ANTHROPOLOGY AND HUMANISM

Fiction/Creative Nonfiction Third Prize

2016 Society for Humanistic Anthropology Fiction/Creative Nonfiction Third Prize[1]

How Grades Had Been Gotten for Penguins and Money

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SUMMARY *This is a story about penguins and passing grades, about the practices and ethics of informal exchange in 1980s Leningrad and 2010s St. Petersburg, and about things' incommensurability spurring stories. It is, specifically, about one dead penguin: a bird that was killed, found, bought, gifted, found, stolen, and gifted again.* [Gifting, storytelling, planned economy, post-Socialism, materiality]

This is a story about penguins and passing grades, about the practices and ethics of informal exchange in 1980s Leningrad and St. Petersburg 30 years later, and about things' incommensurability spurring stories. It is, specifically, about one dead penguin: a bird that was killed, found, bought, gifted, found, stolen, and gifted again.

It begins in 2010, in St. Petersburg, Russia, where I was collecting stories about things that people had managed to make "on the left" and smuggle out of late-Soviet Leningrad factories. These things were many and varied—from knitting needles made at the Ioffe Physics Institute to tombstones made at the metallurgical plant—and the stories of their creation often struck me as fantastical. People generally like to tell tall tales about all the funny stuff they managed to get away with. This particular story was told to me by the grandson of a Soviet counter admiral—a man named Tolya, who is the husband of a friend of mine and in most respects a stable person, almost boring: a biochemist who began his career in a classified Soviet laboratory and was ending it in a municipal firm working for the city water works.

The story is about how Tolya had once gotten a passing grade. In the winter of 1983, he was a second-year student at the Leningrad Veterinary Institute. It was exam session, and he was standing outside with his friends, smoking nervously and discussing the bird disease class, which none of them had attended with any regularity. The situation seemed bleak. The

Anthropology and Humanism, Vol. 42, Issue 1, pp 127–134, ISSN 1559-9167, online ISSN 1548-1409.
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DOI: 10.1111/anhu.12167.

professor was old and pedantic, impervious to both bribes and begging; a man who was only known to love two things in life: bird diseases, and the school's collection of taxidermied birds. And then they saw a guy walking down the street with an emperor penguin.

"Guy!" they hailed him, "What's that you have?"

He said: "It's a penguin."

"Why do you need a penguin?"

The guy didn't have much need for it, really. He was a day laborer, hired to unload frozen fish at the packing plant nearby. He'd found a penguin mixed in with the fish he was sorting; and, because the armed security of the plant was concerned only with guarding fish, and because penguins aren't fish, he was taking it somewhere. To show the kids in the yard, maybe.

It might surprise you to hear about an emperor penguin in Leningrad—a city some 500 miles from the Arctic Circle—since penguins live around the South Pole. But it wasn't wholly unreasonable: the Soviet Union had been commercially fishing the Antarctic Ocean since the winter of 1969/70 (Kock 1992:183). By the mid 1980s, this had American organizations like the Environmental Defense Fund and the National Marine Fisheries Service concerned about overfishing: "There is no doubt," a 1987 newspaper article quotes an EDF scientist, "that the Soviet fishing fleet is competing with penguins and seals" (Lammi 1987). Mobilizing its military-industrial complex to explore the Antarctic ocean, the Soviet Union established its first Antarctic station in 1956—just four years before it put the first man into orbit—and the ideological excitement of the post-Stalin thaw made both space and Antarctica into faraway reaches of the peace-loving scientific Soviet homeland. Penguins starred in cartoons, New Year's ornaments, children's toys, ice cream ads. They are, after all, pretty adorable. But Antarctica was also very far away—45 days' sea journey for super-trawlers to return to the port of Murmansk, carrying their processed catch of krill, fish-meal, oil, fish canned, and fish frozen. So there was a shortage of actual penguins in Leningrad: even the zoo didn't have any.

So, Tolya told me, he and his friends begged the guy to let them take the penguin off his hands: for the progress of science, the study of bird diseases, the good of humanity, and for all the cash they collectively had in their pockets, which amounted to the equivalent of five mugs of beer. Then they sent their class prefect to the professor, to point out that the school's collection was lacking a penguin.

"How do you have a penguin?"

"Let us not get wrapped up in the details, please!" The prefect supposedly said. "Let us turn to the practical side of the matter."

I should note here that this penguin wasn't a bribe. Indeed, the professor was known to be unequivocally committed to the study of bird diseases, and it would have been shameful to offer him a deal in which he would *personally* profit. But Tolya and his friends didn't do this. They only asked him to circumvent the rules slightly, in reward for having obtained an object of the most unimaginable deficit for the school's collection of birds.

Such rule circumvention was widely held to be ethically upstanding, so long it served non-acquisitive and communally necessary ends. Indeed, the

late-Soviet economy itself depended on people working around its rules to redistribute senseless material stockpiles and ameliorate endemic shortages: enterprises depended on their logistics personnel to obtain materials through personal connections, officially state-sponsored social activities depended on participants to unofficially redirect industrial materials, and many things in people's everyday lives—from kitchen utensils, sauerkraut tubs, and stills to tombstones and knitting needles—were made from material that had in some way been "obtained." The informal bending of rules was widely practiced, was necessary for State-sponsored economic and social goals, and was openly acknowledged. Even children's programs taught their young audiences that people need to help each other subvert the rules, because these rules themselves are irrational: a package, for example, must be delivered but cannot be released to the recipient by virtue of his lack of documents, which he cannot possibly have because he is a cat. But I have paws and a tail! the cat protests. Documents must have a stamp on them, says the postman (Popov 1980).

Scholars of informal economies note that people often accuse others of illicit deals while explaining their own involvement in similar exchanges as just "friendly help" (Ledeneva 1998). This is true. But people also tell tall tales and wild fish stories about how they got things and provided for others, striving for the communal good. And this isn't about hiding mercantile interest under a friendship veneer. It's heroic. "I had this incredible wealth," a mathematician told me, recounting that he once obtained brand new industrial nylon air filters, from which climbers sewed backpacks, by bartering them for some technical alcohol he'd swiped from work. The swap happened at the factory at night, and he left up over the roof and down the fire escape to avoid plant security, elated: "I could provide happiness to myself, to my friends! It was amazing happiness!"

It is in this system, in these ethical terms, that Tolya claimed his group to have obtained passing grades: by obtaining a penguin for the school's collection, from the man who had obtained him from the bounty of frozen fish that Soviet super-trawlers were obtaining in the Antarctic Ocean.

I wrote Tolya's story down with some skepticism, relegated to a curious footnote.

Then, in the winter of 2012, the penguin was found.

That winter, Elena Tipikina—this story's lurking coauthor—and I, and our Riesenschnauzer Bruna were planning to visit friends in Ukraine, which had stringent requirements for bringing pet animals into the country. Particularly, the requirements included a blood test for toxoplasmosis, which in St. Petersburg needs to be done at the State Veterinary Lab, located on the territory of what is now the St. Petersburg Veterinary Academy. Tipikina therefore found herself in the industrial section of town, killing three hours while waiting for the results of the blood test. Bored, and without much else to distract her, she asked around until she found one junior professor who vaguely remembered something about there being a penguin, somewhere. And, after some dedicated searching, she finally found him—in an unused classroom scheduled for renovation, standing next to two stuffed chickens and an anatomical model of a skinless goose.

Figure 1.
(Image courtesy of Elena Tipikina). [This figure appears in color in the online issue.]

Missing one wing, with the other held on with copper wire, the penguin had fared significantly worse than his storage case neighbors, who had had the luxury of professional taxidermy (Figure 1).

By the time that the penguin was found, the department of bird diseases had been abolished, merged into a department of fish, fur-bearing animals, birds, and bees; the bird disease professor was gone, and the era of his famous collection had ended: the penguin and the two chickens were all that remained. The era of obtaining and stockpiling use-values had ended as well. "From stamps, to matchboxes, to books," an old-time philatelist told me, "All Soviet people collected something. Or stockpiled whatever they could get, when they could get it: food, soap, building materials. And then all of that ended. Because lack ended: the only thing people started lacking was money."

Post-Soviet economic reforms had changed the nature of shortage and surplus, making both strictly monetary. This liberated people from needing to obtain things—and also from needing to produce them. Thus, while the penguin stood in a metal filing cabinet with a black bag over his head, most of the factories that had formed Leningrad into an industrial center were bankrupted and closed: the massive plants that had constructed ships, machines, tanks, and tractors, that had produced everything from steel and cement to ball bearings and rubber. The centralized system that previously distributed material entitlements and obligations now distributed access to surplus profit from international oil sales. And, with the price of oil hovering around $100 a barrel, thick pecuniary gobs of surplus amassed on the pipeline and were fired off into all forms of conspicuous consumption: into public street festivities, into covering capital cities' facades with a thin euro

chic veneer. Put into a revelry of appearances, profit made from the sale of hydrocarbon exhibited a predilection for form over content, which made it "corrupt": distributed by virtue of kickbacks and personal ties rather than by virtue of optimal business development.

Corruption was widely discussed around the time that Tipikina found the penguin in his metal cabinet. It was discussed by friends over dinner and by strangers on public transport, conveniently covering awkward silences: a topic upon which everyone could agree. Its bottomless logic—which, like the logic of witchcraft, cannot be disproven by the absence of proof—blended accusations of bribery and nepotism with wider conspiracy theories against vague outside forces: America, demons, international corporations. The leftwing and rightwing press both railed against corruption, accusing the other side, and a crisis in the educational sphere was often reported. Some people insisted that there were universities in which grades could never, under any circumstances, be bought, but most people suggested that they sometimes could be. First person stories of grade buying typically centered on uncontrollable particulars and purchases gone awry. A neurologist told me about the trouble she'd had with her military-reserve class in medical school: the officer teaching it accepted payment from the whole class a month in advance, post-dated the grade-slips, and went on vacation—and died there, leaving a disembodied post-dated signature for the living to deal with.

The post-Soviet reforms changed the nature of centralized distribution: from that of material entitlements and obligations to that of access to profit. The ensuing industrial collapse eradicated employment positions to which many men in late-Soviet Leningrad had previously returned from their mandatory military service: positions like industrial fishermen, mechanics, farm machinery operators, engineers. But the high price of oil helped resolve this infrastructural lack with a plethora of private security jobs, in which men used their military service skills to guard just about anything—including the Veterinary Academy. In the summer of 2013, Tipikina entered the Academy just as classes were letting out, found the penguin still stored in his dusty filing cabinet, and, with a cab waiting outside, stuffed him head first into a knapsack and walked out past the pass gate, his feet sticking out on their wooden platform. The guard stopped her and demanded to know what she had in her bag. She told him it was a penguin.

"Why do you have a penguin?"

An unbearable heatwave was gripping the city on June 17, 2013. And it irritated everyone. She's taking this thing out for restoration, Tipikina said—but no, she hasn't got any papers, because she's just the courier and because no one gave them to her; and if the fate of this fucking dead mite-eaten penguin so much troubles the guard, then how about she just unload its remains right here on his desk, and he can deal with the damn thing himself. Me, she told him, believe me, I've got better things to do with my time than drag mite-infested carcasses around in the thirty-degree summer heat. The guard, weighing his options, made a split-second decision.

The same year that this emperor penguin was killed and carried, frozen, in the hull of a super-trawler to a Leningrad fish-packing plant, to be twice obtained and installed to reign in post-mortem glory as a star exhibit in a

Figure 2.
(Image courtesy of Elena Tipikina). [This figure appears in color in the online issue.]

collection of taxidermied birds, I was born in a Leningrad maternity ward nearby. While I grew and the industrial infrastructure of Leningrad crumbled, while a new economy of glamorous consumption and monetary lack

replaced one of the shortage, obtaining, and stockpiling of things, the penguin became increasingly useless: too worthless to even be stolen—unlike the collection's other rare birds, which were gone by the time he was found, likely having retained all of their wings.

And then, three decades later, we met.

The morning of my thirtieth birthday I found this most invaluable of bird carcasses enfolded in flowers on our dining room table. Now named Anatolij—in honor of Tolya, the man who obtained him into this story—the penguin has been properly washed and lives in St. Petersburg (Figure 2).

Benjamin points out that stories depend on the rough bodies of things—they nestle in the inherent incommensurabilities of exchange, latching onto that which cannot be smoothly transferred by the flow of value to value (Benjamin 1999). Stories begin with lives that end unexpectedly, center on *such happiness* of having obtained this particular thing and no other, depend on the serendipity of having met with an emperor penguin on an industrial Leningrad street in the winter of 1983. And I offer you this story about the incommensurate exchanges to which this penguin was party, the epochs in which he was moved, and the logics and people who moved him: about Soviet super-trawlers turning Antarctic sea life into a source of cheap protein; rules being ethically circumvented and grades being illicitly obtained; about the day laborer, Tolya, the professor, the pass-gate guard—and about Elena Tipikina, who gifted me the decrepit remains of this bird, this imperial relic.

May his story serve to enfame those who have sought and obtained him.

Acknowledgment

I want to thank the Wenner-Gren Foundation for sponsoring my 2010–2012 fieldwork, upon which this article is based; the Harvard Academy for International and Area Studies for my 2015–2016 residency, during which it was drafted; and my colleagues Casey Lurtz, Samantha Goodner and Amiel Bize for helping me write it.

Note

1. This essay received third prize in the 2016 Society for Humanistic Anthropology's Fiction/Creative Nonfiction Awards. *Anthropology and Humanism* does not, as a matter of course publish anything but the first place award in this category; however, the author of this piece submitted it to the journal as regular, peer reviewed nonfiction. It was approved by our peer reviewers for publication.

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