

Artem Chapeye (*Fiction*, p. 58), a Ukrainian writer, is currently serving in the Territorial Defense Forces. His book "The Ukraine" will come out in English next year.

THE UKRAINE

Artem Chapeye



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She and I converged on a sullen love for our country. A hate-love, some might say. A love with a dash of masochism, I used to say. A love in defiance of pain, she used to say. And that was how she and I loved each other, too—through pain and a bit frantically.

Almost every weekend, she and I would get on a train or a bus and head off somewhere. And, in Ukraine, you can get far in the course of a weekend. And make it home, too. Only once were we late for work on a Monday—when we were hitchhiking back from Milove, in the Luhansk region, in January. It's the easternmost point of the country. We made it there on buses and headed back on foot along a snow-covered road, hand in hand. We had just fallen in love then. Guys in Soviet-style Zhiguli four-doors were giving us rides, no problem, but each time they'd give us a lift for only a few kilometres, then drop us at the side of the road and turn off toward their villages. We shivered in the blue twilight, but we were happy.

We felt a melancholy love for precisely everything in Ukraine that annoyed many of our acquaintances. The random thrashiest of thrash metal on intercity buses. The obligatory multi-hour sessions of awful comedy shows like "Evening Quarter." The flat-screen TVs at the fancier bus stations, like Dnipro, where the thrash on the speakers was even harsher—like that little rap that goes, "The best feeling's when you're the coolest of 'em all"—and performed by Ukrainians who write their names in the Roman alphabet because they think it will be more familiar and appealing in the West. The sour smell of the alcohol that was poured in semidarkness on the lower bunks of the economy-class sleeper car while we were trying to fall asleep on the top ones. The instant coffee in plastic cups and the plasticky sausages in hot-dog buns. The cheap train-station food, like cabbage-filled patties or meat pies wrapped in paper; even back then I wondered why it was that she didn't at all care about her health.

Or the more tender things: the slightly squat, chubby mother and daughter speaking Surzhyk, that slangy

combo of Russian and Ukrainian, so alike in appearance—dark, cropped hair, their faces wide, a deep beet-colored flush on their cheeks—who wouldn't have been all that pretty if it weren't for the huge, kind gray-green eyes that made them beautiful! They were the proprietors of a cheap café at the bus station of a nameless town, with tables covered with oilcloth carelessly slashed by the knives of previous guests, which the daughter rubbed with a gray rag before bringing out plates of food that her mother had prepared for us. We had a meal there—for less than a dollar, if you add it up—of mashed potatoes with a sun of butter melted in the center of the plate, pork chops fried to a crisp, and homemade sour-cherry juice in tumblers. Or the people with gray faces, smileless and weary after a long shift, on the buses of Donetsk. The wet autumn leaves stuck to the footpaths of the Storozhynets Arboretum, in Chernivtsi, where we had gone just to take a stroll—likely the only people ever to make a daylong excursion to have a look at a city where, when push comes to shove, there's nothing much worth looking at.

She was quoting Serhiy Zhadan, her favorite poet: "*Ya liubliu tsiu krainu navit bez kokainu*"—"I love this country even without cocaine." I prosaically chimed in, "And without antidepressants, either." It was then that she stopped taking antidepressants; she said they made her gain weight—the only vanity I noticed in her in all those years. And now she always resurfaces in my mind along with a line from my favorite poet, Tom Waits: *She was a middle-class girl*. . . . She had spent a few years living in the U.S.: her father had gone to earn some fast cash, then brought her over, too. While there, she finished college, got married, and quickly divorced. It was a past I was jealous of, and that was why we rarely talked about it. One time, she told me that her friends in the U.S., and even her ex-husband, used to call her home country "the Ukraine." With the definite article. Even though they knew that in English it was correct to just say "Ukraine," their tongues kept reflexively pronouncing "the" first. Why? she would

ask her ex-husband. One time, after some thought, he said, "I think it's the 'U' sound." The U.S., the U.K., the Ukraine. She and I laughed about this, but from then on we began to notice and point out to each other situations and instances when it was actually correct to say "*the Ukraine*"—because there's Ukraine as such, but there is, in fact, also a *the Ukraine*—a "*voilà-Ukraine*." A Ukrainian Dasein.

For example, it's the middle-aged men in peaked caps, with long mustaches and leather jackets over their warm sweaters. It's the middle-aged women in chunky-knit hats. The college girls who, on their way back to the dorm after a weekend at home, step over puddles of oozy mud in their fancy white boots, clutching the handles of checkered plastic tote bags with fingers red from the cold, trying not to chip their long painted nails. It's the old lady in the ankle-length brown overcoat and cheap white sneakers who's carting apples on a hand truck. The coiffed, aging blonde behind the wheel in a traffic jam in Donetsk who's calmly smoking out the car window, watching life pass by.

Once in a blue moon, during the worst frosts or protracted rains, she would plant me in the red Škoda Fabia her father had given her—because, of the two of us, only she had a license—and then we would look out at the country, separated from our fellow-Ukrainians by glass and music: usually, Tom Waits, who, for some reason, perfectly suited the Ukraine. But, in the end, the trip would sour her mood, because, separated in that way by music and glass, we could only watch and not experience, not identify. The following weekend, we would once again buy tickets for a train or a bus and be among the people.

The Ukraine, for us, was a gigantic and empty new bus station, dusted with snow, at the edge of, I think, Cherkasy. I didn't understand why it was so gigantic or so empty. She and I stood in the bitter cold in the middle of a snow-covered, concrete field beneath an open canopy, alone. Opposite us was a single minibus, a white Mercedes Sprinter—ours. I opened the door, but the driver barked, "Shut

the door! Don't let the cold in! This isn't the stop."

So we stood and blew on each other's fingers until, fifteen minutes later, he pulled up fifteen metres. Her face flushed in the frozen air. In the van, too, our breath turned to vapor. We paid the driver, who grumbled, "This is the stop." She giggled softly and whispered in my ear, "This here is the Ukraine."

She was generally quick to laugh, though sometimes with a dark sense of humor. For instance, one time in Khotyn we were taking a selfie at her prompting in front of a store called Funeral Supplies and Accessories. She let out a ringing laugh and said that this, too, was the Ukraine.

When the bus stopped on the highway north of Rivne and in climbed an old woman whose sheepskin coat smelled of hay and cows, the people turned up their noses, not appreciating that this old woman was, in fact, the Ukraine. The official folk kitsch—that stereotypical woman with ribbons flowing from her hair, holding bread and salt on a traditionally embroidered towel—is a fake, but that dilapidated mosaic at the entrance to the village, depicting a Ukrainian woman with ribbons in her hair—only she's missing an eye—now, that's the Ukraine. The Ukraine is also the romance of decline. The unfinished concrete building on the outskirts of Kamianets-Podilskyi. The bottomless, purple-green lake in a submerged quarry in Kryvyi Rih, which you're looking at from a tall pile of bedrock, fearfully watching as a single minute swimmer slowly does the breaststroke, holding himself up above the lake's impossible depth on the treacherous film of the water's surface. It's the slow destruction of the Dominican cathedral in Lviv, grayed by rains, and the faded-white plaster Soviet Pioneers with lowered bugles in Kremenets, in a gorge between the creases of mountains, unanticipated among all the fields overgrown with withered grass. The abandoned Pioneer camp outside Mariupol, where we sat on rusted swings, thermoses in our hands, with a view of the Sea of Azov, which swished with ice, pushing its surf,

layer by layer, onto the shore. And even in Kyiv—the gray, multilevel concrete interchange at the Vydubychi transport hub, framed by the smokestacks of the TETs energy plant, which belch a thick, dense smoke into the deep-blue sky.

We were wanderers: we glided on the surface and often saw the Ukraine through misted windows. In the final years, she'd have her treatments in the summer, and we couldn't travel then. That's why the trips I typically remember were in late autumn or very early spring, when the country is in a palette of gray, rust, faded yellow, and pale green. It is unimaginably beautiful. Side roads along alleys of poplar or birch trees, barely winding through hills, lead you to

places where you haven't been and aren't visiting, and you feel the urge to stop, to climb out of the bus, and go—actually go—to those places where you haven't been and aren't visiting.

One time I dozed off, my head resting on my hat against the steamy pane, and, when I awoke, through the window I saw, right next to the road, large and seemingly metallic waves frozen in time.

"Is this a reservoir?" I asked her. "Where are we?"

She laughed softly and stroked my temple.

"Rub your eyes."

Those waves frozen in time turned out to be large mounds of plowed black soil.

Once, at night, behind a belt of forest, bare in November, a tractor

was running with four blinding headlights, two on the bumper and two above the cabin, and this detail struck me as particularly romantic, for some reason, yet somewhat mysterious. Another time, the minibus driver stopped at a café in the middle of the woods—near Chudniv, I think. The café was encircled by a wall of logs, sharpened on top like pencils, with frightening, elongated, crested faces of Cossacks wearing large earrings carved on them. It was trash and kitsch, but it was the Ukraine. The night was frosty, and star-pierced deep space loomed, black above the forest road.

I think that fatigue, too, affected our perception on these trips. We were under-rested, and everything struck us as a little unreal and simultaneously über-real. Blurred objects and

people emerged through the fog, becoming distinct as they approached. In silence, with a shared pain and delight, the two of us could spend whole minutes watching a droplet trickle down the other side of the pane. Even then, she was succumbing to mood swings, which were rubbing off on me, too. One time, I recall, the other people in the bus were mouthing, “Starkon, Starkon. We’re heading to Starkon.” There was something cosmic, futuristic, and damply mysterious in this word. When, an hour later, it turned out to be Starokostiantyniv, for some reason she grew disenchanted, pouted, and withdrew into herself. For the next hour, everything seemed horrible. In Starkon, two young men sat down behind us, reeking of alcohol. All the passengers

were gray in the partial darkness of the cabin and swayed like sacks on the rugged road; no one was smiling. Then, suddenly, one of the drunks behind us began to tell the other one about his little son.

“I look over, and he’s got a snotty nose and he’s crying. I tell him, ‘Open up your mouth, I’ll take a look.’ He shows me his mouth, and he’s got a little side tooth that, you know, had pushed through in two places. I felt so sorry for him. ‘Poor little kid!’ I say. And I start kissing him, and I grab him in my arms. . . .”

The bus was suddenly bathed in love and beauty. All the people who had been sitting silently, swaying with the bus’s motion, lost in their own thoughts and their own problems, ceased to be gray mannequins: inside each of them, behind the mask of weariness, was an entire universe, a gigantic cosmos brimming with internal stars, and she leaned over and whispered in my ear, “People are beautiful, even if they don’t realize it.”

Sometimes she and I would set out on our weekend journeys on foot. In the early years, when it was still possible. Outside Yuzhnoukrainsk, on a Polovtsian grave field in the steppe, we ate a stolen watermelon. Outside Konotop, we got lost in the meanders of the Seim River; emerging from waist-high mud, we walked onto a farmstead, and a young woman, whose husband had gone off fishing in his boat, fed us boiled perch and polenta flecked with scales. And, when we paid her, the woman tried to refuse, but her hands began to tremble because it was an enormous sum of money for her. While it was still possible, we climbed a mountain overlooking Yalta, and from a kilometre up we saw clearly that the earth was round: the deep-blue sea segregated itself from the pale sphere of sky in a distinct arc.

I had anticipated that during our early trips she and I would be constantly making love, particularly in the fields or in secluded and beautiful spots like that mountain over Yalta. Yet she almost always said, “Ew, we’re dirty.” Once or twice, during a mood swing of hers, she initiated lovemaking on

her own—like in the transit hotel on the highway in the bogs of Polissia, where we startled the long-haul truckers—but I quickly understood that, for her, our trips weren't at all about that. She was catching time, which was trickling through her fingers. Particularly in the final years, when she needed more and more treatments and we travelled less and less.

I was jealous of her past in the U.S., of her learning, which came from I don't know where. Or, rather, of her chaotic erudition. For example, she had this category: "random fact." We could be travelling in a black vehicle through a snow-dusted field in the boondocks, which, between the two of us, we referred to as "Kamianka-Znamianka," and we'd be marvelling at the greenish hue of the asphalt when, out of nowhere, in response to some mental association, she'd burst out, "Random fact: When Voltaire died, his relatives sat him up in a carriage as if he were alive. And just like that, seemingly alive, the corpse was driven to a remote eastern region. You know why? To beat the mail. So that the Church wouldn't have time to give the bishop there an order pro-

hibiting Voltaire's burial in consecrated ground."

I was jealous of her past in the U.S., the past from which these paroxysms flared, while she, it seems, envied me those years which she had missed in Ukraine. I would tell her stories. I told her about how in the nineties, as a schoolboy, I was forever digging in our gardens with my parents because, at the time, we had amassed as many government-issued plots as we could till from elderly relatives and relatives who had gone abroad for work—so that there could somehow be enough food for all the children through the winter. I told her how the electricity would get shut off in winter, and my entire family—clad in thick sweaters, because even the gas heat wasn't all that warm—would gather in the kitchen, first around candles and eventually around the car battery that Dad had bought, which enabled a light bulb to emit a pale glow; and how, on those kitchen evenings, Mom would bake flat biscuits with a dollop of jam in the gas oven or fry crêpes on the stovetop, which we ate with preserves; and how at the time, of course, I didn't understand that these would be the

happiest memories of my childhood.

I told her how my brother and I travelled to my grandfather's funeral from Kyiv. I was living at the Polytechnic Institute then, not far from the train station, while my brother lived in a hostel in the Vydubychi neighborhood. We bought tickets for the no-frills train that was leaving for Radyvyliv in the middle of the night, when the metro wasn't running, so my brother came to my place, in order to be walking distance from the station. We sat and sat, talked, smoked, but, when we headed out, it turned out that we were running late, and so we sprinted the last kilometre, as fast as we could, panting and sweating, and jumped onto the moving train, teetering on our bellies on the already raised steps. The conductor saw all this and scolded us: "Dumbasses, you could have had your legs chopped off!" I wanted to laugh in relief but thought that laughing wasn't appropriate. We ended up late for the funeral all the same, and, when we arrived in the village of Boratyn, our dad and the neighbors had just returned from the cemetery and were sitting at a table beneath the old pear tree in the yard set with cheap booze, cheap smoked sausage, and homemade pickles. They tried to force me and my brother to have a drink. A minute later, the neighbors were recounting how good each of them had been to the deceased old man and what the deceased had promised to bequeath to whom. Our dad, his son, sat at the table in silence, and later, as he led me and my brother to the grave, he complained, "The body isn't even cold yet, and they're already divvying up the inheritance. I don't need anything, but at least don't start in front of me."

After I told her this, I recall, she and I took to saying that thoughts of the Ukraine always, sooner or later, led to memories of funerals. Why?

"Maybe love is more acute when it's mixed with the feeling of inevitable loss," she surmised.

I think I finally understand what she meant.

One time, in her last year, I told her about how my best friend's mother was dying of cancer in the hospital. And about how he had to take a syringe to

the head nurse and give her a twenty-hryvnia bribe each time he wanted her to fill it with morphine for his mom.

She laughed. "That is most certainly a contender for *the* the Ukraine."

And then she began to cry.

For the two of us, the booming talk of "official" patriots about their "love for Ukraine" that you hear everywhere—that talk was pompous and stilted, hackneyed, and, above all, it was what the Russians call *poshlo*: passé, tacky. Or, if you prefer English, it was lewd. Paraphrasing an American saying, she used to argue that patriotism was like a penis: irrespective of its size, it's not a great idea to go waving it around in public. Choral singing and walking in formation. *Sharovary*—the bright-colored ballooning pants of the Cossacks—and everyone on the same day sporting traditional embroidery, on shirts and even plastered on cars. Waving flags on sticks or, better yet, flying the biggest flags possible! Ukrainian tridents on chests.

It was all a pretentious demonstration, a showy show. It was an aesthetic on the same level as putting up a billboard beside the road with a picture of your beloved holding a Photoshopped bouquet and the caption "Natalka! I love you! Your Tolia!" Only in this case it was done collectively: "Natalka, lookie here at how you arouse our patriotism!" It was group exhibitionism.

Sincere feelings don't need megaphones. Love is quiet, barely audible. It's in the comma and in the reiteration: "I love her so, I so love my poor Ukraine." Today, I almost let out a sob when I came upon this line. Taras Hryhorovych Shevchenko. In defiance of pain, a bit frantically. Tenderly. Acutely. With a fear of loss. In love, the imperative is acceptance.

During one of our final trips, in the heart of winter, the rural bus we were on broke down, mid-ascent, outside Dunavtsi. Little by little, the cabin of the bus began to freeze. Outside, a cold damp wind blew, piercing through our flesh all the way to the marrow. The driver was poking around in the engine. The bus was old: that was why it had broken down. Someone began to grumble, "And here we have the perpetual 'Are we part of Europe or are we not?'" I, too,

was growing irritated. But she was warming her hands in her armpits and smiling. She said, "I've never heard that someone up and froze to death in Ukraine from a bus breaking down. O.K., it isn't pleasant. But it happens."

I was learning acceptance from her. When her mother called and invited me to the funeral, it was bitterly sad, but I wasn't surprised. She hadn't said anything to me directly, but now, looking back, I saw that all along she had been living a life short on time. Just as she had gleaned satisfaction from depression and from a sullen love in defiance of pain, I was confident that she had even gained a certain pleasure from her suicide. I only hoped that the physical pain of it had been less than the pain she had had to live with.

But now she's dead
She's so dead forever
Dead and lovely now

I didn't notice when I stepped on the edge of the freshly shovelled, soft mound of earth. Her mother looked at me judgmentally. Lips compressed into a thread, painted with dark-red lipstick. A thin, properly contoured, made-up face. Her mother had a wonderful figure for her age; she would have had a similar one had she lived as long. Her mother wore a light-colored business suit, a white overcoat, and black high-heeled shoes: that was

why she stayed on the concrete path and didn't approach the mound. She had a scarf on her head because, after all, it was a cemetery. Her mother probably thought I wasn't displaying enough grief. All those years her mother had thought that I was a bad influence on her daughter. That it was me dragging her "who knows where or what for." That it was me refusing to formally start a family, or at least live together full time. I'm curious, did her mother

understand the pain her daughter lived with? Someday I'll tell her about it. Or maybe not. Her mother was very orthodox and concealed the truth so that her daughter's body—her body—could be buried in accordance with the rules. In consecrated ground.

I was learning acceptance from her. Clay from her grave stuck to my shoes, and I recalled how she and I had walked around the cemetery in Krasnoilsk the previous spring. Fake flowers adorned almost all the crosses. We read the inscriptions, written in a mix of Romanian, Russian, and Ukrainian, and yellowish clay stuck to our feet in just the same way then.

Her mother and I heard muffled cursing behind us. Apparently, the two cemetery workers who had filled the grave were squabbling over the tip that her mother had given to one of them. If I recall, they were a little drunk. Her mother glanced at the workers, her painted lips clenched, then turned away and snugly tightened her scarf, which she would take off upon leaving the cemetery.

"What horrible people," her mother murmured.

The gravediggers asked my forgiveness with a gesture. They quieted down and walked past me and her mother, their shovels over their shoulders. When they thought I could no longer see them, one punched the other's shoulder, then gesticulated: idiot. Yes, they had had a bit to drink. They smelled. They were filthy. Gray, in tattered jackets. They probably consume that TV trash, I thought. They weren't European, they weren't civilized. What else was there to say? Inside everyone there's a universe, a gigantic cosmos brimming with stars. And so be it that an uninviting exterior, humdrum labor, thoughtless amusements, and squabbles over money often keep it from being seen. Sometimes people forget that it exists inside them. Sometimes we do, too.

I turned to her mother: "You know what she used to say? People are beautiful, even if they don't realize it." ♦

(Translated, from the Ukrainian,
by Zenia Tompkins.)

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