

NPR. Since the other election, the one tantamount to a coup. The fields green and flowing, then brown and stubbled. Dusted white once or twice. Less every year. The house lulled under an afternoon moon. Sound of a hose being dragged; a barrow with a heavy load. Smell of tack. Smell of ether. Drifting out toward the river. He said he could smell it on his tractor. They become reclusive. Her especially. He does the shopping. He goes to an office. It is just the two of them now. Certain sensations have to be attended, an itch that intensifies, an ache that gets louder. The disposition of him, whose face we don't see. A length of frayed material is hung up. Unbleached muslin or an old tablecloth. Now stand behind that. Within hearing of a branch cracking. Crows cawing. Always crows. Distant drone of machinery. An old tree has fallen. It will burn through the months in this room. The light stretched, curved, squared off. The contrasts strictly regulated. Stippling of the backs of the legs. Torn strips. Craqueleur. Shredding. Blackened slurry in the corner of the frame. She did that. The sorcerer. He is worn smooth, marmoreal. Tomorrow he goes into town, to lawyer. But he is standing now. He is Vulcan. Hephaestus. (Who had a bum leg.) He is at his forge. He is Fire. He is the only god on the Mount with a job. Who works with his hands. If the room were amplified, it would tick and respire as walls and windows disappeared. Mattress fit for a prison cot. A bowl made by a friend, a Russian tea glass, an aerial of a television disguised as blackdrop, and *them*. A man beheld. It goeth to the quick. To the quick. Has your arm gone to sleep? Stripped of activity. An overflowingness of being. He knows we are looking. When he faces the window, the rain obscures the field. Perhaps nothing is out there. Else, the world, sweet and wet, swarming with color. A darkling hand hovers above its opposite shoulder. The image of the back, a canvas for scratches made by the photographer. All backs are lonely. All backs existentially apart. The way they knew it would be. And yet "empirically personal," the words retrieved unacknowledged. Likewise these, "big strong seeing." How is it their privacy is not penetrated by the audacity of our stare? How is it that these frames add up to an enactment, not a series of stills of him? Let's all sit down in our broken chairs with our broken hearts in our laps and clap. Anticipation of movement, of a sudden shift. The body's betrayal, dignified by its bearing. Just some window light, some cloth, a worktable, a man lying quietly, or standing with his foot on a stool. *The mystery*, thought the optimist's daughter, *in how little we know of other people is no greater than the mystery of how much*. The converse is also true. Do you need to stretch now? Can you open your legs more? Can you get closer to the edge and recline in the air a little more? Can you stay on that brink? Were you dreaming again?

Of being choked off? Limb by limb? If she knew what he was thinking, would she turn away? Would regret trickle in, shame maybe? A spill of unsaid? Speculate, as you will, on the meaning, but not the upshot. Every frame, evidence of deep true control. Clear, beautiful, frozen. His face, finally. Painfree. *Like a patient etherized upon a table*. Would she turn away? Never.

[Story]

HYGIENE

By Ludmilla Petrushevskaya, in *There Once Lived a Woman Who Tried to Kill Her Neighbor's Baby: Scary Fairy Tales*, published this fall by Penguin. Translated from the Russian by Keith Gesen and Anna Summers.

One day the doorbell rang at the apartment of the family R., and the little girl ran to answer it. A young man stood before her. He looked sick in the hallway light; his skin was delicate, pink, and shiny. He said he'd come to warn the family: There was an epidemic in the town, an illness that killed in three days. People turned red, swelled up, and then, mostly, they died. The first symptom was a rash of blisters. There was some hope of avoiding infection if you observed strict personal hygiene, stayed inside your apartment, and made sure there were no mice around—since mice, as always, were the main carriers of the disease.

The girl's grandparents listened to the young man, as did her father and the girl herself. Her mother was in the bath.

"I survived the disease," the young man said. He removed his hat to reveal a bald scalp covered with the thinnest layer of pink skin, like the foam atop boiling milk. "I survived, and now I'm immune. I'm going door to door to deliver bread and other supplies to people who need them. If you give me money, I'll go to the store—and a bag, too, if you have one. Or a shopping cart. There are long lines now in front of the stores, but I'm not afraid of infection."

"Thank you," said the grandfather, "we're fine."

"If your family gets sick, please leave your door open. I've picked out four buildings—that's all I can handle. If any of you should survive, as I did, you can help me rescue others, and lower corpses out of the building."

"What do you mean, lower corpses out?" asked the grandfather.

"I've worked out a system for evacuating the bodies. We'll throw them out into the street. But we'll need large plastic bags, I don't know where to get those."

"Thank you," said the grandfather, "but we're fine."

The young man went along to the other apartments in the hall like a beggar asking for money. As the R. family closed the door behind him, he was already ringing their neighbors' bell. The R. family heard the neighbor reply abruptly, but apparently the young man didn't leave, for there were no footsteps. Another door opened slightly: someone wanted to hear his story. Finally someone said: "If you have some money already, run and get me ten bottles of vodka. I'll pay you back!"

They heard footsteps, and then it was quiet.

"When he comes back," said the grandmother, "he should bring us some bread and condensed milk, and some eggs. And soon we'll need more cabbage and potatoes."

"He's a charlatan," said the grandfather. "But those aren't burns; they look like something else."

Finally the father, Nikolai, snapped out of his reverie. These were his wife's parents, not his, and he rarely agreed with them. Not that they asked. But something was happening: it couldn't help but happen. He'd been sensing it for a long time now, and waiting. He walked the little girl out of the foyer—there was no need for her to stand there until the mysterious guest knocked again. Nikolai would have a serious talk with him, man to man, about treatment options, escape routes, and the overall circumstances on the ground.

The grandparents were still at the door, listening. Nikolai joined them. His wife, Elena, came out of the bath at last, wanting to know what was going on, but they hushed her up.

Yet they heard no more doorbells. Nikolai turned on the television, and they had supper. Nikolai ate a great deal. He ate so much the grandfather felt compelled to make a remark. Elena came to her husband's defense, and then the little girl asked why everyone was always yelling, and life went on its way.

That night, on the street, someone, judging by the sound of it, shattered a very large window.

"It's the bakery," said the grandfather, looking from the balcony. "Run, Kolya, get us some supplies."

Nikolai went downstairs with a backpack and a knife. A police car drove up, arrested someone, and left, posting an officer at the bakery door. A crowd had gathered. They surrounded the policeman, knocked him down, and then began jumping in and out of the bakery. A woman was mugged for a suitcase filled with bread. They put a hand over her mouth and dragged her away. The crowd kept growing.

Nikolai returned with a heaping backpack—thirty kilos of pretzels and ten loaves of bread. While still on the landing he removed all his clothes and threw them down the trash chute. He then soaked cottonballs in eau-de-cologne, wiped his body down, and threw the cottonballs in the chute as well. The grandfather, very pleased with these developments, restricted himself to just one remark—the R. family would have to ration their eau-de-cologne.

In the morning, Nikolai ate a kilo of pretzels all by himself. The grandfather, who wore dentures, dipped the hard pretzels lugubriously into his tea. The grandmother seemed depressed and didn't say anything, while Elena tried to force her little daughter to eat more pretzels. Finally the grandmother broke down and insisted that they ration the food. They couldn't go out robbing every night, she said, and look, the bakery was all boarded up, everything had been taken already!

So the R. family divided its supplies. During lunch Elena gave her portion to her daughter. Nikolai was as gloomy as a thundercloud, and after

[Rote]

THE ANXIETY OF INFLUENCE

From repeated phrases in stories written by Florida fourth-graders for the state's Comprehensive Assessment Test, cited by authorities as evidence that teachers had given students sentences or plots to memorize. In one plot, protagonists went "poof" and found themselves in a magical land. The Florida Education Department, which is trying to stop the practice of "template writing," called these "poof papers."

One quintessential, supersonic day . . .

One ordinary day turned into an extraordinary day . . .

In the blink of an eye, Sally and I were perambulating home from . . . POOF!

I ran as fast as wildfire. Then neon colors encircle me . . . POOF!

A kaleidoscope of colors encircled me . . . POOF!

A potpourri of iridescent colors surrounded me . . . POOF!

As nervous as a marshmallow in a bonfire

Mango orange, Paris pink, kiwi green

C'est la vie

Hasta la vista

[Transcript]

I WASN'T RESISTING

From an audio recording of the February 14 arrest of Gerald Amidon. Boise, Idaho, police officers Cory Bammert, Deidra Harr, and Guy McKean were dispatched to the home of Amidon's girlfriend, Laura Bryson, after complaints of a fight inside her house. In July, Amidon sued the Boise Police Department and the arresting officers for employing excessive force.

DEIDRA HARR: Get on the ground.

GERALD AMIDON: Oh my God. Hey, I'll get on the ground.

GUY MCKEAN: Get your hands behind your back.

AMIDON: They already are, sir. Sir, I thought—
[Police handcuff Amidon.] Can you let me up, please? My hand—

MCKEAN: If you move again, I'm going to stick this Taser up your ass and pull the trigger. Do you feel that? That's my Taser up your ass. So don't move.

AMIDON: I'm trying not to. I can't breathe.

HARR: Stop moving!

AMIDON: [Screams as McKean tases him.] Okay, sir. Pick me up.

MCKEAN: Do you want another Taser deployment on you?

AMIDON: No, sir. I can't breathe. Stop, stop, sir. Just let me up. I just want to breathe.

CORY BAMMERT: If you're talking, then you're breathing.

AMIDON: [Screams] Stop! I'm trying to be good.

MCKEAN: If you move again, I will deploy this Taser.

AMIDON: I'll be good. Can I get up? Sir, I can't breathe. [Grunts]

MCKEAN: Now, do you feel this in your balls?

AMIDON: I do, sir. I'm not gonna move.

MCKEAN: I'm going to tase your balls if you move again. Will you cooperate with us?

AMIDON: I am! I just can't breathe.

MCKEAN: Okay, I'm going to take this Taser out of your asshole now. Are you going to fight?

AMIDON: No, not at all, sir.

MCKEAN: [Speaking into radio] So far, for the last two minutes, he's been cooperative. But then, my Taser's in his ass.

HARR: Hey, I'm going to sit you up. This is what happens when you resist.

AMIDON: I wasn't resisting.

BAMMERT: [Speaking into radio] I'm not sure who the med units are here for. Is it for his nuts?

lunch he ate a whole loaf of black bread by himself. They had supplies enough for a week.

Nikolai and Elena both called in to work; no one answered. They called friends: everyone was sitting home, waiting. The television stopped transmitting, its screen blank and flickering. The next day the phone shut off. Some people were on the street with shopping bags and backpacks. One person had sawed down a young tree and was dragging it home through the empty yard.

It was time to figure out what to do with the cat, which hadn't eaten in two days and was mewling terribly on the balcony.

"We need to let her in and feed her," said the grandfather. "Cats are a valuable source of fresh, vitamin-rich meat."

Nikolai let the cat in, and they fed it some soup. The little girl wouldn't leave its side; the entire time the cat was on the balcony, the girl kept throwing herself at the balcony door. Now she could feed the little creature to her heart's content, but eventually even her mother could no longer take it. "You're feeding her what I tear out of my mouth to give to you!" she cried. There were now enough supplies for five days.

On the third night they heard the roar of motors outside. It was the army leaving town.

"They'll reach the outskirts and set up a quarantine," said the grandfather. "No one gets in, no one gets out. The worst part is that it all turned out to be true, what the young man said. We'll have to go into town for food."

"If you give me your cologne, I'll go," said Nikolai.

"Everything will be yours soon enough," the grandfather said. He'd lost a lot of weight.

Nikolai left that night for the store. He took the shopping bags and the backpack, as well as a knife and a flashlight. He came back while it was still dark, undressed on the stairs, threw the clothes into the trash chute, and, naked, wiped himself down with the cologne. Wiping one foot, he stepped into the apartment; only then did he wipe the other foot. He hadn't gotten much: some soap, matches, salt, some oatmeal, jelly, and decaffeinated coffee. The grandfather was pleased, however; he was positively beaming. Nikolai held the knife over a burner on the stove.

"Blood," the grandfather noted approvingly before going to bed. "That's the most infectious thing of all!"

Nikolai had started going out every night, and now there was the question of his clothes. He folded them into a bag while he was still on the stairs, and each time he came in he would disinfect the knife over a burner. He still ate plenty, though now without any remarks from his father-in-law.



“Untitled, Distant Steam Vents, Yellowstone,” by Victoria Sambunaris, is on exhibit this fall at the Gallery at Hermès, in New York City.

The cat grew skinnier by the hour, its fur pulled taut, and meals were torture, for the girl kept trying to throw bits onto the floor for the cat as Elena rapped her on the knuckles. Now they were all yelling all the time. They would kick the cat out of the kitchen and close the door, then the cat would begin hurling itself against it.

This led to a horrifying scene. The grandparents were in the kitchen when the girl appeared with the cat in her arms. Both their mouths were smeared with something.

“That’s my girl,” said the girl to the cat—and kissed it, probably not for the first time, on its filthy mouth.

“What are you doing?” cried the grandmother.

“She caught a mouse,” said the girl. “She ate it.” And once again the girl kissed the cat on the mouth.

“What mouse?” asked the grandfather. He and his wife sat still with shock.

“A gray one. It was fat and big,” said the girl. The cat, in the girl’s arms, was trying to free itself.

“Hold her tight!” yelled the grandfather. “Go to

your room, girl, go on. Take the kitty. You’ve really done it now!” His voice was growing louder.

“Don’t yell,” said the girl. She ran quickly to her room.

The grandfather followed, spraying her path with cologne. He secured the door behind her with a chair, then called Nikolai, who was asleep after a night outside. Elena was with him. They woke up reluctantly; everything was discussed. Elena began crying and tearing at her hair. From the child’s room they could hear knocking.

“Let me out, open up, I need to go to the bathroom!”

“Listen to me!” yelled Nikolai. “Stop yelling!”

“You’re the one yelling!” cried the girl. “Let me out, please let me out!”

Nikolai and the others went into the kitchen. They were forced to keep Elena in the bathroom. She began knocking on her door, too.

By evening the girl had calmed down. Nikolai asked her if she’d gone to the bathroom. With reluctance the girl answered that, yes, she’d

gone in her underwear. She wanted something to drink.

There was a little bed in the room, a rug, some bookshelves. It was a cozy room for a little girl; now it had become a quarantine chamber. Nikolai hacked an opening high up in the door. He lowered a bottle with soup and bread crumbs through the hole. The girl was told to eat this for dinner and then to urinate in the bottle and pour it out the window. But the window was locked at the top and the girl couldn't reach, and the bottle turned out to be too narrow for her to aim into. Defecating should have been easy enough: you took a few pages from one of the books, went on those, and then threw it out the window. Nikolai fashioned a slingshot and finally placed a fairly large hole in the window.

But the girl soon showed the signs of her up-bringing. She was unable to defecate on the pages. And she couldn't keep track of her own needs. Elena asked her over and over whether she needed to go poo; the girl would say no, she didn't; five minutes later she was filthy.

Meanwhile her food situation was growing intolerable: there were a finite number of bottles, and the girl was unable to retie the ones she'd used. Nine bottles were already scattered on the floor on the day the girl stopped coming to the door. The cat must have been sitting on her, though it hadn't appeared in their line of vision in a while, ever since Nikolai started trying to kill it with the slingshot. The girl had been feeding the cat half of every ration—she'd simply pour it out on the floor. Now the girl no longer answered questions, and her little bed stood by the wall, outside their line of vision.

They'd spent three days innovating, struggling to arrange things for the girl, trying to explain to her how to wipe, getting water in the room so she could wash herself. Nikolai decided to wash the girl by pouring a bucket of hot water on her when she was expecting food. After that the girl refused to come to the door. All this had so ground down the inhabitants of the apartment that when the girl grew silent, they all lay down and slept for a long, long time.

Then everything ended very quickly. Waking up, the grandparents discovered the cat in their bed with that same bloody mouth—it must have started eating the girl, then climbed out to get a drink. Nikolai appeared in the doorway, sized up the situation, and slammed the door shut. The door remained closed; Nikolai refused to cut an opening, he put this off. Elena yelled and screamed and tried to remove the chair Nikolai had placed there, but Nikolai once again locked her in the bathroom.

Then he lay down on the bed and began to swell up, his skin distending. The night before,

he'd killed a woman for her backpack, and, right on the street, he'd eaten a can of buckwheat concentrate. He just wanted to try it, but ended up eating the whole thing; he couldn't help himself. Now he was sick.

Nikolai realized quickly that he was sick, but it was too late; he was swelling. The entire apartment shook with all the knocks on all the doors. The cat was crying, and the apartment above them had also reached the knocking phase, but Nikolai just kept pushing, as if in labor, until finally the blood started coming out of his eyes, and he died, not thinking of anything, just pushing and hoping to get free of it soon.

And no one opened the door onto the landing, which was too bad, because the young man was making his rounds, carrying bread with him. Soon all the knocking in the apartment of the R. family stopped, with only Elena still scratching weakly at her door, as blood came out of her eyes.

Why was the young man so late? He had many apartments under his care, spread across four enormous buildings. He reached theirs for the second time only on the night of the sixth day—three days after the girl had stopped answering, one full day after Nikolai had succumbed, twenty hours after Elena's parents had passed, and five minutes after Elena herself.

But the cat kept mewling, like in that famous story where the man kills his wife and buries her in a brick wall in his basement, and when the police come they hear the mewling behind the wall and figure out what happened, because along with the wife's body the husband has entombed her favorite cat, which has stayed alive by eating her flesh.

The cat mewed and mewed, and the young man, hearing this lone living sound in the entire building, where all the knocking and screaming had by now gone silent, decided to fight at least for this one life. He found a metal rod lying in the yard, covered in blood, and with it he broke down the door.

What did he see there? A familiar heap of blackened flesh in the bathroom, another in the living room, two black bodies behind a door fastened shut with a chair. That's where the cat slipped out. It nimbly jumped through a makeshift window in another door, and behind that door the young man heard a human voice. He removed a chair blocking the way and entered a room filled with broken glass, rubbish, excrement, pages torn from books, and headless mice. A little girl with a bright-red bald scalp, just like the young man's, only redder, lay on the bed. She stared at the young man, and the cat sat beside on her pillow, also staring attentively at him, with big, round eyes. ■