

Lateral Thinking: On Love and Impermanence

Dmitri Peskov

Beginning a few years ago we experienced a pandemic and the world stopped for a bit, and the dance world stopped with it. But not entirely. People continued to dance as they always have and hopefully always will. But the dance world as we have once known it—the theatres, the lights, the shows, the fundraisers and the galas have all stopped, or at the very least, paused. Those who were ahead of the curve, did better: dance filmmakers, interdisciplinary artists, bloggers and to some degree scholars of movement.

During that time, I made two dance films: *This Blinding Light* and *Whatever Makes You Empty*. I was lucky because I knew a videographer, because I had quite a bit of private footage from my last trip to Russia and because I still had a space where I could explore movement: my Snow College dance studio.

Dance is of the moment. It disappears in its performance and wherein lies its beauty. Dance film is not of the moment. At the very least it is a recording of a moment. Most times it is also much more than that: an edited and compressed version of a particular world.

My world is often a melancholy place populated by strange outsiders and ghosts. It is a world of limbo. After all, I am a Russian born citizen who moved to Switzerland at the age of thirteen, then lived in the Chicago area for almost twenty-five years before moving to Manti, UT. How could my world be anything but transitory, unstable, and dream-like? And dreams are not always pleasant.

It took a lot of effort to make these two films and now they exist and that is all there is to it. So, along with filmmaking, I turned to writing. I began to write in Russian as I felt compelled to acknowledge my origins while living in a world that temporarily shut itself down. It was as if I wanted to look back at my life and take stock of it. Take stock of it from the very beginning. In the beginning was the word, and for me, that word was

Russian.

This is one of my stories, "Dry Water," written during the pandemic. Please feel free to skip through it and go straight to the English translation.

Сухая вода

Детство Егор Потапов провел в землянке. Пока мама работала в лагере, он сидел на сырой земле и играл с кастрюлькой. Иногда сверху на нее падал солнечный луч. Егору казалось, что луч был особенным, волшебным. Он стекал по внутренностям тела, очищая от грязи и всего ненужного. Становилось чуть-чуть легче. Например, когда мама убегала к реке, чтобы спрятаться от него под водой, он уже не кричал: «Мамочка, ну пожалуйста, ну не надо...» А просто стоял на берегу и шептал: «Свет, свет, свет...» Тогда она выходила на берег и, дрожа всем телом, молча возвращалась в землянку. И еще—однажды Егор с мамой ехали накатере в ближайший город, чтобы встретиться с каким-то начальником. Егор облокотился о дверцу, она внезапно открылась, и он упал в воду. Плавать он еще не научился. Тогда мама вытащила его за волосы и сказала: «Осторожней, маленький. Глубоко здесь.»

Если у них кончалась еда, а еда у них кончалась часто, он держался только водой. Мама уже не пила, а он пил. Закроет глаза и представит, что в ней содержится все, что нужно телу. Потому что вода и свет—это одно и то же. То есть вода—это более грубая форма света.

Когда их землянку наконец-то откроют солдаты освободительной армии, мама уже целую неделю будет неподвижной, и от нее будет плохо пахнуть. А Егор будет сидеть, облокотившись о настил, и очень медленно дышать. Воображение спасет его от неминуемой смерти.

Больше он не будет никогда думать ни о землянке, ни о маме, ни о лагере, ни о солдатах. Только в самом конце, состарившись и лежа на больничной койке, он снова увидит ее. Она мягко возьмет его за волосы и потянет куда-то вверх. Тогда он скажет: «Мама, мы что—космонавты?» А она ответит: «Нет, сыне, мы плывем по сухой воде. И уже совсем скоро попадем в луч света. А там мы наконец-то встретим нашего папу.»

Dry Water [English translation]

Egor Potapov spent his childhood in a dugout. While his mother worked in the camps, he would

sit on the damp raw earth and play with a cooking pot. Sometimes sunlight would fall on it from above. For Egor, this was no ordinary light. It's as if it would flow down his body and cleanse it of all its impurities or superfluity. He would then begin to feel better. For example, when his mother would run to the river, so that she could hide under the water, he would no longer cry: "Please don't, please don't..." He would simply stand ashore whispering: "Light, light, light..." She would then come ashore to join him, trembling from the cold and they would slowly walk back to the dugout.

Once they crossed the same river on a motorboat hoping to meet an important man in the city. Egor leaned against the door, the door suddenly opened and he fell down. He has not yet learned how to swim. His mother pulled him out of the water by his hair and said: "Careful, my little one. Everything is too deep. Always too deep"

When they ran out of food, and they ran out of food almost all the time, he would sustain himself through water. His mother already stopped drinking it, but not him. He would close his eyes and imagine that all that was necessary for life was contained in one single gulp. Because for him, water and light were the same. Liquid was a simpler form of light. But their essence was the same.

When their dugout was finally discovered by the soldiers of the liberating army, his mother was already motionless. Her body had a bad smell. Egor was still sitting against the wall. His imagination saved him from the impending death.

Never again would he think of the dugout, the camp, his mother or the soldiers. Until the very end, when he was already old and laying in a hospital bed. His mother would find him again and pull him by his hair. They would flow upwards. "Mother, have we become cosmonauts?"—he would ask her. "No, dearest, we are swimming in dry water. And very soon, we will be caught by a ray of light. And there, we will finally meet our father."

I cannot think of many artists that I know who like to explain their work. I, too, do not want to explain what is already written. What would be the point? The text is meant to speak for itself. Still, I must point out a few things.

First, the story is based on my father's childhood. He was a son of a political prisoner and he lived in the dugout with his mother, and he was often hungry and he had an imagination that helped him survive his predicament: he would indeed drink water or (on rare occasions milk) and imagine that it contained all the nutrients necessary for one's sustenance.

Whenever I would create a dance piece that I would consider worthwhile, imaginative, and unique, my poor students who would be tasked with reviewing it would quickly label it (and by association me) as weird, dark, problematic, chaotic and confusing. And of course, on one level they would be right. Perhaps my work is indeed strange (I prefer "strange" to "weird" as I do not like to be alienated) dark and confusing. Though I also dispute these simplistic interpretations.

After all, the story above literally ends with light. And the use of the word "father" is deliberate. My father. Our father. Our Father, who art in heaven.

I never sit down to write or get into the dance studio thinking, "Well, today is a good day for creating strange and dark things." I simply sit and then I wait. Words and movements come to me as they are. Sometimes they do not come at all. Since I am not currently the victim of starvation or imprisonment or other deprivations, I do not consider what I do to be dark. It's dark to the people who experience it. It was indeed dark for my grandmother or my father. But for me, as a recorder, it's neither dark nor light. It is simply something that is a part of a world we live in. And I make a choice not to avert my gaze. Not to avert my gaze from the faces of my ancestors. Not to silence their voices that still live through me.

Sometimes when I can neither write nor dance, I draw. I draw as if I were still a child. What I draw does not copy the world, I have no talent for that; what I draw

represents an idea. A face has two eyes, hence circles, a face has a mouth, hence lines, a face has ears, hence more circles. Lines and circles. Lines are straightforward. Circles and curves are dangerous. The faces are lonely like the characters of my stories or dances. But they are not entirely deprived of hope either, because they are drawn in a very simple and naïve way. The misfits. The poets. The saints. As viewed by a child who is already an old man.

At times they morph into their forms and become pure lines and curves. Eventually lines and curves find light. Thus, I shift from desolation to hope. A line is just a line. A curve is just a curve. Whether we dwell or whether we leave, a line and a curve would still be there, still the same. This is true of nature as well. This is why I like to take pictures of flowers and trees and saturate them with more light. Nature does not care for our sufferings. May we be more like nature in our ability to endure things. May what I do help someone to endure.



Figure 1, On Love and Impermanence, by Dmitri Peskov

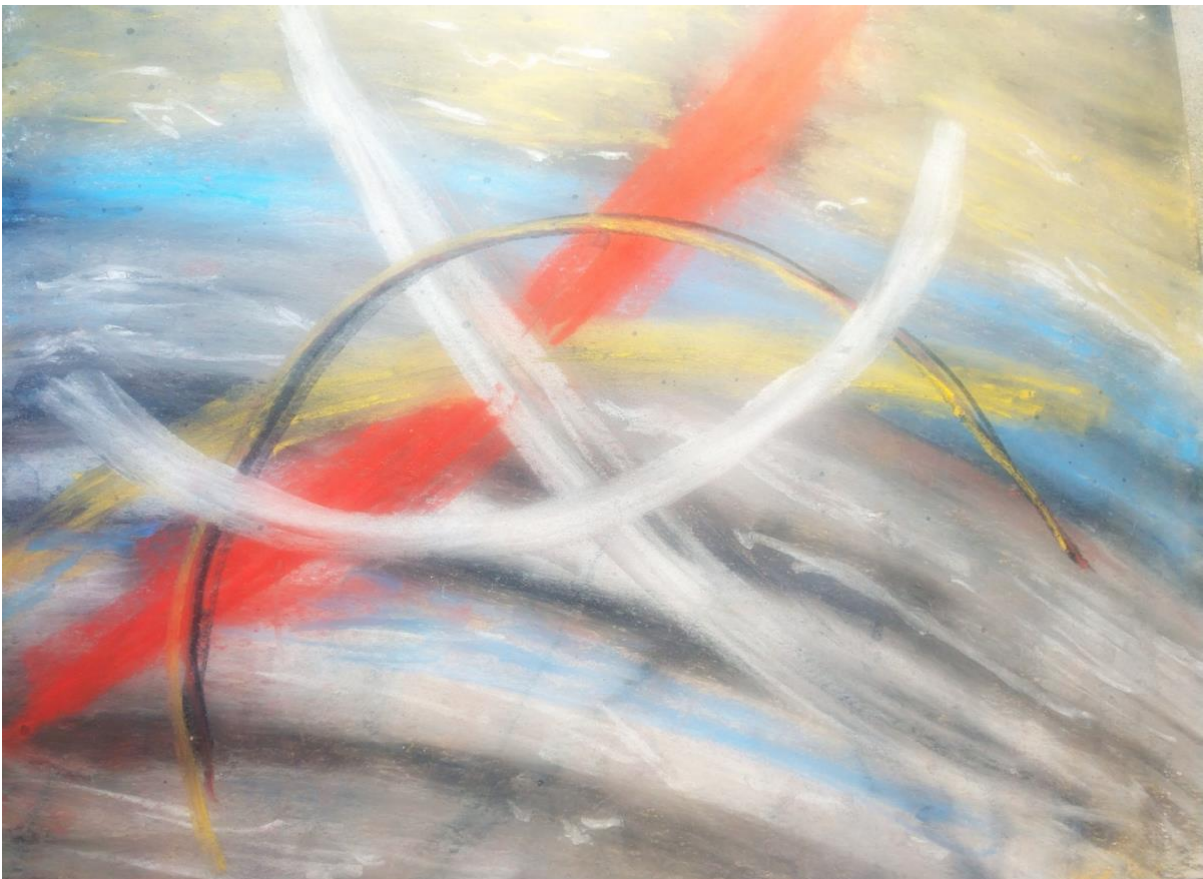


Figure 2, On Love and Impermanence, by Dmitri Peskov



Figure 3, *On Love and Impermanence*, by Dmitri Peskov

This is an essay on how I gather knowledge. I hope by now it is clear, that if knowledge is of the facts, I do not generate facts. Instead, I make things. This is a different kind of knowledge. Less analytical and less binary. It invites ambiguity. I call this knowledge by the same word, used by my father, who survived his early imprisonment: imagination. I could use other words. Words that have something to do with the spirit. Something akin to a revelation.

I submit to you that this kind of knowledge is much more important than the knowledge of facts. Facts are easily accessible. Facts do not change. Facts are mechanical. And facts are still filtered through the limited perception of our human consciousness. Facts are not really...facts, are they?

On the other hand, imagination, learning, a desire to make sense of who we are, of where we come from and where we are going, the mystery of it all—these things render us human. They are less verifiable than knowledge. And yet they are no less crucial to our very survival as a species.

This is an essay on how I link things together. My films are linked with my dances, my dances are linked with my stories and my stories are linked with my poems, photos, and drawings. I would like to believe that what links them is a very simple and very human desire: to love and beloved. And so, I end on the words of love, written a long time ago but still true to me today:

"If I speak in the tongues^[a] of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass

away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears. When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me. For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.”¹ (*New International Version Bible*, 1 Corinthians 13: 1-13)

May we continue to learn together, each in her own way and always with love.

¹ *The Bible*. New International Version (NIV), Biblica Inc., 2011.