

Медведь; Oiseaux (Bear; Bird)
Shannon Deep

The three a.m. raids, creeping into your kitchen lit solely by the bleached light glaring weakly from over the stove. Our warm feet crackle and slap humidly on the star-cooled linoleum. The windows are open to the moist night, the breeze doughy and clean like the center of a loaf of bread. I pluck dark cherries out of a plastic bag and drop them, heavy and dolorous, into a faded yellow plastic bowl. Ten plump drops, their skin swirled like drying blood, still glistening from their recent rinse in the sink. I count each aloud as I plop them into the bowl, one through ten. I count them in Russian, your palm pressed to the small of my back.

“*Adeen*,” I say. I mumble, shy.

One. One cherry. The most beautiful blood clot, smooth like a seastone.

You affirm, “*Adeen*.” Strong and sure.

I roll another stem through my fingers. “*Dva*.” Louder, for this one is the easiest to say.

Two. Two cherries in a faded yellow bowl. Two people in your kitchen. Two bed-warmed hands on me— my back, my arms, my neck.

“*Tree*.” And another cherry plunks dully into the bowl. I am embarrassed that I cannot roll my R’s.

Three. The number of languages between us, the number of “dates” we’ve been on, the number of times we fell back to sleep this morning.

I give each cherry a foreign name. “*Chetirie*,” I say, like a low bird. (“*Che-TI-rie*,” you correct gently.) My English tongue is rough over the cherries’ smooth skins. I am trying to learn, but every word seeps reluctantly from my mouth as my tongue prods them, tests them, feels all the wrong angles. Russian is an oblong language; bits of every word stick out of my mouth the more I try to contain them. They are silverfish-quick. I can bring my cupped hand to

my chin but still they will rain all over the counter, all over *adeen, dva, tree, and chetirie*, prim and plumply tucked away in their yellow bed. The cold mercury words will tumble down my nightgown; you will move your foot a second too late and your toes will feel the moist chill.

Russian is not at all like French.

In French, my mouth is pretty. In French, my lips are quick and round and my tongue is easy. French feels like spitting glass pebbles. The words crunch in my mouth, tossed from the back of my throat to the tense space behind my teeth. I do not need to roll my R's in French; I can crush them like ice between my molars, gargle them like salt water.

You do not like French; you studied it in high school but the flashy language never appealed to you. It is too unsure, too fleeting. It crumbles in the mouth and falls over the lips and chin, peppering the front of your shirt. French is too inconsistent for you, sounding at once both heavy and thin. Sharp and voluptuous. Flexible. Brittle.

You with your routines, you with your lists. You who likes it when answers are right or wrong, likes solutions sprung from logical conclusions—you prefer the solidity of Russian, the broad-shouldered language. It is born fully-formed from the mouth; it needs no time to find its legs, gain its bearings. The syllables are blocky, unadorned, simple and powerful. Flat like a punch. Stocky like a seated bear.

When I try to speak this sturdy language, my mouth rebels. Where are the wings? my tongue asks. Where are the feathers? Where are the delicate points and razor thin curves? My mouth—used to birds—finds the introduction of this bear to be the ultimate betrayal. I have counted four cherries so far, fighting for every number.

Then I accidentally skip five.

“*Shest*,” I say instead.

Another cherry nudging its corpulent friends. But you make me fish it out; what about five? And my mouth is dry and empty. There is no five behind my teeth.

“Pyat,” you exhale.

“Byat,” is what I hear and what I say, but I mean *five*. Fingers: faint but distinct points of pressure on my spine. Days: I will be staying. Times: you’ve had to remind of the Russian word for five. *Pyat* blocks tumble. The tower will not stand.

Now *shest* can return, freed of its misnomer.

Then with the suddenness of a curtain rising, *syem* and *vosyem* tumble from my mouth like twin acrobats. I see them in my head as compact, dark, little Russian men with swoopy mustaches. They wear matching leotards and are moderately impressive trapeze artists. (*The Sensational Syem and Vosyem! Soaring Siblings from the Soviet!*) I can always remember them, *seven* and *eight*; they feel naturally sequential, like brothers who look alike or even your yearbook picture from one autumn to the next. They are graceful, clipped. They sound like French.

Nine and *ten* are almost the same way—they sound alike, addendums of one another, flawed reflections—but unlike my Soviet acrobats they are furtive, constantly slipping through the spaces between my teeth before I can notice they have escaped. You have to prompt me on both *devyat* and *desyat*, and ashamedly I drop the terminal cherries into the bowl. They land with a thick, fleshy plop on top of the others.

Carrying them to the kitchen table, I watch the fruit jiggle slightly with each of my four or five steps. They twitch together alluringly, like a large bustle of a chiffon dress. You sit down next to me, having opted for a sandwich and a mug of amber-colored tea. I prepare to eat the cherries; one through ten, *adeen* to *desyat*, knowing that their skins will burst in my mouth

with a clean little snap and their purple-red juice will stain my stumbling tongue and clumsy lips
like crushed flowers on the sidewalk. Tasting the sounds. Hoping that their essence will root
and flourish, making my mouth remember.