

DMITRY NOVIKOV



# A FLAME OUT AT SEA

GLAGOSLAV PUBLICATIONS



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by Dmitry Novikov

Translated from the Russian by Christopher Culver

Published with support of the Russian Booker Foundation  
Sponsored by GLOBEXBANK

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## A RAINBOW ON THE WATER

Among the generation of Russian “New Realists”, who burst onto the literary scene at the turn of the millennium and were met with a loud welcome from critics and readers, Dmitri Novikov stands apart from the rest.

The New Realists became known as a wartime generation who wrote about the uprising in the Caucasus, about local conflicts, about how the young men who served were broken and came back from the war straight into Russia’s brutal 1990s. However, Novikov affirmed a peaceful, everyday existence, with the silence of the northern forests in autumn and fishing on the tranquil lakes of Karelia.

The New Realists were a generation of activity: demonstrations, skirmishes and explosive outbursts. Novikov however dealt in contemplation, in the static and still, and in adoration. Indeed, the collection of stories that brought him fame was entitled *A Fly in Amber* (2003).

The “New Realists” arrived as a generation of unbridled self-biographers. They created a myth about themselves, either confessing or repenting, like Roman Senchin, or building up a tough self-depiction, like Zakhar Prilepin. However, Novikov retreated into the shadows; the image of the author himself was obscured and his characters were allowed to speak instead.

Perhaps this is why, while Prilepin has his expressive “boots full of hot vodka” in that eponymous story, Novikov has his “fly in amber”, an emblem of a frozen, enchanted life; while Senchin has his hopeless *Flooded Zone*, Novikov has his “flame out at sea”: a flame that arises like the spirit of God over the cold waves of the White Sea, and Novikov refers to the open expanse by its Karelian name, *golomya*.

There is nothing in the world more beautiful  
than the shore of the White Sea...  
There is nothing more fearsome than the shore of the White Sea...  
There is no greater border in the world than the shore of the White Sea...

Dmitri Novikov's new novel is essentially about faith and love. As it should happen, faith must first be lost, and love (of God towards mankind, of human beings towards nature, of kith and kin for each other... I could go on) is put into question.

This doubt is expressed in the form of the novel, which is devoid of linear narration and which fragments into flashbacks, whether to pre-war Kem, to the village of Keret before the October Revolution, or to the 16th century inhabited by hermits and renunciants, or to the fat first years of the new millennium when the descendants of the Karelian fishermen, hunters, camp guards and prisoners come to fish on the lakes in its natural reserves. The protagonist of *A Flame Out at Sea* turns out to be a descendant himself. Grisha is a doctor in a children's ward, a folktale hero with an ample red beard (however, in this portrait one might guess at the appearance of the author himself...). Nonetheless, the book is not so much about Grisha, as about a person's journey towards himself – through history, through time, and through terrible and painful memories. The path to oneself, a path that lies over water, is the principle that runs through the novel and gives it unity: restless Grisha, his stern and moody grandfather Fyodor, the good Konstantin, and the quiet and saintly old man of the place Savvin –all belong to the White Sea, as they all gaze out at the mysterious *golomya*.

Is the White Sea, the open expanse, the *golomya* really the novel's main character? That seems to be the case, especially considering that ultimately the grandfather and grandson, Fyodor and Grisha, must come to the sea and wrestle with it.

In this novel the figure of Fyodor is linked to a certain secret that weighs over everything. Even his wife of many years, Grisha's grandmother, has not disclosed it, "nor why he had received a pension that was as small as a sparrow's tail; nor why some people came to the house without even waiting for the funeral and took all of grandpa's medals, one after another according to a list." Gradually things become clear. Grisha's grandfather, the war hero ("The Karelian front. Private in a penal battalion. Sixteen combat reconnaissance operations. Two medals. Senior lieutenant. Then captain. Commander of the penal battalion. Concussion. Wounded.") was one of those Soviet functionaries who sent men to prison, who castigated landowners and had men shot; this trace of the grandfather's crime immediately sets Novikov's novel apart from other family requiems that are dedicated to people who are ruined or who suffer without doing anything bad themselves. Deep down in the world of *A Flame out at Sea* is a crime: a barge began to sink as it

was bearing arrestees – strong Pomors, men who knew the sea – off to the labor camps; they tried to save themselves by leaping into the water and swimming to the shore, but it was none other than Fyodor who shot at them from the barge, shouting “about treason, about running away, about how the country would not forgive us...”

Bullets spread over the water like a fan. The water turned red [...] One by one these men, who had been bold sailors on icy waters, now sank into the depths. One by one our northern people disappeared, Russia's men of steel. Like fish that flash white in the depths, they disappeared into the sea. Like a flock of salmon that has left its native shores forever, tortured by an incomprehensible, evil force [...] A bright, sinking, heavenly rainbow lay itself over the sea, it was parting now along with life and hope, following after the tribe of fish, which not so long ago had been people, they had left because of human evil.

Was this the same grandfather who brought up his timid grandson and showed the boy the secrets of the sea and the forest? The same one who, wounded and contused, served the whole war and had medals to show for it? The same one who always wanted to catch a bear?

Novikov's *A Flame out at Sea* is a paradoxical novel. Nature, history, psychology, human relationships – everything within it is ambiguous and uncertain, everything is shown to the reader as an unbearable radiance or a pitch-black abyss, as an icy plunge into a stormy sea or as a rainbow rising above the calmed waters. It is no coincidence that an image that runs through the novel compares a man with a fish, and it is concerned throughout with fishing; a series of striking and fascinating metaphorical scenes, in which love proves to be closely linked with death, tenderness with brutality, and the deaths of the precious fish of the north with the powerful life-affirming energy by which these fish burst through the surface of the water.

All of these episodes of fishing are depicted by Novikov with unconcealed delight, something he naturally transmits to the reader too, by forcing the reader to follow with baited breath, not only the symbolic and metaphorical “fish,” but also the specific details of a fishing expedition. Here, we have a man bound to an enormous slippery burbot with a triple hook. Here, under a rain shower, he pulls forth from the water a gray Atlantic salmon. Here, he enjoys a veritable feast of pike. Here, a flock of salmon is heading upriver to spawn and no nets, no traps made by man, can stop it. Here, a bullhead catfish puckers its mouth as

if to say, “Look-there, watch-out,” and thus warns Grisha in his boyhood against a looming abomination from the world of older people...

The scene of violence against a child, just like the scene where the protagonist is rescued after drinking to excess, follows the spirit of the New Realism, as if contrasting with the expressionistic style of the White Sea chapters. Yet, what is interesting is that for any other author this scene would have served as a culmination that ponderously points to the total collapse of our world and an inescapable catastrophe for the main character. However, for Novikov this scene is just one of many, alongside the shooting of arrestees on the barge or a bear killing a full-grown moose during rutting season. Yes, Fyodor’s crime ricochets back and strikes Grisha, but Grisha then lifts himself up and becomes a doctor in a children’s ward. We kill, we are killed. The fish that are killed give the fishermen a sensation of the sharp, pungent taste of life. Above the icy waters a rainbow flickers. On the shores of the White Sea, among hermitages lost in the forests, a demon appears to Grisha and his brother. The open sea threatens death, but only by coming into contact with the elements can one regain the desire to live. The fishing metaphor is simultaneously transparent and intense, straightforward and sophisticated, and already something one expects from Novikov, but nonetheless unpredictable in each scene:

Even when I caught and killed salmon, I loved them. I loved to lay their silvery bodies down on the stones at the riverbank and slowly, and carefully, gut them. Inside they were just as fine as they were on the outside. Their flesh was bright orange, with mother-of-pearl innards, always an empty stomach (when the salmon is spawning, it doesn’t eat) – sometimes it seemed like all this was just some fine waxwork figure that clung to the highest spirit of beauty that the salmon bore within itself. I loved their smell – they smelled of themselves, alive, their leaps, their raging flights into the sky. They smelled like cheating on the sea...

*A Flame Out at Sea* smells of blood and saltwater, of our world today and of history. The *golomya* is in fact a place where one can perish, but also where one can be saved. That is our history, the history of Russia in the 20th century (and not only). Where else than in the White Sea – along the coast with its ancient monasteries and Soviet camps – can one remember this and take it to heart?

Elena Pogorelaya  
Literary critic

# A FLAME OUT AT SEA



I was very pleased to get a rare book, a gift from my friend Grisha, a man who had the appearance of an old style Russian hero: he was tall, with auburn curls and an ample beard. Grisha worked as an ER doctor at a children's hospital. He also wrote some powerful, catchy songs that even brought tears to the eyes of the most grizzled men of the North. He had brought me this book as a token of his thanks after I had recommended some routes along the White Sea shores to him. He wanted to go there to "find healing for his soul", as he put it.

The heavy, dark-blue volume was pleasing to the hand and the eye. Its title, embossed in gold, was also a delight: *Dictionary of the Spoken Pomor Dialect*. I am very fond of dictionaries in general. One can learn many new things from them, unlike some novels. Yet again, I was intrigued by the story of this dictionary's author, Ivan Durov. He was a native of the old Pomor village, Sumsky Posad, and a self-taught man. He was fascinated by the Pomor dialect and began collecting local proverbs, sayings and ritual speeches. He worked on this for five years, compiling a dictionary and ultimately sending it to the Academy of Sciences. Several years later he was shot at the Sandarmokh site in Karelia, the victim of repressions against local historians. His manuscript languished in the archives for eighty years and has only recently been found and published. This was a precious gift.

Grisha would talk at length, and enthusiastically, about what he had discovered in the places I had recommended to him. "You are a good guy," he thanked me, imitating Pomors accent, after he had been given a chance to hear them. He would paint in words the White Sea, the northern rivers and the fields of juniper. Then I recalled the words of my Karelian grandmother: "Juniper is the tree of death".

## 1975, PRYAZHA

The worst thing was seeing him from behind when he had nothing covering over his back. On his arm, his shoulder and his shoulder blade: three holes. They had closed up, healed, but these were not scars, they were holes. Grisha was afraid to ask, and his grandfather never talked about it. Even though it had clearly been a machine gun, he had been shot in the back and it was unbelievable that anyone could survive that. Yet his grandfather had survived. Only now his steps were slow and he coughed terribly at night. So loud and hoarse in fact, it sounded like a raging lion dying somewhere in the depths of Africa. The coughing would often wake Grisha and his back would feel cold and shriveled. Grisha would just lie there for what seemed like an eternity without daring to even move, holding his breath. Then his grandfather would fall silent again. Grisha too would fall back asleep, his nose wrapped in his grandmother's old blanket.

It smelled strange and tart. The entire house was imbued with the smells of some former, forgotten life. These smells would rush into your nostrils as soon as you came in from outside and they would make you involuntarily reflect, and recall, what each thing meant. For instance, this smell was so warm and dry, with a slight tinge of dust and limestone, like an old Russian oven. Not the bottom part of it – there smells of delicious food always emerged, whether it was pancakes, fish soup or fried potatoes – but rather the top, which in fact was referred to as the “oven top”. “Don’t climb up on the oven top!” his grandmother would say, not yelling at them but just so none of the numerous small children would fall from there. Grisha was the eldest of all these small fry and therefore responsible for them all. The “oven top” was covered with old, yellowed newspapers with some animal skins laid on top. One skin, Grisha knew for sure, was from a wild boar, it had long, coarse hairs and a yellow inner side that had a pungent smell. This skin could be used to frighten the younger children when they could not control themselves and spent hours fooling around. Other skins came from harmless domestic sheep; these skins were soft and somehow defenseless. All of these things – the warm stove, its whitewash surface, the old newspapers, the wild boar



and the obedient sheep – would mix together, to give off that smell of a village home that would remain in one's nose for ever. Years later it could make one recall childhood; the age would rise back up with a note of melancholy and in its fullness.

The oven was grandmother. With its smell, its warmth and with the taste of the food that continually lay within its warm womb in huge black cast-iron pots. It was eerily mysterious how these dishes would appear out of the raging, purple-flickered hell, grabbed by handles that jutted out like horns. With strong tea, sweetened so much it was viscous, every hour from a dark, smoke-blackened teapot. Later, this would be replaced by a shiny new electric kettle, meaning tea was taken more frequently. Black bread, sprinkled with oil and coarse salt, or a white loaf with sugar – this food was also grandmother.

Grandfather was the cupboard. It was small, dark and located on the left after you came into the house, opposite the kitchen. It wasn't even a cupboard but a large closet. A curtain made from rags was hung over the door. That was where the shotguns were. Grisha would go there alone, not letting any of the younger children in. He would sit for a long while in the dark and run his hands over the cold metal of the shotgun barrels and the smooth wood of their butts. The shotguns also had a smell. They smelled of danger and alarm. Also, they called to him with some manly affability, some ultimate responsibility. Grisha immediately felt older when he carefully cocked one and then slowly pulled the trigger. The hammer would give a dry click; if any adults were in the house, especially his grandfather or uncle, they would immediately start yelling at him to not fool around.

Hunting clothes were also hung in the closet. Their smell was similar to the boar skin, just as wild, but with a metallic, artificial twinge. Immediately one could sense how they were all interrelated: the clothes, the shotguns and the boar skin. It immediately became clear why everything was the way it was: the danger, alertness, excitement, a shot, a brief shriek, scurrying legs and a long knife in one's hands. The dry leaves under the animal's body. The hot blood and the autumn soil drinking it up greedily. The closet was Grandpa. A soldier's greatcoat also hung inside it.

There were also many things from the army inside the home. Photographs, in an album, where Grandpa was a dashing lieutenant in a tunic adorned with medals. Grisha already knew that the Red Star and the Combat Red Banner were real medals, deservedly won, something to be proud of. They lay in red boxes in an upper drawer and Grisha would

often secretly take them out and run his fingers over their lacquered surfaces. He especially liked how they were attached to clothing not with a pin, like some common badge, but with a sturdy fastener which could only be taken off with a large piece of clothing and one's heart coming off with it. His grandfather never talked about the war and would not let him play with the medals. His grandfather never yelled at him, he just knew how to give Grisha a look that would send chills down the back of his neck and made him want to obey. In another drawer, kept under lock and key, were the bullets.

Sometimes he was allowed to watch when his grandfather and uncles got ready to go hunting. They would take out the fascinating cartridge cases, the shining, precious caps, the shot in various sizes and the funny wadding. All this was set out on the floor, on top of a neatly laid sheet of newspaper. They would sit down alongside one another and begin something that was clear but still somehow secret: they rammed the caps into the cartridge cases and poured in the powder, then inserted a thin cardboard strip and then the thick wadding, and then filled the space with shot. One more strip would be added, then they crimped the cartridge shut. Sometimes, instead of shot, a bullet was placed into the cartridge, mostly one that was round and funny, but occasionally one that looked dangerous, with a sharp tip. The steps proceeded so quickly and deftly that Grisha could not even manage to appreciate the work. They would do this in turns, each seeing to his own; the entire process was blurred into a clear, simple harmony, delighting in guns. Grisha would reach out his hands to help them, but they would only allow him to play with the shot or, rarely, he would get to pick up a bullet that had fallen into a crack in the floor. There were also ramrods with brushes. The adults would clear the barrels of their gun, smear them with a dark oil, look up into them against the light and, satisfied, set the gun aside. Here, a strict custom was observed, a ritual and at its head was grandfather. Occasionally, one of Grisha's uncles would fall out of the rhythm, he would get distracted and move his fingers clumsily. If this happened, grandfather was not afraid to cuff one of these grown men on the back of their necks. If this was done in jest they would laugh, but if grandfather was serious they would say nothing in response, only lower their heads and try harder.

Grisha's father never touched these guns and ammunition. He said that he felt sorry for the animals. He was the eldest son and had moved to the city early on. He would sit and watch the deft fingers of his brothers and his father, but he never picked any of these exciting, tempting

objects up. Grandfather would look at him with a mysterious smirk, as if he knew something that others could not know, regardless of their age or peacetime experience. Peacetime experience is experience of life. Grandfather knew something different.

Grisha's father also remembered something that his younger brothers and sisters did not.

The maiden name of Grisha's grandmother was Vlasova.<sup>1</sup> It was an ordinary name, half the village had it. Then a certain era swept everything into place meaning some were honored, some Ulyanovs, while others were considered to be the enemy. How can one grasp that a new era has the potential to bring sin and decay? The laws of humankind are age-old, any speedy attempt to bring about happiness can turn into the opposite, and that a human life would suffice to see all the stages of this process, from the enthusiasm of the young to the dull despair of the old. Between young and old lies the spite of adults, so confident but shameless. This is referred to the demonic "dialectic", but how could one understand it without experience and without God? Yet everyone had to understand it. Even Grisha's grandfather.

Thinking is hard – Grisha realized this when he grew older. While young, when you are full of strong emotions and spite, it is easier, and a spiteful gaze will boldly look for enemies. There are so many of them around; those used to holding a gun in their hands know that.

There was a shout and the crying of children. Grandfather was not grandfather back then but a young hero. A wounded man, a hard man. When Grisha's grandmother protested against something back then, she too was not grandmother yet but a mother, and a young but plain woman who had already given birth to five children. She would protest, and maybe she would say something in Karelian. Grisha's grandfather would forbid her from speaking Karelian, "The Soviet authorities demand we be international". When she spoke out against something too daringly or in a language he could not understand, or when she carped about something sacred to him, he would fly into a blind rage. The veins on his neck would throb from fury. Everything would come rushing back to him: the cries of others earlier, the bread of an orphan, storms at sea and the waves dashing against the rocks. Trust in his elders and in commanders. Betrayal and three holes in his back. Everything came back to him again and goaded him on. Just like the waves crashing on the rocks.

---

1 The same surname as that of Andrey Vlasov, the Russian general who defected to Nazi Germany and was later hanged for treason.

He grabbed his gun and shouted at that damned woman, “You get out of here, you enemy of the people!” The kids were wailing, the kids he called mongrels, degenerates and the enemy. Shoots from a foreign root. Not Russian, almost all Finn.

“You get out of here! I’ll shoot, you damned Vlasovites!” he screamed so loudly, as to deafen himself. The children fell silent, they were deeply frightened. Only the eldest sniffled slightly, barely breathing. Their mother stood on the ground of the plowed field. Barefoot. She held the two babies in her arms, the middle children pressed themselves against her legs. Her firstborn was standing slightly to her side. Everyone stood looking at him without saying anything. The gun danced in his hands. Anger danced in his head. It had filled him up completely and pushed everything else out. Then it started to rain. Thick drops fell on the earth, on their white heads, on their dirty feet. Where a drop fell on their feet, he could clearly see how the filth of the soil disappeared and a vivid pink circle of healthy skin suddenly glowed in its place. The children’s skin, the woman’s. His families.

Cold streams of water were flowing down his face, his shoulders and under his collar. He shuddered and threw the gun down into the dirt. The hatred in his head suddenly shrunk to the size of a grain of sand and his head began to ring like a bell. He turned around and ran, staggering, towards the house. The eldest child rushed after him. “Don’t cry, pa!”

The house stood on a low slope, above the river. It wasn’t really a river, more of a stream, heavily overgrown with willows and sedge. The stream gaily gurgled among the stones and between the roots of trees, sometimes being completely hidden by these. By hopping from one large stone to another you could cross the stream completely. Only fear stood in the way. The bank near the house was hidden behind the thin trunks of trees, as if Grisha were surrounded by real jungle on all sides. The cries of birds fell silent. Only a willow would rustle mysteriously with its slender leaves, and this rustling too sounded somehow confining and dangerous. Fear, along with an irresistible force that made him want to make his way ever further across, made the stream’s spell as spicy and clean as the smell of frozen earth. Indeed, that is what the stream smelt like with its wet earth, tree roots and bushes, its babbling radiant water and the wet moss of stones. Grisha could spend hours observing its life. He would track the fleeting minnows through the swift currents, look for caddisflies in their little homes made from sticks and watch the wonderful frogs that darted about. Once the stream gifted him a real wild animal. The boy had made a few leaps over some stones that his feet

knew (further on there were some unfamiliar and dangerous stones that threatened a fall into the water), and he saw the animal. It was small, dark brown, with a pointy muzzle and round ears. It was quite close, just two meters away. Grisha froze. The animal sniffed, dissatisfied, its nostrils flaring. The white points of its teeth stood out. On a stone nearby lay a bird, torn apart. Or rather, it was no longer a bird at all, just a fan of feathers and a few drops of blood scattered over the rough gray surface of this wild countertop. For a second the animal stood there, estimating its strength, but then it turned and disappeared, fleetingly without a sound in the tall grass. Only the long tail of a snake slithered after it. How strange this all was, frightful but attractive, an experience which was both haunting and powerful. It was as if Grisha had been the animal, as if he himself had crept through the grass and devoured its prey. After a minute had passed Grisha began to breathe again, and a few more minutes later he turned around and hopped on trembling legs back to the familiar bank. He rushed past his grandfather's bathhouse. He picked up speed and dashed over the delightfully springy boards laid over a muddy patch towards the house. As he flew in, he cried to his father, "An animal! An animal! I saw it! It was brown! It ate a bird!"

"It was probably a mink," his father answered indifferently. "It must have escaped from the fur farm."

The bathhouse stood right on the bank of the stream, just a step away from the water. A bit further, between two stones, there was a deep channel with water up to an adult's chest, and after steaming oneself in the bathhouse one could leap into it and laugh merrily. Saturdays were generally bath days, a sort of celebration. The bath would be warmed in the morning. Grisha was allowed to watch after the fire and, proud at having this adult responsibility, he would haul wood, feed it into the crackling stove and close its heavy cast-iron door. He would then watch carefully to make sure that, God forbid, not one little piece of charcoal would fall from the red-hot maws of the stove. It was hard to look after the stove due to the heat, as it would become nearly unbearable and he would often jump outside onto the bank of the stream and take a few deep breaths of the air that was doubly fresh after the bathhouse heat: like a stupid fish caught on a hook and intent on breathing to the end. Sometimes his grandmother would come to see how he was doing. She would stroke his head with her eternal "My my, how they're torturing the boy!" and place a lump of sugar in his hand. It was nice when the sugar was rock-hard, barely absorbing any of his saliva. It was much worse when it was professionally refined sugar, for it would instantly

dissolve in his mouth, leaving behind a taste of dissatisfaction and fleetingness.

His relatives began to come in for lunch, his aunts and uncles with their families. It got noisy in the home, especially in the yard outside. The children, so happy to meet, started running around. Grisha, proud of his job, looked upon these little ones indulgently. Only when Serega arrived did he allow himself to relax, because the other began to immediately help him. Serega was the same age as Grisha, but Grisha's father explained that he was Grisha's first cousin once removed, so of his uncles' generation. This came as an unpleasant surprise to Grisha, but his "uncle" was unperturbed. The two became friends.

Serega was odd. He was somehow too nice a boy. He would forgive anything. Once he was running and leaping across the clearing between the bathhouse and the house, and a ram that was grazing nearby attacked him. Twice the ram butted him with its sharp head, then pinned him against the fence. Serega tried to push the ram's head away with his weak hands, but the ram only pushed him harder towards the wooden fence, pinning him under his ribs. Serega was already breathing heavily, but when Grisha grabbed a big stick, he shouted, "Don't! You'll hurt him!"

Serega stood in this dangerous vise until the ram grew tired of its victim's weakness and went away. Yet, even after this there was no question of Serega doing anything in revenge, not even throwing a rock.

He also loved birds. He could spend hours watching a big bird soar in the sky, the high blue sky, and seeing how it turned into a tiny little thing in the distance. He could spend all day with pigeons, carrying them on his breast and whispering to them. Men like him easily take to alcohol. They don't have the strength to resist its swift, powerful current. Some twenty years later, after a month-long binge of tearful drinking, he hung himself on a clothesline. On his grave there were always some bread crumbs, the cross-like prints of birds' feet, or downy feathers tangled in the high, wild grass.

They would start going to the bathhouse a couple of hours before dinner. The women went first. Their procession was always led by Grisha's grandmother and it was funny to watch how she solemnly led the column of compliant young people behind her, moving duck-like from foot to foot as she. "My, my, they've made it so hot you can't even go in," came her merry voice from the bathhouse. Grisha and Serega exchanged glances, for her words were to their credit.

The women's turn did not take long, the first session in the steam was hard. When an hour had passed they were already came back in-

side the house, marching in the same line. Their heads wrapped in wet towels, their flushed faces, their smooth and languid movement were imbued with some rare, uncanny sense of leisure and ease. Some sort of wisdom and detachment. Some sort of firm submission. It did not last for long. As soon as they entered the house, they began to make a fuss, rushing about and preparing dinner. Grisha's grandmother headed this, but not with an aggressive stance, she was soft and in good humor. Here and there one heard her plaintive "My, my!" That simultaneously pitied the slow-moving, inept girls and drove them on.

The men would go into bathhouse when it was already like a furnace. Red-hot heat from the glowing coals lurked within the brick-lined depths, exhaling a gentle and dangerous breath. They closed the little door on the stove. It had become impossible to breathe. Impossible to even exist. Grisha's head grew muddled and he felt an urge to jump outside. His legs buckled and it seemed like he had reached a point where he could only lie down. But then his father or grandfather would gently nudge him to climb up onto the benches. The wood of the benches was so hot it put a bitter feeling into Grisha's mouth. It was impossible to sit, it felt like his backside would catch fire and burst into flames. Grisha put his hands under him, his palms could better handle the heat. He would hardly come to his senses, to perk up and look around, before his grandfather would open the little door to the stove and, after nodding to the other men in warning, cast half of a dipper of hot water into its black maw. There was an explosion inside and a violent but colorless cloud of steam would burst from it and sweep away all of the life in its path. Grisha's ears, nostrils and fingernails were gripped in tongs of blinding pain. He squealed and leaped down from the bench, trying to escape among the bodies of the adults. However, his grandfather was prepared for this. He swiftly grabbed Grisha by his wrist, deftly put him on his stomach and began to whip him with a bath broom that had been made ready, steamed beforehand. Grisha screamed and kicked. His back was burning, he could not breathe and his head was swarming with multi-colored balls. "You just hold on, squirt. Hold on, you little greenhorn," his grandfather would say in a serious voice, but somewhere deep down mirth could be heard. Grisha felt that he had reached the end, that his little life was over, but his grandfather would throw on more steam and work through Grisha's stomach, chest and shoulders. Then he would let Grisha go. Grisha's father would pick him up and set him on the floor. His grandfather would take a bucket of cold water and drench the child from head to toe. The sudden sharp cold through the glowing heat, the

flowing life over red-hot death forced Grisha to squat down, as if a hand had been placed on him in blessing. After this, he stood up straight on trembling legs and grunted in an adult fashion, surprising himself and making the grownups laugh. His grandfather wrapped him in a sheet and carried him out to the dressing area. “How was it, you little green-horn? Good?” he asked, and then dived back into that hell. Grisha sat drinking water from a large aluminum mug, listening to the cries and whipping sounds coming from the bath. His head was empty and in a marvelous state, as if it were the shell of an egg made clean. His body was singing, his soul trembled within it.

It was in the bath that he first saw his grandfather’s back.



## 1913, PRYAZHA; 1943, KARELIAN FRONT, LENINGRAD REGION

I know, Fyodor, I still remember a whole generation later: you really wanted to catch a bear. Tapio, the forest spirit, the god of marshes and pine forests, you remembered it all.

You were enchanted by the stories of the old; how men would catch bears with a spear. Your grandfather, an old hunter, spoke with firsthand knowledge. How to choose a good birch tree, one with a trunk that split in two. The angle should be the size of a bear's neck. It shouldn't be rotten wood but strong and healthy, because your life is going to depend on it. A spacer could be inserted between the forked trunk, or conversely the forked trunk could be pulled closer with a rope and it would take on the desired shape within a couple of years. You have to do everything right; life can change into death in a flash if something goes wrong. The bear will not give you a chance if you slip up. How to find the beast, how to goad it so that it would move towards you? A bear is not an evil creature; it would rather walk away than fight, as long as its young or its prey is not threatened. For this reason, it is better to catch it through a bait, where it won't want to give up what belongs to it. How do you make it get up on its back legs, so that it will fall upon you from above in its rage? How do you successfully set the spear up so that it will clamp down on the bear's neck, and stick the other end into the earth? All without making any mistakes. Even then, when the bear is about to tear it away from you, you'll get a chance to leap up at it, the Finnish knife must strike its heart. The *veyche*, as the Karelians called this knife, had to be metal and so tempered that it would slice through the bear's ribs like butter.

Your grandfather forged and sharpened knives himself. When the blade was ready, red-hot out of the fire, he would take a birch-bark container, fill half of it with water and the other half with linseed oil. Then he would submerge the knife into the container so that the cutting edge would be in the water and the top of the blade in the oil. It would then be tempered so that it would be flexible but not brittle, and then the blade could cut through wood or bone without being dulled. He would

then fine-tune it with a file, tsssh, tsssh, and would then drive a nail into the log wall and cut straight through the nail with the new knife. Afterwards, there would not be the slightest nick on the blade.

Remember how he once caught a bear and brought it back home to carve up? You were amazed at the animal's claws. They were like thick, black needles, long and sharp. Your grandfather was in a joking mood, he put the bear's paw on the crown of his head and the claws reached down all the way to his chin.

"You see, Fyodor," he said, "a bear has such power in it." He spoke with respect and awe. "If a bear gets angry, you can't run away from it, you can't hide. You couldn't get away even on horseback. Sometimes you can climb up a tree to save yourself. When a bear is big, it doesn't want to climb trees, it's too difficult. But it could knock down any tree. It'll tear up the roots and bring the tree down. For that you'd have to really upset it, get it out of its den in winter or wound it. Also, in early spring, a bear can be angry when it is very hungry. Or when a she-bear has to protect her cubs. But a bear is usually peaceful, it walks around and grazes. It gathers berries or different roots. It'll sense if a person is around and try to slip away unnoticed. You won't hear a branch crack under its paws. You'll just sometimes feel it staring at you in the forest. If you get a chill down the back of your spine, that means the bear is looking down on you from somewhere in the mountains. That's why when you walk in the woods, you should make loud noises, sing something, so that the bear can just slip away. Sometimes, if you suddenly come upon a bear without it hearing you, it can get scared and attack you out of fear. That's how God made bears subject to people. They are afraid of us."

Your grandfather said all of this when he was taking the black, heavy skin off the bear. Again, you were amazed to see how much a skinned bear resembles a naked human being. The legs, arms and shoulders. Only the shaggy head with its huge bared fangs emitted an inhuman power.

"No wonder the Finns have sixteen names for the bear, so that they don't have to say its real name, it's too frightful. You might even attract a bear, call it to you, if you say its name aloud. That's why Tapio, the spirit of the forest, is the most suitable name. You don't need to be afraid of it. It's a great joy if you catch sight of any animal in the forest – it means that nature has revealed some secret to you. You don't have to be scared of animals in the forest. Be scared of people."

Your grandfather turned gloomy and fell silent, lost in thought.

You got lucky immediately after. You were walking along a forest path gathering mushrooms. It was early autumn and the birds were still

in full force and fluttering among the branches. You could hear tweeting from some places and cooing from others. The leaves were still green, only here and there, on the birch trees, yellow strands glittered like cheap gold. You walked along the path in the forest you knew so well and again you were amazed and delighted by new things: here an aspen had grown and become magnificent in its bright-red garb; a stone that was home to a snake was deserted this time, the creature having crawled off somewhere. The path was an old one. Some strong, old men had uprooted huge boulders and stacked them in heaps on either side of the path. It was probably them who had dug the wide ditch running alongside the path; in marshy places the little road had remained dry. Who knows in what era this all happened, whether it was back when the Karelians still made the sign of the cross with their left hand, or later when they had grown weary of the raids by the northern invaders, so the children of ten Karelian tribes joined together and burned down the old Viking capital. However, today, the forest was a cheerful place. The hardwood trees rustled gently in the warm wind and the age-old pines quietly whistled far above, with their age-old song.

Then suddenly came a terrible roar. It shook the air like thunder at the beginning of a storm. You knew that September was the moose's rutting season, when two powerful beasts would confront each other to fight for love. When they roar like that it is better not to come across a moose.

You started looking around for a strong, convenient tree, but something had instantly changed around you. The roar fell silent, replaced by a powerful cracking sound and the slight birch trees around you began to sway. You had not even managed to jump aside when a moose leaped out into the small marsh only three meters away. Now it was not just walking forcefully, it was running. It tore across the forest cleaning and jumped over the ditch full of water and mud, but it did not make it all the way across and now, with a splash that sparkled in the sunlight, its hind legs got bogged down in the filth. It leaned with its forelegs on the dry earth and struggled to break free. An instant later, a massive thing wrapped in a black hide made a huge leap out of the forest and with a roar, it fell onto the moose's back. One sweeping blow with its paw, a hunk of flesh and skin, still throbbing with blood, rolled right under your feet.

How you ran! The wind was whistling in your ears and your legs bore you galloping over the boulders, over the trunks of fallen trees towards home, towards people. But no one was running after you. The master of the forest had taken its prey.

I did not know you very well. You left when I was six years old. We had gone fishing together a few times as kids. I had heard a few stories about hunting. At night you're coughing, heavy, almost a howl, when you were trying to clear out your lungs that had been shot through and had got too much smoke in them. Your gloomy face and harsh words when you were invited to meetings of veterans and war heroes. "The real heroes are the ones lying in the earth," you would say.

The brief lines of the papers attested to two medals.

Your father's name was Trifon. Your grandfather remained nameless to me. Who were they, where did your mother and grandmother disappear to? Were there any brothers or sisters? I know nothing of this.

Why did you catch pikes on the lakes with Pomor tackle, and set a long line? Is this not the reason why I am so attracted to the White Sea, is this not the reason I love it?

If you originally came from there, how did you end up in the Vologda region when the war broke out; were you in the gulag? Because you were enlisted as a private in a penal battalion. Then suddenly, your father and grandfather disappeared in the Ukhta uprising, when the Karelians, who had earlier been so inclined to the Russians, rose up because they could not bear the bad treatment and heavy taxes, when the Russians were taking away the last meager fruits of the northern lands. Did your mother save you by pushing you into the carriage of a passing train, not caring where it was going to, just so that you would not end up on the black barges which people remember in the Pomor villages to this day?

I know nothing. I have no answers. I can only guess, only seek out the meager traces among those brief lines on those military honors. The Karelian front. Private in a penal battalion. Sixteen combat reconnaissance operations. Two medals. Senior lieutenant. Then captain. Commander of the penal battalion. Concussion. Wounded.

You really wanted to catch a bear, but for some reason this was not granted to you. You even started thinking that if a bear without its hide resembles a human being, then could a man, putting on a hide, not come to resemble a beast? A hide over the soul. Maybe you didn't have enough of the beast inside of you then? Maybe the bear was not an enemy to you at all? After all, you bagged moose, wolves and boars by the dozen.

You remember that time hunting. You had been tracking it for a long time and finally caught up to it. It was quietly grazing over marshy ground, munching on cranberries. You stood downwind of it, a bullet

was in the chamber, the safety off. Your hunting dog was silently tearing at the leash, sensing that the prey was near.

Then the dog broke away, the leash could not hold. It bounded over towards the bear. The bear was too preoccupied with its food and had seen nothing. Suddenly a wolf mother leaped out from among the thick firs, grabbed the dog by the back of its neck and dragged it into the forest. You had no choice but to shoot the wolf. You killed it and saved the dog. The bear just slipped away. The wounded dog was incapable of walking, so you carried it in your arms for miles. It was hard, but you still held onto the dog and managed to carry it home. Was that how they carried you, with those holes from the exit wounds in your back? Behind you they dragged a prey squealing from terror. The night was white.

Three hours before that you had been sharpening your Finnish knife, your *veyche*. Sharpening it like your grandfather taught you: “Tsssh, tsssh, tsssh.” In such a way that it would smoothly go through ribs like butter.

You were probably thinking about many things at that moment. Looking back on your life. Things you never told anyone.

Again and again, I read through your papers. “Personally laid several hundred antitank mines, twice as many anti-personnel mines, even more explosives... Personally led combat reconnaissance operations. In one of them, he was first into the enemy’s trenches. With two grenades he blew up a dugout with five enemy soldiers and their officer. While repelling the enemy’s counterattack from a machine gun he killed over twenty Nazis. He showed great skill in reeducating the soldiers of the penal battalion.”

For a long time I just could not understand how you were capable of this. How, after months of soldiers retreating, after many thousands of men had been taken prisoner, after all the grievances you had against the authorities and the nation, you were able to reverse everything.

I would think about it and couldn’t understand, that is until I met an interesting man. He was the same age as me, a colonel, a decorated Hero of Russia. With a gold star on his chest. When we had already drunk a little bit, a half-liter of bitter and vodka, I decided to ask him about that.

“You see,” my colonel friend told me, “Russians never wage war for someone or something, but against an injustice. Never for ‘the motherland’, Stalin, or whatever, but rather against the Germans when they understood that the Germans were enemies to take down. After all, the Germans were no fools, they tried to play on Russians’ historical feel-

ings: they re-opened churches. Our guys watched and thought about this for a while. But when they realized how things were, they decided it was time to break skulls. Everything else just wasn't important anymore."

The Germans had marched in merrily and brazenly, like that moose in the autumn rutting season. With a roar and a fanfare. And then they were stopped.

You finished sharpening your knife. You glanced at the clock and muttered, "Let's go".

After the platoon had put on their camouflage hides, they began crawling. Not a single branch snapped under their quiet movement. The platoon spread out but merged into a single powerful forest entity. One which already felt that its prey was near. "Forward!" you shouted in the final meters. The platoon roared as it made its short leap.

## KONTAKION IN THE THIRD TONE

Thou didst devote all thy will to God and didst follow him with all thy soul, and didst reject the vanity of the world. Through prayers, tears and suffering, thou didst spurn the flesh and fight the unseen foe righteously, didst defeat him and camest rejoicing to the gates of heaven; now, thou standest with the angels before the Holy Trinity, and after thou didst fall asleep in the Lord, the All-Seeing Eye has seen thy efforts, and has granted thee the gift of working miracles. We venerate thee, we approach and bow in front of thy venerable relics. From thy righteous grave thou healest us invisibly, and thou prayest forever, preserving thy native land and people unharmed from enemies visible and invisible. So, we all cry aloud to thee, righteous father Varlaam: pray for us ceaselessly before Christ our God.

## 2003, LOVOZERO

“*Syoy, syoy!*”<sup>2</sup> Baba Lena heaps steaming venison onto our plates. She is a Karelian. Old man Andrei is a Komi. An Izhem Komi. He is clearly proud of his origins.

It is warm in the little forest cottage. That is the most important thing – half an hour before, Volodya and I were shivering like animals, completely soaked in the spray of the savage waves on Lake Love (as we nicknamed Lovozero, which really did sound like Love-ozero).

Andrei is a short, wrinkled, easily drunk old man with striking blue eyes. True alcoholic’s eyes are dull, constantly tearing up. But in his, there was not the slightest glimmer of such.

“Don’t you think I haven’t seen anything just ’cause I live in the forest now? I have seen a *lot*.” He is constantly on the move: sitting at the table, jumping up to throw more firewood on, stirring the steaming pot on the stove. “I used to live in the village. Before that, I did reindeer breeding, worked as a foreman in a brigade. I had twenty people under me, and all the girls...” He squints charmingly. “I was senior Communist Youth,” after a pause and a sip of hot tea, nearly half of the mug filled with sugar, he continues: “I collected fees.”

“What kind of fees were they, how much?” I ask, suddenly interested because I had recalled a red booklet with blurry purple stamp marks inside, “Paid. Communist Youth.”

“How much? Some amount. One line, one fee.” Old man Andrei laughed heartily, he clearly enjoyed his time in the Communist Youth.

“And where did you live before that?” I ask. “Where are you from originally?” I find it interesting, I have been in the tundra only twice in my life. But I already feel how the beauty of this place impresses me. It is an unreal, harsh beauty: the light-blue, fast-flowing river, bordered by a slender strip of vivid-green northern forest in summertime, and beyond it an endless expanse of gray swamp. In the distance the Lovozero tundra, blue mountains with white snowfall melting from their tops, looms over this peaceful landscape.

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2 ‘Eat!’ in Komi.



“We’re from Komi country, Izhem folk. They sent us here to the Kola Peninsula to take care of reindeer. There were eight of us. Only two are left. That’s Communism for you.”

A gloomy look comes over old man Andrei’s face and he suddenly falls silent. I have to pour him another glass of grain alcohol diluted with water.

“What’s it like in this part? Interesting?” I know a little of them myself, but I wanted to hear it from a local. Local people are good for an inquisitive sort, they know many secrets and will tell you if they feel like it.

Old man Andrei gave me a significant look. “No place more interesting. Lake Seydozero will be off your route to the side, so you won’t see many seidas.<sup>3</sup> But Kuyva<sup>4</sup> will keep an eye on you.” He lets out an odd chuckle. “You’ll pass the rocks. They’re called the Ancestors. There are some drawings there. Some old temple. A very special place is Chalmny Vare. If you get to it, of course.”

He fell silent again, chewing a hunk of meat, lost in thought. “Nah, life has been fine. Just hard.” The old man gripped his glass in his broad palm and downed its contents. Then he slowly crawled onto the bed, so enormous that it extended along the entire wall and seemed to take up half the house. It could easily fit fifteen people. The blankets were clean animal skins. There was no dank smell of human misery in them. The bed was strong, made from rough-hewn boards, and it lay close to the ground. It seemed to be very cozy and warm – outside the cottage’s walls the wind continued to rage, rain streamed down the windowpane. We could hear the roar of Lake Love.

Volodya had been led away somewhere by Baba Lena. Volodya was one of those ethnic Ukrainians whose family had moved to Kazakhstan and he had spent his whole life in the steppes. This was the first time he had ever been in the forest, in the tundra. He was therefore somewhat clueless, like a new bucket on the edge of a well – it stands there on the edge, the zinc sparkling in the sun, unaware of the imminent plunge down. Good thing there is a chain on it.

I hadn’t managed to get much sleep. The same jitters, an unbelievable fear for a forty-year-old, which had come over me long before our trip out here and had not let me relax, for even an instant. Sometimes I managed to momentarily quash this fear with a deep draft of liquor, but

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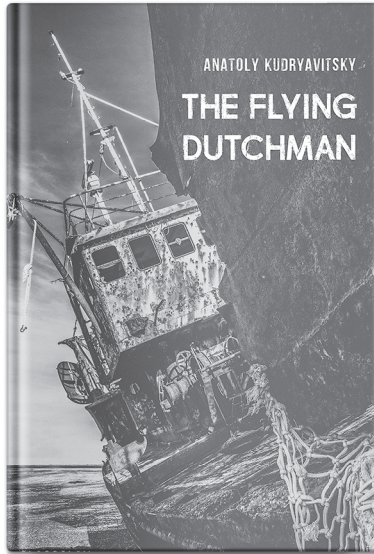
3 A Saami sacred site, consisting of a large stone placed on several smaller ones.

4 A supreme deity of the Saami people. An image of him can be seen on one of the rocks above Lake Seydozero.



# The Flying Dutchman

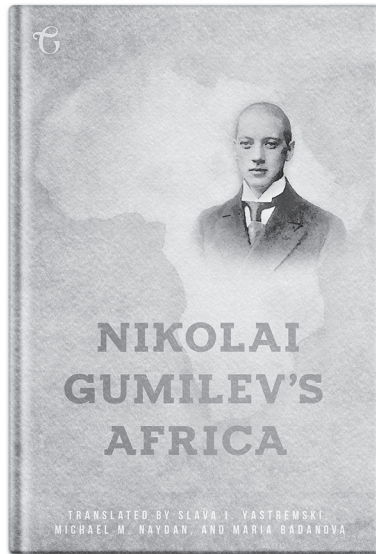
by Anatoly Kudryavitsky



Some time in the 1970s, Konstantin Alpheyeu, a well-known Russian musicologist, finds himself in trouble with the KGB, the Russian secret police, after the death of his girlfriend, for which one of their officers may have been responsible. He has to flee from the city and to go into hiding. He rents an old house located on the bank of a big Russian river, and lives there like a recluse observing nature and working on his new book about Wagner. The house, a part of an old barge, undergoes strange metamorphoses rebuilding itself as a medieval schooner, and Alpheyeu begins to identify himself with the Flying Dutchman. Meanwhile, the police locate his new whereabouts and put him under surveillance. A chain of strange events in the nearby village makes the police officer contact the KGB, and the latter figure out who the new tenant of the old house actually is.

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## Nikolai Gumilev's Africa

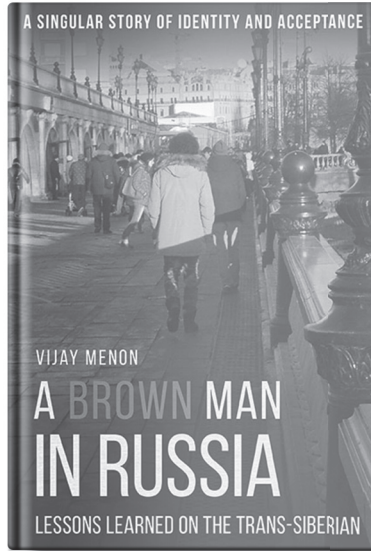


Gumilev holds a unique position in the history of Russian poetry as a result of his profound involvement with Africa. He extensively wrote both poetry and prose on the culture of the continent in general and on Ethiopia (Abyssinia, as it was called in Gumilev's time) in particular. During his abbreviated lifetime Gumilev made four trips to Northern and Eastern Africa, the most extensive of which was a 1913 expedition to Abyssinia undertaken on assignment from the St. Petersburg Imperial Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography. During that trip Gumilev collected Ethiopian folklore and ethnographic objects, which, upon his return to St. Petersburg, he deposited at the Museum. He and his assistant Nikolai Sverchkov also made more than 200 photographs that offer a unique picture of the African country in the early part of the century.

This volume collects all of Gumilev's poetry and prose written about Africa for the first time as well as a number of the photographs that he and Nikolai Sverchkov took during their trip that give a fascinating view of that part of the world in the early twentieth century.

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**A Brown Man in Russia**  
**Lessons Learned on the Trans-Siberian**  
by Vijay Menon



*A Brown Man in Russia* describes the fantastical travels of a young, colored American traveler as he backpacks across Russia in the middle of winter via the Trans-Siberian. The book is a hybrid between the curmudgeonly travelogues of Paul Theroux and the philosophical works of Robert Pirsig. Styled in the vein of Hofstadter, the author lays out a series of absurd, but true stories followed by a deeper rumination on what they mean and why they matter. Each chapter presents a vivid anecdote from the perspective of the fumbling traveler and concludes with a deeper lesson to be gleaned. For those who recognize the discordant nature of our world in a time ripe for demagoguery and for those who want to make it better, the book is an all too welcome antidote. It explores the current global climate of despair over differences and outputs a very different message – one of hope and shared understanding. At times surreal, at times inappropriate, at times hilarious, and at times deeply human, *A Brown Man in Russia* is a reminder to those who feel marginalized, hopeless, or endlessly divided that harmony is achievable even in the most unlikely of places.

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*More coming soon...*

The protagonist of *A Flame Out at Sea* heads to the shores of the northern lakes and the White Sea in search of its present, which unexpectedly proves to be inseparable from its recent past. Against the backdrop of the powerful northern elements, the drama of a single individual in the here and now begins to seem tiny and insignificant but the tragedy of the nation irredeemably large. "The novel is a confession, a travelogue and a doorway into a great historical era."

*A Flame Out at Sea* is about going beyond the boundaries of the big city, about overcoming the fetters of one's private and family past, leaving aside one's resentment, squashing one's pride, unclenching one's fists and turning one's life around. It is about a journey to the origins of speech, personality, courage and love made by a modern man in the harsh, sacred, nourishing and draining circumstances of the Russian North.

Valeria Pustovaya

*Literary critic*

