

*Dear Svetlana,*

*The very first time I watched you dance you were teaching in Toronto. As you moved, I began to realize that my looking felt somehow passive, crossed out. Instead, your eyes were clocking me, absorbing my stare. I was the only outside viewer and you had invited me to sit there on that bench, your audience, to watch you perform. I was fascinated by you and I wondered ... how was your gaze more powerful than mine? And this is how our relationship began.*

*Before we met, I was determined to contact you after reading about your story last January—how you had personally received threats around the time of the attack on Sergei Filin, the director of the Bolshoi Ballet, and then bravely moved your family to Canada. In your prime as a principal dancer for the Bolshoi, you were now without your company, your country, and your career.*

*Could you continue to dance without the Bolshoi? Or, if you went back to Moscow, what sacrifices would you have to make? Your situation made me think of Sergey Prokofiev. In 1936, Prokofiev was enticed to return to the Soviet Union after living for 16 years abroad, with a commission to compose the music for a ballet of Romeo and Juliet for the Bolshoi. Prokofiev decided on a finale with Romeo and Juliet blissfully dancing into the next chapter of their lives together, but the Soviet censors demanded Shakespeare's original ending of the death of the young lovers. The composer fought for his version for years, but a decade after it was written, Romeo and Juliet finally made it to the stage of the Bolshoi with the Soviet-approved tragic ending.*

*I wrote to you in February 2013:*

*"I propose we make a film with you playing the role of Juliet, where you perform the entire balcony scene from Prokofiev's ballet—but without Romeo. How do you feel about using Lavrovsky's choreography? You'll begin by winding down the backstage stairs and dance your way through the pas de deux with an invisible partner. The duet will now be a solo. You will probably need to mark your way throughout the dance in moments when your partner should be lifting and supporting you. Maybe best if you move in and out of character depending on what you think you should be doing during Romeo's solos. Maybe this version could open up the underlying intention of the movement and transform this famous duet into a monologue."*

*I was thinking about absence in terms of what the French sculptor Camille Claudel once said: "Il y a toujours quelque chose d'absent qui me tourmente." There is always some kind of absence that is tormenting me.*

*But you had a very different approach and the most incredible response to my letter: "My classical Russian ballet training is a gift that they cannot take away from me."*

*My muses have always been characters from novels or films or iconic figures from the past. I was drawn to these people for different reasons—because of their wisdom, intelligence, sense of humor or sense of adventure, maybe because of the way they spoke in riddles, their prophetic aphorisms, or a particular accent, or maybe how they moved, held a martini glass, paced around the room with nervous energy. Over time I gathered them for inspiration,*

*sometimes conjuring them back to life again for companionship. I made films, photographs, and drawings of them. But you, you're not a character—although as a ballet dancer you play many different ones. And then who are you when you're not a character?*

*We spoke in April about the idea of photographing you every day over the next year. My husband asked me, "Why would you want to take still images of someone who truly comes to life when she moves?" I immediately thought of Degas' muses and his attempt to force their movement into the still. But I keep thinking back to when we first met, and I realize that I had and continue to have this desire to kidnap some of your femininity. I asked you: "How about we try to capture all of the tiny gestures, moments, and characteristics you have stolen from the many roles that you continue to play? Will you be able to separate yours from theirs? Maybe by capturing the artifice we can see what remains of you when we're finished."*

*Do you remember your response? I do:*

*"Yes, I would love to spend this time with you, but I don't know that I can be the muse. Don't you realize that you are the one who is the muse?"*

*Hope you can come to Germany for the show.*

*With love,  
Anna*