

VALERIE SENYK

I Was Last Young in Kiev

There I was! with my new bright companions,
Anna and Maryna, pausing in our giddy wandering
to devour cream-filled buns in a teahouse,
where the silver samovars stood gleaming,
steaming from their spouts, drawing
homeward workers in for a mouthful of sugared-
something
before the patient wait at a trolley stop, and the
inevitable fate of returning to overcrowded flats....

But we girls walked the wide avenues, the stony
roads
of ancient conduit, a constant stream of foreign
conversation,
giggling in two languages; their rare smiles buoyed
me up;
Maryna's red featherweight scarf buoyed and float-
ing
in the hazy Kiev twilight....

Another day it was Tanya who led me about like
an underling on her arm, for my cultural edification:
"Here, behind this viny brick wall, is the museum of
Taras Shevchenko, our hero"—a place of poetic
reverie
in the midst of revolutionary murmuring
and anxious traffic.... "And here is a cathedral,
where the true believers light their candles.
How carefully we must pray," she instructed me,
"thus, and so—" so I would not go wrong,
or beg the wrong favour of the wrong saint ...
and I could feel her youthful fervour
through the cloth of her sleeve....

Which reminds me of the tall, the elegant Elena—
a good copy of an *Elle* model, except for
the one empty sleeve where an arm should have
been....

With her one hand, she took me in hand
in the hallway of English School One-Fifty-Five,
to find the lavatory: mistaking my mask of
Canadian naiveté for that of a child, afraid that
I might have an accident, as children do....

In their assumed sophistication they marvelled
at my playful irreverence, tried to subdue my bounce,
made fun of my free ways that only North Americans
possess;

I was feeling like a newborn babe in a strange
and awe-filled world, where my one responsibility
was
to devour with wide eyes the pictures that im-
pressed
themselves on the shutter of my innocence: but
they
should not have let me keep my thumb in my
mouth....

Then came the last evening in Kiev, a gathering
of new friends taking leave, these young women
flanking me, the red silk wound 'round the collar
of Maryna's best dress, the mood open and bold
in this meeting of East and West.... Natasha's long
braid
swung as she stood to offer a song to the night
and the people; and with the first few recalled
notes,
of the land and its beleaguered folk, her deep-
throated passion caught me off-guard—this
melodious
passion quite pierced my carefully layered self-
possession,
broke my free and easy way, my lighthearted
touchdown
in the city of my ancestors—and I wept surprise
tears,
wept like a prodigal daughter in the bosom of her
forgiving mother, and wet Maryna's stoic red scarf
at her neck....

I was last young in Kiev....

These are my memories:—and Here is my home,
and my work, and my children ...
and my brooding reflections on a journey
that hang like a red flag in a corner of my soul;
the flow of images that have stayed: true hunger,
true heroism, true need—

All of it continues without me,
it continues despite me,
and I don't feel so young,
no, I don't feel so young any more.

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