

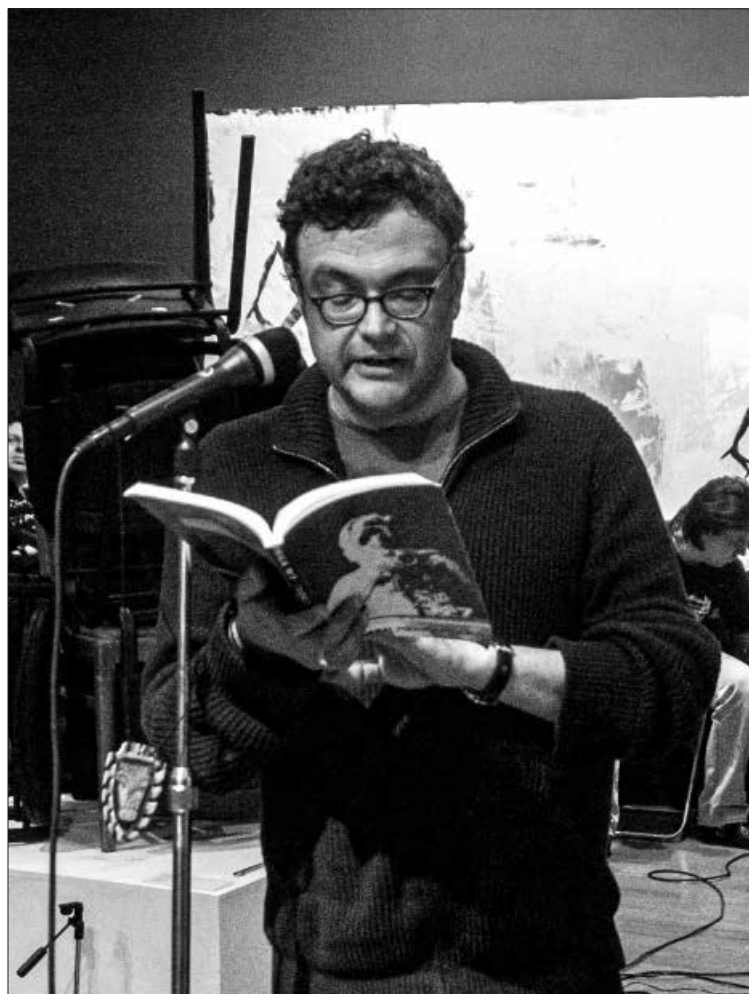


PAVEL LEMBERSKY

THE DEATH OF SAMUSIS,  
AND OTHER STORIES







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AND OTHER STORIES

BOSTON • 2020

**Pavel Lembersky**

**The Death of Samusis, and Other Stories**

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The talented Pavel Lembersky, Jewish Odessan heritage pulsing in his literary arteries, adroitly talks the Russian expat talk as he walks the American immigrant walk. Lembersky's verbal art is nothing short of a wonder. Once a Soviet teenager quickly outfitted to write original American prose, Lembersky has steadfastly followed the example of the leading lights of early Russian émigré literature—Aldanov, Berberova, Gazdanov—by refusing to trade in his Russian quill pen even after decades of living in America. *The Death of Samusis* generously showcases Lembersky's achievement as a writer of shorter fiction—a fearless chronicler of exile, a loving absurdist of desire, a paradoxist of life's endless bifurcation.

— Maxim D. Shroyer,  
Boston College professor  
and author of *A Russian Immigrant*

# Content

Humble Beginnings . . . . .	11
So Long, Dos Passos . . . . .	12
The Lost Bet . . . . .	16
Sax Solo . . . . .	20
The Foreskin . . . . .	25
2 Sisters . . . . .	37
Snoopy Goes to Kasimov . . . . .	42
Among the Stones . . . . .	49
Oleg, Mila, and I, and Honolulu, and the Korean . . . . .	52
Visiting the Girlfriends . . . . .	55
Tony + Lyuda = Love . . . . .	57
The Dead Wave . . . . .	60
Status Quo . . . . .	63
Wish You Were Here: A Few Postcards from New York . . . . .	66
Bobby the Loon . . . . .	73
some folks call it paranoia . . . . .	80
De Kooning . . . . .	83
The Death of Samusis . . . . .	88
Chronicle of a Murder . . . . .	95
Five Easy Pieces . . . . .	102
The '90s . . . . .	113
Love Gone South . . . . .	122
Rehearsal . . . . .	129
The Last Words . . . . .	136
Nothing but Tights . . . . .	140
Once in a Lifetime . . . . .	145
Cat-Dogs . . . . .	159



## Humble Beginnings

**I** was born and raised, you will recall if you peruse the society pages with any degree of regularity, in my maternal grandfather's log house in the fair town of Kislodrotsk. Humble beginnings, you might call my formative years. I call it child abuse. 100 pushups with koromyslo, no ifs or buts, prodrazverstka with DA, lend-lease, anybody? You bet your bottom Stradivarius. Times were rough (but are they ever not?), collectivization to give you one glaring example of polysyllabic madness, no sense of history, who is Liubov Orlova the benumbed ipod kids of today ask and scratch their bazookas in faux bewilderment. Whatever. They run on gastric juices alone, they have no shame to speak of. But neither did Tatiana and I. So please, no mudslinging while I wallow in nostalgia and gasp for oxygen, tovarichi.

## So Long, Dos Passos

**I**t's just that long long ago we lived in a city by the sea where in the summertime our bodies tanned brown as chocolate. We started smoking early and in July we would entertain ourselves by flipping our cigarette butts off the balcony and making bets on whether they'd land on the sidewalk or hang suspended in the leaves of the chestnut trees, swaying. The smoke from the cheap cigarettes clenched in the corners of our mouths made us squint as we played popular tunes on our guitars. At dusk we would stroll out with our lady loves. We were envied. No wonder—we were young, with bell-bottoms and bad English, we laughed with exaggerated gaiety. Granted, the Beatles had split up. Well, so what. So the Beatles split up. Her eyes were still like deep dark pools, you could drown in them.

And watching the sun come up on the boulevard? Cool kvass on hot humid nights? Not another soul on the square. We sit at the foot of the monument and read your beloved Mann. Aloud. Thomas, Thomas. We love theatrical gestures, especially on public transportation:

“Citizens, your tickets please?”

“I've got a free pass.”

Then the whole bus joins the chase, like in that Breughel, the reproduction at our dacha that winter, no parents and no electricity, the three of us drinking mulled wine out of a shared glass in the dark. We're young, you know? Just tell me one thing. Where does it all go, leaving you nothing but heartburn? Where to? Into the sand? Through your fingers? Tell me.

Hey Jude? Sang it. Sang them all. Seems like the Beatles were all we had. But now we didn't even have them.

Your first date? Let me remind you: you—hooked nose, bedroom eyes, sensitive lips, chestnut-brown hair, corduroy jacket with threadbare elbows. Overcoat—duffel. You wait for her on the corner by the candy store. She's innocence itself, a breath of air, a white-tailed fawn. . . those eyes, those eyes! Shy movements, awkward jokes, too late for the movies, too early for home, short on cash for cafes but try one kiss and it's "I'll call the police." Her relatives still an unknown—but as for you, well, papa's a doctor, mama's a doctor, grandpa's a doctor, grandma's dead, but she was a doctor too, first rank. The profession's in your blood, fine by you, all the Trachtenbergs are dermatologists. But she's from out of town, hasn't been here long, talks a little oddly, makes writing mistakes and my god can you believe she's never read Feuchtwanger? Not Wagner, wanger. The Jewish War? That's about aggression in the Middle East, right? Jud Süß? We've got a tailor named Zuss in our building. Senya. Senya Zuss.

And then there's another twist: her secret admirer, the son of someone in the Security Organs, he's aiming for the same kind of job, Mr. Designer-Label—platforms, Levi's, right jacket, right dope, *Machine Head*, daddy's Grundig—and he's kicking himself right now and hoping to put our Romeo away for a long long time with no mail privileges, but it just so happens you prefer the epistolary genre, and she just loves your epistles. See, you've got this romance-by-mail thanks to a certain carrier pigeon with a broken wing (I was in a cast for two months, fell off my bicycle) but you couldn't send anything to her address—her father was a real hard-ass. And you were in school somewhere else, they were asking three thousand to get into the med institute here and your uncle (also a doctor, but an ear-nose-throat man) could only scrape up fifteen hundred, and all fifteen hundred would get you was construction engineering and you hate construction, you

start twitching at the very words “directional angle,” you want to cure disease or if worse comes to worst study languages—read Faulkner without a dictionary, Dos Passos in the original, Ford Madox Ford like the back of your hand. And that’s how it eventually worked out—fifteen hundred gets you the foreign language institute, but in Rostov instead of here. Meanwhile there you are at the candy store, you take her hand and raise it to your lips to warm it up, and she laughs, she’s embarrassed but grateful.

But her secret admirer ratted you out, and then sicced his pals on you besides, because Security Organs are all well and good, but a good ass-stomping, excuse the prosaic expression, never hurt anyone either. A preemptive strike. In a word—bloody nose, bloody coat, she’s in tears, you’re in a snowbank. She helps you get up, you lean on her skinny elbow, try to crack a joke, but somehow you’re missing the teeth for it. That’s how your romance began. What came next? As far as I can recall—the four seasons.

Wintertime—you’re a bit ironic. Three weeks passed. It was the end of February. Another snowbank, with a bathhouse whisk in it. The neighbor lady complained: I’ve got blood pressure, and they’re not heating the place. You didn’t see each other much, and when you did you fought. I tried to avoid you together. I watched you from behind a kiosk, through tears. You would kiss, multiply, kiss. Once I was standing on the corner by the candy store; she came up from behind and put her hands over my eyes. I could guess who it was from the smell. Her hands smelled of your tobacco. She was surprised. “How could you tell?” I made some lame joke. She was in a hurry to get to class. Her Polish boots squeaked on the snow. I wonder, if I’d told her how I felt back then, how would things have turned out? Just the same, or not?

Springtime—a bit romantic. Tan raincoat, sideburns, she’s got a chignon. She pinches your earlobe, you quote Nadson, I pretend I’m absorbed in the movie on TV. *The Irony of Fate* or *No Right to Be Oneself*, I can’t remember. You got nicknamed Stroker, because all

you did was stroke her head, supposedly. Turned out you did a little more than that. You also tickled her nipples with your tongue, and her calves would go all goosebumpy. Her father taught thermodynamics, her mother did too. She's thirty-six now, the boy's about to turn ten. They say her looks are ruined, she's gained weight. I don't know, to me she looks the same as she always did.

Autumn—melancholic. What else? Secret admirer's daddy put your uncle away on a bribery count, you got kicked out of your institute, so did the dean. So long, Dos Passos. Hello construction detail. But you hated construction as much as ever, and so you decided to apply for an exit visa, and you started getting ready, little by little. You promised to come back and get her, but you didn't come back, and you didn't get her, and instead you grew a beard and bought a house with a nice lawn and started selling computers somewhere around Cincinnati. At first she cried every night, then she got over it and married her secret admirer, who had, by the time you left, finally come in from the cold. He brings home flowers every evening. Must mean he loves her. Must mean even Security Organs are capable of real emotion. . .

I open the door, there she is in her washed-out housecoat, smoking L&M's, grumbling, "Glads again, what a surprise"; out on the balcony our son is playing with the collie. I thank my lucky stars. She was and is everything I ever wanted or needed. From anything or anyone.

We hardly ever think about you. There's not much reason to. Except in the summertime. That summer you were so strange. You kept staring at me, saying "Why do you hate me?" I'd get mad: "Are you crazy in the head or what?" You'd laugh this theatrical laugh, I'd shrug, make circles with my index finger around my temple, you'd slap me on the back and say, declarative, interrogative, I don't know, "M'boy, you just don't get the joke. . ."

*translated by Jane Miller*

## The Lost Bet

**F**inally we heard the shot. Collin had shot himself. There was a general sigh of relief. The night was still young. Next up a toast for the coming year 199. . . Greg, surfer boy from California, had already managed to get on the general nerves with his camera. He was in New York for five days; when somebody told him that Collin and I had a bet—\$10,000 he blows his brains out on New Year's—Greg decided to ditch his relatives in Bay Ridge and showed up instead at our place. In case I lost the ten grand were to be paid out to Collin's sister Oona. Oona was spending the evening with Greg's relatives in Bay Ridge. She worked at a women's boutique in Soho, somewhere like Mercer St. She knew nothing of the bet.

Only a handful of the guests knew about it too (Stacy didn't have a clue): Rodger and his new wife from Mass., my nephew from Queens—his parents had dropped him off at our place and flew off to Paris—Greg, obviously, and that's it. I had been to Paris six years earlier, also around New Year's, and so I agreed to make my brother a list—fairly sizable, as it turned out—of must-sees and sound advice: like what to do when it rains or snows (Answer: pick a spot in a café, watch people. What could be better? Stacy doesn't agree with me, though: according to her there's nothing sweeter on a rainy day than the Musée d'Orsay. She's pretty obsessed with the 19th c. in general, though—you can leave her on a desert island with several oils of Delacroix and Courbet and she wouldn't know the difference.)

Greg had invited us out to California for the last New Year's: he's finishing up law school out there; in his free time (how is this

jurist-in-the making finding free time, I'm thinking) he's running around San Francisco with his semipro camcorder, shooting anything he can get his lens on: tourist-packed cable cars, the bums on Market, the lesbian parade, the festival in Chinatown, etc. We got to see all of it that New Year's Eve, with a detailed commentary track. At first I was interested, then uninterested, then I started falling asleep. Stacy kept nudging me in the right side and querying Greg in a loud voice: How often do you have these parades? Or your bums really seem livelier than ours in New York, don't they?

Now I know that this was Stacy's way of making sure I didn't fall asleep completely and thereby mortally offend Greg. She's a kind, sensitive person, that Stacy.

The New Year's we ended up spending with his artist friends in Monterey. The party had a distinctly conceptualist tinge: instead of a tree there was a stump in the bedroom with two branches. One had a green ball, the other had a red ball. Everyone got hella stoned and got down to REM, then Run DMC, and LL Cool J. One of the high moments was Stacy dropping to her knees and yelling: "Clear the intersection, now! I'm talking to you!" Turned out she had briefly mistaken the tree for a traffic light, sans yellow. Past midnight we were joined by the neighbors: they were wearing black leather and had handcuffs protruding from their back pockets. There were no more than three of them, but somehow they managed to populate the entire house. Toward the very end I remember punching one of them in the face, then driving Greg's deformed Chevy home with one hand—the other was neatly packaged in ice. Greg was rather voluble (coke plus "ecstasy" I'm guessing); Stacy was sucking her thumb peacefully in the back.

"Just keep it in mind, Al—you're way stoned," contributed Greg to the non-existent conversation. "Don't drive too fast, but not too slow, either. The main thing is to try to avoid the cops."

"Why would I want to do that?"

“That’s very funny, really, but this isn’t the time to be funny, Al. Just listen to what I’m telling you: if you get pulled over don’t start up with any kind of arguments. Think back to the worst possible fuck-up from your high school, the one they eventually kicked out for too much ass-kicking. That’s the type that ends up on the force. I know those guys, trust me.”

Driving down unfamiliar roads at three in the morning—stoned, one-handed, with Greg’s blabber on the stereo—was no easy task. All things being equal, two hands would have been better.

Why did I punch out one of the leather-clad neighbors, I remember thinking the next morning in our temporary marital foldout. Finally I remembered: it seems he was trying to chat up Stacy.

“He’s not interested in your Stacy,” Greg lectured me over breakfast. “He’s been married for almost a year now to the kid that came with him. Jealousy will be the ruin of you sooner or later. Mark my words, Al: ruin, end. Did you say coffee or tea?”

Greg had been seeing Collin’s sister Oona for something like three years. Every now and then he called me up in New York to ask how things were going generally. “Come and see for yourself,” I said, but he would get annoyed, and I had to appease him:

“She’s working, daughter started school,” I would say, though I’d see Oona about once a month at best and my information was probably old news to Greg.

How do people do this long-distance thing? She goes over once or twice a year, he comes out once or twice a year—but that’s it, isn’t it? As far as I knew she had no plans to move to California. His moving out here before getting his degree was out of the question. And then, what if he can’t find work here? A life together is a never-ending compromise—I got to figure this one out a while ago. Stacy and I—well, we’ve managed to file down the rough edges a bit, learned to understand one an-



other, I guess. Take me, for example—I'm not ready to have kids, and she isn't rushing me. On the other hand, she's been trying to get Collin to visit from New Zealand for a second year straight now—I say gladly, plenty of room, too.

Greg was just finishing setting up his tripod when Stacy went out into the hallway to usher in newly arriving friends. Greg had hooked up two additional spotlamps to his camcorder: one of them was clamped to the back of a chair, the other he handed to me and asked to keep it pointed at Collin. Then he switched on the camera and said to no one, "So. What's next?"

Collin had put on an embarrassed smile, I tried to keep calm, though I was ready—in case of forfeit—to dig into the ten grand with both hands. I was already going through the prospects: a decent stereo system? Down payment on a new car? A trip down somewhere like Indonesia or New Zealand—Collin, incidentally, has been trying to get us to come visit. Nothing wrong with Paris, don't get me wrong, but if that's all you ever get to see. . .

Collin drew a .45 pistol from his backpack and cocked the hammer.

"He's not kidding then," flashed through my mind, and I looked over at Greg, who was turning the zoom ring.

Collin hurriedly took the gun in his mouth and pulled the trigger. There was a noise. A red globule hit the wall just beside the cheap reproduction of Renoir's *Bathers* and immediately started on its way down. Collin fell to the floor.

"Let's hope that all the evils of the passing year depart, and the New Year brings us only joy," somebody said with overdone optimism, presumably Greg.

Where am I going to get the ten grand I owe Oona now—I don't even want to think about that.

## Sax Solo

This was no kind of mood; the worst kind. Tried reading. Nearly killed herself with *Madame Bovary*. Picked up *Mumu*—just about started howling. “Where is he already?” She was about to leave a note on the fridge “Put soup in microwave. I’m getting Samantha” when she heard the anxious rustle of his feet in the hallway. He was in high spirits, though. Five click pens tumbled out of his pocket, and he didn’t even wait to take off his coat, but told her exactly how he had stayed after most of the staff had left for lunch and then tiptoed all the way to the secretary’s desk and there—between the calendar and the telephone—he found the keys with a keychain like a Stop sign (didn’t stop *me*, though, he laughed), and with keys pressed into his fist he went up to the cabinet (the one with the office supplies) and back again, and he did it three times to make sure that nobody was watching, and when the coast was clear he quickly picked out the one key—out of four—opened the cabinet door and swiped the pens.

“How’s that?” he was looking at her, expecting—at the very least—a kiss to seal his triumph. She twisted her mouth to one side.

“What’s with you?” he said, throwing his coat over the back of a chair en route to the refrigerator.

“Nothing,” she said. She thought, “My husband is a clerk at an ad agency, he makes two hundred and twenty-five dollars a week, hates his job, steals pens from the cabinet to spite his boss, his fate, and ultimately himself.”

“What’s for dinner?” he said, pretending not to see her ill humor.

“Whatever you make,” her voice came from the corridor.

Then he heard the door close: at six o'clock she went to pick up their daughter from practice.

No more than a year ago—no more—her eyes filled with quiet joy as she gazed into his sloping back before the window, where he stood silently, watching the snow land softly on the car roofs below.

“He isn't like the rest of them,” she thought. “Right now something wonderful is happening inside that dear head.”

Just one year! She collected his bons mots—even the flatter ones—rewarding him each time with the bright notes of her laughter. And she shooed away the little snowflakes on his lapels every five minutes. And that was love. Six years ago, when they were married, he was a slender saxophone player, with graceful curls and promise adorning his bright head. Even a year ago she could still make out her former Erik behind the balding, pasty banquet hall musician. That Erik—a princely sapling, soft and polite, in a paisley shirt and blue jeans and fiery curls cascading to his shoulders. They met in Sochi, signed the papers in Kiev, but the wedding feast had to wait until New York, until a tiny restaurant just down the street from their apartment in Astoria.

Strolling together they sent forth a kind of radiance. Pre-schoolers offered them their gapped smiles. Cats attended them everywhere. At the pizza shop on 32nd and Broadway they always got more change than they deserved. Not that it doesn't happen to everyone once or twice, but nearly every time—the reader will agree—is highly unusual. Let's say they order two slices of Neapolitan with olives and mushrooms. One dollar seventy-five times two comes to three dollars fifty. Plus a giant diet Coke—they always got one to share—that's a dollar twenty-five. He extended a ten-dollar bill to the perennially unshaven, white-aproned Stan. And Stan, after giving the cash register a series of quick punches, counted out their change: a five bill, two singles

and a quarter (total: seven twenty-five). But it should have been five twenty-five. This happened nearly every time. At the end of the exchange Stan always winked—first to her, then also to him—and croaked, “Buon appetito!”

All of a sudden the restaurant burned to the ground—the one where he played on Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays. But someone said it wasn't so sudden. The owners, so they said, went through some sort of calculation and it was clear that the insurance money would come out three times as much as their annual take. Simple math. One Saturday he came home—not at three, as usual, but at eleven thirty—black from soot, clutching his charred sax to his chest. She heard the door creak, tossed aside *Anna Karenina*, jumped from the bed and ran into the hallway.

“What happened?” she asked. “Where is the case?”

“Burned,” he whispered, sank into a chair by the coat rack and wept. She rushed to him, kissed his moist cheeks, then climbed into his lap and started to undo his green bowtie. She had given it to him on his thirtieth birthday.

For two and a half months he looked for another gig. Finally her friend Jill set him up with the ad agency where she worked. At first he thought little about the job, then he grew to hate it. On Saturdays, when wife and daughter went to the park—or week-nights, while she fetched the girl from practice—he took the saxophone down from the closet and went to the window to play. He had scrubbed off most of the soot with a special solution. As he played his thoughts traveled high above the wet tenement roofs, beyond the dark lindens, toward a park, where snowbanks lay frozen beneath scraps of clouds. He played and his fingers just barely kept with the movement of his thoughts, and his thoughts were not of things as they were, but of things as they had been or might have been, if it had all worked out in another way, since he wouldn't have had to leave, he could have stayed and had his speech therapy degree by now—her father promised to help

with a job once he was done; could have won a camera through the lottery and gone to heaven; *preferans* with wife's friends in the summer—she could be genuinely concerned: don't sit in the sun, you'll get burned; many things would be transformed into habit—like “dinner is ready”; she—the other one—wouldn't come to him in the night so often, and then she could also laugh, not at him, but down there by the rocks; she could have loved him, and tears would come all on their own, and the lump in the throat also; Jews could learn not to torture their R's and Russians not to stutter after the third and Uzbeks not to eat rice with their hands so much. How did it go now? Kefir in the morning, first you have to shake it for a long, long time—shake well—and then pop the green foil lid with your thumb—hop. Holland cheese with tea in the evening—hop two. But that's mostly about eating. Always making generalizations—that isn't useful. Yes, there were many good things, dog poop aplenty, too. The evenings in May were cool and the wind came some place from the sea; the 1st of May tableau was really just many lightbulbs put together, and read backwards it would be Ram 1. We were all going crazy over that album, and so we smiled at one another across the falling dusk: we liked to think that the town elders shared our tastes, if only backwards, never really aware of it, but still they were in it too. Everything could have turned out differently. But it didn't, meaning, perhaps, that it couldn't have. All things being equal—that's just the way it is in math, but in life she could have broken her heel a month later, and then he wouldn't carry her in his arms up the stairs that Sunday and her eyes wouldn't shine the way they did on that night in June. And her name could have been something other than Inga, but rather Agnia, or something. But who can say—the best of times: is it already past, or is it still ahead? Is it something that could have been, or is it something that is—here and now, at this window, saxophone in hand? Who can say? Not I.

And now a hand flies up all the way in the back of the classroom—the hand of a new boy in a comic waistcoat. And everyone turns to see. And the teacher tells him: yes, go ahead, Erik. And Erik, with a nervous stutter—or is it an ancient impediment?—gets up and says in a hollow sort of voice, “I feel like the best is still the head of us!” and he turns absolutely bright red. And suddenly everyone is laughing. The teacher is laughing. And the new boy is laughing with them. And the laughter all around him grows bigger and bigger. And the laughter is at once inside of him and outside, and out the window, over by the lindens in the park, and even farther down. And he sees two figures—one big and the other just tiny—crossing the street in the falling dusk, and the two of them are looking at him, and then at each other, and the big figure hunches its shoulders and shakes its head, while the little figure is waving at him and smiling, and he waves back, nodding, still playing.

*translated by Sergey Levchin*



**P**avel Lembersky's verbal art is nothing short of a wonder. Once a Soviet teenager quickly outfitted to write original American prose, Lembersky has steadfastly followed the example of the leading lights of early Russian émigré literature — Aldanov, Berberova, Gazdanov — by refusing to trade in his Russian quill pen even after decades of living in America. *The Death of Samusis* generously showcases Lembersky's achievement as a writer of shorter fiction — a fearless chronicler of exile, a loving absurdist of desire, a paradoxist of life's endless bifurcation.

— **Maxim D. Shrayer**,  
**Boston College professor and author of *A Russian Immigrant***

**F**unny, unique and completely unpredictable, *The Death of Samusis*, takes you on a wild journey through transitional states of mind, inspired by all kinds of binaries: Russian vs American, Male vs Female, Old vs New.

— **Lara Vapnyar**, author of *Divide Me by Zero*

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**Pavel Lembersky** came to the United States from Odessa, Ukraine in 1977. He graduated from the University of California at Berkeley with a degree in comparative literature, did graduate work in film at San Francisco State University, and worked on film projects with Jonathan Demme and Spalding Gray, among others. Lembersky writes his prose in Russian and in English.

He authored five collections of short fiction. His short stories have been translated into English, German, Spanish, Finnish, and Vietnamese, and have appeared in literary magazines in Moscow, New York, Munich, Jerusalem, Helsinki, such as *Solo*, *The New Review*, *22*, *Little Star*, *Calque*, *Words Without Borders*, *Fiction International*, *Trafika*, *The Brooklyn Rail*, and many others. He is the author of several novels, most recently, *200 Brand New Shiny Cadillacs*.

Pavel Lembersky currently lives in Brooklyn, NY.

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