MEAT FOR TEA

VOL 5 ISSUE 3
THE VALLEY REVIEW

Boudin Noir

Meat for Tea: The Valley Review

Meat for Tea: The Valley Review was founded by Elizabeth MacDuffie and Alexandra Wagman. We are a non-academic affiliated magazine committed to recognizing and featuring the work of the artists, writers, and musicians living in western Massachusetts and beyond.

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Cover Art: FRONT: *"Paper Doll Pinups"* by Cassie Rose Kobeski
BACK: *"L"* by Burns Maxey

Printing:
Paradise Copies, Northampton, MA
Typeface: Gill Sans, Libel Suit (Ray Larabie)

Special thanks:
Mark Alan Miller, Susanna Apgar, Ramiro Davaro-Comas, Broadside Books, Henning Ohlenbusch, Span of Sunshine, Thick Voltage, Tovarish, Happy Hour Burlesque, James Heflin, Tom Sturm, FOE Gallery, Feeding Tube Records and all of our sponsors.

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Vol.5, Issue 3, September 2011, first printing

www.meatfortea.com

salutations from the editor

Greetings, dearest readers. As we wind down the summer, we, of course, wind up for a new edition of Meat For Tea: The Valley Review, and in the season's dusk and the rise of Autumn's slow, cooling blaze, I find that my eye, invariably, as it does every year, turns to change.

I like summers in New England. I like how full of itself New England weather gets every season, really, each brash change a new color's reveal on the proverbial leaf. They say that the leaves are their impossible colors throughout their entire cycle, but so flooded with chlorophyll from birth to antiquity that they simply look green. It is only in their final, fleeting moments that the spectacular shades that bring tourists in to creep their cars around twisting mountain roads are finally revealed. But it was there all along. But this seasonal bombast crossed over into something much more this past summer, and much more devastating. No stranger to disaster - natural, personal, and otherwise - surveying the aftermath of June's tornado with a few of Springfield's city fathers, this one, as they say, hit home. Tornados simply do not touch down in Western Massachusetts, and when they have, they've upended a few trees and upset a few pets, but nothing serious. The level of destruction was not only astonishing, it was invasive. The smallish, tough, scrapper of a city that had invented basketball - a Muggsy Bogues unto itself - very suddenly had an obscene and incongruous swath cut through it. The tornado was followed shortly, and impossibly, by an earthquake. An earthquake. A much smaller event in terms of physical impact, its proximity to the tornado had some calling Springfield "Satan's Rotisserie." Churning furiously and almost immediately on its heels, Irene swept up the Eastern Seaboard and flooded our hill towns beyond recognition.

Things buckled. Houses, trees, buildings, streets, bridges. They simply buckled. Tarps covered where roofs had buckled, chainsaws came in to cut up and haul away the buckled trees, pylons went up to mark the buckled sections of streets. The community also buckled, and quite decidedly so. Our little, ripped-up neck of the woods buckled together: That is to say, we found each other, connected, and locked in to create something stronger and safer than its separate parts.

Did we create it, though? Perhaps not. Like the leaves, perhaps we revealed, under duress, what had been there all along, as the everyday necessarily fell away when the extraordinary took its place.

So here we are, on the the side of this summer and its astounding circumstances, and just this side of Meat For Tea's new issue. The issue itself boasts an interview with Burns Maxey, recently appointed Easthampton City Arts Coordinator, who plans to do much to strengthen liaisons between local business and artists. Her art also graces our back cover. At our Cirque du Poupées to release said issue, we welcome back our dear Ramiro Davaro-Comas for more live painting. Our beloved Happy Hour Burlesque Troop returns as well, back to our open and inviting, ahem, eyes. Our bands include Henning Ohlenbusch, Span of Sunshine, Thick Voltage, and Tovarish. Coming up from Rhode Island to rock the Elevens with their Soviet Doom Noise as well as a video show, Tovarish are recommending that folks bring ear plugs.

Buckle up. Tune in. Get your world rocked. Again.

besos y abrazos,

Meaty

milk and vodka

Stephanie Baird

I. Arrival

I was in Moscow on a student exchange during the pivotal time of Gorbachev, Glasnost, Perestroika, and the Gulf War, living with a Soviet family, the Antonovas. We were fulfilling our respective schools' mission of improving relations between the old enemies through personal contact. At my Soviet "home," a tiny one-bedroom apartment, I had my first indoctrination in sipping Vodka, spilling milk, listening to tales, and telling the truth. The building I sat in was one of a million tall, faceless, grey communist blocks – no different from the cement tenements in that great capitalist capital of ours, New York City.

II. Russian Vodka

At a party my "family" had on my last day, I took the opportunity to complete my rite of transatlantic passage by imbibing several piercing shots of virtually pure liquor, despite my initial misgivings. My Russian father gave me critical and complicated instructions in proper vodka intake: inhale, exhale, down the shot, then follow with a chaser of bread and butter. By the fourth shot, I could finally swallow the Russian "water" in one fell swoop. My "father" said I was a "real Russian woman now" and lamented my inevitable departure. He wanted me to stay and be his drinking partner. I wanted to stay, too, as the inebriation finally loosened my family's tongues, unleashing the truth about their thoughts on this lumbering bear of a country.

At my request, my thirty-something year-old "brother" Peter gave me a lengthy tutorial in Russian swears and invectives. He left the apartment to smoke in the hallway, and I, with 18-year old puppy dog eyes, followed with some hesitation, ignoring my cigarette hatred and fear of usury. I giggled all the profanities back several times, under his patient and flattering tutelage.

Peter told me I was a beautiful girl, causing me to glance downward at the wrist corsage he had brought me for International Women's Day. The other Antonova women were also wearing corsages, but I thought mine was the prettiest. I had been eyeing my handsome "brother" for several days now, conspiring to get him alone, yet ultimately resigned to the fact that the odds were against any extracurricular diplomatic relations. But this night, clouded by drink and haunted by the imminent morning departure, we contrived to cling together a short while.

My "brother" complained about the lack of consumer goods in Moscow, stating "1917 was a big mistake and now we are paying for it." He told me that communism was on its way out, but that capitalism was hardly a better mistress. Bitterness burst through his usually congenial and light-hearted nature as he professed that freedom and money made Americans self-centered and apathetic, and Soviet-style communism and paucity made Russians paranoid and apathetic. I inwardly agreed with the assessment of paranoia, this being the first open heartfelt discourse I experienced during my month in Moscow.

"But the Soviet Union is a place where huge things are happening every day," I told him petulantly, inching closer to his tall frame in the hallway, with big eyes gazing upward. "Just yesterday we were at the Pizza Hut and saw and heard tens of thousands of 'comrades' in the streets, some protesting for Yeltsin, others protesting for Gorby. You people tried

to cover up and tell us it was nothing, to distract our attention – having no pride in your own demonstration. Just like all the food and milk – usually so hard to get – yet magically appearing in your cupboards and refrigerators, like nothing," snapping my fingers in emphasis.

"I found out the groceries were obtained especially for us through extra rations from your family's involvement in the exchange program," I continued. "And look at this corsage… flowers are everywhere! Not a day has passed that I have not seen hundreds of people carrying flowers about." I kept quiet my observation about the million sad faces on the street. Perhaps flowers acted as an antidote.

Terminal bitterness and disappointment regarding all governments shrouded Peter's words, though charm poured forth liberally from under his dark cowboy-like moustache. I was drawn to his ruby lips, excruciatingly bright like the Kremlin against the backdrop of drab grey streets and concrete buildings. I knew he had a wife, and I had probably even met her once or twice during my stay, but held little regard for this fact as he inched his milky blue eyes closer to my own vodka-enlivened ruddy lips and cheeks. Here we were, Soviet and America courting - off limits - yet dying for a taste of the other: the opposite and exotic.

The haze of our blurred visions created halos and fogs, softening the choice and muting the stink of alcoholic alteration. My body seemed to be wading through three feet of thick, mercury-like air. I discerned only his red lips in the engulfing grey daze. Desperate for a transgression, I wanted to complete my voyage to the other side, beyond my vodka baptism, yet found myself stalling and inwardly fretful. I did not want to act the wonton "whore" that the U.S. often finds herself playing on the global stage.

Against one set of desires, I backed away from the Russian man, melting into that bland grey wall in an effort to be a model citizen. My mind licentiously continued with the fantasy; however, my thoughts being my own.

We exchanged tight, gripping hugs in the dusk of that final morning, tears of clear grain streaking our cheeks as our orbits began spinning away from each other. With an active hangover coupled with a continuing blood alcohol level, I was whisked away to the awaiting plane home.

III. Russian Milk

Just before Glasnost, I sat in that tiny Moscow kitchen and held my nose while swallowing milk. I pinched my nose tight, leaving red marks on either nostril, because the milk was too thick for my American tastes. Clumps of white bobbed up and down, like dumped whiskey barrels and abandoned lifesavers in a choppy sea, while I sat at a cluttered old wooden table, the surface worn smooth from decades of scrubbing and wiping down.

The two countries were finally thawing from a long and tiresome cold war. Unfortunately, despite the goal of improving "relations," I hated my Russian "sister": ice-cold 16-year old Olga who played with Barbie™. However, I loved my warm Russian Ma, Papa, and brother. It was because of them that I felt acutely guilty at my lack of appreciation for their milk. Olga had manipulatively told me that her family did not typically drink milk, and was only able to procure it for me due to the special privileges conferred on them for the foreign exchange. I indeed love milk, but it is only the thinned, watered-down mediocre milk I can stomach – the milk of American capitalism – diluted for the best price-production ratio.

With calculated betrayal I lingered at the table, waiting for my Russian family to leave the room so I could pour their hard-won milk down the sink – quite similar to my own American family dinner hour. At my own home, I'd wait long hours at the table for my parents to get up, do their dishes, put the food away, and retire to the den. I could then sneak away from the table and pour my mother's grotesque cooking (all made from frozen or canned foods) into the trash before she could catch me. Thankfully my Russian mother's cooking was superb: buttered mashed potatoes and buttered leg of rabbit or chicken, all richly buttered and tender. It was only the milk that caused turmoil.

I thought about the other white thing I loved that was all around me in abundance: snow. Coming from Houston, I had not seen snow in about a decade and was completed overwhelmed and overjoyed by Moscow's winter wonderland. At my first opportunity, a three-foot deep snow angel was lusciously constructed. White snow, orange faux fur trimmed navy parka, and myself, a pinkish human, were all found nestling with Matroshka sensibility. Sliding down a very tall, very steep hill several times, using cardboard as my sled on the icy human-made gauntlet, I stopped only when a kid banged into my tailbone with a real sled. This pain lasted several years, acting as a physical reminder of my time in Moscow. Strolling outside with an ice cream cone that did not melt, I inhaled the fresh thick vanilla taste. I marveled at the irony of my situation – lovely snow all around, yet no palatable milk to be found - the complete opposite of Houston.

I remember hearing the house fall quiet while I waited and debated whether to pour the milk down the drain. Although a few details in the kitchen remained to be squared away by the mother before slumber, Olga and her parents were ostensibly settling in for the night in the far room. That small room was a den, parents' bedroom, study, TV and living room. Every inch was covered, from floor to ceiling, with decorative rugs, bookcases, bric-a-brac shelves, a roll-top desk with a hidden computer (fancy playing Tetris™ and Simcity™ half-way around the world), and "L"-shaped sectional couches that reconfigured in about a million different ways. I can still picture the tidy, well-stored configuration of this family's detritus; things packed inside things like the Matroshka dolls of Soviet leaders and purple swan-girls I brought back. The little middle room, Olga's bedroom and study, had been turned over to me for my stay and was awaiting my evening retirement.

Yet there I sat in the kitchen, staring at the colorful Russian folk art rooster above the sink, with this tall glass of milk tantalizing me, wanting milk and wanting to drink that milk more than anything in the world. Deprived of satisfying cow for over two weeks, just the sight of the white stuff made me salivate. But this milk simply tasted too real. I felt like a calf suckling at her momma's teats, gulping down all the blemishes and imperfections that supposedly make nature unique and beautiful – something I was not accustomed to with my processed food lifestyle.

During this pensive moment I heard a rustle from the other room, following by a squeaking floor. I took that tall glass of milk in my right hand, stood up quietly from the table, tiptoed over to the sink, and….

IV. Dénouement

Nothing is ever simple, and sometimes I don't know if I have the stomach for it.

Courtney Lynne

miss thing in action

Connolly Ryan

Uncle Becky has a love interest:
a willowy freckled unassuming affair
whom he admires from afar.
Next to the bulk of the broads at large
(emaciated, complacent and sartorially
overwrought,) she, (Miss Thing he calls her)
is a tasteful throwback to a time when taste
existed. Dressed like a florist's apprentice,
or perhaps a welder's muse, she travels
through her day as if through a Welsh
short story: aware of everything save her own
startling loveliness that transforms onlookers
into concertgoers. Onlookers like Uncle Becky.

In her gait he identifies symphonies
from the long ago; in her smile he sees
immeasurable reassurance that autonomy
is not automatically doomed after all; in her
hips, unchartered etceteras. So nuanced are
her everyday orchestrations that he even
relishes her clichés: feeding sparrows sourdough;
reading adventures in the linden's shade,
chatting up the lonely, beleaguered and elderly
denizens of her no-name little town. Uncle
Becky would kill for her if necessary; but
of course it never will be, considering how
entirely adored or utterly ignored she is.
She is anonymity's cathedral, a synagogue
for the underdog, a mosque for the unmasked.
Most of al though, she is a chapel in the applegrove
of Uncle Becky's ecumenical heart. "In the name
of God and all that is ungodly, I would kill for her
in a raven's heartbeat!" he declares to himself.
But that won't be necessary, whispers the weather
which, like her, is already always inside of him.

1/1/11 - becky's directive

Connolly Ryan

The big days call for the big guns,
so to speak, which is why Uncle
Becky is cutting no corners, only
throats (so to speak,) on this numerically
significant day. In the café he plugs in,
with great urgency, the headphone jack
to his transistor radio just in time to snuff
the hyena-spasms of small-talk with which
this habitat seethes. Classical music swims
into his head and softens the bludgeons
and troubled pinwheels of his predatory
thought-stream. Now he may concentrate
his considerations on the world of the window's
other side: snow flurries, neckless crones,
the usual lobotomy-parade of dead-to-God cars;
the gas station, generic enough to qualify
as somehow poignant. Becky soaks it all up.
He enjoys the maniacally bland architecture
of this sleepy town's structures, the quaint
torture they connote. The café fills up with
more people: an overture of caricatures
to which the waltzing strains of Strauss
offer a merciful sound-scape. It's the age-
old story of music mollifying the desire
to destroy or at least derail these
trainwrecks disguised as sleighrides:
these grotesques passing for picturesques.
Good old unrelenting rage, Becky's most
reciprocal bedfellow, now rests in fetal
position as visions of meathooks swing
in his head. One eleven two thousand eleven:
a day of unified infamy and a momentary lull
in Becky's sacred massacre of they who traffic
in the pornography of unwarranted prestige.

Courtney Lynne