aruba

Stalin invented the art of cropping:
chopping Trotsky out of every archived
rally, removing the heads

of his friends from family albums,
splicing his own head into a childhood
of wheat fields, farm animals, fruit trees.

Every time we eliminate red-eye, ten pounds
or ten years, that troublesome ex from our photos,
we do the same or a very different thing,

depending, most would say, on our intent—
trying to obscure? or clarify?
Some might ask if we mean to deceive.

But simplicity and clarity always obfuscate:
actions become ideas we only squint at,
too small or dazzling to see properly.

Stalin's favorite trick: cropping out
his own head, enlarging it,
then pasting it above dozens of girl-heads

bound in white and red kerchiefs.
He knew a good photo is more
than propaganda. The good papa,

he was reflecting back only
what we wanted, needed, to see.
Just like I might superimpose Stalin

onto someone's vacation photos. Stalin in Aruba!
decked out in a tank suit with red racing
stripes down each side, open-mouthed, amazed—

not by the chrome and glass of the capitalists,
or their neon string bikinis, pierced navels
and nipples, frothy daiquiris in eighteen flavors,

but by the dozen disposable cameras flashing white,
poolside, one after another!
Blinking, Stalin rubs his stunned eyes— what

will we later make of all these snapshots?
And why so many? They will be archived
in shoeboxes in the shadows under our beds,

not among the copper pipes and dark
metal guts of a Kremlin utility room,
but kept nonetheless— to what end?

I'll leave Stalin in Aruba, amazed
but peering past the camera's flash,
and smudge out all the rest, until

the bleached teeth and winking diamond rings
blur together— simply dazzling.

The Suburbs

Torch

1.

Human torches in newsreel black and white:

Monk Quang Duc, the unflinching lotus,
aflame, on the busy streets of Saigon.

A Quaker father from my hometown,
aflame, outside McNamara's window at the Pentagon.

Jan Palach flailing, running, falling,
aflame, through Wenceslas Square.

And now, the boy's smile splits open the tv camera:
I hope at 14 or 15 to explode myself. I will make my body a torch.

2.

Torch,
from the Old French *torche*
bundle of twisted straw
from the Latin *torquere*
to twist, to bend
from the habit of twisting the tow at the end of the wood
before setting it ablaze.

Torch shares its root with
torture
to twist the body
retort
to bend words back
extort
to twist the will
distort
to twist apart
and *nasturtium*.

3.

The boy isn't aspiring to a lone death,
the single body flaring up in protest.
There are other bodies
twisting
bending back
and out
in this equation.

4.

Torchbearer,

someone in the forefront
of a crusade.

When his face is painted on cement block
and his name flares up on the front page,
the switch he will flick,
the sound that will tear,
starts to be called
a torch.

5.

Torch,

any various portable devices for emitting
an unusually hot flame.

The boy is nameless until he twists up into the air,
bends the sky out of focus.

Then he becomes an arching blur of orange,
a hail of ash and pebbled bone,
that somehow begins with the nasturtiums trailing
their flame across my yard.

Cutaway

So long as the apples are being
sliced, the pies are being baked

(You really shouldn't have.

I know. Don't I know.)

and he is unfastening his tie, leaning in
and pursing his lips,
we stay an instant away from snow, from
the moment she turns away from the oven,
slams down the metal spoon, scratches behind her ear.

So long as the girl in the Rite Aid, with
shoplifted shampoo jammed down her waistband,

(You won't do it.

Yeah? Watch this.)

waddles down the aisle, arms wrapped
around her stomach, as if
she is yanking herself forward,
we stay five minutes and two aisles away from
the security guard, the unpainted back room
smelling of yellowing armpits and cigarettes,
the grainy black-and-white videotape.

So long as we keep having
the conversation about her affair

(I want to tell him. I'm going to tell him.

Not this again.)

we stay five years away from the run-in at the bar—
her, bleached blond, gray suit, martini;
me, stained jeans, ducking behind my hair.
I haven't seen the casserole pans glinting up ahead
and she hasn't had to be given up,
hasn't had to cram everything she owns into boxes,
including the cat, left on the steps of the SPCA.

The Art of Settling

Who doesn't recognize it as we trail up
the aisle past the mother with her brat stomping
his feet, demanding candy? We long for an end
to the tantrum but we can't avert our eyes. We wait
for the worst of it so we can see all we have avoided.
We'd like to think it isn't necessary to settle.

But don't we all learn to slouch down and settle
into the back row and not put our hand up
or bob our head for the doctors? Don't we all avoid
the well-dressed Jehovah's Witnesses stomping
the snow from their boots on our porches, waiting
for us to answer the doorbell so they can warn the end

is near? No one wants to write off the easy endings,
even if we've already written off our parents who settled
down and gave up more than they should've, waiting
for our mouths to stop puckering, our legs to keep us up,
neglecting their Italian or golf lessons as we stomped
our fat legs across kitchen tile. We've avoided

becoming them and we keep on avoiding
anyone who smells of sacrifice, reminds us of any end.
No matter if as kids we wore Izod and horn-rims or stomped
and hollered Down with The Man, wore unsettling
slogans scrawled on t-shirts and promised to fuck shit up,
we will still climb into our small ruffled boxes and wait

for the earth to return us to dust; we will still wait
for all of it to wash up, everything we've avoided—
one more word to that redhead and we might've wound up
in a different bed, but why look back? In the end
isn't it better to skip the regret and settle
down wherever there's room and leave the stomping

to soap operas? The son falls to his knees, the man stomps
offstage, the woman sits to brush her hair and wait;
I can easily stop here, not go deeper. My own poems settle
for convenient crescendos and closure, avoid
getting to the gut. Am I wrong to want the easy ending,
and still imagine I'll go out in combat boots, kicking dust up?

My heart stomps wildly, as if the motion itself avoids
the quiet, the waiting. Even though in the end
that muscle settles too, stiffens and strains up.

Why Old Women Cry at Weddings

The floor clears
and the white-shouldered bride totters
in her tight sequin heels up to her groom
and the two fall against one another, swaying
to a song I made out to in high school.
His hand, big and pink, crushes the satin
on the small of her back.

The old women
mist up, but they are not just nostalgic,
already tasting the mud in their mouths,
remembering themselves queasy with champagne,
hair lacquered stiff, itchy lace cuffs,
their groom in his dress blues, not shipping out
until next week. And it's not
that they forget things.

We all do.
They cry because we want
them to, or because it's a wedding,
because there will be so many others
we will attend, one after another,
until all faces smear into years
pressed against frosted glass,
a year unfolds in an hour
spent fumbling
with a linen napkin
shaped like a swan.

The Fat Woman

After a 2001 National Geographic photograph of an elderly Roma couple holding up their wedding portrait from WWII

His third note to her he composed in his head,
wriggling out of the Warsaw ghetto on his elbows
through the tunnel under Muranowska Street:
Bronislawa, will you marry me?

The night they wed, shells fell over the reception hall,
raucous artillery flapping like a thousand
duck-wings pounding into the local lake,
and she shivered,
her breath warm and tickling his ear.
With his forearm encircling her waist,
he thought how easily
he could protect a woman
so small.

Back then, the danger was simpler:
the muttering man in the gray overcoat,
a knock in the middle of the night,
or no knock at all,
just a hand pressed over your mouth,
yanking you from sleep.
Protection was a mustache like the Führer's,
a forged set of papers, a knife,
a cup of strong coffee.

Who is there left to hide from but each other?
Today protection is the framed
black-and-white wedding portrait
he holds across his chest.
He is the same man still,
without the mustache,
and with new bags, new creases between.
But his wife,
she is not the same bride
with two ringlets carefully arranged
over her shoulders,
over her long slender neck.
Now she has tripled her original girth
and wears a headscarf.

Who could recognize her,
her body layering itself against defeat?
When her still-svelte husband stares
into her eyes, does he see his young bride
drowned in this massive body?
When he pushes aside the sprigged bedsheet
serving as a front door, settles down

on a chair of wooden crates, peers
into the static of the tiny rabbit-eared tv,
does he know she will only continue
to expand with the seasons?

No. When she is planted on the couch, a pyramid,
her weight dribbling down, he digs into her,
settles against her yielding side,
and just sits, waiting still, like all of us,
to be swallowed up again by something,
anything,
bigger than himself.

The Eastern Forests

Wars

1.

Who can stop thinking of the small things?
Dishes against sink,
small white feet against chilled linoleum,
pucker of scar against skin's plate,
body against bed, against sleep.

2.

It makes sense how we can live
with a thing like war
when we have been living
with our families so long.
Cards come only at Christmas
and Easter, wishing all the best
to fathers who die to punish their sons,
sons who keep on living
to spite their fathers,
daughters who curl up
in the car on the ride home
and don't speak for hours.

Names: for the Insomniac

Remember the half-formed names
you would invent, alone
in your big-girl bed
in your plastic-footed pajamas?
You had a name for everything—
not being able to sleep,
a small square name,
would curdle on your tongue.

And now, rattling up the hinge
of your throat like a bad dinner,
it is more than a dream, less
than an answer, just a fluttering, just
one of those lost names.

When a sugar cube dissolves,
does the tongue forget the sweetness
before or after
the form is extinguished?
What is lost first—
the memory of the name,
or the name itself?

You try to recall all the names
you once had for the hush
that is not quite a hush, the names
for paralyzed sky, churning twilight,
the names for staying up
just late enough, long enough.

You lost all those names long ago.
When you were naming, were you
already forgetting the sweetness?
Was your tongue numb
even then
from asking the night
if what you are
would overtake you soon?

Whiskey and Soda

When the tanks rolled through her village,
she came out into the dirt road
to ask if the soldiers were hungry—
don't big boys need a big meal,
deserve a good hot meal for their trouble?

Leaning low over the fire
until her face stung
with something other than fear,
she fed them a leisurely
dinner, served homemade plum
whiskey, dark and cloyingly sweet, stalling

until the Russian soldiers in the woods,
the Jewish family in the barn,
could melt into the fields of sunflowers,
the underbellies of mountains.

Now only her craving for soda
will get her off her plastic-covered
couch, away from
the ceaseless gameshows,
broadcast Mass
on her television.

When, thinking her sons are her old suitors,
she adjusts her bulbous cleavage or fumbles
with her lipstick, we can't watch.
We just keep bringing
cases of soda—
nursing home currency.

Once, fists thick
with rosary beads, hair full of rain,
she followed me out into the dirt road,
crying inconsolably, insisting
she would be dead before I visited again.

Now she coos and claps
when we hand her
the glinting aluminum cans.

The Outhouse

It's what families do— share the same
outhouse and I've been spared or cheated
of that until now.

I've left the kitchen,
overcrowded with plates of the stolen corn
my great-aunt has steamed up and buttered slick,
each ear easily a foot, and platters
of sliced egg, tomato, bread, triangles
of meat, *kolaches*, chocolate bars.
The kitchen even has an Old World
baba chiding me to *Eat more!*

Her hairpin
stuck me in the cheek when she leaned up
to kiss me, the stabbing so quick and clean
I didn't notice until she started
dabbing at me with her apron, kissed her
finger, pressed it to my face.

I smelled her
flour and fried apples and soap, and
smelled my grandmother too— fifteen years and
forty-thousand miles away.

The kitchen
suddenly too small, I told her I had
to use the outhouse, the only place here,
I'm told, family can't follow, but
now ten feet away,

I'm overwhelmed.
The smell sits close to the earth and it is
beyond dark in the eastern fingers of
this forest— no streetlights, no glowing coil
of highway, no trains thrumblng by.

Just the roosters,
pigs and cat in the barn and the gypsies
who sold us the stolen corn. Once I weigh
this dark in the iron handle of the
outhouse, I can't get up the courage to
empty myself here.

They have their outhouse
and I have only my breath tearing
open the stillness, my finger pressing
that hairpin wound shut.

Until Ohio

You are Pavel, they say,
clapping their hands,
meaning not Pavel, you, my father,
but your mother's youngest sister's
youngest son.

She is daughter, they say,
clapping our heads together
for a photo,
meaning this great-uncle is father
of my gestures, quick eyebrows,
elastic mouth.

Is there room for you?
I scrutinize your face for evidence
and find it in our squints, our frowns,
those lines too easily erased.

In a house of four shrieking sisters,
unable to age, you grew silent instead,
cracking pistachios.

You can always come back home,
you murmured on my wedding day,
neither of us knowing
where, who that was.

Do you see it? they want to know.
Pavel, you – same.
Yes, yes, of course,
but in my saying so,
something slips away.

Gypsies in Seven Parts

1.
Darkness tumbles us
past a lone streetlight,
a bus stop of corrugated metal,
gypsy boys running the streets at midnight.
I don't care if we get lost.
I am lost already,
dizzy from wrestling down a jagged alphabet,
dizzy from drinking
the obligatory shot
each time I meet another
second cousin, great aunt.
Stuck in Slovakia, I am looking for gypsies.
The correct term is Roma,
I know, but when I use it, my cousin
stares at me blankly. *Y'know*, I say, *gypsies*.
That word she understands.
She teaches me another: *cigon*.

2.
Gypsies in Nancy Drew stories kidnapped babies
or made counterfeit money, something,
I wish I could remember it precisely.

Gypsies in *National Geographic* are beautiful,
with faraway eyes, browned skin, thick hair,
and always dancing.

Gypsies in Prague are day laborers,
splitting open the sidewalks with jackhammers,
without gloves, hard hats, ear plugs.

Gypsies in Slovakia tramp down the roads five abreast,
dragging barefoot yellowed children,
Gadje, they jeer at us as we swerve around them.
White people, my cousin translates.

3.
Grandma's story about the gypsies:
they sneak into your yard, slit your
chickens' throats, then bang
on the door, drunken men
leering at whatever farmgirl is handy,
and announce all your chickens
have mysteriously died,
offer forty crowns to take them off your hands.

She would hear them later that night,
up the road, whistling and stamping their feet,

see the glint off their fire,
know they were roasting up her chickens,
laughing.

4.

It becomes grotesque,
how they keep coming,
coming round my side
to grab my purse,
coming up to my husband,
propositioning him,
coming through the fields
with satchels of stolen corn.

5.

The Irish poet doesn't like how gypsies
keep popping up in my drafts.
You shouldn't write about gypsies, he tells me.
An American, what could you know about gypsies?
I want to tell him, but don't,
how my grandmother had a ritual to undo their evil eye:
the sign of the cross, a kiss on her palm,
bits of the Rosary, a guttural curse.
I wish I could remember it, precisely.

6.

In the Bardejov bus terminal,
two gypsy girls
threaten to slit my throat.
Either they have mistaken me for a chicken,
or a foreign prostitute poaching on their turf.
I take off running, my feet stamping the ground,
stamping out their laughter. *Gadja. Americhanka.*

7.

There's another name for girls like me,
foreigners with native surnames— *cudzineca*.
Tumbling downhill in the tin Skoda,
the engine shrill and angry,
headlights cutting up the cornfields,
is it any wonder I'm looking
for other uncounted, uncountable people?
Then, up the road, a campfire magnified
against a metallic trailer, the low wail
of music, the aroma of roasting
chickens. *Look*, my cousin points. I tell her
not to slow down, I don't need to look.
I tell her I'm sorry.

*

The Mummies

See what I've made of them.
No, I couldn't crumple up nor
keep hacking out the tumors,
the troublesome, and start again.

See how I didn't just fling
them in a box. See how careful
I was— like so.
Linen cut and measured into
exact strips— just so.

It took me a week to wrap each one.
If you could've seen me, how
carefully I wrapped each one—
a prayer each ring around the body—
how I cocked their ears so they
still might listen, pressed down
linen to keep each face distinct.

They smelled like perfumed,
metallic old ladies drying out,
these white packages the size
of large cats, small dogs,
fetuses spent.
I pressed coins into what
I once thought might
be their eyes, the knots
where new poems might sprout,
perfect and pale when
freshly dug up.

They'll need the coins to pay their
passage, past what I intended,
underworld
and back up.

*

Notes on the Poems

“The Science of the Suburbs”

The title is taken from a line in the poem “Atomic Era Arias” by John Surowiecki: “the sciences are the suburbs of our language.” Surowiecki’s line, in turn, is adapted from Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*: “Our language can be seen as an ancient city...and this surrounded by a multitude of new boroughs with straight regular streets and uniform houses.”

“Dear John:”

Scarlet fever is caused by a strep bacteria. In 1814, Louis Pasteur’s germ theory was more than half a century away. However, scarlet fever was already known to be highly contagious, and quarantines were the only way to stop the spread of the disease.

“Etymology of My Lenin”

“Comrade Stalin,/ he wrote in his will near the end,/”

The document known as Lenin’s Testament is a letter secretly dictated by Lenin on December 22-29, 1922, intended for the Twelfth Congress on April 1923. In it, Lenin championed Trotsky as his successor and requested Stalin’s removal. The letter was known only to his wife Nadya Krupskaya and two secretaries, until it was read to delegates at the Thirteenth Congress a year after Lenin’s death.

“Lenin was pickled and jarred”

After his death, despite the opposition of his wife and family, Party leaders had Lenin’s body preserved and publicly displayed in a mausoleum in Red Square.

“Lenin on the Sealed Train”

In 1917, Kaiser Wilhelm agreed to grant Lenin passage back to Russia through Germany, despite the ongoing war between the two countries. In order to avoid charges of treason, Lenin insisted the journey be undertaken on a sealed train. Ten of the travelers on this sealed train published detailed firsthand accounts of the journey. The accounts cited most often include those of Karl Radek, Olga Ravich, and Lenin’s wife.

“hang...one hundred kulaks so people might see,/ tremble,/ know, shout.”

This quotation is derived from Lenin’s written orders in August 1918 concerning a kulak insurrection in the Ukraine.

“Nadya to Stalin, 1925”

“Otherwise, I will tell the world who was really Lenin’s wife--”

The opening quotation is reported in a variety of sources, including Michael Pearson’s *Lenin’s Mistress*. Stalin was referring to speculation about an affair which probably began in 1909 and ended with Armand’s death in 1920. This speculation is supported by surviving letters between Lenin and Armand (now in the Russian State Archives) and the accounts of their contemporaries.

“Soso,” or alternately “Koba”— Stalin’s childhood nickname

“Our children”

In letters, Krupskaya frequently referred to Armand’s daughters as “my little girls.” After Armand’s death, Lenin and Krupskaya would unofficially adopt her three younger children.

“I may have loved her more than he did.”

Krupskaya and Armand were friendly by all accounts, and Inessa would regularly dine and vacation with the Lenins. After Armand’s death, Krupskaya advocated for a memorial in her honor.

“your own wife was your typist first”

Stalin first met his second wife, Nadya Alliluyeva, when she was three. He was a friend of her parents and possibly, for a brief period, her mother’s lover. Alliluyeva and Stalin became lovers in 1918 while she was working as a typist on his armored train. Alliluyeva was sixteen or seventeen at the time; Stalin was thirty-nine.

“his white face, / his white wreath on her coffin”

Firsthand accounts by Party members describe Lenin on the verge of “collapse” at Inessa Armand’s funeral.

“Purging the Aunties”

Accounts of Stalin’s 55th birthday party based upon guests’ memories and photographs from the Russian State Archives can be found in Simon Sebag Montefiore’s *Stalin : Court of the Red Tsar*. The photograph at the end of Part 1 is an imaginative creation, but it is based on actual birthday party photos.

Svetlana was Stalin’s youngest child, from his marriage with Nadya Alliluyeva.

Of the seven women listed in this poem, all relatives or close family friends, only Dora Khazan would avoid arrest.

“From Maria’s Diary”

Maria Svandidze’s diary was preserved in Stalin’s own archive and is currently in the Russian State Archives. The diary begins in 1932, right after the suicide of Stalin’s wife, and ends in December of 1937, when the Svandidzes were arrested and eventually shot. The excerpts I have borrowed were translated by Simon Sebag Montefiore.

“two heavy losses”— Maria is referring to the 1932 suicide of Nadya Alliluyeva, Stalin’s wife, and the 1934 assassination of Sergei Kirov, Stalin’s close friend.

“crazy Olga, idiot Fyodor...” — borrowed from a passage in the diary where Maria bemoans the lack of sophistication in her extended family

“Gypsies in Seven Parts”

“*cudzineca*”— Slovak, translates as “female foreigner”

“the tin Skoda”— Skoda is a Czech car manufacturer

Vita

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