

Equipment failure

by Sean O'Toole

It's one of those mornings: head full of fuzz and a pallid Berlin sky that augurs the end of summer.

No more swimming.

Coffee only nominally corrects things.

After a few false starts, I am reading about a Ukrainian despot's empty palace.

The linear optimism and guttered austerity of modernism, which nowadays is its own kind of religion, apparently had no purchase in this guy's mind: his gilt residence is an unimaginative rehearsal of dictator chic.

I think of Saddam Hussein's gold-plated AK-47 and matching sniper rifle, Jean-Bédél Bokassa's two-ton gold throne in the shape of an eagle, also that fist crushing a fighter plane outside Muammar Gaddafi's war-freckled Tripoli compound.

Synonyms for dictator: caesar, führer, oppressor, pharaoh, strongman, tyrannizer, tyrant.

Rhyming words: castrator, collator, creator, curator, dumbwaiter.

The New York Times tells me that the style of the former Ukrainian president's Finnish-built folly is now mockingly referred to as "Donetsk Rococo".

Like.

What will they call that thatch-roof compound back home?

(I'm not home at the moment.)

I add a link to the article to my Facebook wall, along with a tart remark.

Imagine dawdling through the president's palatial retreat and – like ordinary Ukrainians have been doing since February – gawking at what political ambition and greed can amass, I write, more or less.

I briefly read other people's ironic refrains to whatever compels them.

The mental mist returns.

I should be ...

I should be what?

I should be writing.

Paintings are not books to be read: they possess neither opening lines, nor are they beset by the semantics of translation.

Where did that come from?

I don't paint.

Nor have I been to the Ukrainian village of Velyki Sorochyntsi.

"We have no grounds to say that Ukraine will be without bread," the missing despot told reporters during a 2010 presidential visit to Velyki Sorochyntsi, where writer Nikolai Gogol was born. "Our country will have bread."

I have no ambitions to visit Velyki Sorochyntsi.

But, one day, I hope to walk on Nevsky Prospect in St Petersburg, where Collegiate Assessor Kovalyov, the self-important man who loses his nose in Gogol's 1836 short story *The Nose*, strutted with his starched shirt and provincial whiskers.

Fashion mattered to Gogol.

It signified.

I used to hawk fashion once upon another lifetime ago.

Maybe that's why I love Gogol's short stories.

They signify.

Especially *The Overcoat*, in particular Andrew R. MacAndrew's translation.

The opening sentence to this 1842 masterpiece reads like a contemporary South African news report.

"Once, in a department ... but better not mention which department."

Of interest, there is another English translation of Gogol's short fiction about the miserable life of Akaky Akakievich Bashmachkin, the St Petersburg copy clerk who, like my wife, knows a thing or two about flamboyant coats and being thrifty when needs be.

It reads: "In the department of – but it is better not to mention the department."

I prefer MacAndrew's translation.

Perhaps it is that early comma, and the ellipsis.

(Dashes, I once read somewhere – I think it was in an obituary for a proofreader – are supposedly feminine.)

(I don't agree.)

But anyway ...

Malevich's primary shapes, pristine monochromatic voids, are subject to none of this diverting bullshit.

Mediation.

Translation.

Renarration.

But I don't paint, nor have I been to St Petersburg, where Malevich announced something in 1915.

And – I should be honest about this – I have never seen a real Malevich, nor can I read Russian.

Hobbled.

That's the word.

To totter.

I always stumble and stagger and lurch in front of paintings.

They are their own language.

Mostly, I find, my equipment – an Updikian caboodle of nouns, verbs, sentences, commas, dashes and metaphors, all welded together by a thing called literary style – to be, well, kaput.

Still, I should ask Lisa if she thinks a painting can possess an opening line, by which I mean a kind of gestural ground zero where thought and action find common cause and become.