

Reflexive Essay

Homework—Hopework

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Pasha Tretyakova

What is possible when a home is not home because home is love and love contains hope? Do you not have hope? Does your place of origin hang around your neck like a problem? In the wake of the war that Russia has been perpetrating in Ukraine, with the full-scale invasion beginning on 24 February 2022, the author negotiates in this autoethnographic essay with performative elements what it means to see, love, lose, and have hope in your home.

Keywords: autoethnography, home, hope, image, Russia

for my cat

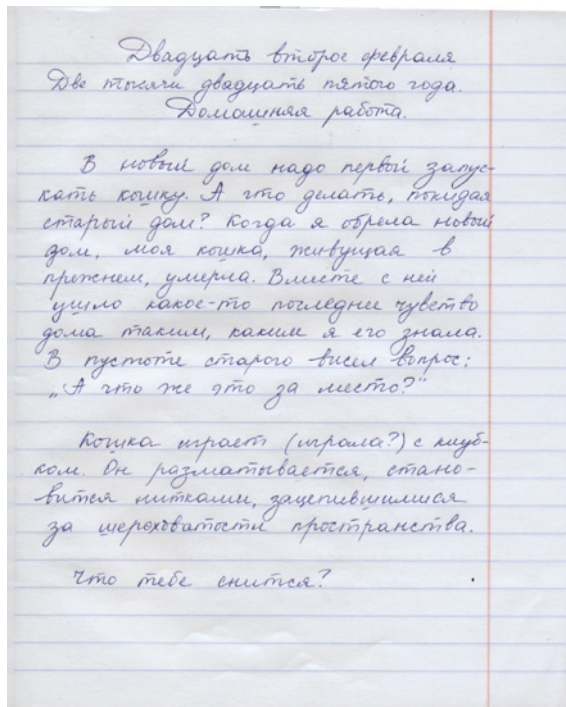


Figure 1. Pasha Tretyakova, *Homework—Hopework*, 2025. © All rights reserved, courtesy of the author.¹

22.02.25.

My cat died. It lived at home.

In the texture of this loss I feel the threads of many more.

There is a folk belief in Russia that when moving into a new home, you have to let the cat in first. It rids the space of evil spirits, I think. I've moved away from Russia, I have a New home. But no cat.



There's a fear that seems to be waiting for me to get off the airplane, to meet me at the airport, to hug me, to welcome me, to take me home, and slowly to settle in my mind and body. I try to run, to run away from the here and the now.

Everything is congruent. My impulses match up with the environment. I want buckthorn tea? Here's buckthorn tea. The patterns in me and the patterns around me are in synchrony. As comforting as the synchrony is, it makes me feel as if nothing else in the world exists. Just home, just me in it, with it.

It's like being a parallel line to your surroundings. Things run so smoothly, without the knots and yanks of culture-shock discomfort, that one never has to wake up. Slide along on the ice rink of home. Keep moving. Glide. The maneuvering will come naturally.

Leave the rest at the door. *Оставляем за скобками. Не сюда, не надо.*

But because of the fear that first holds me by the hand, then hugs me around the shoulders, then carries me, I slip and slide on the ice towards something further away. To balance on ice, you have to concentrate, bodily. But I am afraid to see a reflection in the ice and thus look look look, with every fiber, elsewhere. Feeling nowhere. Every once in a while, I fall flat and look up and see patches of the sky.



Figure 2. Pasha Tretyakova, *Homework—Hopework*, 2025. © All rights reserved, courtesy of the author.

What does one do when home is so configured to be constantly rearranged into fear? Where is the problem—am I the problem? Is there hope in the cracks or only a wind that will make you catch a cold? Our states of wakefulness—awake—awoke. The sky is blue.

Land of cold and sad, I say. The place I call home is a problem, in many ways. Or too many. Is it a problem to me? Even when I say 'Russia,' I think 'gorod N.' At the end of the day, home is just *gorod N.*²



I have been home on and off since the beginning of the war. (*Well, in 2014—when it actually started—I was still in school. By 2022, when we all started counting, I had gone abroad.*) Some longer periods of being there I called 'living in *gorod N*' and some shorter ones 'visits,' but the lines between the two were confused. Over these periods, I started taking zoomed-in pictures of my city. It felt strange because it used to be something I'd never do: bad-definition pictures made for low-quality Instagram aesthetics. But I was drawn to it, cropping reality to only capture things that were pretty. Occasionally, things I found interesting. My camera-vision remade the place I found emotionally intolerable when viewed as a whole. And this way I could put together something that I found beautiful, if nothing else. And make myself at home in that, safe. Without army-contract billboards, without Z-marked caps and stickers.

I printed the photos.

I sewed them together.

It looked very strange.

As if I lived in heaven.

Like the red pen of a school teacher marking mistakes in your notebook, the red threads pull out something you don't want to see.

Writing it out now, I see that this behavior is something I myself might label a 'problem.' Looking away is what Russians are faulted for most—the morally questionable territory of just going on. So, I spell out the choices for myself, remembering my endless therapy sessions from the summer of 2022. 'Бей—бегги—замри—смирись.' 'Fight or flight' is a reaction I knew well. But not 'freeze or fawn'—play dead or appease. They made sense then, convincingly mapped onto my disquieted self. When I google the terms now, I learn they are neatly arranged under the umbrella of 'trauma responses.' But in July 2022, my therapist had given me a print-out, pointed to 'fight—flight' and said, 'You are here.' And then she pointed to 'freeze—fawn' and said, 'You need to move over here. That is safety.' The place where you make some peace and carefully keep going. Talk about culture-specific therapy.

I tried to be attentive to the expanses. The big sky, the big water—the things I love. I stared and I took pictures, and I tried to fly myself into them. I zoomed in to be closer. Freeze the scene, the moment, and yourself in it. Then use it as a stepping stone.

In my New home, I am experiencing something that I find confusing: belonging. Brought about by a sense of agency, of being in the right place, and sustained by comfort and familiarity. It's like the warm air of a supermarket gushing towards you as you step in from minus 20° Celsius. It's startling and a little nauseating—how could this much comfort exist? You will be drunk on it in a second. Can you no longer fight then? I worry about being strong.

I now look at the old pictures. Pretty pieces frozen to be something safe. Put together, they form a puzzle. What of? The irony dawns on me as I look at the sunless photos. I spend a lot of time disgusted at the efforts of the Russian government to distract people from the war, to entertain them. But what did I do when I put on their shoes? I looked at the sky. I looked away. I'd go home to pet the cat.

I am not guilt-tripping myself. I remember clearly how rare it could be to find an island of safety. Now I look at my visions because I can — I am not falling head-first into the overwhelm of 'trauma responses.' Some feeling has returned to my limbs. 'To perceive is to be the movement, not the object' (Adnan 1986: 32). I can move between 'freeze—fawn' and 'fight—flight,' but only once I start looking. I had learned to deal peace like a deck of cards. Face down. No more than four each. But I don't want to anymore. I have a flight to catch. And a cat to bury.



Figure 3. Pasha Tretyakova, *Homework—Hopework*, 2025. © All rights reserved, courtesy of the author.

An image of a crumpled piece of paper has been wandering my dreams. No. Of a hand crumpling a piece of paper into a ball and then letting go of it. The paper slowly unbunches a little. Neither here nor there, ball nor flat.

Grief is a tongue-twister. You think you've smoothed it out. And then the day starts again, and it's all messed up, tied up in a knot that is lodged between your eyebrows and one that is at the bottom of your stomach and one that yo-yos up and down between your throat and your chest. It's not really a solar plexus anymore, it's a shadow plexus. A place where something you can't grasp dwells. Something that follows you, won't leave you alone. Comforting, maybe, because it keeps you company. But like a black hole it sucks life in and traps it. And it makes you feel like you can't get out, either.

All these terrors I have found inside. Coming out of the numbness of years.

'Russia is a terrorist state,' goes a chant. It is hard for me in my heart to agree with this. I guess it's my sense of belonging, of love, of care that holds me back. And that makes me wonder: are the terror in me and the terror of the state connected? Do they come from the same place? Are we, too, sewn together?

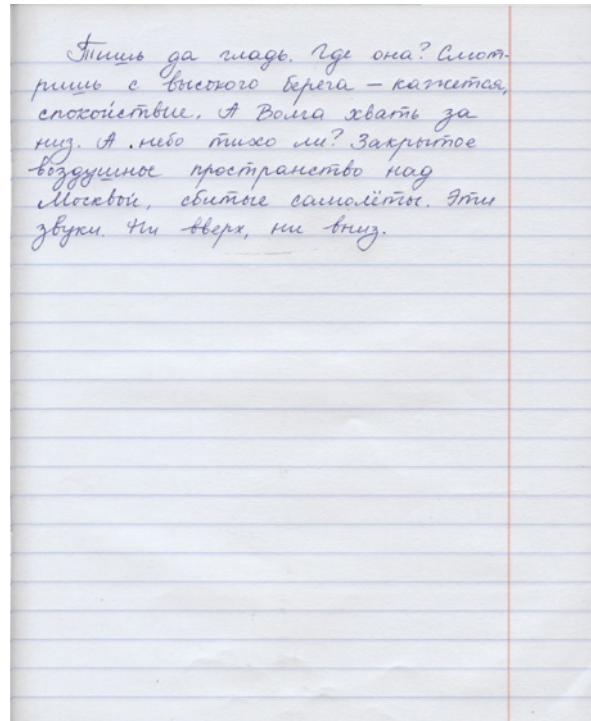
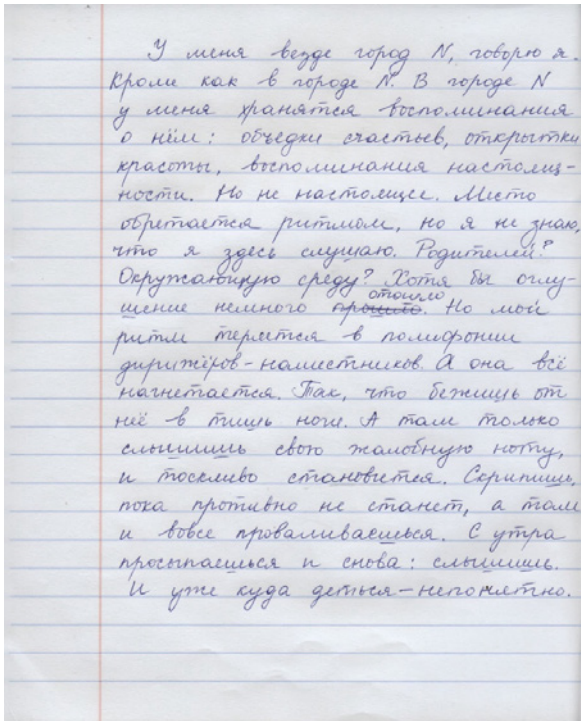


Figure 4–5. Pasha Tretyakova, Homework—Hopework, 2025. © All rights reserved, courtesy of the author.³

Home is where your people are—yes. But it has taken me some time to figure out that home is *with* people, not *in* people. We aren't matryoshki. Recognizing a familiarity, a safe space, a comfort will make you feel otherwise.

I have tried to hold on to love. But the love that held me in place here is growing its own way. The people I love are having to live, to cope, to be and become in ways that restrict love because being becomes oriented towards fear. I don't blame them. I can be frustrated and hurt by their lack of courage. My anger is a revolt against concessions. But living in a state of unacceptance means hurting the people I love more. I can't do that.

How do I mourn the abundance of love being peeled away by suspicion, by fear, by shame, by *n*, by *n*, by *n*? I've felt how much the jagged edges of mourning hurt. Somewhere in the waiting, in the death of Navalny, in the waiting for a house search and detention, in the parties overseen by SWAT teams, in the impossibility of visibly loving the person you love, it got lost. Or trampled on? It was turning into bitterness. I was home. And I used all of my mental powers to not be there.



Figure 6. Pasha Tretyakova, *Homework—Hopework*, 2025. © All rights reserved, courtesy of the author.

How to not give yourself over to loss? Otherwise, your life becomes a memorial, backwards-looking. We have enough memorials. That's not what love is. It has to be able to move, to breathe.

Accepting loss has meant accepting that which has been lost is not what holds me in place. Finding other things to lift you—me—up. It has surprised me how much it has, in a dull-achy sort of way, hurt to see friends find their New home, abroad and not. Because then we are no longer neighbors, not by street nor by sadness. We really are far away. Every meeting is a new meeting.



Home is a place you come back to many times, where you see ghosts and live with them. Like a piece of lined paper you've written on in pencil and then erased what you've written so many times that the lines become blurry, the fibers pilling. It's a mess more than anything else. A new attempt to write shows up faint on the already gray background—the pencil lead can't hold onto the washed-out cellulose.

But we weren't allowed to write with pencils in school. Always a blue ball-point pen. And for mistakes made with ink, you need *White-Out*. You white it out, thick and meaty. You wait for it to dry. You write again. Or you forget and it stays blank. Or you write again and make the same mistake. So then comes more *White-Out*. Layer upon layer. And it all blooms into a little high-rise over the page, inflexible. But you've written with the pen is still there, buried under layers of *White-Out*.

Looking away is a little bit like that. The ink is still there, of my pictures and of the crimes of the state. I can rearrange one but not the other. I can sew them together to know that they are not the same thing, but they are side by side. To look at them and imagine a puzzle that uses these pieces to make a more hopeful picture. My best guess is that homework is hopework. My cat always loved to sit on my homework.



A few flights later, I am back in the New home. I feel lost, as if I've started all over again. During my recent visit to *gorod N*, I slumped down to the loneliness and felt its sickly warmth and melted into it and bubbled with panic. And I came back up wanting to be understood, to be held in the comfortable temperature of known-ness—my friends were there. Feeling the cold bits of bewilderment had made me scared again, made me run, run into walls. I wanted out. And when—running—I was met with the emptiness of my New home apartment, with a place so ridiculously perfect it felt wholly unknowable I felt stranded all over again. And reaching and grasping and grasping and reaching. No rhythm, no people, no space space space. Trying to kill time time time. If I didn't know what to fill it with, it meant I might be empty, too. But inevitably everything—including me—falls into place. And I pull out my pictures because they don't break my heart anymore. I pull them out of my eyes and onto the paper. When you miss something, you see it everywhere.

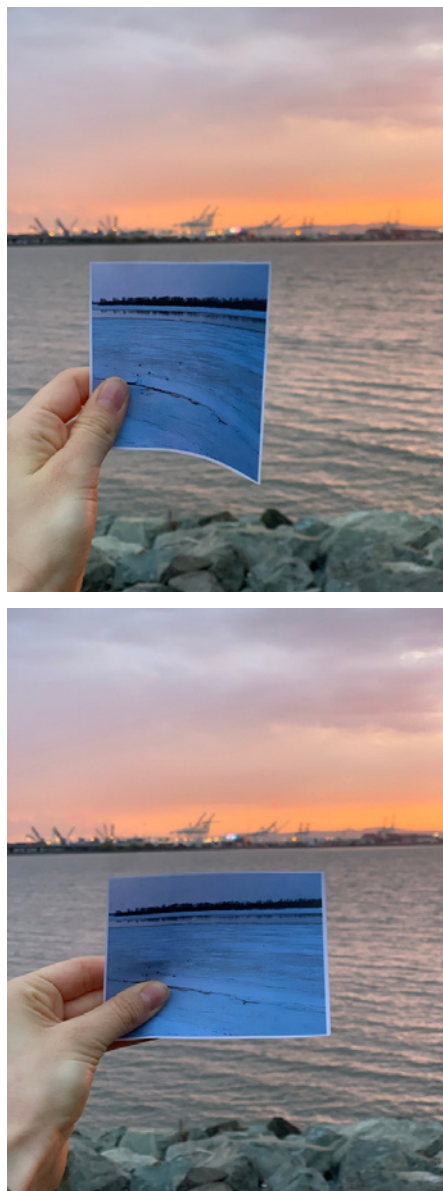


Figure 7–8. Pasha Tretyakova, *Homework—Hopework*, 2025. © All rights reserved, courtesy of the author.

The images, as they lay on the floor in front of me, scare me a little. While I'm looking at them, while I see them—I know where they are and who I am. But when I look away, they go on by themselves. But I know that they linger somewhere deep in my retinas and that makes me nervous. When I feel their prism, I feel a thin layer of home, of comfort. It's like following someone's footsteps in deep snow. Less work for me. But I don't know whose they are. I don't know exactly where they lead. I become suspicious. I don't trust the people whose footsteps I have always followed. I know where they took me —

to the hurt of February 2022 and beyond. So I don't go. I stand still and I lay. Freeze? But from that stillness, the images become more pronounced. The stillness is like a dark canopy for the movie theater of images. I used to dream of *gorod N* not as a dream but as a reality — it was there, before my eyes. And there was nothing else.



Figure 9. Pasha Tretyakova, *Homework—Hopework*, 2025. © All rights reserved, courtesy of the author.

So I don't trust the images either. But because I try so hard to look away from them—I am afraid, I am ashamed—they hold me even more. Even here, far away from *gorod N*, that city can steer me. The images creep into my peripheral vision like frames, like blinkers on carriage horses. And they make you keep going down the path. Just forward. I'm not entirely sure how to get off the path. But I think it's time to zoom out. To look down and around, not away.

My cat anchored me. She would climb up to lay on my chest and the weight of her, the warmth, her purr would make everything okay. With her departure, the last warmth of being still, the protections it afforded, has gone. Home is not a place I recognize. And in a strange way, that gives me hope. Because it lets me choose new paths, within it and without it.

We buried my cat very deep in the ground. She's holding down the fort. I am using the threads of the loss for mending.

1. 'February twenty-second. Two thousand and twenty-five. Homework. A cat should be the first to be let into a new house. But what should one do when leaving the old house? When I found a new home, my cat, who lived in the old one, died. With her went the last feelings of home

as I knew it. In the emptiness of the old home hung the question: "What kind of place is this?"

The cat is playing (was playing?) with a ball of yarn. It unwinds, it becomes threads that catch on the rough surfaces of space.

What are you dreaming about?' (Translated from Russian by the author.)

2. *Gorod N* [Eng. *city N*] is a made-up toponym which commonly appears in Russian literature to denote provincial towns (in the works of Gogol, Chekhov, and Dostoevsky, for example).

3. 'I have *gorod N* everywhere, I say. Except in *gorod N*. In *gorod N*, I keep memories of it: scraps of happiness, postcards of beauty, memories of realness. But not the present. Place is acquired through rhythm, but I don't know what I'm listening to here. My parents? The environment? At least the deafening ring has subsided a little. But my rhythm is lost in the polyphony of the feudal conductors. The polyphony keeps building. So that you run away from it into the silence of the night. There, you only hear your own plaintive note and become sadder yet. You let it screech until it becomes disgusting and then fall into oblivion. In the morning, you wake up and again: you hear it. You aren't listening, but you still hear it. And it's already unclear where to go.

Peace and quiet. Where is it? You look from the high bank—all seems calm. But the Volga current grabs from the bottom. Is the sky quiet? Closed airspace over Moscow, downed planes. All these sounds. Neither up nor down.' (Translated from Russian by the author.)

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Author's bio

Pasha Tretyakova (pseudonym, any pronouns) is an early-career researcher of anthropology with a focus on movement and embodiment. She completed the Erasmus Mundus Choreomundus—International Master in Dance Knowledge, Practice, and Heritage program through Université Clermont Auvergne, the Norwegian Institute of Science and Technology, the University of Szeged,

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