

Insurgent Summer

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Gardens of Resistance, Aragorn!, Artnoose, Ariel, The Anvil Review

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Themes

Work

These relations between dehumanizing work and progressive politics return over and over again, not just in LoI (for instance, with Zdenek), but also in the contemporary world of "the left." Here in the Bay Area, we have plenty of opportunities for so called political work. Whether it concerns labor, environment, or health, there is a lot of work in organizations that advocate for policy change. Indeed, there is a lot of money going toward trying to "make the world a better place" through state reform. Still, radicals have been scrutinizing the limits, and even setbacks, that are created by the very same non-profits which are often dependent on state money. As a consequence, these organizations end up compromising the Left and protecting the state.

Should politics and work be combined in this way, or should they be combined in a different way - or not at all? Can work and political change be linked? Yarostan's constant insight is that what he ironically refers to as a genuine workers' union (such as Zdenek is working to create) doesn't actually change anything. The goal of these unions is actually to replicate the same form of activity and labor that preceded the union. The only difference is the workers will be exploiting themselves rather than being exploited by another apparatus. Indeed, as Yarostan writes, Zdenek has "worked much harder and has been far more 'responsible' at his job since the strike at his plant took place." Zdenek's work hasn't changed, he is simply more driven in the drudgery now that it is self-imposed. This makes me suspicious that work and politics can be combined at all, or that the goal of our work can be separated from the practices through which we bring that goal about. - Gardens of Resistance

Proper Revolt

In the beginning letters it seems evident to me that both Sophia and Yarostan are correct and are making different points. Sophia argues that the power of autonomy and independent creative action (aka the class struggle) is the important part of the story, perhaps of life itself. In her analysis Yarostan is making group identification entirely negative. If one member of the working class is willing to act the role of the politician then are the working class dupes of the politician?

Yarostan's argument is that the specifics, or the intentions of the actors, aren't particularly important to the reality of the twenty years he spent in prison, or the not-positive impact they had on the situation that they were in control of (not to mention the world outside of their factory) or their relationships.

I identify strongly with Sabina's criticism of the events at the box factory as "nothing." I agree that the general project of the Left as it expresses itself in strikes, protest, and even revolution has been woefully inadequate to the circumstances of their times and is even more hilariously inept and inadequate to the circumstances of today. I basically believe that this shared criticism goes without saying which is why I do not participate in the debates on the matter which swirl around the projects I participate in.

Sabina voices a point of view that I essentially agree with, but it is generally read as being a statement that begins ends the conversation, which is wrong. You can both not believe in the total righteousness of your project (political or not) still participate in it. We are not Crusaders,

the revolution is not just around the corner, the means by which the world will be changed (and more importantly how we will live a meaningful life), is not simply defined or stated.

Yarostan identifies with prison guards in his first letter and is rebuked by Sophia.

I think that the thrust of her rebuke is a great challenge for those who would live the great struggle. If you can't find a way to identify with those who (to put it frankly) oppress you, then how will you survive at work, on the roads, or in the queue for a social service or a beverage? Somewhere in this question is the difficulty of the revolutionary project... words I don't really use anymore. To survive in this world there is an expectation of civil humanistic behavior.

The break from this world requires experience in uncivil, a-human behavior.

This is a tantalizing thread. - Aragorn!

The Revolutionary Project

is convenient shorthand (jargon) for the idea that one desires a totally different world, and believes that achieving that world will require a break (whether that is bloody, merely cognitive, or psychic is hypothetical). Traditionally the term revolution evokes images of storming the Bastille (France) or Summer Palace (Russia) which more-or-less makes the terminology moot during the period of online petitions and social networking protests against conditions that do not give a fuck. - Aragorn!

The Devil

We suffer for not having other rich mythological frameworks like the one that Mirna lives in. We suffer for having belief systems that only range the desert between Darwin, Marx, Smith, and Jesus. I would rather hear talk of 9/11 conspiracy than the glory of the light of Jesus or the truth of evolution. I fear the lack of new religions more than I fear the belief in things that aren't true. Truth is not at issue regardless of protests to the contrary. Money isn't real and yet we are ruled by it. Government isn't real and yet we march in line to its calls. The devil is as real as all of that and I am entirely sympathetic to Mirna's relationship to it. It is the relationship that we develop to these ideas that provide them form, and spectacular reality still trumps the world of pixies, hobbits, and dancing robots with laser beams. - Aragorn!

Sex, Incest, Love Games

An extremely wild incest scene happens on the mountain top. Yarostan smacks Yara to quell her sexual advances and is demonized for it by Mirna and Yara. It has been clear that he sees Yara as a daughter and not a potential sex partner — he has been having monodirectional arguments with Mirna while Yara tries to participate in the conversation, and he redirects her sexual innuendos into playful parental exchanges. Mirna and Yara push the envelope this time and try to force Yarostan into having sex with Yara, to decide which side he's on: the side of the tanks or of limitless freedom. They bring up a certain hypocrisy, that Yarostan applauded the abolition of social barriers when it was Sophia's story about the garage, but he maintains the mores precluding incest. This is what I mean when I say that the incestuous angle is one of the most brilliant parts of the story. Yarostan can't tell if the problem is with him or his family, and any critical reader has to examine this as well. I think one of the strengths of this book is how the question

of boundless freedom is pushed to a level found intolerable to most readers. Each of us has a line, after all.

Mirna divulges that Vesna had caught her and Yara in the middle of their "love games" and was disgusted. To free her from her puritanical views, they pulled her into bed and began trying to have sex with her. She froze up into shock, which is not unheard of when people are being assaulted. She snapped out of the shock only to fight her way into her grandmother's room and then resumed the catatonic state. So, as far as Mirna and Yara are concerned, Vesna was killed because the sex-negative morals imposed on her by her religious grandmother disabled her from expressing her true sexual desires. Mirna comes to conclude that it's not demonic passion that causes destruction: "It's only those who deny the devil who carry a sword!"

It seems that on the one side, there's Mirna and Yara (and probably a tiny number of readers) who see puritanism and the medical establishment as the things that killed Vesna, and on the majority side there's the belief that incest is wrong and that Vesna was right in opposing it. Maybe I have a third road here (I hate the notion of the middle road, ugh) that while sex-negativity does cripple almost all of us — so that we don't explore the full extent of our sexualities — non-consensual advances don't help. It's like trying to force people to be free. I believe that Vesna typifies the person who simply is put through too much in a short period of time and has too few resources at her disposal. She plays what may have been her only card — insanity — and it proved fatal. - Artnoose

Love Games and Predatory Pederasty

Yara and Tina's desires are even more confusing than Vesna's! For now, let's focus on Yara. The question of where Yara's desire originates from is a tough one. Does she enjoy having sexual relations with her family members because she has been freed from her socially constructed morals, or because she was raised in an equally coercive environment, one where incest wasn't just normal, it was practically mandatory? As Mirna tells us (though Sabina remembers the interaction differently):

It was I who taught Yara to play her love games that very afternoon.

I told her that when you returned you'd make love to all three of us. I threw Yara on my bed and showed her how you'd touch us, embrace us, hug us, exactly as Sabina had once shown me Jan would embrace me.

So Mirna is the one who taught Yara her love games. "Love games" is an interesting phrase. On the one hand, it has the totally innocuous reference to role-playing. This is an absolutely healthy sexual desire and practice. (Let me pause from all this meandering for a sec and say: Woo! Up The Kink-Friendly Anarchists!!) On the other hand, it's remarkably similar to the language of predatory pederasts today. Sexual abuse is often referred to by the perpetrators as games. Similarly, one of the red flags of sexual abuse teachers and caretakers are taught to look for in children is early sexual activity. Common examples are children trying to perhaps inappropriately touch or kiss other children, often on the playground in a game setting.

However, even in today's broken society, some amount of childhood sexuality is considered perfectly normal. Not every child who plays doctor is an abuse survivor, and as we are all likely aware, masturbation is common even in infancy. So expression of sexual desire very young is

not necessarily worrisome. These varied but related behaviors are often hard to distinguish as an outside observer, and unfortunately I don't have any clear answers or opinions about a hard and fast rule to adhere to when trying to decipher so-called healthy from unhealthy responses. In fact, part of what I am trying to point out is how futile that label is. No outsider can ever be certain of an other's perception. With children raised to be just that, children (as opposed to a youth like Tina - treated as an adult and capable of making her own decisions no matter her biological age), there might be some socially imposed limit to their understanding of sexuality. Going back to Sabina's version of her sexual relationship with Mirna:

Mirna and I were only two years apart and I didn't play the dominant role. The seduction was as mutual as the most reciprocal love depicted in any poetry. The mutuality of our love condemned the ugliness of all the brutalizing one sided relationships in the midst of which it took place.

[...] Our love had nothing in common with all those. It had no blemishes.

So from at least one perspective, this was a relationship embarked upon by equals, whereas I wouldn't bank on the fact that Yara's relationships with Slobodan and Julia were made equally freely.

Often children who are being abused go on to unintentionally abuse others. The abuse victims often teach other children the same games they themselves are being taught. In fact, abusers are occasionally caught by this fact. One child teaches another child a game that they don't quite know how to (and often to) hide and get found by adults who try and figure out where this game was learned in the first place. These original abuse victims often grow up feeling shame and guilt about these interactions that they initiated, feeling as if they were perpetrators themselves. These things are complicated by the relative innocence these children have about sexuality as a whole, and specifically sexual power dynamics, causing a weird dual victim/perpetrator identity or alternating feelings of resentment and guilt. (This fact becomes even more muddled when hypothetically considering a world where child-on-child or child-initiated sexual activity would be seen without judgment, because then even if the original initiation by an adult was harmful or unwanted, the child-driven activities could possibly be somewhat untainted by coercion, and thus not a shame-inducing thing? For now, though, let's stick with a comparison between this world and Perlman's world.)

My point in all this is that just because Yara has made the choice to have a sexual relationship with Slobodan and Julia, doesn't necessarily mean that decision was a completely free one. In fact (speaking of Julia and Slobodan) we have no idea what they want. They are almost never given a voice, even through a third party filter. If we are to seriously consider the question of childhood sexuality, how can we do that without knowing what the children think or feel? We have no way to gauge how freely they are engaging in these activities and how much is coercion or a feeling of inevitability. - Ariel

Time line

In LoI there are many people to keep track of, and many events are out of chronological order. Perlman also kept the events vague, probably partly because the order of things looked very similar all over Eastern Europe, but also perhaps because being unable to pinpoint the exact location

means that readers are more likely to reflect on the events as global, rather than pigeonholing or isolating a specific nation. Buttressing this interpretation, it is difficult to tell whether some of the events are historical or metaphorical.

1941-44 Nazi Occupation

Near the end of the Occupation, when he is fifteen years old, Yarostan's parents are abducted by Nazis and he flees to the city. To get by, he steals and sleeps in various places, including the carton plant. When found out, Titus and Jasna protect him from the foreman and he becomes a member of the Partisans: the insurgent People's Liberation Front clandestinely opposing the Nazi Occupation. The Partisan organizations were primarily Communist, which makes sense of the pressure put on Yarostan to "go straight" (stop any larceny), so that the organization isn't implicated or endangered.

1936 "The Revolution"

"The Revolution" took place nine years before Yarostan (orphaned and newly arrived in the city) shows up at the carton factory. It is the highlight of Luisa's life of rebellion, and the lens through which she interprets later uprisings. She had just met Nachalo and his daughter Margarita (who is a few years younger than Luisa). Luisa becomes pregnant and gives birth to Sophia. The three also meet George Alberts, who becomes inseparable from Margarita, who then becomes pregnant. The Revolution, which is described as the invasion of their city by the army, is reminiscent of the 1936 Spanish Civil War. While many Balkan anarchists went to fight against the rise of Spanish fascism, there is no indication in Letters that they are anywhere other than in Eastern Europe at the time. Shortly after "The Revolution," Margarita gives birth to Sabina and dies in childbirth. A few months later, Nachalo dies battling the "combined forces of the army, the landowners and the church." Fourteen years later, Manuel describes these same events to Yarostan while they are in prison, having been arrested shortly after the "revolutionary victory against the army."

1944 The Rebellion / The Barricades

Yarostan is put off by the hostility at organizational meetings between "comrades," but nevertheless enjoys the three-day uprising (when the People's Front together with the city's workers fight to expel the fascists, and the city is "liberated"). Many people cheer as Communists show up with tanks, provoking one of Yarostan's more biting comments:

"But if we fought to free the city, why did we - thousands of us in the streets, as you say - cheer and dance when the tanks and soldiers of the 'liberation army' marched into the already liberated city? If we fought to liberate the city, why didn't we turn our guns on the new occupiers?"

Shortly thereafter, Yarostan is introduced to Luisa, then in her late twenties, twelve year-old Sophia, and nine year-old Sabina. Luisa teaches Yarostan to alter his narrative of the Rebellion from one of pure vengeance for his parents, to an analysis of the changing power relations of the city.

1948/49 The General Strike, The Carton Factory Takeover

This was a back-door coup of the existing communist leadership. Marching into Zagad's office with Yarostan, Claude claims they are representatives of the "plant council." These events are representative of the larger-scale events of the time, which was the break between Tito and Stalin, replacing bureaucratic communism (Soviet-style leadership) for autogestion, or workers' self-management. Whether it is or is not a substantive change is in large part the argument of the entire first few letters, as Yarostan describes the empty husks of people that populate the so-called workers' state. In a moment of good humor, Adrian suggests to Zagad that he come back afterwards for his job, eerily foreshadowing the reality that nothing is going to change, or certainly not change for the better.

Yarostan is arrested after the uprising as a saboteur, and meets Manuel in prison, who prompts him to reconsider his perception of the Revolution and Luisa's story. As Luisa saw it,

"We were overwhelmed by external forces, by 'statists' and by the 'fifth column.' At no point was there a trace of rot at our own core. Maybe a few, very few, of our militants made some mistakes, but they were minor and insignificant, and everyone makes mistakes."

While Yarostan focuses on the inherent and generalized "rot" of the so-called workers' state, there may have been a fifth column (anti-revolutionaries hiding within the revolutionary apparatus) very close by. George Alberts (evades imprisonment and his family (Luisa & Sophia, arrested and detained for two days) is released almost immediately to emigrate to the U.S., probably Detroit (but again, the lack of specifics as to location is intentional - as the point is perhaps most useful when generalized). There are hints, here, that Alberts was well-positioned to make a deal to secure the safety of his family: workers at the carton plant had already cast suspicions upon him, and he was able to fit easily into his new country (with a job and a place to live).

1953-1957 Yarostan is released from prison for the first time

Yarostan seeks out Jan, and stays with Jan's family. He becomes a bus driver, marries fifteen year-old Mirna, and in a few years, Mirna gives birth to Vesna. Toward they have their second daughter, Yara. Around Sophia sends her first letters to her old Eastern European comrades, conveyed by Lem. Lem is arrested after delivering the letter, and Yarostan is arrested before he gets home to receive it. Mirna, attributing to this letter the previously-mentioned "strange power," destroys it but memorizes the return address. Yarostan refers to this era as one of a re-emerging moment of possibility, perhaps in reference to the anti-Soviet movement in Hungary, violently crushed by the Soviet invasion of Budapest in 1956, but which stimulated political idealism in non-aligned communist nations such as Yugoslavia.

1965-1968 Yarostan is released from prison for the second time

After eight more years in prison, Yarostan is released (this time, he says, "broken"). After about two years, he comes back to life, excited by Yara's protests at school against the disappearance of her teacher. He writes his first letter to Sophia, who in turn describes the student movement and urban rebellions such as took place in Detroit in 1967. By 1968, students were protesting throughout the world, including Yugoslavia. There were also a number of uprisings and protests in communist states, including Yugoslavia in 1968 (which Perlman wrote about in his 1969 pamphlet, "Birth of a Revolutionary Movement in Yugoslavia").

Some of the themes we've left out...

Memory: "It's funny that Yarostan keeps referring to the time and place of my birth," [Sabina] said.

"He wasn't even there. It's as if his memory were an extension of Luisa's."

Illusions: The union apparatus acted as puppeteer. Union politicians infiltrated the strikes, prepared the spontaneous demonstrations and lectured about the solidarity, power and determination of the working class. It was our role to confirm our solidarity by reciting our scripts, to demonstrate our power by gesturing and to show our determination by making faces. The play was educational: its main purpose was to instruct the audience about their lines, gestures and feelings. The feeling you still express today; the illusion of autonomy the fusion that we were defining our own projects and making our own decisions, was precisely the illusion the play was designed to communicate.

Politicians: A member of a political sect had given a speech calling for "picket lines and demonstrations to support the wildcatting assembly plant workers."

He had been applauded. But then one of the strikers had given a speech explaining that picket lines and demonstrations would only attract the police, whereas what was needed was "wildcat strikes and occupations everywhere; we don't want demonstrations called by politicians; we don't want picket lines manned by politicians; we understand that such tactics are maneuvers through which politicians tie their ropes around our necks." He had gotten a standing ovation. Someone had shouted, "Hang the politicians with the guts of the capitalists."

Drugs: Radicals who are Tina's age today might think me "maimed" in that respect as well. That explanation would be false because my generation of radicals (there were pitifully few in that generation) explicitly ranged narcotics among the weapons of the oppressor. The anti-utopia I grew up with was a "brave new world" of nodding imbeciles kept in line by tranquilizers and kept happy and padded by narcotics. I simply can't stomach those of Tina's peers who today consider the imbecilic nod of an addict the supreme revolutionary act... My "No thank you" was an expression, not of prudishness, but of genuine hostility.

Story

Realistic political discussions enmeshed within the plot add to the story's appeal to me. There are always a few conversations going on between Sophia and Yarostan at any one time: their shared and separate pasts, current events in their lives, and their discussions at home with the other's previous letter. Sophia's first letter is comprised mostly of the story and arguments surrounding a group reading of Yarostan's first letter. Sophia brings up topics such as the institution of the family and the role of workplace organizing, and these sorts of relevant political discussions continue throughout the book in the way that they continue throughout the span of an interesting life. - Artnoose

Yarostan's letter describes an entire town of laborers rejecting the new state and calling it out as precisely the opposite of what they had fought for. He describes the change that he begins to see around him, and differentiates it from his past project with Sophia. Previously, the workers listened to politicians and followed directives from above, which turned the slogans that the workers carried into symbols for something that was not what the workers controlled or decided.

Now, the workers are listening to the politicians, but rather than carrying their slogans they are deconstructing the language of the politicians and making decisions on their own.

They are on a journey with an unknown outcome, and no longer exist as a mere appendage acting out the strategy of a larger entity. - Gardens of Resistance

In this second set of letters, a conflict gets drawn out that I think is a fundamental theme: the subjectivity of shared experiences. At this point in the book, Yarostan and Sophia are already beginning to acutely disagree about events that they both experienced in years past—twenty years, mind you. These aren't small squabbles either. Yarostan essentially tells Sophia that the strike in the carton factory, the event that she has held to her heart for all these years as the pinnacle of her life and the beginning of all meaning, was at best a puppet show and at worst the beginning of a descent into an even more repressive government.

The popular uprising that both Sophia and Yarostan participated in as teenagers ended for Sophia as a suspiciously quick emigration to the West, while for Yarostan it was followed by years of imprisonment only to be released into the totalitarian arms of the "people's" society. Sophia's experience ended in the midst of the excitement, while Yarostan had to endure the backlash of the uprising.

Yarostan even goes so far as to call Sophia "an imaginary person celebrating an event that never took place."

One specific argument that comes up between the two is that of Yarostan's marriage. In Sophia's first letter, she upbraids Yarostan about his conventional family structure and nomenclature. The response in his second letter is to commend Sophia for her refusal to "compromise with this institution" but at the same time to ask whether she has refused to compromise with wage slavery also an institution she loathes. Snap! - Artnoose

Yarostan sees himself in the workers who guard him while he is imprisoned; he claims that these guards did not dream of this role in society, implying that it is a concession and a giving up of their dreams to do so. He wonders about the pivotal moments for each of them that created this divide,

Was our point of departure the same, and were we at some point interchangeable?
How much has each of us contributed to what each has undergone? If a guard ever dreamed, was it of prisons and camps that he dreamed, and was he my jailer-to-be already then?

Sophia argues that "points of departure," or pivotal moments, are not that important for the shaping of one's identity but that instead, the starting points were actually different altogether. It was always the commitment of those in power to manage society and to move up through the ranks to do so. - Gardens of Resistance

A separation twenty years in the making begins to be bridged. In Sophia's 4th letter we see that the letters between the two are beginning to concretely alter Sophia's perspectives. In Yarostan's 5th letter we see the change in him as well. His tone softens somewhat and he mentions "critical appreciation," telling Sophia that he sees these letters as an expression of friendship and not an attack.

Sophia's influence on Yarostan at this point is made clear in that he accepts Jasna's invitation to see lectures by Vera and Adrian because of his correspondence with Sophia. Yarostan's main remark about the lecture is that the audience applauds Vera but hisses at Adrian. He doesn't understand this because he sees them both as politicians and therefore not any different from one another. He lambasts the notion of politicians who are "on our side", as being just like the prison guards who fellow prisoners would claim were "on our side." He says that people who think in terms of good politicians and bad politicians "can no longer imagine any freedom other than the freedom of the prison guard."

Yarostan divulges in this letter that the newspapers at the time played a large role in the suppression of the Magarna uprising. This explains his hostility to Sophia's work on newspaper projects. During the Magarna uprising, not only were the newspapers reporting lies in service to the state, but even at their very best they were acting as intermediaries between workers, which precluded direct communication between workers themselves. Yarostan says: "Locked into the world of representations, the reporters couldn't see a struggle against representations as anything other a struggle between one representation and another." Journalists, like politicians, rely on the perpetuation of their specialized roles even when these roles are at odds with liberation. - Artnoose

The letter in which Sophia freaks out about Ted and Tina is my least favorite. There is a certain amount of situational comedy that just doesn't speak to me. I understand being confused and making dumb decisions under stress and that there is some kind of humor in that, but over seventy pages of Sophia's schizophrenic behavior (and her erratic thinking about her behavior) was just disturbing. I never enjoyed watching Three's Company either. - Aragorn!

Mirna's mother is portrayed as an extremely religious old woman, from whom Mirna has picked up a lot of superstitions and language. Mirna (and by extension Yara and Yarostan) often refer to people who submit to their own desires as devils. What starts to come to light in Yarostan's sixth letter is that while Mirna's mother might have been somewhat nutty, she's also a very conservative woman who discovered that not only was her husband having a relatively open affair but also that her children were physically intimate with other children and each other. As is custom in this book (perhaps reflecting cultures that place less value on linear, rational reasoning), rather than saying something specific like, "Hey, stop having sex, ewww," she shakes her broom at them and says cryptic things about devils.

From this Mirna takes the strange concept of a "devil's price," that is, the suffering that a person has to endure if she indulges in a desire in any way. Mirna is sure that her own sexuality caused the disappearances of her brother and her neighbor's father. The causality is dubious to a western mind and seems more like shame she got from her mother. It also supposes that sexual freedom and economic liberty are related. Jan thought that when capitalism was overturned then he and Mirna would be free to love each other, and when the strike was inconclusive, he told her to lock her feelings away. - Artnoose

So why doesn't Mirna, the champion of desire, make sense to so many readers? Presumably, it is her belief that so-called unintended consequences can be attributed to a person as intentions, so that Sophia's apparently accidental forays (from her early prison release to her sending Lem on his mission) are ultimately explained as Sophia's vicious revenge and resentment. So, what?

All of a sudden, the consequences of actions aren't relevant? What happened to the whole of idea of the "Road to hell being paved...?"

Mirna continues on to say that there are no coincidences.

My whole life's meaning is built out of such coincidences! [...] Marbles experience coincidences, Yarostan. People experience meanings. Don't you know the difference?

Here, she also touches on an important theme in this book, knowing the difference between people and things. With regard to an object, a consequence of an action may be static and predictable, but with a person, a consequence of an action has contextual meanings attached to it, meanings that are continually re- visible and not subject to the same constraints of time and space. Mirna's alternate reality is one that challenges anybody to take a deeper account of themselves when trying to explain their actions, and prevents the typical, banal rationalizations that people use to justify their lives. - Gardens of Resistance

The scene with Lem remains for me one of the most memorable scenes in the book, maybe because I have primitivist fantasies and am fascinated with various, off-beat sorts of escapes from civilizations (see the Beales from Grey Gardens and Chris McCandless's fateful trip to Alaska). After being held and tortured for two years by the Eastern European government that he considered his political ally, Lem was led to reform both his belief system and his political identity. He subsequently denounced Civilization, although his separation is mostly in his mind, since the property he lives on is hardly wild (it belongs to a friend of his), and he is supported by weekly food deliveries, etc.

As Lem recounts his story to Sophia, he seems at least somewhat lucid, though he is clearly unfit for dealing with society at large. He dwells on the importance of the "inner light." Unlike his portrayal of Mirna, which I think is at worst ambivalent, Perlman is much more demeaning in the portrayal of Lem. Still, I can't help but see parallels between the two and think that the different representations of these figures are mostly contextual. Perhaps it is one thing to come from a culture of mysticism, and another to try to return to it in a fit of rage and abandonment. - Gardens of Resistance

Yara returns from a kid-only week camping and tells of love games she played. Perhaps they are sexual, perhaps they are merely affectionate. She doesn't describe them in detail but says she learned them from Mirna. This leads Mirna to describe her own sexual history as a parable about having sex with the devil. She accuses Yara of killing her sister Vesna and then begins beating her. It's a very strange scene, and most people, including me and apparently Yarostan, see it as Mirna being delusional and abusive.

Yarostan, confused by all this, begins recollecting his second term in prison and how he had never before understood the tremendous pressure Mirna had been under, with a full-time factory job, two small children, ill parents, and a sense of guilt that she had caused trouble for everyone she had ever loved. He had also never thought about what life must have been like for Vesna: taunted by school children, keeping house while her mother worked all day, being forced to deliver packages to a father whom she blamed for everything, and living with an insane grandmother who called her whole family devils all the time. It is no surprise that Vesna suffered some sort of breakdown which led to her being fatally treated for brain injuries that simply weren't there. - Artnoose

Characters

Yarostan and Sophie are the people whose letters form this book. The two met twenty years before these letters are written, and were then separated by the emigration of Sophie's family and by Yarostan's extended prison stays. Their relationship begins when they are young people, entranced by the desire for and expectation of dramatic social change. Sophie, years later, reaches out to Yarostan, and years after that, he responds, and they begin a regular correspondence, involving both their families and old and new friends, challenging their memories of events they had in common, and inspiring and aggravating each other as to current choices they make. Yarostan is the more pessimistic of the two, having seen the changes in the people that Sophie only has positive memories of. Sophie deals with the western world (her family immigrated to the US), and reflects on how the west is more subtle and insidious in its repressions.

Luisa is a political matriarch, impressing many people (including Yarostan) with her rhetoric (at least initially). She is Sophie's mother, lover of many of the men in the book, wife in all but name of Nachalo (Sophie's father, who dies before Lo7 starts). She is a dedicated member of the Left, with all the strengths and weaknesses that that implies.

Sabina is the daughter of George Alberts and Margarita. Arguably Sophie's alter ego, she's the person that Sophie wished that she could be, more adventurous and self-accepting in every arena, sexual to political.

Mirna is Jan's younger sister, Yarostan's wife, mother of Yara (alive) and Vesna (dead), daughter of a superstitious peasant mother. She frequently makes choices based on intuition rather than rationality. In the course of the story, she transitions from rural to urban, from traditional peasant to consumer/capitalist, and demonstrates some of the costs of that kind of transition.

Yara is the second and only living daughter of Mirna and Yarostan. She creatively and playfully pushes the terms of politics and morality to new levels and challenges Yarostan to reimagine the boundaries of his ideology. She is part of the most inciting scenes in Yarostan's later letters, scenes that keep many people from being able to fully embrace this book.

George Alberts is Sabina's father. He met Luisa, Nachalo, and Margarita (Sabina's mother) through political meetings and the four became inseparable. Shortly before the carton plant takeover, Alberts is fired. Although he does participate in the uprising, he is not arrested. He is inexplicably able to get Luisa, Sophie, and Sabina released from jail. He then arranges for their emigration to the U.S. and somehow manages to pre-arrange a job for himself in the U.S. as a high school science teacher. He lives with Luisa until Luisa figures out that he is trying to fit her into the role of wife, then he packs up and leaves with Sabina. Sophie never sees him again (she can't stand him and considers him an opportunist and pedagogue). He teaches Sabina science and sets up a large lab in their home. Eventually, he is labeled a subversive at the high school and is fired. He then starts a business that is connected to the military.

Jan Sedlak is a serious catalyst in Yarostan's life: he introduces Yarostan to his sister, Mirna (Mirna and Yarostan marry); he gets Yarostan work; invites him to live with his family when Yarostan gets out of prison. He is a part of the carton factory takeover and a consistent voice for uncompromising revolution—which can't come fast or strong enough for him. Jan is, to some readers, the purest of those interested in fundamental change, the one who is least confused by the way that rhetoric gets used by people who have ulterior motives.

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Notes as they appeared in The Anvil Review #2 special insert: Insurgent Summer was an on- and off-line cooperative discussion, held during the summer of 2010, of Fredy Perlman's epistolary novel, *Letters of Insurgents*. These are brief notes based on those discussions. And thanks also to

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