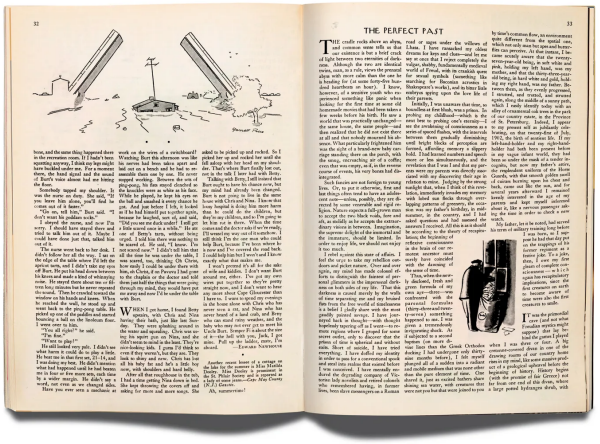
TAKES

ELIF BATUMAN ON VLADIMIR NABOKOV'S "THE PERFECT PAST"

By Elif Batuman June 1, 2025



THE PERFECT PAST

April 15, 1950

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Eleven chapters of Vladimir Nabokov's autobiography, "Speak, Memory," initially appeared, out of order, in *The New Yorker*. "Portrait of My Uncle," one of his first prose pieces in the magazine, became Chapter 3. Chapter 1, originally titled "The Perfect Past," came out last. Its opening line—"The cradle rocks above an abyss, and common sense tells us that our existence is but a brief crack of light between two eternities of darkness"—has, by now, been seared into numberless brains.

The most interesting texts often include tips about how to read them. Midway through "The Perfect Past," we find an instructive anecdote. Part 1: in 1904, a family friend, General Kuropatkin, is entertaining young Nabokov with a trick involving matches when he is suddenly called away to the Russo-Japanese War. Part 2: fifteen years later, while fleeing Petrograd, Nabokov's father is accosted on a bridge by a gray-bearded peasant, who asks for a light and proves to be Kuropatkin in disguise. Nabokov alerts readers to "the evolution of the match theme: Those magic ones he had shown me had been trifled with and mislaid, and his armies had also vanished, and everything had fallen through"—just like the toy trains he had moved over frozen puddles the following winter, imagining them crossing Lake Baikal. The "true purpose of autobiography," Nabokov continues, is "the following of such thematic designs through one's life."

"Speak, Memory" reframes life itself as a detective novel sparkling with

clues. Nabokov professed to "abhor" crime fiction, maybe because what he was trying to solve wasn't a crime but its opposite: a transpersonal, death-undoing act of recuperation. Interpreted correctly, the clues would reveal the "two eternities of darkness" as an illusion. The "walls of time" would fall away—just like the last sofa cushion in the "pitch-dark tunnel" through which Nabokov, as a toddler, would propel himself "on rapidly thudding hands and knees" before emerging into the drawing room of his family's country home.

It's a testament to cosmic synchronicities, and the thoughtfulness of *The New Yorker*, that a cartoon on the page where that passage appears shows passengers in a glass-topped "dome car"—then a new technology—ducking their heads as their train rushes into a tunnel. The cartoon on the following page seems, initially, less relevant: four ladies at a card table, one declaring, "Of course you understand I don't always have what I bid." But consider the game—and the significance, here and elsewhere, of bridges. Consider Nabokov's claim to have envisioned his memoir "according to the way his life had been planned by unknown players of games." Think of other groups of seated women: of the fates, and of table-turning. A poem on the same page, at the end of "The Perfect Past," is titled "Séance."

Séances play a role in Nabokov's 1962 novel, "Pale Fire"—which, like "Speak, Memory," is an artistic effort to undo the losses incurred by time, to find the "correlated pattern in the game." In a pivotal scene, Hazel Shade communicates with a ghostly "roundlet of pale light." After her death, the light reappears in a poem by her father, posthumously published in "the New York magazine *The Beau and the Butterfly*."

It clearly struck Nabokov as remarkable that the magazine that played a

decisive role in his American career had, as its emblem, a young aristocrat examining a butterfly—a cartoonish image of Nabokov's own youth. A lifelong lepidopterist, Nabokov often invoked the butterfly to collapse time and space. In "Speak, Memory," he chases a swallowtail in prerevolutionary Russia, only to rediscover it, forty years later, on a dandelion in Colorado—during a sojourn made possible, he explains, because Harold Ross, *The New Yorker's* founding editor, "hit it off so well with the ghost of my past." A contract with the magazine saw Nabokov through his cash-strapped pre-"Lolita" years—and continued beyond them for three decades.

Long after Nabokov's death, a fantastic-sounding theory that he had formulated about butterfly migration was vindicated via gene sequencing. (He had proposed that New World *Polyommatus* blues had originated, a bit like himself, in Asia, migrating in five waves across the Bering Strait.) In at least this instance, a Nabokovian literary resonance turned out to reflect an empirical truth. In future years, will more cases come to light? ♦

Read the original story.

The Perfect Past

Neither in environment nor in heredity can I find the exact instrument that fashioned me.

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