



Photo credit: Elena Siemens

Shabby Chic Afternoon

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This project captures, in words and images, a single afternoon in St Petersburg, Russia and Toronto, Canada. Notwithstanding their many differences (age, architecture, style, sensibility), both St Petersburg and Toronto belong to Yury Lotman's category of "eccentric" cities. Any city, Lotman writes, is a place "where different national, social and stylistic codes and texts confront each other"; as such, it is inevitably a "place of hybridization" (194). But "eccentric" cities, those situated "at the edge" – "on the sea shore, at the mouth of a river" – take this hybridization to the maximum (192). Lotman cites the example of St Petersburg, whose "spatial antithesis" (the "clear demarcation" of its space between "stage" and "behind the scenes") has been interpreted in literature as a "mutual relationship of non-existence" (197). Each of the two St Petersburg's "scenes," Lotman points out, has produced its own stories associated with particular "streets, districts, their own space" (199). Christine Wiesenthal's poem "Jane Street, January" depicts Toronto's "behind the scenes" space: "shabby corner diners"; "a plaster-cracked apartment above a pet store." The poem's story about a

bittersweet visit with friends is set against a “slushy grey January day.” In St Petersburg, the weather was a mix of sun and clouds. My father wanted to visit Alexander Pushkin’s house-museum, an attractive 19th-century mansion located on one of St Petersburg’s many canals. Later that afternoon, we went to a small café near our hotel – a less affluent neighbourhood more reminiscent of Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment* than Pushkin’s *Eugene Onegin*. I said I felt at home in this city. “As you should,” my father smiled in reply, “you were conceived here.”



Photo credit: Elena Siemens

Jane Street, January

A slushy grey January day
on Jane Street &
I hold the daffodils
stiffly in front of me:
splattered egg yokes or
perhaps artificial suns

You hold the wine

To cut through the gloomy
rush hour streets we dash past
shabby corner diners &
over muddy gutters, soggy
snow flakes falling thick as
rag paper pulp scrap
from the sky

These are flowers for your old
Toronto friends, two jobless people

In a plaster-cracked apartment
above a pet store
their Beef Wellington is rare,
the moody cockatiel is too
& they are new parents

What else would they need
this slushy grey day
on Jane Street

but a cluster of flowers, a lovely
little lemon clutch of lies.



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REFERENCES

Lotman, Yury. *Universe of the Mind: A Semiotic Theory of Culture*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2009. Print.

Wiesenthal, Christine. *Instruments of Surrender*. Ottawa: BuschekBooks, 2001. Print.