

Dissecting Matryoshka

When I thought I was in Love, Love told me that He liked Slavic girls — as long as they weren't too sassy. Slavic girls are savvy, but not in an obnoxious way. Smart, but not too cunning. Love told me, pump warts of nitrogen, breasts of silicone, large gaping mouths of turgid flesh and yawning skin and dimple and freckle and cellulite. Tongues white with anti-dandruff shampoo and sagging tonsils purple urethras babushkas billowing in the wind catching on spires and bell towers ice-cold showers at six thirty in the morning because Love likes His girls freezing and desperate and dilapidating. Love likes His girls with a heady accent and a bad vocabulary and ellipses twitching under bleached mustaches. Love likes His girls with His hand down their embroidered skirts and theirs in plastic and porcelain and sunflower headpieces.

I am a doll to you, Love. Set me free.

When the Russian woman Loves she Loves like a Matryoshka doll. She opens her arms to you and she says, *come hither*. She says, *take me, I'm yours*. She says, *Love me until I can't take it anymore*. I am a city girl — I have been born into a ghost-town of black-eyes and chemical burns, and we walk these ghost sidewalks with our heads bent backward as though we could swallow the stars if we weren't starving. And Love dangles our collars, mocking, and we crane our necks toward ceilings and candelabras trying to gauge heaven. Some nights we are nesting dolls — we are rounded bodies and lactating and embroidered and pretty and we were made for men who only want us until Zeus blasts us from Hoverla. We stir borscht in no-good cauldrons and slather our bodies with sour cream.

Stefania Bielkina 2

In the Middle Ages the Mongols birthed us from dance and couch cushions and we sang for them so that their wives could scream murder. We were white sheepskin and rogue flame and we performed for Love and burned for freedom. We frequented illicit taverns and marketplaces and crossroads because freedom is not a concept — it is azure sky and textile prototype. Freedom is the vestige of a cigarette butt and beer-bottle ashtrays. Freedom is wreathed in poison ivy and haggled to your doorstep. Our world dissolved in December of 1991 and we sat there, in front of the TV, cutting ourselves with contraband cassettes and gnawing on oat and horseshoe. We bled not every month but every two seconds, bleeding out from the cracks in our palms to the cracks of the Mahogany doorways to the cracks of whips and hollow voices.

We toddle by Rusanivsky and railroad and festering river and we wait for stork to drop wailing embryo and amniotic fluid and potato vareniki stuffing and when our fathers aren't looking we slap ourselves silly with hanger and shoe horn and pink dumbbell because stupidity looks good on us. In the middle of the night we are husky voices flirting with horny Brits on the phone and we are flimsy apron and cranberry kompot and we are married off to American business and briefcase and bludgeon and Love haunts us still with His whips and contracts and emaciated certificates. Love waves at us a green-card and we queue up by the Iron Curtain and slice green veins for green dollar bills. Love banishes us instead to warehouse and shackle and factory and sometimes it feels like we haven't even left. We are on TV and magazine covers and porno specials and play dress-up with blazers and placards and nude lipstick. When we wash away clotted mascara we are carbon and ashes and whittled cupid's bows.

We are bloody handprint and sickle.

We are smelted dolls impaled on sunflower pedestals because Love likes His girls stupid and oblivious.

Stefania Bielkina 3

Love likes His girls with His hand down our embroidered skirts and so the world follows.