

“Dacha: hot strawberry childhood” and “This is my model school” both explore a favorite literary theme of contemporary Russian poet Inna Kabysh: the journey to adulthood in a highly imperfect world. Much of Kabysh's poetry is written from a child's pert, bright-eyed perspective: her child narrators, often fatherless and sometimes motherless as well, are not so much innocent as resilient. Theirs is a world of frozen landscapes, burned *kasha*, and uncollected garbage. But Kabysh's young narrators endure poverty, neglect, injustice, and the bizarre vagaries of life in a collapsing Soviet Union with cheerful ingenuity, making earrings by hanging twin cherries over their ears and befriending stray cats with stale food. “Dacha: hot strawberry childhood” masterfully evokes the beloved Russian tradition of summer at the dacha, almost always a ramshackle cabin (with or without running water) where families go to get away from the city, raise vegetable gardens, and commune with nature. Inhabiting the dacha is a kind of voluntary exile from the miseries of urban life: not surprisingly, Kabysh compares dacha life to the forced exiles of the great Russian poet Pushkin in the early nineteenth century and the Roman poet Ovid (known in Russian as “Ovid Nazon”) to the Black Sea region centuries before.

Kabysh herself is a teacher, but teachers generally play modest -- and often highly ambiguous -- roles in most of her poetry. The incessantly pregnant teacherladies (вечнобеременные училки in Russian), the authors of “moronic” exams, and the psycho librarian of “This is my model school” are of a piece with the teacher who assigns a composition on Lermontov's Cosmism (an absurdity of Soviet pedagogy) and the teacher who rebukes a young student for watching too many Western films in other Kabysh poems. In keeping with Soviet reality -- an entire generation of males perished during World War II, leaving women to raise the children and administer the country -- Kabysh's authority figures, like her teachers, tend to be female: the unsympathetic, overworked director of an orphanage for the souls of aborted children; the mother who abandons young children to their grandmother's care while she schemes to marry a man with Kremlin connections; even the mail carrier who brings an auspicious letter and stays to down a glass of vodka in celebration. In “This is my model school”, the school, like the country it represents, has effectively fallen into ruin: cold, dirty, provincial, its best students forced into prostitution to make ends meet. This poem, like many of Kabysh's poems, is not so much about loss of innocence as it is a weary contemplation of the logical consequences of living in conditions of social, political, and often moral bankruptcy. The poem's final line resonates beyond the walls of the schoolyard, the pond, the birds'-eye view of one Russian landscape, addressing as it does the fate of an entire nation and its people: “God! Save her. Amen.”