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The Last Chicken in America
 by [Ellen Litman](#)

From the Other Shore

A Review by Elaine Blair

Alyosha Kamyshinskiy came to Pittsburgh from Leningrad some years ago with his wife, two teenage daughters, an advanced degree, and a love of art museums and "gentle poetry" ("a sleigh, a moonlit trail, the melancholy trot of a troika"). In America he put together a fragile life for the family that has since fallen apart: his daughters -- one of whom dropped out of college -- don't bother to look for jobs, his wife has died of cancer, and his boss has fired him. He pays the rent with welfare checks and dreams of moving to Chicago to live with his twenty-seven-year-old girlfriend (a former classmate of his older daughter).

He is still seriously debating this possibility at the end of "About Kamyshinskiy," a story in *The Last Chicken in America*, Ellen Litman's collection about a community of Russian immigrants in Pittsburgh, but the reproachful voice of his late wife rings loudly in his mind: How can he even think about abandoning his daughters? Though the story ends inconclusively, one guesses that he will not, in the end, leave Pittsburgh -- he will stay put and eventually get an inferior job and muddle through at least the next few years, much as his fellow immigrant friends do.

The twelve stories in the collection take place in and around Squirrel Hill, a historically Jewish neighborhood in Pittsburgh where many Russian immigrants have settled (in real life as well as in fiction). The immigrants of Litman's Squirrel Hill all seem to know one another, and often reappear as minor characters in each other's stories. These stories, spare, realistic, sometimes gently satirical, are told from the various points of view of old widowers, middle-aged divorcees, unemployed engineers, and resentful college students still shackled to their parents by economic necessity.

The book begins in the early 1990s, at the height of Soviet and post-Soviet emigration, and follows some of the same characters for a period of about ten years. During this time, the community prospers. The residents slowly fan out into the "better streets" of the neighborhood and then the suburbs surrounding Squirrel Hill, and come to feel confident that when their young children or grandchildren grow up they will slip easily into middle-class American life. In the story "What Do You Dream Of, Cruiser *Aurora*?", Liberman, an elderly man just arrived from Leningrad to join his daughter and eight-year-old grandson, is devastated to find that after only a few years in the States his grandson Pavlik speaks Russian with an American accent; Pavlik's mother, meanwhile, is already looking into SAT tutors. But ambition and drive are qualities that remain in the background of

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Litman's stories, and characters who display them flagrantly, like Pavlik's mother, are satirized as materialistic boors. Litman is interested less in the Russians' collective success than in their personal bewilderment and disappointments.

Half of the stories in *The Last Chicken in America* are narrated by Masha, who graduated from high school in Moscow shortly before her family emigrated to the States. She lives with her father and mother, an engineer and high school teacher, who both collect welfare because they can't find jobs. The three of them pass their desultory first year in Pittsburgh, recounted in the book's title story, going to English classes, looking for bargains at the Giant Eagle supermarket, and bickering. Because she barely speaks English, Masha's social world is initially confined to the few other Russian immigrants her age in the neighborhood: Lariska, who dispenses questionable romantic advice drawn from the pages of *Cosmopolitan*; Yana and Mila, a catty pair of twins from Donetsk; and her cagey new boyfriend Alick, who is also, it turns out, the boyfriend of another girl in Philadelphia.

In later stories about Masha's family we learn that her mother has had regular, debilitating episodes of depression since they moved to the States, that her parents have no luck finding work in their fields, and that, after a stint cleaning houses for cash, they have to settle for lesser jobs than they had in Russia, as a nursing home aide and mechanic, respectively. These are, of course, far from the worst jobs that immigrants have had to take, but like Kamyshinskiy and other middle-aged characters in the book, Masha's parents take the setback hard, and they often seem forlorn and defeated. Her father contemplates leaving the family temporarily to take a better job in Kansas, but doesn't feel up to it ("I can't jump around from city to city. I'm not a boy of twenty anymore"). Whatever energy and optimism propelled them to leave Russia seems, by the time we meet them, to have been spent. While looking after the child of an American family, Masha is embarrassed to spot her parents across a crowded mall:

I saw a couple stop: bundled-up, middle-aged, their faces drab, a hint of discontent and kidney stones. My father saw me first. He prodded my mother, who at first looked startled and then elated. They waved to me. I made a brutal face that meant *Go away!*...

We watched them withdraw into a side street, two comical figures, stepping timidly on the icy sidewalk.

Litman's immigrants seem hesitant and irresolute, temperamentally unfit for the adventure they have chosen. This impression is echoed by the stories' plots, which often hinge on actions not taken. In "The Trajectory of Frying Pans," Misha, a computer programmer in his late twenties, has dated nearly every eligible young Russian woman in Squirrel Hill, but none of them have held his interest for very long -- he still misses the high school girlfriend he left behind in Moscow

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years ago. He becomes enthralled with a married colleague, but when she returns his interest and invites him over to her house while her husband is away, he finds that he can't go through with the seduction:

Her eyelids were daubed blue, and I knew she had done it on purpose, for me. But it didn't look good; it looked pathetic. And it made me feel sad, the thought of her getting ready for me like that....

I angled away from her hands and her face. The sadness was gone, and now all I could feel was the tickling of violence. The ailment was in me. I wanted it, the screaming and the smashing, the broken plates and picture frames.

I had to leave before it happened. There were errands, I said, some shopping I promised to do with my mother.

The story "Russian Club" catches up with Masha a few years after immigration, when she's studying at the University of Pittsburgh. Nearly all Russian students at Pitt study computer science, but Masha is tempted by Slavic literature, the more so when an attractive professor from Moscow, Victor Harlamov, temporarily joins the Pitt faculty. Masha is the only Russian student in his class on Russian poetry, and, as they talk in their native language after class and become friendly, she is happy to find someone who feels even more estranged from the cheerful American students than she does. Victor vehemently dismisses them as "soulless," and also scorns the practical-minded Russian immigrants of Squirrel Hill. He urges Masha to go back to Russia and study for a degree from the Moscow State University department of philology, which has the most distinguished program in the country for the study of literature and linguistics.

She's drawn to his vision of a life devoted to literature and a return to her beloved Moscow, but the Russia she remembers is different in at least one crucial respect from the country that Victor glowingly describes: a Jewish student like herself was almost never admitted to the prestigious philology department. And in any case, she can't imagine breaking the news of a reverse emigration to her parents. When she hesitates, Victor grows cold toward her, tells her she may as well study computer programming -- "I'm told it's a good job for immigrants." In fact, she does.

In the rare instances when characters act impulsively, it only highlights their general, sometimes comical tendency toward caution and indecisiveness. The day Kostya Kogan leaves his wife to move in with his mistress in "About Kamyshinskiy," he spends the morning and afternoon wandering around Squirrel Hill wishing he could return home. When Misha the programmer applies to business schools, his vision of "liberation" from Pittsburgh is "a college town in a wintry

Midwestern state." Perhaps this conservatism is the inevitable, belated reaction to the radical break that Misha and his neighbors made with their old lives; certainly it underscores how far adrift they feel in Squirrel Hill. Litman writes about their dilemmas with wit and sympathy. We feel her sympathy most strongly at the endings of these stories, which sometimes slip into sentimental tones.

"Russian Club" rushes forward at the end, summarizing the rest of Masha's college career. She never speaks to Victor again after the Russian poetry class ends. She sometimes wonders "what'd become of Victor," but, though she could easily find out the answer from a classmate, she solemnly tells us that "I never asked." In "Dancers," a newly married wife has an unrequited crush on a friend of her husband's, a dancer who lives with the couple for months before leaving for a gig in Canada. Seeing that she's devastated at the dancer's departure, her clueless husband promises her that they will visit the dancer next summer in Montreal. But "come summer he would forget" about Montreal, the author tells us in the last lines of the story. "They both would forget." Will she really *forget*? Not literally, surely, but she will not always feel as sad as she does now.

Many of the stories end with a quick look into the future, showing life to have resumed its normal rhythms. Through these conclusions Litman seems to be trying to offer her characters consolation: they may not be happy in the present tense of the story, but she can at least project them into a future that will be somewhat better -- not because they will have done anything to change their lives, or because anything good will happen to them, but simply because the acute pain of recent events will have passed. When that's not possible, they fall back into the past. "On a night like this you can pretend nothing has happened yet," Litman writes at the end of "About Kamyshinskiy." She is describing a middle-aged couple, friends of Kamyshinskiy. The wife is in the middle of chemotherapy treatments, the husband weighed down with worry about her illness. But for now, "it's just the two of them in the rainbow of fluorescent shops, in the round dance of streetlights. Many years ago."

The immigration of Soviet and Russian Jews to the US in the 1980s and 1990s already has its own small body of literature in English. Litman, who grew up in Moscow herself, is one of a group of young writers from the former Soviet Union to publish novels or stories in the last five years. The group also includes Gary Shteyngart ([The Russian Debutante's Handbook](#), [Absurdistan](#)), David Bezmozgis ([Natasha](#)), Lara Vapnyar ([There Are Jews in My House](#), [Memoirs of a Muse](#)), Anya Ulinich ([Petropolis](#)), and Olga Grushin ([The Dream Life of Sukhanov](#)). Litman's book, with its large ensemble cast, offers the most expansive and the most detailed view of Russian immigrants' experiences, but certain kinds of scenes and characters and observations recur, in different ways, in many of these books: unemployed fathers, neurasthenic mothers, infantilizing ESL classes,

the benevolent condescension of American Jews toward Soviet ones, the materialism of many immigrants in the community, and a painful sense of duty to one's struggling immigrant parents. That Litman, Vapnyar, Ulinich, and Grushin write in English is remarkable since they were all in their late teens or twenties when they came to the US, old enough that mastery of literary English can't be taken for granted.

All the novelists who write about this wave of immigration face the problem of how to render spoken Russian in English. Their solutions run a spectrum from ordinary idiomatic English to ungrammatical fresh-off-the-boat burlesque. Vapnyar and Ulinich write dialogue in clean English, Bezmozgis gives the voices of his older Russian characters a Yiddishy inflection, and Shteyngart, who is particularly inventive in this respect, does everything from transliterating heavily accented speech to using unusual syntax and rhythms to convey foreignness and Russianness indirectly. But Shteyngart's novels are wildly plotted comic picaresques, well suited to flamboyant and improbable voices.

Litman, writing in a tradition of minimalist realism, doesn't risk cartoonishness. Instead, using turns of phrase that are not quite in the American idiom -- sometimes more terse, other times more formal than one would expect of English speakers -- she manages to suggest something of the cadence and the subtle humor of the Russian conversation that the characters are supposedly having. Their speech is occasionally punctuated by phrases that seem to have been translated directly from the Russian. "Firs-and-sticks!" the young professor exclaims while waiting in the cold for a bus. "Eat, Grisha," a wife urges her husband at a dinner party, "drink and snack." These expressions sound strange to the American ear, but some of Litman's readers will be able to hear the Russian language through the English.

That Litman has abandoned her native language adds a note of elegy to her depictions of Russian immigrant life, demonstrating that she, at least, has moved out of the community and into the wider world. And eventually so does her alter ego, Masha. In the last story of Litman's book, "Home," Masha briefly returns to Pittsburgh from Cambridge, Massachusetts, to be a bridesmaid at her old friend Lariska's wedding. It's been about nine years since Masha's family arrived in the States, and several years since she left Pittsburgh. At the opening of the story Masha is driving from the airport to her parents' house, and observes that downtown Pittsburgh

met us with a jolt of electricity and the wet glint from the rivers. I could never properly describe it, the way it spilled in front of you, the lighted tips of its buildings, the disco blue of the new stadium. It seemed impossible not to like it.

This unprecedented affection for her American hometown seems a sign that the city and its immigrant world has in fact loosened its hold

on her -- it's no longer a trap but a pleasant place to visit. We soon learn that she has not only moved to Cambridge but given up computer programming to study for a Ph.D. in Slavic literature at Harvard. She has an American boyfriend and American friends. Though she wonders if she will ever have the "boldness and fluency" of Americans, she can no longer imagine a life in Squirrel Hill. She is skeptical of Lariska's plan to marry a distant cousin, Zhenechka, and move back to Squirrel Hill:

Like most Russian men, Zhe-nechka had antiquated views of family. He'd cheated on Lariska, and he would cheat on her again. For a person of his background, cheating was normal. "I give it six months," I said.

My father said, "Like you know."

"I know enough to avoid the Russians."

"Sure," he said, "You just study them in college."

Studying literature is still an exotic pursuit in the eyes of her parents and their friends in Squirrel Hill -- admirable, but reckless. They would think the same, presumably, about a career as a novelist. The fact that so many young Russian immigrants have recently published books in the US speaks to the quick pace of Soviet-Jewish assimilation. It also suggests something about the evanescence of the Russian-speaking community. In most of these books there's at least a hint of nostalgia for the entire immigrant experience and a sense that it is finished; most of those who would leave Russia have left, and a good many children will hardly be able to speak Russian by the time they grow up. The old neighborhood still exists (Lariska is moving back there), but it appears to us in these stories as something that has already been gently entombed in the past.

Elaine Blair is the author of [Literary St. Petersburg](#), published earlier this year.

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