

Marina Frenk

long ago and not really true

Translated by Lauren Beck

(Berlin, Germany, now)

I'm too petty for suicide, that would be bordering on pathos, like my shitty pictures. Besides, Karl needs me. I am stuck in my daily life, in my comparative affluence. If I still lived in Eastern Europe and weren't some oligarch's daughter, which of course I'm not, I would think of myself as rich. What would I actually do if I still lived in Moldova, or in Romania, Latvia . . . someplace I've apparently never been? I've dabbed my burns with disinfectant. Now I inspect the skin, which seems to be puckering up, and imagine the cells invisibly trying to regenerate. I throw myself onto the bed that Marc hasn't slept in for ages and push the pillow tightly against my face. I push it down into my memory: I was in my early twenties when I flew to Chişinău, alone for the first time. I exited the airplane, and on the bus to the terminal looked at the other people, many of whom gave off the impression that arriving in their home country was a national holiday; they seemed proud and relaxed, and in a way, I admired them, because I felt nothing, just the same otherness as everywhere else. I stood in the main hall and had forgotten that Moldova does not belong to the EU. "This country is not in the European Union," rang in my head. It burned, it almost boomed. I kept moving ahead in the line to passport control and began to pray: "The EU solves economic problems. The EU creates free trade areas in accordance with the will of the EU itself, which serve the long-term stabilization of the country. The EU is the country's main trade partner for the country. Why does the EU do that? Does it have too big a heart? Because that is how it receives money from Moldova, by selling crap from the EU in the marketplace in Moldova."

Reflexively, I pull the pillow off my head and gasp for air. My parents often prophesied before that if I still lived in Eastern Europe, I would sell crap from China in the marketplace or wash dishes somewhere. See, some people can see into the future, my parents can see a non-existent present by means of a non-occurred past. Obviously the other way around is better—rather buy crap from China here in the discount shops than sell it there in the marketplace. . . . But I would probably do the exact same thing in Moldova

that I do in Germany: vomit onto my canvas and pretend that it's art. How do you say "пошлость" in German, I wonder and stuff a corner of the pillow into my mouth, can't breathe, and spit it back out, coughing. There is no translation. Banality, platitude, obscenity. But none of those describes the same thing that the word "пошлость" does in Russian . . . it means much more than banal or lewd or slimy or crude, it describes my soul and my paintings. This word's meaning, "poshlost," it smells like putrid meat, tastes like wet cigarettes, looks morally reprehensible if you're moral. Its meaning can only be understood if in some regard you are still moral, because when all memories of any values are truly extinct, "poshlost" reigns, and what that is cannot be translated into German. Impossible. I press the pillow against my face again and try to endure not breathing; maybe this is how I'll finally learn to dive as well.

I stood in the line for passport control at the airport and feared its end. I decided to laugh off the whole situation and imagined that I am not me, I was always good at that. I could transform myself because I got lost at the beach as a kid once. As a precaution, I prayed my post-Soviet prayer all the way through to the end: "The EU is the country's main trade partner because it sells its crap in the marketplace in Moldova, so my parents were right, someone is always selling crap in the marketplace. Russia says: if you don't cooperate with the EU, we won't buy your wine, nyah-nyah! But Moldova only sells wine. Russia weakens the Moldovan economy: if you cozy up to Europe, we won't buy your wine, nyah-nyah! When it comes to the Moldovans themselves, one half wants the EU to be their momma, and the other half wants the Eurasian Economic Union." I learned this designation by heart in case someone should ask . . . does Moldova really want to be independent?

The EU solves economic problems. The EU creates free trade areas, I think and chew on the corner of the pillow.

"Identification!" a smoky mechanical voice demands from me. A robot that smokes?

"No, I don't have my passport on me, just my ID card," I apologize.

"Were you born in Chişinău?" asks another voice, female, not smoky, but judgmental.

“Yes, I was.” Smirks. Whispers. Snickers. “And why did you give up your citizenship?”

“Because I’m an AIWN.”

“A what?”

“Absolute Idiot Without a Nationality.”

“What??”

“Mother’s Russian, father’s Jewish,” I say, crossing my eyes. A contemptuous glance on her part. Whispers. Phone call. Marching off. Searching.

I spent one night at the airport and flew back again. I returned a few months later, this time with a passport and the understanding that Moldova was really something different from the better Europe. It is to this day, and at some point, it will probably just be Russia again, just like it was the Soviet Union for a long time, because it is too small for its own independence.

I crawl into bed with my head under the pillow and cry bitterly. What’s the point of this senseless blubbling? Why can’t I function? I don’t feel desired anymore, loved anymore, seen anymore, I don’t see anything anymore myself, except the subject of this strange painting I finished over the past weeks that I myself call “poshlost.” I’ll put it up with the other paintings in the attic since I have no gallerist, no agent, no photos of my success on Facebook. Not anymore, I died over those last few years. I sweat under the pillow, my nose runs, my tears turn the pillowcase and the sheets all wet and slimy, and I would love to dive deep underwater, which I don’t dare to do. I want to dive into the depths of our origin to look at the algae and fish and water bugs, to shiver naked in the icy water and to just open my mouth in order to try to become an organism capable of letting liquid into its lungs. To adopt this glassy fish gaze from that Catherine of my dream and to drift through the water as if in slow motion while I occasionally let my mouth gape open to swallow smaller fish. “*A fish doesn’t think because a fish knows everything.*”

I close my eyes, do not breathe, and observe my fear. Marc’s inner abyss is as dark as it is here with my eyes closed under my pillow. Darkness that is darker than it can be, blinder than blind. He does not talk about it.

I throw the pillow at the floor lamp and gasp for air. I stare at our bedroom ceiling. “What is depression?” I once asked him. “No more interest,” he answered.

His fingers’ tenderness transformed over time into an immobility made of viscous gel, enclosed by his thick skin that no longer lets anything through. He does not talk with me anymore.