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VOLUME 8

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Prose

An Excerpt from *Deceit*

Yuri Felsen

Translated from the Russian
by Bryan Karetnyk

Translator's Introduction

The previous issue of this journal (vol. 7) carried a short story – “A Miracle” (1934) – by the Russian émigré author Yuri Felsen, whose murder in the gas chambers of Auschwitz in 1943 precipitated his sharp plunge into obscurity. “A Miracle” was the last of Felsen’s stand-alone prose pieces to be published before he turned his attention fully to “A Romance with an Author” (*Roman s pisatelem*), the major series of compositions that consumed the author’s creative energies for the best part of his career. It is perhaps fitting, then, that in continuing this modest revival of Felsen’s *œuvre* we move from the acme of his extra-“Romantic” stories not only to his debut novel, but moreover to the very work that inaugurated the project for which he would be best known in his day. This neo-Proustian opus consisted, by the time of Felsen’s tragic demise, in three novels and seven interlinking short stories, each of which develops the narrative episodically, jigsaw-like, all the while advancing the protagonist Volodya’s romantic, psychological, and artistic evolution.

The extract that follows is drawn from Part One of *Deceit*. The novel was first published towards the end of 1930 in the “Contemporary Writers” series put out by the Paris-based publisher J. Povolozky and

co., which also included debut novels by other up-and-coming writers in exile such as Gaito Gazdanov and Nina Berberova. Between 1926 and 1928 Felsen's literary career had gained significant traction as he published his first short fiction, was accepted into the Union of Writers and Journalists, and began reviewing regularly in the émigré press. The year 1929, however, was fallow in terms of works published, leading one to suspect that this was the year in which he composed much of this first novel.

Written in diary form, *Deceit* presents a sustained psychological portrait of Volodya, a neurasthenic and aspiring author, whose often-thwarted amorous pursuits of the elusive Lyolya Heard provide the grounds for his many beautifully wrought extemporizations on love, literature, and human nature. Modulating between the paroxysms of Volodya's tormented romance and his quest for an aesthetic mode befitting of the novel he intends to write, *Deceit* is remarkable for its depth of psychological introspection and sophisticated psychoanalytical inquiry. In the ensuing extract we meet Volodya in ecstatic expectation of Lyolya's arrival. Like voyeurs, party to his most intimate thoughts and burgeoning infatuation, we accompany him as he goes about Paris, making enraptured preparations for the materialization of his fantasy. We observe not only his eagerness, dreaminess, and poetic inclinations, but also his compulsive desire to analyze his surroundings and self. Yet in these ravishing, beguiling flights of scrutiny, the discerning reader will also find subconscious slips, solipsisms that hint at Volodya's monomaniacal tendencies, which also blind him, for all his sophistication of thought, from seeing the true nature of his circumstances. Thus begins an exquisite game arranged by Felsen, wherein it falls to the reader, while delighting in Volodya's observational acumen, in fact to second-guess the essence of what really lies behind his descriptions.

The baroque, idiosyncratic, tortuous style that Felsen developed to give such fine expression to the most complex and contradictory of emotions and motivations was precisely what won him renown in the diaspora. Never had the Russian language been deployed in such a fashion or to such an end, and the degree of textual difficulty that results from this – it cannot be denied – places considerable demands on the

reader. His writing is not for the faint of heart. Indeed, discussing Felsen's singularly challenging style, the critic Georgy Adamovich was moved to comment that while Felsen's prose may have lacked the immediate exuberance of Nabokov's and Gazdanov's, for example,

when you pore over [Felsen's] works, he offers significantly more than any of the aforementioned authors. Of Felsen, truly, one may say that "not a single word is wasted." Clearly he does not court easy success and sooner tries to ward off his reader than to lure him in: as if the only reader he values is that who is capable of reading a phrase, pausing, mulling it over, and reading it over again – until the author's idea and feeling are at last revealed to him.

To the brave souls among you, I commend the opening of his *Deceit*.

* * *

Part I

December 7, 192...

Everything I do is superficial – engagements, acquaintances, time-keeping – dull and dry, and it hopelessly anaesthetizes what little in me remains alive, my final frail impulses: never shall I attain so much as a melancholy clarity with regard to myself, a sense of remorse, even if an idle one, or the simple warmth of human kindness. Only more persistently than before, more shamefully, do I sense that I am the same as others, that, like everybody, I swill down idle days in trivial anguish, and that one day I must, as must everyone else, rightly disappear. Throughout the years of loving tenderness and incessant

jealousy – covetous, quick, though never apt to bear a grudge and lightly forgiving – I had, in a sense, greater magnanimity, would blithely turn my back on those sinister and terrible comparisons (with “everyone else”), on the absurd inevitability of the end, and considered my own sublime intensity unique. Now, however, when all this comes back me every so often – limp, numb and impoverished – and thereafter follows a period of deep, somnolent repose, I succumb to an error one so often describes in people – that the present will never change – and so I conclude: my sense of amorous exaltation has ended once and for all, as have all my private thoughts and feelings, but in such moments, so reflective of the past, one need only seek to discern something, to uncover it, communicate it – for the residue of those emotions, of that exaltation, is preserved, that old anxious haste no longer interferes with them, and perhaps their importunate recollection, which painstakingly reconstructs what was once achieved but is now forgotten, constitutes the entire sense, the whole bizarre purpose of these lonely and wasted years. Yet no sooner does a sliver of blissful, inane hope appear – from a touching similarity, a smile, attention paid to my words – than in an instant I alter, no longer do I see my present humdrum rut, I forget that all these private thoughts and feelings are over, and only my obstinately suspicious nature – that vestige of experience, failure and the eternal ascription of value to everything – unexpectedly and opportunely sobers me: but then suddenly comes despair or treachery all over again. Or else, in the wake of sobriety I experience that belated, blistering, vaingloriously defiant sense of regret, which sometimes brings women (seemingly without provocation) to tears – because there had been a chance for something rare, dangerous and foreordained, and because now it has been lost irrevocably.

I suddenly felt this chance for something blessed, dangerous and new as I was reading a letter from a Berlin acquaintance of mine, Yekaterina Viktorovna N., who had written to inform me that her niece, Lyolya Heard, was coming to Paris – “Remember our conversations about her, help her, look after her a little – you surely won’t regret it.” Katerina Viktorovna, a colonel’s widow, a faded army woman cut from a hulking, much too masculine cloth, and possessed of a coarse, grey face

and a booming wooden voice that manneredly gave commands, would for days on end, in the Berlin *pension* in which we had found ourselves cast together, regale me with stories of her beloved niece, “a rare, exotic creature, quite unlike any of these local girls,” whereupon she would smile boastfully and provocatively, with just a touch of sympathy, as it were: “That’s her, my darling – what a great pity you haven’t met her.” These were still desperate times – the last of money, candor and hope – and that aging destitute woman, herself bereft of hope and prospects, compensated herself with this fantasy of a romance between her beloved pet and me – in some measure I conformed to her naïve and sentimental martial notions of chivalry. Not only did she try to allay her insatiable womanly kindness by offering up in her own stead the equally attentive, lovely and clever Lyolya Heard, but she even tried to reconstitute a scattered, vanished social circle, the little bit of influence she is used to wielding, the conditions in which Lyolya and I could meet, in which Katerina Viktorovna could aid and abet us. At first I did not credit her bombastic raptures, but there were photographs, letters, casually uttered words – each of them drew me in more than the ingenuous praise of the old colonel’s widow. In turn, I, too, constructed an image of Lyolya Heard – a dazzling blonde, fragile, with a searching and cultivated mind, vulnerable and at the same time courageous, able to tackle any setback head-on. Particularly I recall her hands in one of the photographs – elegant, capricious, awkwardly bent backwards, as though in despair, but unyielding all the same. Lyolya Heard, in divorcing her husband, had found herself alone in Belgrade, unable to move to Berlin, but when at long last she did move, I was already in Paris.

December 8

She arrives in five days’ time. By then I shall have clarified a small matter that will allow me several months’ freedom from having to seek out new opportunities, freedom from worrying – with indignity and gall – about every little expense, freedom from putting off necessary purchases (collars, shirts or neckties). The crucial thing is that it will

make life easier and more pleasant when I am with Lyolya, about whom I am beginning to think with rapture and hope: even now I want to show her around Paris, to take her out, to entertain her, not to begrudge her time, not to think that somewhere someone is waiting for me and I must brace myself for the negotiating table, not to let up and forever be reminded – money is vital, how good to have it.

Why does the knowledge that Lyolya Heard is coming here so captivate me, uplift me even? For so long I spared absolutely no thought for her whatsoever, but something strange and unhealthy began back then, one day in Berlin – because of her, because within her, inadvertently, so to speak, two wills collided, equally charged, extraneous to one another, having originated long ago and for reasons that are very likely unclear even to me. I shall attempt to master my mental inertia and put a name to these reasons, to combine them, to wrest them from their mute dormancy, into which plunges everything that befalls us and is not marked at the time – I am sufficiently practiced in suchlike acts of remembering, and I have a presentiment (perhaps artificially generated) that something brand new is about to commence with Lyolya's arrival, which means that my old – particularly those old – associations with her must be tidied up and put in order. I am even glad that between this mysterious last minute – here, in this room, in this solitude – a minute yet blind and merely conjuring Lyolya's arrival, that between this and her first friendly smile at the station, in five days' time, will be carried out all those wearisome tasks before the feast, whose purpose is to prepare me for some great happiness, to prepare me not morally, but mentally – rather a submission of accounts than some regenerative Hindu act of purification.

Those two wills – mine and Katerina Viktorovna's – sympathetic muses that suddenly befriended one another, were powerful, each in its own cause, for they transported us both to what was most imminent and vital: above all else Katerina Viktorovna feared being torn from the past, feared seeing herself as "some old colonel's widow," grey and haggard; she wanted to appear girlishly younger, blonder, svelter, when really, since her youth, back home – there, where people had once listened to her – they had courted her, reckoned with her, and so it was

not my presence or charm that imparted to her this illusion of youth, home and the continuation of her former life (although it was from me that she received the affectionate little nickname “the romantic youth”), but rather the attention, genuine, avid and rapt, with which I listened to her when the talk was about Lyolya – obsessively I wanted one thing only: to find a “Lyolya” like this.

Like many people, having once upon a time found and then lost what they desired, I was far from any thought of embarking on immature, ill-defined searches and knew perfectly, *ad absurdum*, what I wanted, what sort of woman, circumstances and relationship I would pick. Very likely my first condition would be that there be no docile, dewy-eyed, excessive youth, that there be no need to “educate” her, to remake her in my own image, only then to look, as into a mirror, and with ennui recognize myself (in the case of success), while also risking the misfortune of some rude and spiteful surprise. I have always wanted not only to become a support, but also to find a support – a friend, an opponent, an intellect, a force – and not on account of weakness, but rather because of some (granted, inconspicuous, not even wholly intentional) hubris, so that there come about a fascinating, daring contest, a comradesly and romantic union, on equal terms, instead of a swift and foolish takeover, so that my partner already be on the same spiritual plain, rarely attained by women, when everything dignified and precious, everything characteristic of love – mutual reliance, ennoblement, support – becomes, for both parties, deserved and assured. Such emotional depth in women, one that rivals my own (or that which I ascribe myself), is the vestige of experience, struggle, happiness and failure, and is in no wise the result of a miracle: I have had girlfriends, spoken with people at whom, I knew unhesitatingly, I might have been able to direct my longstanding readiness to love, so jealously guarded and unspent – but each time I would stop myself (this will work at first) because of a lack of money, because of my habit of waiting for one last, irresistible “next adventure,” which would usually never come to pass. Yet Katerina Viktorovna somehow managed to inspire me with the notion that this unequivocally irresistible “next adventure” was none other than Lyolya Heard: I succumbed to the

infectious excitation of a lonely woman in revolt against fate and old age (her excitation pertained not to Lyolya, but to herself), and insensibly credited her arguments in Lyolya's favor – true, they were casually pronounced and superficial, but they moved me by having some sort of correspondence with the very thing for which I had always been searching, and in which, without a decisive push from someone else, I feared to believe. These superficial arguments, which I understood perhaps arbitrarily and transfigured so that they would please and convince me, consisted in Lyolya's shrewd maturity, in her pains to seek out worthy individuals, in her indifference, even mercilessness, towards those who proved unworthy, in her struggle with poverty, in the recent calm, uncomplaining help – considerable, stalwart, at times self-sacrificing – she gave her husband, without any of the usual people to console her, who were petty and malicious (as, incidentally, were those she consoled); all this, imaginary or real, overfilled me with the hope that Lyolya was in some way destined for me, that she too would be sure to choose me and place me among those few who shared in her human (if one can express it thus) significance, and I relished the anticipation of this, envisaging myself – reserved, not apt to “poke my nose in” – suddenly exposed by Lyolya's perspicacity, and so not for the first time in recent years, with the impatience of a beggar awaiting a legacy, I took to counting down the empty days that passed by in idle expectation. Occasionally the insipidness of this hope would become much too patent (I recall many a time in Berlin when I would suddenly cool towards Katerina Viktorovna's words and tales, formerly so arresting, and hear her out half-distractedly, with a strained civility, and in her frustration she would dub me not a “romantic youth” but a “diplomat”), yet each time my rapid disillusionment would turn out to be nothing more than the statutory post-stimulation crash, and my old trust, my old feverish hope would return to me. Once again I prepared for my anxious first encounter with Lyolya, and in her alone I continued to see a resolution, an end to this dull, drawn-out tract, something inimitably luscious, overwhelming and impossible to defer, something I had once possessed and which had for ever remained a beguiling, exhilarating reflection, an irrepressible “belief in love.”

December 9

I am often made to feel out of sorts as a result of the fairly commonplace notion that every expectation will be frustrated, that the joy proclaimed to us will be robbed – and not only by absence of mind, unconsciousness or sleep, but also by the trivial, routine necessity of work, into which we must plunge ourselves without trace. Thus, I know even now that in advance of Lyolya's arrival much preposterous scurrying about lies before me, much loathsome, mercenary unrest and odious effort required to hear out rejections with composure, to persuade afresh and with skill, and I know that this will eclipse both the blessed joy of anticipation, and that other task, about which I wrote yesterday – that of tidying up the past, outwardly pointless, but worthwhile even so.

Now I am faced with that devastating, depersonalizing period, when with every ounce of quivering tension you are drawn to one thing only, to success (as you sometimes are at cards or the races), because you need it, because it is your salvation, and because it is predictable to the point of clairvoyance; that is why every moment you rebuke yourself for inaction, you want to prod someone, to mend something, and almost superstitiously you fear rest or repose. I fancy that I find initiating business inherently more difficult – like any beginning, it is hard, but the difficulty also comes about because of the insulting uncertainty of my situation: I emerge from somewhere in the ether and must practically truss myself to both ends of the affair, neither of which have any need of me – and often, fearing ridicule, not wanting to become a petitioner, I delay for weeks on end the decisive first conversation, in suicidal quiescence, like those petrified during a terrible dream or before some deathly waking danger. But even if that first jolt into action comes uneasily to me, a time like the present, when the principal obstacles have been eliminated and all that is left to do is to wait for the money, with impatient avarice, fearing that other obstacles may arise – such a time is somehow even more torturous: no longer must you, as at the very start, break and harness your will, but then nor is there that conventional posture of dignity and correctness (it would be too obvious a fall), and every failure, no matter how small, every new restraint, is grimly borne – to the point of exhaustion.

For all this neurasthenic fever of mine, so flagrantly base and self-interested, I find sundry justifications. I ascribe it to an aptitude for commerce and rejoice – it means I shall not perish. I ascribe it also to my lengthy penury, to the odious trivia that reminds me of it (they are many: the morning selection of a shirt and the far-from-comic despair that they have all turned to parchment with age, the obligatory dash past the concierge, with the haunting suspicion that she can see me through the wall and so justly despises me, the over-roasted muck served in the restaurant and the dismal beer in the café, the dread of running into those lovely people who had placed their confidence in me, or of engaging in conversation seductive and easily known women) – regarding each piece of trivia like this, I try to believe that I am, for the last time, standing on the threshold of some wondrous change, but then, after some hiccup, some obstacle, some failure, I find myself at once on the threshold of nothing, do not believe in rapid change, deem myself fated to vagabondage or beggary, and am ashamed of my deceived friends, of the dinners at somebody else's expense, of my comfortable bed in my unpaid room, of all that hopelessly absurd life, which imperceptibly leads me to despair and savagery. This would seem to justify my feverish pursuit of money – in my usual industrious state I cannot even conceive of its absence, I disburse and allocate it in advance, and for me such precipitate assuredness is not some empty, accidental fiction: much of what I have initiated has already paid off, and, every time it did, I rejoiced anew, astonished that here in Paris, having relied on both family and the state, I should now be feeding myself, paying for my (albeit modest) desires, and, in the trappings of a mid-range restaurant, taking for granted the servile attentions of waiters. But the fact that money is so humiliatingly vital, and that its appearance is very likely, even imminent, still does not excuse, does not expose that darkest, most troubling part of me, which I am utterly unable to get at: it is an arid inferno, isolated, removed from everything external, a never-ending fear that one day sprang from that grotesque money, a fear that became, with time, abstracted and void (it swoops down in oddly silent, ever quickening bursts, making it impossible for me to dwell on anything, to concentrate, to recollect myself)

– and never shall I comprehend, never shall I bring to heel this barren, destructive flame. And yet, for the first time it has failed to engulf me entirely: something gentle and ennobling – from love’s anticipation, from joy at the prospect of Lyolya’s arrival – will always remain, and I can discern, almost graphically, how diluted, how diminished by the other are each of my two overflowing “passions” – and perhaps, for that very reason, I can handle them both.

December 10

The business is in the bag: were I not so suspicious – owing to many misfortunes in the wake of certainty and naked achievement (which are put down to bad luck, and for that very reason are so particularly galling) – I should think that there could be no doubt about it, and that tomorrow morning I need merely go and collect the money. Yet now, after this wealth of experience, my aim still seems beyond my reach, it seems as if the affair is dragging on and will be decided only tomorrow, the moment I receive the money, and meanwhile I must once again set aside my schoolboy glee at this resounding victory, at impending leisure, as well as that other glee – for the first time absolute and unencumbered – concerning Lyolya, and must somehow pass the day that is so like unto those that came before it.

I continue to deny myself every little trifle, in the café I drink, instead of liqueur, always the same insipid beer, although I have no trustier means of making myself insensible to time than swift, stupefying inebriation, and although I know *ex ante* how readily and recklessly I shall spree from tomorrow morning. Granted, I am never outright lavish or extravagant – each of us has our own unwritten rules, our own elastic limit of expenditure, which depends on circumstance – mine is somehow too prudently linked to the duration of the result: it will seem natural to me to spend a whole evening in an expensive venue and not to go home in a taxi, because the journey shall pass instantaneously – as you set off, the end is already within reach. But even that is not quite right: I have an additional fear of “useful purchases” that purport to

bring long-term benefit – I have that terror of “big numbers” peculiar to those without a steady and guaranteed income, to those whom “big numbers” much too graphically hasten towards penury, towards the bewildered, long-familiar question: Where do I go from here?

But all this austere “codex” (it is less consistent than presented here) is thrown out the window and forgotten the moment I find myself in someone else’s company: accidental words from any quarter, an unexpected appeal will lure me to help, pull at my heart strings, compel me to give some parting assurance of support, and not one that is insincere but made good – throughout years of solitude, there has amassed in me sufficient unspent, muted *tendresse*, and often it is directed at people like me, but who are more helpless than I am, and incomparably more frequently at women whom I like but even in the slightest measure. This is probably connected to yet another, intimate, reason for my irrational profligacy: I have the unhappy knack of being determined too much by women – as a student of the *gymnasium* I could not, at a ball, “off-load” a dull young lady I had invited to dance, and would await liberation from her, so as not only to rejoice in freedom, but also to take pleasure in pitying myself, the jilted party (thus, as it were, forestalling my amorous lot) – and so now, having at last attained an indifferent, grown-up invulnerability, if in a café I should unwittingly engage in conversation my plain, painted neighbor, I will not resolve to stand up, leave, and suddenly disappoint her, but needs must, like some *naïf*, throw away my money on her.

Such was the case even today: almost against my will, with a semi-abstracted gesture, I invited to my table in a cheap, lively café a ruddy young girl who was playing an animated game of cards with her girlfriends; when she came over, I scarcely succeeded in tearing myself away from the imaginary novel (a romance) that would ordinarily have been filling my quiet hours, and managed after a fashion to keep up the necessary pleasantries until I was stopped in my tracks by a single turn of phrase (methought, uttered sweetly and with dignity); I wanted to help, but recalled at once that this was impossible, that it would rob me of the time I had just calculated I needed, and all this I explained to her awkwardly.

The words that had surprised me were essentially run-of-the-mill (to my enquiry about a boyfriend, she replied: “*Non, je me défends toute seule*”), and perhaps it was the tone that had transformed her into someone new and respectable, but there is something impossibly refined in that ready Parisian patter, which lays equal every social group (perhaps with the exception of the “intellectuals,” who are, as they are to the majority of Russians, unknown to me) and so reconciles them that there is little to distinguish between my new acquaintance and that debonair old boy from the wealthiest of families, on whom my business affair depends and who, at every mention of our penurious misfortunes, of these guardsmen-turned-chauffeurs, of these mannequins with titles, exclaims with indignity and distress: “*Aï, aï, aï, quel cataclysme*” – both the viability of such a comparison (a gentleman for whom wealth was a birth right and a common *filles de la rue*) and the miracle that the common girl off the street has imbibed these artful turns of phrase and that infallible, unerring tone necessarily perplex and move me.

Reading over today’s page, I am astonished – yet again – by how much of my writing, owing to my dogged pursuit of accuracy, is sharper and more intense than what I think and see, and by how little correspondence there is between such “accurate” entries in my diary (though scrupulously faithful, they are condensed by the weight of the words and by my inexplicable determination) and my initial vague observations. Granted, there are also things that go quite unnoted – among these is the imaginary romance, which I am now describing for the first time, about which I find it strange to think in habitual words and definitions – so much is it all outwardly delicate, mute, disembodied. I concocted it at the age of sixteen, when I experienced those first impatient, jealous forebodings yet to be augmented by experience – which kills imagination (now made redundant) – and with some sort of stubborn indolence I lugged it through the entirety of my youth, through adventure and experience – strange and unique, like everyone’s – changing but little of the original according to my later hopes and desires. For years I have been recounting to myself these same pleasant details during rare hours of quiet wrested from the tumult of business, from amorous woes and recollections: this “romance” is my repose, a

constant source of release and oblivion, and because of this I do not hear, I do not notice words, I do not even catch the ends of phrases and, thus immersed, I delight – for I am telling of myself, as I would want to be, as I am imperceptibly becoming.

These polished, familiar details, their half-melancholic serenity alternate with stirrings for Lyolya – stirrings whose authenticity I immediately recognize and which spill into absolutely everything, irrespective of what happens to me throughout the day: they acutely influence not only the “romance” and my foolhardy fever for money, but also my scatterbrained curiosity out of doors and the poems (mellifluously lulling or abruptly wounding) I read aloud at home – and so every experience of the day leads me just as naturally to Lyolya; how hard it is to tear myself away from them for the sake of some rarefied and drearily calculated diary entry, which today seems (perhaps because of Lyolya’s imminent arrival) particularly dead and dry.

December 11

I received the money this morning, and it, having saved me from horrid, degrading poverty, from the imperative of limiting myself like a beggar, from spiteful and sorry bitterness (had I been thwarted), from everything unpleasant and drearily repellent – this money, as it were, unveiled and exposed Lyolya to me. I am an appreciative, perhaps even deliberately appreciative, person – indeed, is it not better, more dignified, simply more advantageous to rejoice in success for days on end than to be conceited and hardly mark it at all – time and again I expressly remind myself that it is good to mark success modestly (being rare, it is a good thing), how much worse things could be, what impediments have been avoided, what perils have left me fortuitously unscathed. I also wish to demonstrate to myself that this joy is not a sigh of relief from a neurasthenic after some drawn-out, slipshod, half-abandoned job, but rather the just satisfaction that is awarded us as the fruits of our success – and that if a sudden new obstacle were now to present itself, I should be prepared at once to set again to work and struggle. The latter

is especially true, but my readiness to struggle and work is born of will – standing in contrast to my inherent aversion to any labor or exertion – whereas the joy of completion, of looking back, is perfectly neurotic and lazy, and all my painstaking determination is probably little more than a vestige of ambition, of the deadly drive to perfect (as though for show) anything and everything, of the inherited practice of submitting loyally and without complaint to any duty or order, albeit imposed from without.

Without stopping at home, I set out post-haste for all the shops I required – earlier, before the money's arrival, in order not to tantalize myself needlessly, not for anything would I have lingered by shop windows (much too enticing and beyond my reach) – today, however, as soon as I left the bureau, where the debonair old boy had paternally slipped me a primed envelope containing a check, I immediately began totting up how much I would spend on what, adjusting the figures, swapping one decision for another and proving to myself once again that I was quite able to make spontaneous decisions – indeed, I drew up a half-mock (though quite serious) budget, carefully adhered to it, and then hastily bore off my purchases, so as to lay them out together all the quicker. At home each purchase seemed to me a miracle of good taste (as we find everything that bears the hallmark of our selection, our accidental favor, our slightest efforts, and to which we immediately cede both our sense and our serene equanimity), and each of these tastefully chosen items, gifted to myself, unexpectedly drew me closer to Lyolya – for her sake alone had I chosen them, and so in every respect, even in this act (not only mentally and emotionally), did I prove myself worthy of her.

The day passed almost without note and with less anxiety than I had anticipated – between it and tomorrow's arrival there is still night, oblivion, sleep, which, more than strenuous and dull work, makes any event seem farther off: the expectant consciousness only distracts itself in work; in sleep it vanishes completely. This is why I am more indifferent towards death than most people: how much more dreary effort, how many more nocturnal vanishings until it comes – and then I shall die, not the man I am today, throbbing with life, determined, but

that unfathomable new man, the one I shall become – perhaps in the distant future – after all the burdensome distractions that still await me.

Towards evening a telegram arrived – “MEET ME TEN AM” – bringing with it that former impatient anxiety of mine, which now began to flourish, betokening a feverish insomnia – I wanted somehow to ward off the expectation, to make its transition into dream easy, to half-lull myself to sleep and thereby artificially expedite the morning, yet, in order to make a record of this in my exasperatingly meticulous and sober mind, I also wanted to “revel in my success,” or, to be more exact, to revel in the fact that everything had come off so uncharacteristically smoothly – without the usual postponement and obligatory unexpected obstacles.

I brace myself momentarily and step into a smoke-filled and drunken mid-range Russian restaurant, where, deafened by the quick-paced music, the ceaseless flickering of the waiters, the array of elegant and provocatively curious women, the unfamiliarity of such fast-moving, vibrant images, I lose all sense of myself, my ungainly, restless legs, my now-limp body, and I look round hopefully, thinking how I might sit more conveniently so as to see every one of these women at once and leisurely select from them a few particularly attractive ones – to exchange glances, to get to know them (hardly likely, of course), but mostly to practice tenderness, to hold imaginary intimate conversations, which since childhood (true, now they are distinguished by a rather different tenor, one lacking that former ardent trust) I have constantly and secretly carried on.

The table that fell to me was most unfortunate – right in the middle of the room – and so I found myself with my back to several young women, whom I had scarcely glimpsed but already marked, and now, as far as I was concerned, they had vanished, casting those left into even greater relief, much as other people vanish, potential friends or lovers – at a railway station, at a street corner – and others who truly are dear to us, if they wind up in some foreign city, inaccessible to us, for a long while. But then, for them we, too, vanish, effectively making way, helping others, as it were, yet this should not console us, but only once again remind us of the irregularity of human relations, of their dependence on the most insignificant trifles, which so obnoxiously evolve into destiny.

In order to shrug off the burden of expectation completely, which had already been allayed by the restaurant's balmy air, I drank several double measures of vodka in quick succession, feigning that I was not in the least drunk and, by dint of my forgetfulness, amazed even myself, for I do not get drunk at once; instead, I become unrecognizable and find myself unable to hold back the change. This time the change that came about was astonishing, and, what was more, there was seemingly no transition: I suddenly succumbed to a merry impulse, one that was unwitting, as though inspired from without, ever quickening and thus drew me towards it more and more inevitably, so much so that there the usual disappointment in the wake of sobriety could never follow it – and I trusted the lusty, frenetic, emancipated music, striving not to listen, not to think that it was a sham (even with its now saccharine, now violent Rumanian accompaniment), and rushing to catch up with its gasping – distinct from anything of my own – rapturous flight. Admittedly, the music was encumbered by the food – because of the vodka and, perhaps, on account of my restraint the pies and rissoles seemed particularly delicious; it is not often that food makes me wax lyrical, it ostensibly constrains me, which on occasion also dims my enthusiasm: what with the exposed way in which we eat, how unabashedly carnivorous we must seem, our noble, self-sacrificing decisions (though stimulated by the restaurant's music) are at odds with this, and in cases similar to today's, I hastily eat up my favorite dishes, which are delicious (down to the very last morsel), and then, with counterfeit inattention, as though already in thrall to some noble or bitter emotion, I refuse the remainder and ask for coffee to be brought – a cup of coffee imparts a certain (to my mind, worldly) finality to what I consider the profound attitude of a drunk – though restrainedly so – man, as he poisons himself more and more and is mercilessly scornful of himself.

But now the plates have been cleared away, the cup of coffee sits before me, and inwardly I can relax, while outwardly – maintaining a serene respectability – I only hint at the exalting, dazzling effect of the music and the reminiscences it provokes, and using this cue and my own (apparently unusual) self-control I somehow impress and intrigue those glittering worthies I selected at the outset, as I walked in, whom I never

cease to follow with my gaze and who also (with unrelenting application, but in that feminine way, vain and concealed) observe me from various tables. My drunkenness is most often narcissistic: my usual uncertainty vanishes, my opinion of myself, of my success, increases to the point that it blinds me, I become intuitively enterprising, see no hindrances, do not recognize fear, and would be glad of a fire, danger, panic, only to cut a dash with my daring for all to see; when suddenly a long familiar melody will bring me to recall my true past, at times sorrowful, hopeless, suicidal, and then this feeling of the past, magnified tenfold by all that I have drunk, will be charged with that same fastidious, narcissistic pride, and perhaps the only alternative is a form of drunkenness brought on by despair, a rare thing in these humdrum years.

No longer do I consider, as I once did (after my first observations and contentious, hasty conclusions), that a drunken obsession is especially edifying or capable of revealing something new and inspiring – the mind grows unmistakably weak, much of one's memories (be they detailed or shaky) is erased, what is set down in the heat of the moment later proves to be insignificant and rambling – and yet there is something genuine, albeit senseless, in drunkenness, a lack of self-pity, the facility of adventure or sacrifice, a kind of brash and coarsening power.

I mixed liqueurs, dissociating myself more and more, taking leave of myself and, in so doing, almost participating in the general harmonious flight – of the music, of the crowd's heavenly smiles, which promised kindness and devotion, and of the song's careless, unduly expressive lyrics: as the old gypsy woman sang, dressed in her low-cut, modish, anonymizing dress, she seemed to be trying to instill in these strangers her potent, passionate sounds by force. Her voice reached me with a sort of captivating force, communicating, precisely and succinctly, what had taken place within me, and it was adorned and enriched further by her singing – many things seemed to have deluged my memory for good, troubling me, affecting me, forcing me to challenge myself and to clarify something about myself ardently and in honeyed tones. In the composed, sober light of day, those same lyrics may seem naïve, limp and devoid of their pie-eyed sorcery, but so irresistible is this sorcery

that the words lodge themselves in the memory along with all their oft-repeated pleas and protestations. Now the gypsy woman urgently sings out my favorite “everyone remembers their beloved” – and, one after another, muddled thoughts race through my mind: that without fail “everyone” will remember (there is a touching grandeur to the enormity of the generalization); that I too shall remember is, for me, the most important thing, but this refers not to the past (though the music might easily have awakened that), but to tomorrow’s Lyolya, in sudden proximity, alive and almost palpably in love with me. Then comes a new, dancelike, lulling metre and new, peculiar words – “the heart is spent on caresses” – they have the charm of a humble, uncomplaining, eternal readiness to sacrifice, but my objection is unwavering: no, the heart is not “spent,” but enriched – one need only crack open the heart’s riches, and they shall prove inexhaustible. A man’s ingratiatingly solicitous voice softly continues: “I shall leave you as I did before, proudly, though they will think you are still mine.” I find myself inadvertently envious: never have I been able to command such favor – those whom I selected, oblivious though they are, would laugh at me, and they have long already convinced me that that it can be no otherwise, that it cannot be amicable.

Opposite me is a Russian *danseuse* (the men invite her to dance for money); she looks just like the others I singled out – the ones who have been tormenting me, or who could torment me – practically naked, a strawberry-blonde with an intelligent, though impertinent face. That beloved, fixed state of contemplation, which I usually hold to be saturated with life and naturally creative, seems impossible to me; because of the music and the memories, because of the affordability of this woman, I want to reach that crude, perhaps real, life all the sooner and gift myself a night of unencumbered generosity. Yet my grown-up better judgment, coupled with never-forgettable experience, warily stays and sobers me, as if counseling me not to spoil Lyolya’s arrival with ridiculous and shameful trifles – ill-humored fatigue, some absurd disease, at very least the fear of taking ill. Without any effort whatever, I cheerfully master myself, because Lyolya’s arrival is definitively upon me – and the anticipation is impetuous, easy and augurs well.

December 12

I reserved a room not far from my own, in a cheap and relatively clean hotel, and set off for the station to meet the ten o'clock train from Berlin. I left late, so that I should not have long to wait, dawdled along the way and, having learnt that the train was delayed, and surprising even myself, slipped out of the station and ran across the street to buy some flowers. I picked out some deep-crimson roses – dewy, fresh, still in bud, with unnaturally straight, wire-supported stems – and this bouquet was the first thing that transported Lyolya from imaginary life into reality, the first point of contact between my feelings for her and my physical self, a pledge of kindness (of sorts) that immediately bound me to a new and unbroken logic: thus do all our poignant, prevailing attitudes to people – enduring loyalty, unselfish, self-sacrificing solicitude, sweet, simple attention – often begin with some random, capricious action; then do we find ourselves guided by various half-conscious motives (tenderness to ourselves, a penchant for the gratitude of others, a fear of disappointing, sometimes an intolerable and tedious sense of obligation), which yet fortify our charity but bear hardly any relation to the original cause – doubtless, many of us cannot recall why we tip the waiter in one café double that of another, though we still consider ourselves duty-bound not to change our preferences. Such an original cause, one that necessitated my tender affections for Lyolya (now a given), was found in these fragrant morning buds, which by rights, owing to our non-acquaintance, I should not have brought, and it was these (as I was writing just a moment ago) that inadvertently revived the habitual chivalrousness of my long-excited thoughts about Lyolya, securing her with a well-intentioned, effective, earthly act, after which her physical appearance could no longer be new, unexpected, or abruptly interrupt my former candor towards her, and so it was that all this strange preparation, begun by Katerina Viktorovna, sustained by a feeble, half-desiccated imagination of twilight years, and then stimulated by five days' anticipation and yesterday's good fortune, led to Lyolya in the flesh – forgoing the inevitably dangerous interim of space to think rationally, of scrutiny and disenchanting comparisons.

Amid the slow-moving, unwieldy crowd of arrivals, among the first to arrive, I recognized Lyolya by her ermine stole and dark blue overcoat, which I had been informed she would be wearing, and yet I should have recognized her all the same – she was just as Katerina Viktorovna had described her and as I myself had pictured her for years: she has an uncommonly pale (as if from too much powder) face, eyes that resemble a doll’s – on account of their porcelain-blue hue and her long, heavily sweeping lashes – and an unexpectedly sweet (after all this, as it were, artificial rigidity) quivering grin and narrowed eyes. Lyolya is a little below average height and frail, but for all that she holds herself upright, with movements that are so exquisitely defined that she seems tall and strong. Without any hesitation I approached, encouraged and uplifted by the absence of anything new, by my continuing readiness to serve. In the taxi we talked about Katerina Viktorovna, and Lyolya’s eyes smiled good-naturedly, calmingly and with a calm assurance: I know about you, and you know about me – how good it is that we are together now. From the very outset Lyolya was more assured with me than I was with her, though we were each of us equally prepared for the other – thus sometimes a boy, declaring his love for the first time, is for some reason more embarrassed, more anxious than his equally inexperienced coeval. What was more, I immediately divined in Lyolya a particular knack for people and conversation, characteristic of many independent women, a special ability to talk to anyone: she could understand things intuitively, reformulate her questions to clear matters up at once, and effortlessly make those shameful, ordinarily veiled and essentially friendly remarks, without which human intimacy will forever remain difficult and hopelessly tentative. The room was not to her liking:

“Forgive me, darling, you’ve been terribly kind and helpful – how often Auntie said you would be! – but you’re trying to make an impression with all your thoughtfulness, and you aren’t thinking about how to arrange everything sensibly and correctly. I’m only saying this to you – not for myself, but for next time – and I don’t mean to reproach you in the slightest. Quite the contrary, I haven’t yet told you how touched I am by all this.”

Still, the room was not changed:

“It seems we’re going to get acquainted, you and I. Why should I hole myself up so far away from you, when it’s probably better suited for me here. Only tell me frankly, I won’t get in your way, will I? You aren’t just being too sweet, are you?”

With a fair degree of precision, I detected curiosity and trepidation, a vague feminine desire to infer something and to have no competition – for all my uncertainty, I can now detect the faintest, most hidden partiality for me and, though I say nothing, I am moved. I immediately allayed Lyolya’s fears, and no longer does she doubt my firm friendship; as for me, I trusted in the benevolent correctness of all her advice, let her decide things for us both, and imperceptibly it was established that she will somehow protectively take the lead in everything. Her various judgments impress with their insight – one that makes you blush and is not as frivolous as mine – such unerringly divining simplicity, for me, is more convincing than any far-fetched and inaccurate complexities. Not only does Lyolya divine other’s thoughts, but she seeks out her own, even if they are unflattering, and freely admits to them; this comes out naturally, even happily, without any pitiful or lumbering sense of self-reproach. A conversation struck up, so common among people of Lyolya’s and my age (thirty and over), who find themselves alone but still hopeful – of a misspent youth, of a time when there was a love that shook them forever:

“These are the only riches you and I share; it is the only thing that makes us interesting to each other and, if you will, close to one another. A strange ‘capital’ for our ‘partnership’ – as though it doesn’t belong to us, but is purloined. But it isn’t worth being embarrassed about it or keeping it a secret – in any case, we have nothing else.”

We went on to discuss how Katerina Viktorovna was getting by. I said nothing about the fact that I had recently helped her. Lyolya knew of this help:

“Your discretion isn’t as laudable as you think. Admit it, you want to be found out more than anything – then you’ll have won without uttering so much as a word. It’s the same when people don’t immediately mention important or good news, only later to surprise people with their restraint – it’s all from vanity, which is absurd among

friends. I neither like nor value such excessive restraint – *peut-être j'en suis trop éprouvée.*"¹ (Lyolya has excellent French pronunciation.) "Let's judge each other on merit."

Lyolya's manner of speaking may be described a little oddly (though without any contradiction) as "restrained candor": candor in the sense of a certain directness, an unflinching acknowledgement of failure, a lack of embellishment, forethought or false, ostentatious modesty; and a restraint that expresses itself to the same degree, in a shame-faced, impoverished adjective, in a sort of niggardliness of description. I like Lyolya's voice – it is deep and a touch monotonous, but sometimes warm and convincingly melodious.

We spent almost the whole day together, and Lyolya told me a great deal about herself. She listens to me attentively, patiently (freezing comically with concentration), but after her brief, pointed, condensed stories, after diverse eloquent answers, my words somehow do not sound well. Ordinarily I envy those with a capacity for happiness, people who do not have to try, but I accept Lyolya's all-encompassing success as if it were my own, and even this morning I admired the unfalteringly graceful dexterity with which her sweet, capable hands tidied the room and then mended for me a new glove that had come apart at the seam, whereafter she proffered it to me, wincing at my excessive gratitude. Late in the afternoon I remembered (or, rather, as far as Lyolya is concerned I "remembered," whereas I in fact decided this morning) that I must tell her about the restaurant last night and how much better it would have been, if I had been there with her – and only more vividly did I envision how irresistibly I should have gravitated there. Lyolya agreed readily and with a smile that verged on tender:

"All right, but I refuse to bankrupt you any more, and I have no money for going out. After tomorrow, our 'outings' will be frugal and friendly – and, please, you mustn't get annoyed or try to dissuade me."

Soon I must go and fetch Lyolya (she is getting changed at her *pension*), and for the first time in a long while I have no worries, not

¹ Perhaps I'm too long in the tooth.

Yuri Felsen, trans. from the Russian by Bryan Karetnyk

a single troubling or tedious presentiment, no desires aflame with impracticability, and it seems almost a certainty that what is to come will also be like today – good fun, care-free, uncomplicated.

An Excerpt from
The Book of Becoming Mothers

Delia Radu

Author's Note

Set in Ceausescu's Romania, the *The Book of Becoming Mothers* tells the interconnected stories of Venus, a Romani woman trekking the roads with her traditional community of coppersmiths, Zenaida, a village girl from the Carpathians, and Stela, who lives in Bucharest in a dilapidated block of flats, in a home magically filled with books.

* * *

The older I grew, the more and more books kept turning up in my parents' flat. Our place became a maze of books. Get through and decipher – had I been a knight, or a musketeer, as I often dreamed, I would have chosen that as my motto. I was adroit at finding my way across our paper home and picking whatever I hungered for. Most bookshelves sagged under the weight of realist novels – my father's favorite read; the upper part of the lavender scented linen cupboard held blanched bed sheets while its bottom half was bursting with world poetry from all ages; racks of crazy shapes and sizes, made of wood, cast iron, or wicker grew in all the corners and bore the blooms of more recent books; instead of dainty china, dozens of reference books were reflected in the mirror that lined the back of the glass cabinet in our

dining room. It was there that I located a great treasure: a huge book, bound in grey cloth, the second volume of a beautifully written history of art, every photograph in it a cliffhanger. A Sybil – an Infanta – a tortured Saint – A Bar at the Folies-Bergère – I leapt from one century to another and back, from the opening to the last chapter and back, leafing through the heavy tome as my fancy took me. Sadly, scores of reproductions were in black and white but that did not hinder in any way my quests and passionate reveries. I spent all my free time gazing at the pictures and reading about them. Sometimes I ran to the kitchen holding the grey book open at a certain point, pressing the chosen image against my chest. Showing it to my mother, I dragged a chair and read her aloud the critique. Sour cherry preserve bubbled in a big pot on the stove while we, wrapped in the rich aroma, left spoonfuls of red syrup to cool on a flat white plate to test its thickness and gushed over one of the early portraits of Rubens's rosy Hélène Fourment – how high the sky behind that adolescent body wrapped in brocade and tenderness!

As I had started to spend all my pocket money on art books, and received many as gifts from my parents, a colorful and carefully structured paper tower of my own took shape next to my bed, while all my other books lay in disorder everywhere. What other books? A mishmash of many genres, including childish stories, although reluctantly I had to admit my tastes were changing and, because I was reaching that awkward moment in young life when adventure literature fills the reader with laughter, not awe, I had to put certain books behind me. I was still mixing Dickens, the French Dickens Daudet, whose unhappy endings had opened my eyes to the cynicism without borders of life in every epoch, and some of his fellow naturalists, with sea and polar voyages and with some historical cloak and dagger. It was hard to let go of adventure books, I didn't want to. How sad to find the nonchalance strained, and the threads coarse in those old beloved ripping yarns! But my first Rembrandt album – a square book with lustrous color reproductions glued to its ivory pages, a marvel – prodded me further and further from young literature. The self-portraits became the definition of life I swore by, while other paintings shed fresh light on the atrocity of quite a few cherished Greek and

Roman tales that hitherto I used to consider through the lens of miracle or adventure stories only. There he hovered, the ruler of all gods, Zeus metamorphosed into a giant bird of prey, with little stolid eyes. Iron beak, scaly claws hold Ganymede in a ruthless dark-feathered embrace. Fear creases the boy's face and makes him pee in the sky, against the black clouds. One of his hands is twisted by the eagle's grip while the other clutches a bunch of cherries, and the fruit has the color of the raped child's insides, and of his carcass-to-be. The boy's chunky body is short limbed, just like the Slaughtered Ox, with its severed hocks, and has the same shape as the disemboweled animal suspended by ropes in the air, upside down – sacks of mutilated flesh and bone dangling in a nightmare: one large, one small, who's next for annihilation, please? I gaped at the images and learned that the corpse of an animal, unsightly, terrifying, could be an epitome of humanity, as arresting in beauty as a cave wall studded with jewels.

Outside my personal image fortress, there was image fare, too. The portrait of our supreme leader hovered everywhere; there was no escape from it, apart from going blind. It had become easy to ignore the identical prints hanging above each blackboard in every classroom or best-lit wall in administrative offices given that their sheer massive numbers achieved the perfect opposite of catching one's eye. But there was also art. Growing numbers of people were eager to try their hand at rendering the features of Him-Himself, the heroic son of the nation, the devoted father of the nation, the visionary architect of the nation's future, the guarantor of progress and independence, the epochal thinker whose thoughts were the source of all the nation's accomplishments, the glorious commander who condensed the bravery of all the country's kings, princes, and heroes of the past, since Roman times. At school, the portraits of scientists, writers or various national figures of whatever importance were outnumbered and slowly supplanted by artifacts depicting the face of this greatest of all great men, the latest and noblest heroic culmination of all of humanity. In addition, a whole interior wall next to the main school entrance was converted into a shrine where:

painstakingly embroidered, ornately framed, his holy face was haloed by buds, tassels, insignia

oil wells, blocks of flats and furnaces leaned at an angle, tower of Pisa style, to make way for his gigantic epochal head imprinted on a horizon blazing in mustard yellow watercolors

adamantine arches made out of rhomboids drawn in turquoise wax crayon encapsulated his stylized figure, with one arm extended and the forefinger decisively pointing towards a faraway target, unseen and left entirely to the viewer's imagination – perhaps it was an ideal spot for erecting the largest hairpin factory in Eurasia? perhaps it was the ample bottom of a Carpathian bear the supreme commander couldn't wait to gun down? an area in need of better pollination management his supreme laser beam gaze had detected straight at the heart of a model plantation? a foundry-ladle pouring melted titanium, the strongest metal known to man, in the bowels of a metallurgical plant? a magpie darting across the cerulean blue with a glazed crumb of metal snaffled from the people's titanium pot in its beak? or a scrawny cat stealing away from one of the supreme one's banquets with a whole Wiener schnitzel in its cleaner than a human's mouth? no, no, in the big montage on the wall in my school he was eternally pointing at nothing but his own silhouette, face, nose, or stiff nape of the neck; himself, forever young, dishy, dashy, reigning, ruling, in charge, the realm's sarge, commanding, reprimanding, nothing else but himself, encore et toujours, pointing at himself, as he was depicted in various guises by way of innumerable techniques, e.g:

on plaques of foil stuck on papier-mâché to imitate bronze or gold bas-relief, his bulging classical profiles sent out semicircles of sun rays that gave the impression he was wearing a luxuriant feather headdress, at the doorway of a wigwam

on cardboard rectangles the map of the country had been constellated with Christmas bauble shards to provide a background for his face, lovingly cut out from magazine front covers

on ceramic plates he appeared to be drifting eerily over ears of grain that resembled earthworms dancing a sprightly conga

Some materials, such as plasticine or wood graced by scroll sawing never made it onto the altar yet as a proof that there was always room left for innovative media, in a one-off piece of work exhibited in

the top right corner of the wall, someone had branded a poster-sized piece of sage-green linoleum with a soldering iron and the result, a charred portrait, was very lifelike, except for the ingenuous mixture of the leader's nose and Mickey Mouse's snout, which gave it a monstrous twist.

A mere twist. A trifle, compared to the imagery ground out by professional painters. It was their work that was truly, deeply, madly monstrous. They often featured heads of children, in fruitlike bunches sprouting the pharaonically outsized face of the much-loved father of the nation, the titan-in-the-box. Yet some of them espoused a kind of symbolic naturalism and focused on a single child. There he hovered, the ruler of all souls, in a dark-grey suit made of supple, flowing, almost downy material, standing behind a party congress lectern covered in blood-red cloth. According to the canon, his face, silhouette and posture are idealized. Having stopped short of making him unrecognizable, the artist feels free to trample far beyond the frontiers of taste and sense in every other respect and matter of portraiture so the ruler has been made into an almighty being with an oracular smile, morning star eyes and a suited torso which, though wingless, seems to be floating against the background of a cloudless sky – as the political gathering he's addressing is no doubt being held somewhere in the ether of the yonder Elysian fields. In his hands, the leader is holding neither the papers graced with his visionary speech, nor a carafe of ambrosia, but a five-year boy in a white shirt and white footless tights. With chocolate-box grace, the little bare feet rest on the lectern, on the wedge of red, while the overlord of all thoughts is clutching the boy's hips. A child snatched to be paraded in a party rally gives a painter the warm fuzzies and makes him pass a ruthless dark-feathered embrace for a boon. The sham. The humiliation. The complete negation of beauty.

There were other images, made out of our own bodies and the colored placards we lifted above our heads, with the effect that the miracle face of the nation's most dearly beloved man, son, father, brother-in-law, distant cousin, etc., materialized in our colossal people's stadiums. The epiphanic cherry on the cake, that was, at the end of propaganda shows that had started to come thicker and faster.

The shows were ridiculously lavish. Usually they kicked off with a sort of tableau vivant of all the strands of society, in which people in overalls exhibited the paraphernalia of a wide range of industries and danced in a stiff, dignified manner, swinging pickaxes, shovels and a wide range of cardboard tools; later on, the ones meant to star as representatives of the countryside agricultural enterprises tagged along pretending to drive some spiderish harvesting machines with one hand while holding plastic sheaves of superb, overgrown cereal grasses with another; animal farming was never given any representation, owing perhaps to the double difficulty of reining in the innocent beasts and the inherent wisecracks, wholly inappropriate to the occasion, about some adorers of the supreme leader being bovine, others porcine, ovine, asinine and so on; safer, and obviously more celebratory was traditional music; large groups of dancers did scores of lively Romanian folk numbers, followed by a potpourri from our “co-inhabiting” nationalities – as our ethnic minorities were dubbed; there was one Hungarian dance, a German one and a melancholy Turkish one. Towards the end came the turn of us children, bearers of an “advanced conscience” despite our tender age; with robotic vivacity, we also performed a few calisthenics and shook plastic roses, red flags and other articles in the vernal air.

Putting together such an extravaganza took a great deal of rehearsing. The amateur dancers missed work in factories and offices while we missed classes in school and the teachers who had to take us to the stadium and look after us there became unusually bleak and irascible in manner. That they won the argument over our right to wear sun hats pleased and took us by surprise. After days of altercations with the organizers, and because dozens of children suffered from heat exhaustion, our teachers managed to outmaneuver the apparatchiks from the Committee for Culture and Art who oversaw the progress of the show and who had banned hats on the grounds that they muddled the sacred patterns we were supposed to create on the lawn.

What happened down there on the grass was extremely wearying: the incarnations of all strands of life ran hell-for-leather all over the pitch and then froze at certain times in certain poses, according to a rigorous plan, devised and put into practice by a director-choreographer with

a microphone who was shouting in the loudspeakers as if possessed by legions of demons.

It was the day before the show and the 1st May celebrations.

We were having a dress rehearsal and the director was cursing us secondary school girls because we cut such a sorry figure in the red fluffy miniskirts that had just been distributed to us. Our legs were not pretty enough, tanned enough, healthy looking enough, we were ruining his climax, wailed the man in the speakers. We stood there – a field of girls, in silence. Were we supposed to be children in the show or little women, as some of us had started to consider ourselves? Womanhood, or being on the verge of it, flickered in the eyes of some girls, although it didn't billow out, yet, in any of our bodies. Either way, those were the legs we had, they will do fine, I thought, for all the running around, kneeling to toss abhorrent artificial flowers in the air, and then standing motionless and holding your square colored placards, mister. As the director ordered us to execute a certain sequence of the pageant and gave the signal for the brass band music, I looked down and examined my own legs, full of confidence. Lo, a tiny trail of blood on one of my inner thighs. Thin as wire. I pause, look, and wonder how I got that scratch. There's no scratch. Oh my. I'm over the moon, even though my mother calls it *the curse*. What shall I do next? As I head to the toilet, my "advanced conscience" forewarns me that no loo in our fatherland supplies the visitor with anything whatsoever apart from stench. I must think up something and sort myself out. I harden myself: naturalist approach, be gone; adventure literature heroes, good old hearties, you gather round me and steel my nerves. Devils and thunders! This boat of mine, start her, start her! All hearts alive! Thousands of brine shrimps! Battalions of lionhearted rats! Beelzebub's pipe of brimstone! Merrily, merrily, hearts-alive. Start her, patch her – now I inspect the yellowish diseased grass I'm stepping on. There you hide, my lovely moss, delicate as fur. I strip a good handful from the lawn, rub it between my fingers, to get rid of any traces of soil. That'll do, I'm sorted. Any explorers stranded up north in the tundra would do the same, wouldn't they?

"Bloody hell! Who's that bloody bleedin' idiot? Where does she think she's going now?" the demented director roared in his loudspeakers

while I returned to my flock of fluffily clad whatever we were. I walked regally, ignored him. I was thinking, plotting. From the toilets upstairs I had just had a good look at the huge face taking shape down on the lawn: hamster-like as it was, as if struck down with mumps, with dead eyes and hair like a blown up beret made of thick black felt, it had given me an excellent revenge idea. Who the hell are you, I kept mumbling. You are no painter and this isn't a work of art – I know a good portrait when I see it. On top of that, you are no director and no choreographer – I go to theatres, and sometimes to the ballets at the Opera, at home we always dissect and rank each production we attend, so I can see clearly that you're a buffoon, and I promise that tomorrow you'll regret your grossness, you ranting mole cricket!

The next day, the great ruler graced the rite with his presence. Every sequence in the show went smoothly, as we had rehearsed it, except for three things. The best of the dances, the Turkish one, was removed from the running order because overnight a highly principled censor had had second thoughts about it and had alerted the Committee for Culture and Art to the fact that the music was too languid for a festivity, the tinkling necklaces of the dancers too removed from today's realities, and their harem pants – too see-through, which they were, since they had been made of the cheapest synthetic lace curtain material. Another unexpected development: next to the press box there was a band of good, much loved actors who recited the patriotic poetry live – no need for the tapes with amateurs' voices in use during the rehearsals. Actors respected for having played memorable Shakespearean parts on stage, or Chekhov, or Ibsen. So who was I to decree who was the true artist, to make distinctions between this buffoon and that one? I was nothing, a pioneer girl in a stupid red miniskirt in a crowd on a pitch – a minute dot in the supreme leader's portrait. I knew it, but I'd planned to change my fate, and grow into an annoying dot, large enough to ruin the giant picture: I'd persuaded seven other classmates who stood in formation around me to raise deep black placards instead of the ochre ones, during the final moment of the splendour-in-the-grass portrait. How exhilarating it felt to be a wart on the leader's nose, with the help of a few girls with boyish legs, on that 1st May balmy afternoon, in the midst of all that cheering and verse and fanfare.

The prank might have felt good, but it didn't make any waves, it went unnoticed.

About a month after the 1st May show, I understood why. It happened while I was on duty next to the teaching staff room. Every day, a secondary school pupil was required to sit in the main entrance hall, according to a rota. We acted as concierges, received the guests and guided them, kept the place tidy and the potted plants happy, dusted the altar of the ruler with a telescopic duster, pushed the button that operated the electric recess bell or, in case of power cuts, walked the school's corridors shaking a huge metal bell to mark the start and end of the breaks. So, while on this kind of duty, I heard a dialogue between the principal and the pioneer activities instructor about how the director of the stadium show had been rewarded for his work, especially for that outstanding giant portrait on the lawn, with a flat in a villa close to the *nomenclatura*, the important people's residential area. That hideosity – outstanding? The ranting buffoon got himself a place in some posh villa as a reward for it? So everyone liked it? I found that hard to believe. And then the penny dropped: of course they didn't like it, they only said they did. My prank may have been noticed, people may have laughed at it quietly in their heads, but it was unmentionable. Everyone in the supreme leader's circle pretended that, in the giant portrait, the ruler's cheeks weren't swollen, his fluffed-up hairdo wasn't comical, and the accidental black spot on his nose didn't exist at all. The supreme leader's person was sacred, his image likewise. No mischief was possible in the best of possible worlds, no flies shat on the picture of the emperor's face, and that was it.

At least my parents were sensible enough to say he was out of his head. Not to me directly – as ever I eavesdropped on one of their political conversations.

It was the name of Salvador Dali that drew my attention, one afternoon, while they were talking behind a closed door. "Yes," my father was saying, "yes, Dali wrote to him." The ruler, who for a number of years had been in command of the one and only party in our country, and of the executive, had decided to become president of the republic, as well, and had a scepter made to order for the occasion, a massive mace of solid

flashing gold. Dali must have seen it on TV and so he sent the ruler a telegram that read: “Dear so-and-so, I deeply appreciate your historic invention: the presidential scepter.” “The dear so-and-so is out of his head, and he now leads the party, the government, the army, the country, everything there is,” my father said. “Was Dali poking fun at him?” my mother asked. “You bet,” my father laughed, “Isn’t the presidential scepter a perfect surrealist object? And on the bus this morning on my way to work I saw many people chuckling while reading Dali’s telegram in the Party’s gazette *The Spark*. Genius prank.”

An Excerpt from *Odessitka*

Ian Ross Singleton

Author's Note

The *Odessitka* of the title is Zina – short, of course, for Zinaida. Ivan, whose love for this dear creature is unrequited – and whose name is pronounced the American way – is the narrator. This excerpt depicts Zina's and Ivan's arrival from his native Detroit to her native Odessa a few months before the tragedy that occurred on May 2, 2014. Although this is Ivan's narrative about his experience in his heritage country, Ukraine, it's also interlaced with the Odessan commentary of Zina, which represents the remainder of Ivan's past-tense love for her, and attempts at Odessan anecdotes, involving the lesser-known Abramovich. Italics represent the Russian language.

* * *

With Sasha Odessan, I spoke only his language. I never heard him speak mine. When I asked why he thought Sasha the American had left, Sasha Odessan told me this anecdote:

Back when God was just a Little Boy-God, He finished with the creation of the taiga, the desert, the swamp, and the gorge. He even finished with the creation of places close to water. By that time, He was already a Teenager-God. As teenagers do, He became bored with all His creation. So, He created man. He just made places close to water. He figured, why not make man want to be in such places? That He suffered from boredom didn't mean He suffered less from laziness.

One of those close-to-water places was Odessa. There He made twin brothers, who lived in an apartment by a forest, where once in a while snow fell from the trees and splattered on the ground. There they played, while the mother was at work. One brother became sad while they were alone, counting out loud the dark clouds in the sky. The other took a toy airplane, their favorite, and flew it past the sad brother's ear. "It's cleaning your bad thoughts away," the other said. Whenever a plane flew overhead, he said it was flying away the sad brother's sadness. It seemed the other knew by heart and could recite the schedule of the few planes that flew over their apartment, because as he declared this, one roared overhead. Maybe, because it was so amazing for a little Odessan, it worked. The sad brother became happy. Or, at least, he didn't admit to himself, or even to his brother, that he was still sad. The happy brother thought that the words the other spoke were like those of an angel, wiser than the people who lived on this plane of existence.

It was unlike any anecdote I'd heard. Smells like an anecdote, Odessans say. This didn't. Sasha Odessan continued, At age sixteen, the happy brother began to work for a professor who had a computer. Nobody else in their lives had a computer. The happy brother loved simply to listen to its mechanism. Once the professor began to let him touch it, the happy brother realized what he thought about angels before was untrue. Computers had similar powers to the angel brother. The happy brother swore out loud that he didn't believe in angels, as if it was foolish to do so. When the professor said he would take off in an airplane with his computer, the happy brother declared that he'd leave too, with the professor.

The former angel brother said nothing, only stood facing the wooden cabinet, out of view of the happy brother. The former angel brother looked instead at a knot there, which, the brothers always agreed, resembled a heart, like the one in anatomy class. The former angel brother didn't want the happy brother to see him crying, because boys don't cry. But the former angel brother wasn't an idiot. He knew the happy brother knew he cried. It was as if the happy brother let go of the former angel brother's sadness too. Only he forgot to tell the former angel brother, who always remembered this in his wooden heart.

Having become a man, the happy brother banged his fist into his palm and decided what happened was not fate but a decision he made, based on

his hard work and passion for the computer. He forgot he was once the sad brother. The happy brother forsook where he came from. The two brothers became two strangers. Neither of them told anybody their story, not even to their own children. It felt unfinished, without an ending, a kettle removed from the stove.

I don't understand, I said when he was finished.

Well, he answered but didn't finish his sentence.

At that time, Yanukovych had long ago tiptoed out of Ukraine, Crimea's winds flapped the Russian flag instead of the Ukrainian, and rockets sizzled across Donbass. I'd traveled from the happy brother to the former angel one.

I've tried to continue the "anecdote," my part in it at least, beginning with the day I arrived in Odessa. Sasha Odessa's feet touched the floor early, a habit from his service in the *Flot*. Black tea with sugar tasted best when he was surrounded by warm spring air. He pan-warmed half a sausage and ate it with *grechka*.

Zina: That's buckwheat oatmeal.

Later on, I'd compared this to the usual oatmeal, like the kind with the Quaker on the canister. "*Grechka*" is, he trailed off, as if worried about offending me. *Better*, I finished his sentence, since I knew he'd never accept that something American could be as good as that of his world. *Well, yes*, he said. His wry smile was like a warning of things to come.

He used to discuss work with others on the *birzha* in the center of Odessa. Now he typed searches online. Either way, he still found next to nothing. He lived off next to nothing. Now that his daughter was returning, he'd need more. The temperature was already approaching twenty.

Zina: You should point out that's twenty Celsius.

He did a set of stretches for his knee and limped through the apartment, plodding along the floor as if not to damage it. Tools and the paraphernalia of various projects littered the place. He hunkered down in his books piled alongside tiles, parquets, boxes of nails, a sander. These low walls, a ladder draped with a sheet of canvas, kept people from wanting to visit his apartment, *thank God*, he'd say.

Outside the apartment, he could make wider strides. I was always annoyed at how he talked to himself. Now I miss Sasha Odessan's rambblings. *Rapan for dinner. Probably, like an American, Zinochka will be sickened by seafood. I'll say there's no other food. Then it will be priceless to see her face. Schadenfreude is what that's called, Sasha.*

Down a crumbling path to Lanzheron Beach, he passed an acacia, scattering tiny yellow leaves in a slow downward spiral he'd seen millions of times. He nonetheless sighed, inhaling the air they whirled. Tiny, miraculous, these leaves he brushed off by removing his backpack. The sky was clear, as was the beach, the water. He undressed, revealing beneath his shirt the chain from which hung the piece of shrapnel removed from his leg. It was a piece of the ship on which he himself had been during an explosion. That's why he limped. He wedged his feet into the flippers, grabbed the mask and snorkel, made a small splash letting himself into the cool water. The freedom of his leg's underwater movement sent energy throughout his body. He plunged in the direction of the sea wall. After surfacing he tried to float on his back, but he had so little body fat he sank. The sky was the sea was the sky. He snorted, sprayed water, flipped on his stomach.

A wave washed over his face. He shut his eyes and cleared his nostrils of the salty spray. There was no one in the water by any of the beaches stretching north to the city center or south past *Ibitsa* Beach, where the nightclub raged till morning. He dove, snatched snails from their paths along the silent sea floor. Pressure moved him through the water. *Open your mouth, you'll drown.*

Mackerel swam alongside the sea wall. He tried to mimic their languor. On the beach side of the sea wall, they waited for some fishing pole to snatch them from their gloomy life. Sasha Odessan had considered catching and releasing them into the wide world on the other side. He climbed and walked along the hairy, barnacled top. He dove and scooped several snails, put them in the bag, twisted it shut and looped it around his wrist. *The Amerikanka*, as he referred to Zina, *should help save the sea. Eat rapan – save the sea.*

Zina: *Rapan* are snails.

Having almost filled his first bag, he surfaced and set it on the sea wall. His movements made the empty second bag billow with water. His mask fogged. *Galka was unhappy because you overfried, yes charred, the blintzes. She knew you love them very brown, and always risk, well, charring them. She knew, but, all the same, she was angry, became upset, even said, that it's impossible to eat trash, that is, your overfried, it's possible to say, former food. Probably it was the truth. She read about how if you eat char, it causes cancer. She always read something, wanted to know what they eat in America. How they think we should cook blintzes. Even when Zina was born, they were there with their books, badly translated into Russian, their advice. They want to be managers of the whole white world. She said, Maybe I got married to the wrong brother. In the toilet you swore you'd separate with her. Because of char. So it began... If people can't be in the kitchen without an argument, then everything's...*

The water lapping against the concrete and the waves along the sandy places drowned out even memories of screams. Sasha Odessan lay under the tree against the cliff. It was the sandy flat place where he'd lain so many nights with his backpack for a pillow. *Zina couldn't sing like a pretty little bird in such a home. A dumb, gorgeous morning, such as this one, Galka lay in bed, one eye open, her arm poised to push herself up. You dressed, came here, to the beach, and when you returned, your woman's gone. So simple. The man who came to collect her things was quiet. And you were glad for that.*

He used to swim out so far the land was a projection irised by the waves.

I was there. I squatted in the emptiness and listened. *The apartment was never so quiet.* The space began to fill with his projects, found objects, like a junkman's yard. These pieces made their own noise, opposite of human, which sated the apartment's empty ear. Sasha Odessan could tell anyone about an object, a project, its history, which would never end. No piece was without fault. Even though that should suggest that the idea of perfection itself was not true, Sasha Odessan held on to it. It was easier to work with his hands than with his philosophy. It was probably better for his soul. Or it was just the same, and who said he believed in a soul? I suppose he would just set that question aside.

On the trail up from the sea, rocks tumbled into his footprints. Those and the tiny acacia leaves reminded him of Zina as a ballerina in an Odessan version of *The Nutcracker*, *Shchelkunchik*. Zina growled while telling me this.

Sasha Odessan was the first, the only non-English speaker I ever knew so well that I could almost hear his whispered dreams and fears for his daughter. Nonetheless, I'm trying to tell his story in English. That's why Zina glares.

It was only the second time in his life that he had been to the Odessa airport, a place more of parting than reconciliation. For him, this parting started not here but almost ten years before Zina was born, when Sasha Odessan said goodbye to his brother at the Odessa train station, closer to the center of the city. By the time glasnost had begun, the borders had opened up. Sasha Odessan planned a visit to his brother in America. The Berlin wall came down. The country locked down. *Maybe you won't be able to return*, said his mother, on the brink of the death that could wither whatever bodily link existed between the brothers. Then there was the day the TV showed only *Swan Lake*, when the world of all Soviet people changed forever more. Galina, his ex-wife, left, then disappeared without a trace, until a postcard arrived from America, San Francisco to be precise, Zina told me. His brother, the mother of his child, they were only threads of correspondence, abstractions, out there in the world. Packages of sweets and riches from America arrived, but Sasha Odessan wouldn't touch them with his finger, not to mention his tongue. With his brother, there were conversations on the phone. Sasha Odessan listened to tell whether all that was left of their togetherness, the language, had strayed too. In truth, he lived as if these people had never existed, had never been born nor given birth. It was easy, the same way he lived with regard to his father.

Zina: *It's called immaculate conception*, goes the Abramovich anecdote about delinquent dads. Or there's the one that goes, *Abramovich complains to a stranger that he has no children. "It was the same with my father, and my grandfather too." The stranger snorts, "Then where are you from?" "Odessa," Abramovich answers.*

He said he annoyed petty officials with inquiries about travel to America. But it all ended up at a wall, a metaphorical one but a wall nonetheless. Once, Zina asked him why he never tried to travel to St. Petersburg, or, at least, Sevastopol, while he was in the Navy. *I speak Odessan, a foreign language in those places*, he answered.

Zina's grumbling. It's simple – America took her away from him. America drew me back, and now I'm trying to make Odessan not a foreign language here.

Zina: You'll fail.

On the second leg of the flight, I had also sat apart from Zina, and I couldn't find her among those of us who shuffled toward the security checkpoint and Customs. Ahead of me, I heard only wicked laughter and the word, *Amerikose*.

Zina: That's too derogatory a word for an American like you, maybe for the more vulgar ones, or your potential reader.

For me, Europe was a dark room that somebody else had already felt out. An American was too enclosed there.

At Ukrainian Customs, the agent yawned, *Well, do you understand Russian?*

Zina: This was before the passing of the law about speaking Ukrainian.

I nodded.

Why have you come?

Tourism, I told him.

By the time he finished the yawn, he'd stamped my passport. Around the corner was a gauntlet of people staring at me from the other side of a movable barrier. Their faces, their outstretched hands showed an eagerness to take me where I should be. But I didn't know where I should be, so I walked as if with earmuffs and blinders.

There was Zina by a gaunter version of Sasha the American, as if my father had just come from a funeral. He was speaking to her alone in such a way that it was clear Zina had neglected to mention me to him. She didn't embrace this man at first. She only sniffed, then faced him with yawning eyes. She kissed him on the cheek, Sasha the American's cheek, my cheek.

He said, *I thought you'll never return.*

Zina let out a deep breath. *Papa, this is Ivan, my cousin, your nephew.* She watched him. His face hardened. *Familiar? Vanechka, here's your uncle, my father, Sasha.* She picked up her bag and continued on her way past us.

He looked as if he was going to curse. I know now that Sasha Odessan never cursed. Outside the window, a small plane lurched past, Lufthansa written on the side. A man walked alongside, his jaw clenched, head bobbing to music from earphones plugged into a device. He wore a shirt that said "G-UNIT." Outside the sky was the same orange – layers of it descending to the earth – that Sasha the American had witnessed in his apartment in Washington, D.C.

You're joking, he called to Zina. He hadn't been able to keep eye contact with me for long. When he looked at me again, he said, "Guten Tag. Sprechen Sie Deutsch?" This piqued G-UNIT's interest.

"Ja," I said.

"Amerikanets?" he asked.

"Ja," I said. I didn't know what to say.

"Ich kann kein Englisch," Sasha Odessan told me.

I speak Russian, I said while I let my hiker's backpack shimmy down. My clothes had pasted themselves to my clammy skin. I could feel the burden of what hung inside my clothing, my passport and wallet. Everything moved slowly, like the foot of a snail, somehow simultaneously sticking to and peeling from the surface.

This gaunt version of Sasha the American's shirt was unbuttoned, chest exposed. The airport was warm, and he'd made himself comfortable during the long wait. His ropy arm slung out and snatched my backpack. Outside, the plane sat, waiting to return here, where I'm writing this now. I'd done it. A Sasha had spoken to me in Russian. Instead of celebration, I mumbled, *Not necessary.* Then, *You are Aleksandr Pechenko, like my father.*

He simply stared at me. I reached for the backpack. *Please.* My hand touched the back of his. I had to bend down, whereas his hand could rest on the top of the backpack. He was glaring at me. He let go of the backpack, and it fell onto its side. Then he was off, walking forward, his leg describing a small circle with each stride.

Excuse me, excuse me, I murmured as I pivoted through the crowd. I held my backpack in front of myself, so I couldn't see the feet and legs I bumped and mashed. Sasha Odessan glanced back at me. Zina had already put distance between us.

Almost to the exit, several men stepped almost in front of me. "Seer, taxi. Seer." I paused before bursting through the huddle around the door.

I thought of *No thank you* in Russian, barreled past a *babushka*, who continued to waddle without noticing. Outside the sidewalk simply disintegrated into the cracked pavement, no curb. "*Oi, blyad*," said Sasha the American's son. My foot stomped somebody else's. My shoes would never pass as shoes from here.

I looked back. Sasha Odessan stood hunched, while a woman harangued him, her finger pointed in the air, a young daughter crouched with hands patting the top of her foot. Zina panted at his side.

When I came up to them and set my backpack against my knee, the woman began to chastise, and this tongue was too fluent for my ear. Its tone, however, was obvious. I caught the word *svoloch*, which I'd heard Sasha the American use on the phone with my uncle. Her voice was raspy and deep. It could be male.

Why didn't you say excuse me? The little girl will step aside. You have big feet. You "topnut" her foot, Sasha Odessan said.

Zina: *Topnut* is to stomp.

Excuse me, I said, making eye contact with the little girl, squatting and patting her foot. I'd lost the ability to shut my mouth. I said *Excuse me* again, and both Sasha Odessan and the mother gave me the same nauseated look.

"Excuse me, excuse me." Just go, "*debil*," said the mother.

Zina: *Debil* is moron. You.

She yanked her daughter by the arm and hurried away, the girl limping faster even than her normal gait. We watched each other, the girl and I, never to meet again, two quivering gazes, tapering out like a child's mewl. I felt pain too, a worse pain, in my boy's mind. Mine was the throbbing injury of shame, dormant since I was Sasha the American's young child.

Sasha Odessan looked over his shoulder at me. *In Russian, you have to speak loud.*

They say "Excuse me" here? I thought, that Russians don't do that.

We're not Russians.

Ukrainians?

Odessans.

Near the entrance, we approached a crooked huddle of men, one of whom leaned out, as if eavesdropping. Sasha Odessan hunched his shoulders and said to the ground, *Drive us to Economic and Nineteenth for fifty, and I won't tell anybody about it.* The man half-nodded, as if reading what Sasha Odessan said off the ground. He rubbed his chin. Still rubbing his chin, still looking at the ground, he began to walk away from the men. Every action was half done, a grifter's sleight of hand. Still rubbing and looking down, he crossed the street without checking for oncoming traffic. Sasha Odessan followed and, without looking, waved at us to follow as well. Zina threw herself forward.

At a car, the man finally dropped his hand to open the door of a Mercedes. He put one leg in, halted, and wanded over the roof of the car. I followed Zina into the backseat. *Thank you,* I said as I climbed in, hugging my backpack.

Thank you for what? asked Sasha Odessan.

I don't know, I mumbled. It seemed as if nobody was listening anymore.

On the way, I'd practiced the phrase, *If necessary, I can find another place to spend the night.* Already on the plane, I'd started to wonder about this whole journey.

When asked where to, Zina answered.

Oh, I see an Odessitka, the driver said back.

"Da," is that what you see? Zina snarled.

"Da," said the driver. His voice dropped. *I hear an Odessitka too. Let's drive into the steppe.*

Zina shut her eyes and lay back. The driver glared in the mirror. He was saying something about watermelons, probably how much they cost. Sasha Odessan watched the road, shrugged every now and then.

The sunset that yawned across the flat landscape transformed Ukraine into the U.S. Midwest. The steppe leveled the sunset with the earth. The unnatural, or at least too simple, flatness appeared as if it were at the bottom of nature's diverse and varied beauty. As more structures appeared, more people did, more than in Detroit. There was no curb demarcating where the street ended and the road began. Small unpaved patches were simply trampled beds of traces of snow. The Ukrainian Spring was upon us.

As we drove further, even more people began to appear in the streets. Looking at them from the other side of glass, I felt warm and sheltered.

Our car squealed at a turn and pulled over. Zina was completely asleep. Sasha Odessan was already out and approaching a kiosk along the road. A man wandered out from behind a building with his hand near his crotch, either adjusting his fly or fondling the fanny pack he wore on a belt around his front.

He's buying watermelons. From where did you arrive? asked the driver. I hesitated to answer. *I'm from America. I'm his nephew.*

"Hello, American! Why you not live in center?"

It was the truth. *I don't have much money.*

No? And your uncle can buy watermelons for lower prices?

Even though I understood each word, could parse what I had heard back and forth, I didn't comprehend the question until later. This was the first of many of these kinds of moments, where I seemed to be missing some concept when I tried to translate it in my head.

Sasha Odessan sat down in the front with two watermelons in his lap. *Let's go.*

The car started moving again down the same road we'd been traveling before, tires squealing on turns, as usual for this ride. The driver said, *Welcome to Odessa.* Noticing how I shifted at each squeal of the tires, he said, *Better to die quietly, in sleep, like my grandfather, than screaming from horror like the passengers on the bus he drove.*

Zina's open mouth was up in the air. Something could fall in, while she was inhaling, and choke her. Sasha Odessan looked back and forth at the driver and the road on which we drove.

We turned and drove down a tiny alley toward a wall I thought we would hit before the car stopped abruptly and threw Zina's head toward the passenger seat. She clasped her face but didn't look, then fell back, still asleep. The driver turned to Sasha Odessan and held out his open palm. When he spoke, his words were nothing to me but slurred breath and spittle.

Get out, Zina. We arrived, Sasha Odessan said.

"No, Americans. Sixty," the driver said.

Sasha Odessan only stared at him. Zina stirred, as if surprised by the English. Sasha Odessan said something too low to be heard. I leaned forward to hear as Sasha Odessan opened his door. The driver took Sasha Odessan's elbow. *Zina, Vanya, get out,* Sasha Odessan said again. The driver yanked at his elbow. There was a dent in the blank wall of the building. A large crack interrupted the flatness.

Problem? I asked.

"*Nyet,*" said Sasha Odessan. He took the driver's wrist, and the muscles in his forearm flexed. *So rude to change the price after you picked us up.*

I fished in my pocket. Zina stopped me. *What's happening? Papa, let him go.*

I said fifty. He's trying to screw us.

You didn't understand Russian! the driver shouted

I held money out. "It's okay," I murmured. The driver released Sasha Odessan's elbow and snatched the money. *Fifteen,* I said, accidentally, instead of *fifty.*

Eyeing the money for a moment, the driver gritted his teeth. In what was more Ukrainian than Russian, he said, *Wha' you 'aid?* "Speak fah-cking English."

Fifty. Fifty rubles. "I mean, griven."

Zina: You mispronounced *hryven.*

No. I said seventy-five. You didn't understand. You can pay in dollars, not fucking rubles. Thirty dollars, said the driver.

Sasha Odessan turned to sit facing the driver. *Vanya, put your money away.*

I still had some dollars in a side pocket of my backpack, so I fished in there, took out a twenty, and handed it to him. Zina watched as if through a screen, as if she were still on the other side of the ocean.

This is enough, even with something for ice cream.

Zina: That means a little something extra, you should point out.

You have a good nephew, uncle, said the driver. He slipped the bill between his thighs and made a wave with the back of his hand and a little fart sound with his mouth.

Outside the car, I hefted my backpack again. As soon as Zina, the last of us to exit, was out, the car reversed and gunned out of the alley, squealing at another turn.

Sasha Odessan glared at me. *I bought him a watermelon,* he said. Zina shrugged her shoulders and touched her father's arm on the same spot the driver had. *You Americans come here and throw your money around, as usual. He's a little mafia man. A thief, you understand? He always wants more.*

My backpack slipped down from my arm again, while we waited. "Sorry," I said, looking at Zina. But she was obviously still half asleep. Sasha Odessan looked at her. *Tell him not to give those people money.*

"Papa says you shouldn't give money."

"I know. I speak Russian too."

"I'm tired."

My backpack slipped all the way down to the ground and toppled.

Sasha Odessan lead us around the corner of the building. Everybody was reading the sidewalk. I did too. There was a small stair with a ramp at its side. I shifted the weight of my backpack from one arm to the other, then I held it in a bear hug. Zina could still lead me wherever she wanted.

Sasha Odessan jimmied the key. The smell of the car had settled into my clothes and hair. Watching him fiddle with the door, aware of Zina's zombie state behind me, I decided to say, *Thank you,* and address him with the Russian word for *uncle*. Sasha Odessan grimaced. He could pretend he hadn't heard me. So, I said, *the uncle who gave his coat from the Navy.*

I don't know what you're talking about. But I was wearing his pea coat.

Upstairs, a concrete echo was the only sound. The driver's "fahck" clacked in my brain. On the third floor we turned left three times in the hallway. Each door resembled the entrance to a bunker, designed against breaking-an-entering. Sasha Odessan stopped at one, unlocked it, and the hinges grated. "Willkommen," he said.

Inside, a long hallway ended with a bathroom. This, I would come to understand, was a typical communal apartment. The wooden floor had been scored, polished over. One room was large enough for three or four beds. But it had only one now, a mattress on the floor. A large hutch cabinet in the corner displayed china. Otherwise, there were several ghosts in dusty white sheets pushed against the walls. There must be an Abramovich anecdote about poltergeists, about them doing housework. The window was open, and outside cries of children skipped up from the courtyard.

This place was not home, but I hadn't known a home for months. I had to stay awake, as if my life depended on it. Her face nauseated, Zina rushed out of the room and flopped down somewhere else in the apartment.

I leaned my backpack against the wall. At the foot of the mattress on the floor, my knees buckled. I collapsed onto the loose mattress. Sasha Odessan mumbled. I didn't understand. I fell asleep thinking let the *domovoi*...

Zina: Russian for *poltergeist*, you should mention. And what he said there? He said he did remember the coat. Thank you for bringing it back to the country from which it came. He said thank you for bringing it back to the country where it would die.

...take care of it all.

Our Hospital

V. S. Yanovsky

Translated from the Russian
by Isabella Levitin

*... triste hôpital tout rempli de murmures,
Et d'un grand crucifix décoré seulement,
Où la prière en pleurs s'exhale des ordures,
Et d'un rayon d'hiver traversé brusquement.*
Baudelaire

Our hospital stood at the edge of the town. Beyond the park where sturdy rustic linden and maples grew green (and in due course withered) ran a lonely pair of streetcar tracks. The highway wound into the distance, with narrow roads and disheveled paths branching off from it. After a rain, voluminous puddles took a long time to dry out; it smelled of earth and sky, and larks trilled ecstatically overhead.

The town itself, roomy and clean, was famed for its ancient cathedral, its saints, and a special brand of champagne. A war monument adorned the central square, and a marble plaque on the wall of the *Mairie* informed passers-by that a German shell had exploded at that spot.

The natives were friendly and easy-going in a provincial way. On holidays sounds of music drifted from the cafés (they played Wagner, Chopin, Tchaikovsky). The patrons sipped demurely from their cups, picturesquely greeted newcomers and paid ladies pre-World-War-One compliments. Old gentlemen, straight out of Maupassant, crept along the streets, carrying large bouquets.

Fenced in by a high brick wall, cut off from the world, our hospital was rather small, and for children only; like many philanthropic institutions it was managed by women (most of them spinsters). There were two men on the entire staff: the concierge and I. The aged, crumbling head physician dropped in once a week.

Madame la Directrice was an Englishwoman – French by marriage – a widow with an unhappy past. The proud smile of undeserved sorrow had frozen on her face (mothers of children tragically perished look like that). Life had apparently taught her to value one thing only: comfort. She shunned any unpleasantness, hated to be inconvenienced, and, although she always attempted to set a wrong right, she did it in such a manner as to spoil forever the complainant's wish for future reforms.

Her favorite was the Supervisor, a dark-eyed, slightly hunch-backed spinster ten years her junior, with a pale, pretty face. They had known each other in England and come over together. Whether because long years of collaboration make for closeness or because the Supervisor had been a witness to her former, happier life (and reminded her of it), their friendship seemed firmly grounded, enduring, and, as everything connected with the *Directrice*, smacked of egotism. Seeing them sit together conversing softly in the parlor, it seemed as if they were confiding secrets to each other, while in reality they were only going over unimportant domestic matters or planning yet another surprise for their adored pet, Gemmy. Gemmy, the Supervisor's dog, is one of the protagonists of this story; I shall have more to say about her, but first I want to talk about the people.

The head nurse, *La Générale*, was also an old-maid, but one who had managed to get a taste of the sweeter things in life. She was grey-haired, with a mustache and an enormous bosom swelling out of a high, tightly-laced corset, which creaked like a new harness. Squeezed in as she was, she perpetually had to wipe beads of sweat from her shaven, grey, old-woman's neck. In male company, she fussed incessantly with her extremely low neckline. Bringing her squeaking chest close, she would quip: "Last night I didn't sleep alone. Mlle Luneau is my witness, ha,ha,ha! I slept with Gemmy!" And she walked on: heavy, insatiable – on thin, fragile legs.

Mlle Luneau worked on the infectious ward. This enabled her to live aloof from the others. There were rumors that she had not always behaved properly, that somewhere she had a son, and so on... She had joined the staff only two or three years before and periodically threatened to resign. Proud and unyielding, she kept to herself; even when conceding a point, she still radiated a certain mischievous hostility. She spoke with the derisive smile of those who have encountered nothing but hypocrisy and vanity. It seemed that, if it were within her power, she would ruthlessly eradicate many things, good and bad. She was over forty, but every cell of her already declining body was saturated with sex. In her way of answering a question, of crossing a room, of moving a chair, there was something distinctly feminine. Her dark brilliant eyes were calm and smoldering like those of a horse, her lips were full and vividly colored. Everyone disapproved of her, but there never was any open criticism. For some reason she was feared.

She spent her days off with a cousin in town and also stayed there overnight. Upon her return in the morning, Mlle Luneau met the iciness of people who pay high taxes for their moral achievements and are not about to deprive themselves of the benefits to which they are entitled. But she only smiled ironically, even insolently, and showed no remorse whatsoever.

During the day, when the nurses who were not on duty slept, she usually walked in the courtyard, leading Gemmy on a leash. Behind a fence, Bob, the concierge's shepherd, would give out his mellow, dignified bark. With the air of an experienced Don Juan, spoiled by female attention, yet unwilling to let any opportunity go by, he flirted with homely little Gemmy. Gemmy on her part grew frantic, strained at the leash, sobbed and howled in rapture at the thought of possible bliss. Licking her lips, Mlle Luneau said:

“We'd better run home.”

“Why?” I asked. (We were walking together.)

“Don't you know? The *Générale* herself nearly got fired on account of Gemmy; the leash tore and only by a miracle were the two dogs separated. You see, their Gemmy is still a virgin. Why do they mind? They're probably envious,” she explained angrily, adding: “*Merde!*” in

a tone of voice that made it seem a question not of Gemmy's fate, but of her own. With this she snatched up the dog (not trusting the leash) and ran into the house.

Gemmy was a puny, short-legged mutt, always dressed in little coats, mufflers, velvet knee caps, and a brand-new collar with bells. She was the idol of the entire institution, the darling, the beloved, the dictator and tyrant of the old maids. She was permitted to enter any room, and in each she had her favorite place. If it was occupied, Gemmy approached and whimpered until the place was relinquished. Weak and cowardly, she could never have survived on her own, but backing her up, defending her, stood the quiet, all-powerful Supervisor. Thus everyone flattered and petted Gemmy, and she sensed that they were weak and hypocritical. Little by little, her plebeian traits had developed: self-adulation, petty envy, vengefulness; her privileged position had transformed her into a parasite

She was no doubt suffering from a skin disease: her hair kept falling out and the fur between the large bald spots was matted; it must have been this affliction which made her always restless and irritable. She refused ordinary food, whether because she glutted herself on sweets or for some other reason, and neither threats nor supplications had any effect; on occasion she was fed through a tube, like a gastrointestinal case.

For Christmas there was a tree and presents. I got an address book with a pencil; Gemmy received several elegant boxes of candy, a sweater, a cap, and an inflated rubber-cat.

Her mistress slept, ate, bathed with her. These two old maids knew each other's weak points and had learned to get along.

I loathed Gemmy – because of her almost human egotism, her cowardice, her puniness and her hypochondria. Guessing at my feelings, she never stayed alone with me, but was extremely insolent in public: she would approach slowly, plant herself in front of me on wide-spread legs (in a human this would correspond to challenging an enemy, hands in vest pockets), bare her fangs, and start growling and burping. She had no real bark – her voice broke; she could only howl, whine and grunt.

There was one person who paid no attention to the little mutt – that was Mlle Colette. A nurse with half a century's experience, she had already landed one pension and was now edging up towards a second or perhaps even a third. Greed alone was not the motivation. In her lonely life she had become accustomed to hospitals, she felt a kinship with sick people, and was ill at ease with healthy ones. For many years she had welcomed the first cry of the newborn and harbored the last sigh of the dying. She was the senior nurse in her ward, had things her way, gave orders, was obeyed – and for her to retire would mean to go off to die. Everyone knew the amount of her life-savings. On the first free day after payday she set out for town, to the bank, to deposit her money: solemn, in a black hat, with a black umbrella. She came back rejuvenated, carrying small presents for the nurses on her ward. Long ago she had acquired a piece of land in the South, but was in no hurry to build and kept postponing it from one summer to the next. Different firms swamped her with folders, architectural brochures and blueprints, but she could not make up her mind. "During the next vacation, I'll decide," she said. One contractor, having unsuccessfully courted her for a whole year, told her in a fury, "Mademoiselle, you are not going to die in a house of your own!"

She called herself "*très catholique*." When she went to the front, she was indifferent to religion (*comme tout le monde*), but the soldiers returning to the trenches said: "All we've left now is our faith in God." There were many of them, she asserted, hundreds, thousands, tens of thousands, and all said the same thing. Then she understood: man needs the Church. When the bell tinkled and the priest passed by with the blessed sacrament, Mlle Colette, blushing like a girl of thirteen, rushed to kiss his hand.

A dramatic incident once set the whole town astir. A fickle wife had left her husband and eloped with a lover. "*O, si j'avais un mari!*" Mlle Colette would repeat long after, in the dry, suppressed-passionate voice of a pious catholic, always making the same gesture with her arms, as if holding pressed to her bosom and lulling to sleep, the most precious thing in the world. She had preserved an enthusiastic softness, the malleable quality that wins people over. When half-mad Tarney, another

old spinster, had one of her tantrums, only Mlle Colette could appease her.

Tarney suffered from toxic goiter (exophthalmos, fits) and was an ill-natured, hapless creature. During her attacks she would try to bite her own elbow. She took her meals alone, at a separate table, her back turned to the others, asserting that the sight of some faces spoiled her appetite. She tormented her subordinates. And it was to Tarney that, by some cruel logic, a student nurse (a Russian to boot) was assigned: she was nineteen years old and her name was Madame Zubov. What an irony, the graying captain having to salute a beardless general! Tarney had to find a way out. She invited the *Directrice*, the Supervisor and the head nurse to her ward. Ceremoniously she led them to the crib of an infant under Zubov's care and undid the diapers: an enormous safety pin lay there, its sharp end pointed at the tiny body. "That's how she treats our children," Tarney announced in tragic tones. Everyone knew that she had planted the pin. But the choice between an employee of such long standing and a young student nurse was clear – Zubov had to go. It was then, for the first time, that she addressed me in Russian. Sobbing, tears streaming down her face, she told me that she had only two more months before getting her diploma; she already had the promise of a job at the municipal hospital where her husband worked as an ambulance driver; and, please, in the name of all the saints, would I help her.

"*Comme des sauvages!*" was Mlle Colette's comment. She had been listening to our conversation. Irritated as I was by the prior spectacle, I tried to point out to Mlle Colette the inaptness of her remark, but she did not get the point.

"For me to leave France!" she retorted, not to my words but to another, basic point. "*Jamais de la vie,*" giving me to understand that there was a qualitative difference between us. Nevertheless, some wheel had been set in motion. Grumblingly she stood up for Zubov, who thereupon was merely transferred to another ward.

The radio in Mlle Colette's quarters blared all day long. From seven in the morning until seven at night she was on duty, but from the empty room, through the locked door, issued marches, dance music, stock exchange announcements and lectures on apiculture. Whether she

simply neglected to turn off the radio or whether this was an expression of a peculiar kind of greediness – God alone knows. The vulgar automatic sounds echoing in the empty room stressed their futility and instilled an almost mystical fear in me. In the evening she turned off the loudspeaker, donned earphones and, smiling the same smile at brass and strings, at advertisements and jokes, listened while leisurely mending the tubes of an old bicycle that she rode on her days off. The radio was a splendid expensive machine on which one could get Melbourne and Moscow, Budapest and Oslo. But at 10:30 p.m., Radio Paris played the Marseillaise; Mlle Colette neatly folded up her earphones; the day was over. She never left the confines of her country (and in this cruel waste of all other options there was something more than plain stupidity or narrow-mindedness). She suffered from headaches, which she treated with cold compresses. And, when at night the memory of a neglected order or arrangement flitted through her superficial sleep, she hastened into the ward, ancient and virginal, a touching sigh, dressed only in her nightgown and pressing a handkerchief with a piece of ice to her forehead.

Night duty was done by the recent graduates. One of them was Andrée: wheat-blond, slender, with highly colored cheekbones; (every night she ran a slight temperature). Their duty continued for twenty-eight nights in a row, then five days rest, and then the same routine all over. Once, when she had her period, Andrée, bleeding profusely, fell to the floor and remained there till the morning shift (too proud or too angry to call for help).

At night, a hospital gains in significance – it is outside the scope of life and death (or in-between). The motionless, yet ever-changing lacework of shadows; stillness and wakefulness, prayers and despair, sighing and coughing; the infinite perspective of corridors and stairways; the trickle of water; and again, shadows piling up and smells (toilets and death).

In the early morning hours the sight of the nurse, with translucent face, in angelic white, a lonely figure gliding between the cots, could move you to tears. Once I asked Andrée what she was thinking of while she watched over the children's breathing on those winter nights. She

answered: "I think that in the big cities there is music and dancing. And that some day I too shall be there, and dance, and dance... Her face distorted, speaking also with hip and shoulder blades, she crossed the ward with an ecstatic stride, and the very god of revels could not have equaled those gusts of passion or shown a greater thirst for the unknown. Besides the permanent staff there were always a dozen or so student nurses living at the hospital – for practical training. Unsightly eager fledglings, they constantly whispered among themselves, fought and denounced one another. They were all waiting for adventures, had secret trysts and received messages. Sometimes one of those pink billets would fall into the hands of a superior, after which there were lengthy interrogations (medical examination included) and fainting spells.

The morning was ushered in by an early bell – the restless demonstrative morning of a hospital. Ahead, like a paradisiacal island, like a beacon, glimmered lunch. The nurses from the surgical floor joined us for meals and so did the secretaries, two bony Italians with sallow complexion who had both been deserted by their husbands. The nurses entered, businesslike, casting carnivorous glances at the tables, asking "*Qu'est-ce qu'il y a?*" – "What's for lunch?" – with avidly opened lips. They lifted the lids from the dishes on the steam table, looked deep into them, inhaled nervously and, disappointed, went to their assigned places. The five or more senses granted mankind they seemed to use only in connection with food. They had eyes, but there was nothing left to look at; ears-but what was there to listen to? Each had a mouth, a tongue, a brain – but these were wasted: there was nothing left to talk about, there was hardly any reason for thinking. One thing remained: to eat. But then, because they gorged themselves, they suffered from gastritis, complained of being constipated, and took all kinds of pills and powders. The main course was scrutinized, tasted, and pushed aside, while they looked – with envy or disgust – at those who were consuming what to them, for some reason, was forbidden. They left the table unsatisfied, and stilled their hunger with sweets and pastries. On holidays there were two meat courses and a colorful torte or intricate fruit salad for dessert. That was all a holiday brought (in addition to the church service) and yet they were impatiently looked forward to and remembered long after.

Many years before, Mlle Colette had discovered a worm in her cauliflower. Since then she had eschewed that vegetable. The tables were supervised strictly by the *Directrice*: everything on one's plate had to be eaten; she advised wrapping a crust of bread up in a napkin – for the evening. Mlle Tarney (toxic goiter) was having false teeth made. During this period her life lost its last shred of meaning. To nourish herself like a baby on gruels and soups! With her eyes she probed each portion of meat, demanding to smell the pots. Temporarily she even began to talk with her colleagues, inquiring with passionate curiosity whether the meat was tasty, whether it wasn't tough. She would bite off a morsel, chew on it fiercely, violently, stubbornly (breaking into a sweat), then, stealing a glance at Madame, would spit it into her napkin. “*O, gardez vos dents!*” she implored the student nurses in an upsurge of tender regret, “take care of your teeth!”

At long last her false teeth were ready. Tarney approached the table solemnly, like a priestess. Red spots appeared on her thin face as she took her portion of steak and, looking around fearfully with hungry eyes, added another hunk. She cut off a piece and carried it to her mouth. We sat there, watching, as if at a mystery. She gnawed rapaciously. Her goiter, adhered to the trachea, moved with every swallow and was obviously in the way; every so often she adjusted it. At the third mouthful she grew tired. Perhaps one has to get used to dentures, perhaps they did not fit well – she had forgotten how to eat: clumsily she opened her mouth, tried to chew, the food floundering under her tongue without being ground up. Each bite was agony. Beside herself, her head bent low, she moved her jaws. The sweat was pouring down her face and she tried to wipe it off with her napkin, but gave up: there was no time, for her entire attention was riveted on her mouth: it had to be opened, closed, opened, closed, overcoming the pain. Suddenly, violently, she pulled at her teeth, extracted both dentures and, throwing them to the side (as a man ready to fight throws off his coat), she again attacked the steak. But the inflamed gums hurt too much; she uttered a cry, dropped her head onto the table and began to sob.

A short rest, and work started, again: a hard, twelve-hour-long shift, in all probability lovingly accepted, for how else could one stand it.

France sent us her tubercular, rickety, retarded children. From the town came those with infectious diseases (typhoid, whooping cough, measles and scarlet fever cut down the orphans). In the park in Paris, well-kept children walk about: girls in training bras, carrying umbrellas and pocket books; boys with ties and gloves. From where do they come, these emaciated, coughing, scabious ten-year-old gnomes? Each one, itching and feverish, must be kept clean, each has to be fed, treated, fed again: by the teaspoon, one swallow at a time, every ten minutes. Administer oxygen, inject stimulants, apply compresses. At night there is one nurse for the fifty cots that are distributed over several wards connected by long corridors. In each there are critical cases – to and fro, to and fro, impossible to be in two places at once. The body cannot do it. Only the limitless soul, this ape’s soul, streeeeetches.

Whatever there was in them of woman, mother, sister, mistress, they gave away a hundredfold, poured it out miserly, teaspoon by teaspoon, year after year. And continue doing it. (What do they draw on?) The young ones must get accustomed; they struggle. One student nurse quit while I was there: she could not bear to wash a dead child’s body.

The head physician would come once a week. He would smoke his cigar, sneeze, agree with everybody and everything, and be off. I would make my daily rounds and honestly prescribed the least expensive medications. But the nurses carried the leaden weight of our sorry world on their shoulders. “Children die differently,” (not like the others) they would often say, as if sharing a secret.

Visitors were permitted once a week. They found their children washed and combed (shining, calm) as they never were at home. They thanked the Supervisor and left token gifts for the nurses.

Dinner was at seven. Almost a repetition of the noon meal, with one difference: those whose shift was over behaved more boisterously and those on the night shift were tense and yawned nervously (worried or depressed).

The *Directrice*, the Supervisor and Gemmy spent the evenings in a corner of the sitting-room in peaceful conversation. The Supervisor did cross-stitch and therefore considered herself a connoisseur of Slavonic

folklore. The nurses played *belote* – usually not for money, at most for a few centimes. But always recklessly, passionately, with indignation and reproaches at every mistake. The maid carrying the cups passed by with deliberate slowness, peeking into the cards and commenting in interjections.

There were rare visits to the movies. On these occasions they borrowed each other's best outfits and paid for the best seats. They laughed to the point of tears if the hero surprised the heroine in the bathtub or somehow got into the same bed with her; they ate candy and ice cream during intermission and came home tired out. In the days that followed, they continued to analyze the plot and argue about minute details. Invariably someone would remember a pre-war play and recount its contents. And although at the bottom of their souls all this left them cold, since it was never connected with anything familiar and close to them, they still found in it a temporary support: it seemed to them that they had shared in the joys of life; and the more money they spent on it, the more respect they commanded. Thus months and years would pass. Rarely, through circumstances beyond their control, there was an elemental explosion, a storm or something of the sort. A new cook was hired, an additional wing built. The war caused a great deal of confusion and excitement. (Not the war – warfare – itself, but certain of its manifestations: mobilization, feting of the troops, remarks about “*les Boches*.”) There was the day when one of the student nurses tried to poison herself. She was saved and discovered to be pregnant. Such excitement, however, was few and far between, so that our staff was able to digest each one thoroughly and slowly fall back into the accustomed routine.

During my stay there was only one such major occurrence – almost a catastrophe – that shook our foundations. In the morning, while the head physician (it happened to be his day) and I were making the rounds – bulky, awkward figures passing between the rows of cots – turning away from the trusting or sullen glances of the weary children, there came from the court-yard a woman's piercing cries. We ran to the window: on the garden path, the Supervisor was writhing in convulsions. We sped down to help; from all sides women came

running; passers-by, attracted by the uproar, were peeping through the fence. (By now she was lying motionless, completely silent, her face buried in the ground, her hands clutched tightly around her head.) When she heard our steps she raised her head a little but, catching sight of Gemmy and the shepherd coupled at her feet, she groaned, sank back and hid her face again. The shepherd dog busied himself competently, vigorously, but with a bewildered, almost frightened look, probably occasioned by the many witnesses and the noise around him. One of his ears was erect, the other, turned inside out, flapped down askew. He kept his angry, discontented face averted from us and listened attentively to every sound, his back twitching in anticipation of blows. All in all he presented an aspect of stoic, sad acceptance of his fate. Gemmy could not appraise the situation – she had only one fear; that someone would disturb them. Strenuously and hypocritically wriggling, she tried to convey to us, “It’s nothing, nothing at all, in a moment I’ll be through.” But her distended, darkened eyes, resembling liquid tar, were turned deep into herself (self-devouring) in an expression quite unprecedented, bespeaking the possibility of yet another world. Nervously she kept sticking out her little scarlet tongue, every so often hypocritically and placatingly nodding in our direction. But then, unable to contain her delight, as if bursting with gratitude and wishing to share it, she looked at us endearingly. “This is good! This is very good!” she seemed to be saying – and nodded again in her pseudo-friendly way, imploring, “Wait a moment, I’ll be with you in a second.” We stood there, silent, transfixed. Only the concierge who, as the owner of the shepherd, felt responsible, explained to the public at large that it was all the Supervisor’s fault, that she could have pulled Gemmy away, but had simply fainted at the sight of the manly attributes of the aroused dog.

She was given some smelling salts and led into the house. The dogs completed their game, and, estranged, indifferent towards each other, their hindquarters retracted, they sullenly froze and could not be separated. There were consultations, advice, arguments. In our town (a county-seat where the side-walks were made of wood and where a carriage ride was *de rigueur* twice in life: to the altar and to the

cemetery; where the cesspools were emptied by convicts in grey prison clothes with clanging fetters) dog weddings had been seen aplenty. In the fall there was a couple on every square and empty lot, surrounded by hypnotized members of their species, driven on by wind, howls and stones. A shopkeeper would come running from his store with a club, hit them over the head, the back, the legs. The pack would make room, withdraw, and continue to watch events from a distance. It would seem that, free as they were, they could leave, get away from the sinning and the beatings, but spurred on by a feeling of duty, spellbound, they again somnambulistically close ranks around the mating couple. A passer-by, stung to the quick, hurls himself (his face madly distorted) upon the two and begins kicking them relentlessly (with such abandon people only punish themselves). Boys yell, burghers look around for a suitable stick, young girls rush past averting their eyes, both curious and frightened. The dogs are beaten until they separate, God only knows in what state. The bitch vanishes, a gang of males in her wake; the bloodied groom limps far behind.

Obviously all this wouldn't do here. The concierge suggested that the pair be immersed in hot water; his wife disagreed – the water should be cold. Whereupon the head physician, in a Solomonic compromise, pronounced: "Use tepid water." We picked the dogs up. The old doctor and the concierge carefully backed into the elevator with their unusual burden. The pear-shaped elevator – its contents visible through the grill – rose slowly, reminiscent of some ancient biblical fruit from the tree of life. Then the concierge rolled up his sleeves and locked himself in the bathroom. We remained in the corridor, instantaneously, without having planned it, divided into two camps: one – the old doctor and I, the other – all the women. Even Zubov, the foreigner, sided with them. Every so often from behind the slatted door, came Genny's thin whine: and the manly, suffering bark of the shepherd; then the women trembled, as if an invisible bow had been passed over some taut string inside them; they grew pale, cried out, wrung their hands. Us men they seemed not to notice at all. When they happened to look in our direction, their eyes became expressionless, oddly transparent, squeamish. As if, were we to drop dead on the spot, no one would

mind. The *Directrice*, who was obliged to shake hands with the head physician, kept sighing and sniffing for some time after. Everything else had temporarily become immaterial: there remained only the two sexes, deeply hostile at bottom, annihilating each other.

Finally the door opened and the concierge, crumpling a snow-white towel in his hands, winked at me discreetly. Genny and the shepherd were immediately taken downstairs.

This was the beginning of a sad fortnight. Everybody moved on tip-toes, spoke in whispers. The nurses fidgeted and twitched; they slept poorly. No one talked to me. After meals they congregated in small groups, lamenting, and sharing memories. Mlle Luneau told about her wedding that never took place, calling the treacherous fiancé a “*crapule*.” The Supervisor kept to her bed, wrapped up and with compresses on her tear-swollen face.

This, of course, was only part of reality. Externally our life continued in the accustomed way. The children had to be fed, bathed, treated. The relatives who visited on Thursdays probably did not notice any change. But the Supervisor remained closeted in her room, estranged, suffering, ill. Sometimes, when a door was opened downstairs, she could hear the lonely whining of Gemmy; at such moments she dissolved into helpless, inconsolable tears.

At long last the inevitable happened. Some door had not been closed, Gemmy broke loose, sped up the staircase and down the corridor and landed on her mistress's bed. The poor woman raised her hands in fear and cried out, but Gemmy jumped up and, whimpering and sobbing, began to lick her hands. A minute passed. Then the Supervisor embraced Gemmy, pressed her to her breast and broke into tears. She wept over the ruthless laws of our earth, over the sacrilegiousness of what had happened to Gemmy and had passed her by, over her life, her lost strength, and her something else that I am not able to guess at but that Gemmy, clinging motionless to her sunken chest, understood perfectly. The next day, the Supervisor joined us in the parlor. Austere, pale, proud, she was leading Gemmy. So does a mother carry her illegitimate son in her arms, or present her prodigal, repentant daughter. Everyone behaved tactfully, afraid to hurt or anger the Supervisor; they

hid their curiosity and, suppressing their revulsion, petted Gemmy, in order to show that nothing had changed.

But Gemmy – what a dear, friendly, understanding creature she had turned into! Even her bark had assumed weight and measure. She ate whatever was put before her and, despite her age (eight years), played joyfully all day long, apparently having found her place in the hierarchy of life.

Thus, little by little, everything came back to normal, calmed down – was forgotten, until the next alarm.

A few weeks later we were assembled in the dining room for lunch when one of the secretaries, her voice choking with impatience announced: “Have you heard the latest, *Mesdames*? Andrée is leaving!”

The nurses surrounded her, eager to learn more. But at that moment Andrée appeared in the door. With a condescending look at us, she said: “I have news, girls. I’m going to Paris.” There was a moment’s silence from whose depths strains of thoughts seemed to rise: everyone trying to figure out the cause and effect of the news and to assess her own adventure. The first to speak was Mlle Luneau. With heavy, soft, womanly steps, she went up to Andrée, stretched out her arms and kissed her on the forehead. (So does a mother bless her daughter before she is led to the altar; a veteran the recruit going into battle; a tutor his pupil ready for the exam.) Everybody at once, as if having come to their senses, rushed up to Andrée, floridly and hypocritically congratulating her and wishing her luck and happiness.

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The Adventures of Oscar Quinn

V. S. Yanovsky

Translated from the Russian
by Isabella Levitin

I regained consciousness on a green meadow, in the shadow of a tropical tree that looked like a gigantic fern. Surrounding me at some distance was a throng of strange-looking people – strange, yet reminiscent of something familiar. Their lips moved slowly, occasionally emitting abrupt sounds. All of them were tall, with rectangular faces and brick complexions, and dressed in colorless clothes. The women were extremely narrow in the hips, long-legged, with light-green eyes, small heads set on high necks, and short, straight chestnut hair.

The presence of women encouraged me and I got up, smiling as pleasantly as I could; only then did I notice in what a terrible state my clothes were – I was covered with rags, through which my white skin could be seen.

“Excuse me,” I said, trying to hide my hairy chest. “I crashed and I might say that I was saved only by a miracle.”

At the sound of my words they exchanged glances the meaning of which I could not then understand. Unexpectedly one of the girls stepped forward and cautiously, carefully, as though addressing someone deaf or insane, uttered a few disconnected syllables, something like “ehe, aba, uhe.”

I said: “I am a citizen of the United States and I would like to get in touch with the American consul. My plane crashed.”

Seeing that they did not understand me, I drew a kind of map on the sand –the rough contours of Florida, the West Indies, the Azores

and West Africa – and asked them by signs to show me where I was. They looked at me with cold vacant eyes, unable or unwilling to answer my question. Once again their lips moved lazily, the girls stared at me intently, and whenever I spoke all of them would withdraw in fright and turn their heads away.

Almost an hour had passed, when a small car, something like a jeep but longer, drove quietly toward us. Two men of athletic build, dressed in sky-blue uniforms, jumped out and ran to me. From their demeanor I correctly guessed that they were policemen. Ignoring my questions and acting as if determined not to lose a moment, they took me by the arm, politely but resolutely, and led me to the car. I had just time to look back once, and suddenly it struck me what all these people reminded me of: advertisements. If all the models on our billboards and posters vaunting the merits of the various kinds of beer, bras, cars, powder, bathing suits and cigarettes were assembled and lined up, they would form just such a crowd.

The car started, and we rolled speedily along a smooth road. Dotted the hills on either side of the road were green patches of various crops such as corn, wheat and other, less familiar, grain. Agriculture here was obviously on a high level, supported by an abundant and varied irrigation system. The woods consisted largely of trees resembling cedars and gigantic ferns. Here and there I saw individual farms or estates and herds of livestock – horses, cows, sheep and even camels, which quite surprised me. The rivers were narrow and shallow, I noticed, but spanned by solid, monumental bridges.

After several hours of driving, I realized by many signs that we were approaching a large center, and in fact we soon entered a well-planned city with spacious boulevards and tall houses of red stone. There were stores, automobiles, and everywhere the now familiar race of people – tall, brick-complexioned, slow-moving, in spotless clothes. We stopped before the entrance of a large building in the middle of an old, thickly-grown park; to judge by the number of men in blue uniforms strolling along the tree-lined walks, I had been brought to some official place. Escorted by several guards, I entered an enormous, many-storied hall with windows directly under the vault. Out of the semi-darkness there

stepped toward me a small, clean-shaven, wrinkled man who looked Japanese. "Welcome to Atlantis," he said, smiling hospitably.

"You speak English!" I cried, squeezing both his hands.

"I hope my accent does not bother you too much," he replied. "I am Caday. Mr. Caday, if you will. Please, take a seat, make yourself at home – that is the phrase, isn't it?"

I sat on the square stool he had pointed to and began at once:

"Mr. Caday, my name is Oscar Quinn. My plane crashed as I was flying it from Havana to the Azores, and I escaped with my life only by a miracle. Please tell me what island this is. I must send off two cables right away."

"You are on the island of Atlantis," Mr. Caday answered readily.

"Atlantis? I confess I have never heard of such an island in this part of the world."

"Really?" Mr. Caday smiled. "Have you never heard of the legend of the sunken continent?"

"Oh, the legend of Atlantis," I exclaimed, "why, of course, I have. But wait a moment," – here I felt creepy all over – "what has the legend got to do with it?"

"It has quite a bit to do with it," Mr. Caday said gently. "You are in the center of Atlantis, on the bottom of the ocean, under a layer of three thousand fathoms of salt water. Would you mind taking a look here..."

We walked over to a map carved into the marble of the wall.

"That's what it all looked like, once – here is Africa and Europe, and this is Atlantis, the island that sank to the bottom of the ocean. And you are on it now."

"But please," I interrupted him, annoyed, "if the land was flooded, how can we breathe and talk here..."

"Oh, that is quite simple," replied Mr. Caday. "Sit down, please. Would you like some of our fruit drink?" He poured a muddy iced liquid out of a pitcher. Obediently I took a few swallows.

"Good, isn't it?"

"Delicious," I replied, although the liquid was completely tasteless.

"We call it Coca-Cola."

“Coca-Cola?” I exclaimed.

“Yes. I don’t know whether it is like your drink of the same name.”

“For heaven’s sake,” I begged, “continue your explanation.”

“There is little to add,” Mr. Caday said. “Atlantis sank to the bottom of the ocean, but not all of it was drowned. As a result of a marvelous combination of physical forces there formed an enormous air pocket, if I may use this expression, which held up the water above it. Our scientists have thoroughly explored this phenomenon, and I hope you will look into the accumulated data. You will have ample time.”

“I beg your pardon,” I said, “but this accidental equilibrium might suddenly be disturbed, and then a fearful mass of water...” terror prevented me from finishing the sentence.

“Certainly,” Mr. Caday said politely. “But in your world too the stars might change their course, the sun become extinguished, or a comet might fall. In fact, you earth-dwellers also survive only by virtue of a miracle. The latest conclusions of the theory of relativity...”

“So you have heard about the theory of relativity?” I cried, for some reason suddenly happy and reassured.

“Of course. We follow your civilization with close attention. Our radios receive the broadcasts of many stations on Earth. Do you want to hear one?”

He walked over to a heavy cupboard of dark wood and turned a button. Soon I heard: “Wheaties, Breakfast of Champions...” and at the sound of this familiar, native, earthly call – here, deep under water, in a lost empire – I was moved to the point of tears.

“Well then,” I said, in a new attempt to prove to this repulsive man the absurdity or falseness of his assertions, “how do you feed and clothe your citizens? After all, your sources of raw material must be very limited.”

“You have heard of atomic fission?” Mr. Caday inquired. “Well, we learned that secret long ago. Moreover, we can split not only uranium atoms but those of almost any other element. That’s how we get our energy and raw materials. Furthermore, we can produce synthetically any mineral or metal, as well as proteins and simple living organisms.”

“And the sun? I saw it moving in your sky. It gives light and warmth!”

“It’s artificial,” was the answer. Mr. Caday’s yellow, wrinkled face remained serious and imperturbable.

“All right,” I yielded, “but at least send some cables for me to the earth – to my fiancée Barbara and my friend Roger. They’ll be worried.”

“Barbara,” he repeated. “That’s a pretty common name here. We have many Barbaras and you will be able to choose whichever one you please. As for communication with the earth’s surface,” he added sternly, “we don’t go in for that. It might disturb the equilibrium of our domain. I’m afraid there is no way for you to get in touch with your Barbara. You are fated to remain here. Rarely, perhaps once in a century, there come to us people from the world above the water, and even shells of ships – there is some sort of current, a whirlpool, which connects the two worlds. We have a great need for representatives of the earth’s race; they have a special importance for us which you will come to understand, by and by. Needless to say, we are ready to provide you with all the comforts, but to gain our full confidence you must choose a mate and have children as soon as possible.”

“But I am in love!” I exclaimed. The whole thing was like a nightmare. “I love Barbara and I want to marry her.”

“I know,” Mr. Caday said softly, “and it does you honor. But the fact is that you are lost to your earth, we might say “dead”. You’ll never see it again. Now a new life begins for you and all your earthly contracts have lost their validity. I am sure Barbara will forgive you this unwilling betrayal. Just think, you will become a member of our community, perhaps even its head, the Magister. What secrets you will learn! “And, without giving me an opportunity to reply, he concluded: “Well, that’s about all I am supposed to tell you today. Until you have chosen a wife you will be held prisoner and work in our Digests Department. My assistants will explain to you the nature of your occupation. Be seeing you, as they say.”

Two men in blue uniforms led me through a maze of dark corridors and locked me up in a spacious, almost empty room. It is easy to imagine in what state of mind I lay down on my narrow bed; nevertheless, my exhaustion was such that I soon fell asleep.

Next day two clerks who spoke English with a peculiar accent introduced me to my duties. We worked in the area of the Great Museums. I was supposed to compose a sort of Readers' Digest on the basis of the books and manuscripts collected there. In their basic English the clerks explained the nature of my work to me and helped me with the texts, and I wrote a short summary of the first dossier they put before me. This work, interesting in itself, soon became real drudgery because of the furious speed at which I was compelled to write. Moreover, all digressions were forbidden; I had to put down only the gist of the matter.

Vocabulary and grammar I mastered soon enough. The language of Atlantis, which I shall describe in detail elsewhere, is difficult mainly because of the oddities of pronunciation, many sounds requiring only rudimentary motions of tongue and lips. This is explained by the hypertrophy of the eardrum, which enables the aborigines of the sunken continent to distinguish hardly perceptible sounds.

After the working day I was led to my cell and fed. The food was fresh and cool, the vegetables and fruits were brightly colored, but had neither taste nor odor. My guards and collaborators, however, did not seem to be aware of this and could not understand what I was complaining about. Incidentally, it is noteworthy that any mention of odors was considered indecent.

I would walk in the park which was surrounded by a high stone wall. At night a moon appeared, very bright stars gleamed, and the noise of the city and the sounds of music could be heard beyond the wall.

One night, after solemn preparations, I was led to the Assembly of Brides. They placed me on a platform in the middle of the Square and a crowd of maidens formed a circle around me. All of them, as though deliberately selected, were slender, long-legged and green-eyed. To the sound of an orchestra, the maidens moved around me in procession, serious, tense and dignified. Occasionally, one would begin to whirl in a kind of dance; then the Inspector would stop the music and approach me with a question, always the same question. But I turned my head away. The Inspector would raise his staff and the procession would resume its slow motion.

I was sorry for these innocent maidens, victims of a barbarous custom, but I could not help them. Thus the first Assembly came to an end.

I continued my work at the Museum. The number of clerks at my disposal was doubled. After I had composed a dozen digests, I was asked to compose a new, abridged edition – a digest of digests. And I learned that this would be followed by a digest of the digest of the digests – and so on, and so forth. This aspiration to condense the contents of a thousand books into one page, and even into one sentence, repelled me, but Mr. Caday told me there were weighty reasons for having this work done.

Occasionally I was summoned to him. He would turn on his receiver and we would listen to broadcasts from the Great Earth. Thus I learned of Kennedy's victory in the elections, and you can imagine my emotion at this news.

Mr. Caday listened to a political report as to a thriller, with tenseness and excitement. He asked me ridiculous questions concerning our political institutions. He also was interested in English idioms and could speak on this subject for hours, boring me no end with his pointless observations.

Here I must mention a beverage called Rocco which played an important part at our meetings. Rocco in itself is a harmless liquid; however, if after a gulp of this synthetic product a little fruit syrup is taken, one gets imperceptibly and cheerfully drunk. Mr. Caday and all the clerks indulged freely in this pastime. Nor was I adverse to it and, a novice, I sometimes lost the sense of measure. And one day, when I was in this state, I was suddenly dressed up in holiday clothes and taken to the Square – to the Assembly of Brides.

The starry night, the torch light, the music, and the large dose of fermenting Rocco did their job... Among the crowd of women surrounding me, I suddenly recognized the one who, on the day of my arrival at the island, had tried to explain something to me as I lay on the grass under the fern tree. Now she seemed a beauty – slender, green-eyed, with chestnut hair. Majestically, as though under a spell, she circled before me in the rhythm of an ancient dance. There was something

submissive and heroic in her demeanor, as if she were performing a sublime patriotic duty. Almost unconsciously I held out my hand to her.

Instantly, the whole city was illuminated by fireworks, the fountains began to stream... At the head of an enormous procession, I and the redheaded virgin galloped on white horses, first to the bathing establishment, then to the temple. I shall not describe in detail the pagan rites of the wedding. I recall the clumsy statue of their god, in the center of the temple – a head with an open jaw whence protruded a number of huge, polished fangs. For some reason I was made to brush my teeth, and all present did the same.

Then, following the native custom, we were taken to the family estate of Kara (that was the name of my wife). Only by nightfall of the next day did I see the red towers of the ancient castle. At the gate we were met by her numerous family – children, women, old men. Kara was very tired from the trip, and without delay we went to her quarters. As we walked along the corridor I noticed in one of the rooms stretched out on a table the motionless body of a man.

In the morning Kara awakened me. At home she struck me as a sweet child and I smiled whenever I looked at her pretty upturned little nose. As soon as I got up, she made me enter a square booth equipped with a large number of dials and indicators: I thought it was something like an automatic scale. Then we went to introduce ourselves to an old man, apparently the chief of the clan, the same whose body I had seen the night before on the table. The aged patriarch looked very sick and on the verge of collapse.

I spent a marvelous day touring the carefully cultivated fields (later I will speak in detail about agriculture on Atlantis). At night we went to present our homage to the patriarch, whom we found in a chair, with a goblet of Rocco in his hand. I marveled at the speed with which he was recovering.

The days followed each other pleasantly, free of care. I rested from the preceding, exhausting labors. In the mornings I went to the fields, where I sometimes hunted for goats or birds. In the evening we visited neighbors or received guests (Kara's clan was famous for its brand of Rocco and consumed it in generous quantities).

The patriarch, recovered from his sickness, began to take part in our reunions. One day, at table, I said for all to hear: "Look, Kara, the patriarch is growing younger by the hour." For some reason these words depressed everyone: the old man retired immediately to his rooms and our guests left.

The next day Mr. Caday came to see us. Taking me aside, he asked me whether it was true that I had publicly commented on the patriarch's youthful appearance.

"You see," he went on, "I now must initiate you into one of the island's secrets. At first it will startle you, but when you get used to the idea you won't be upset by it any longer. The thing is that, after the cataclysm, life on Atlantis turned back so to speak: the pendulum of time swung in the opposite direction. We are brought to our paternal home as old men and move backward, from old age to maturity; then we grow younger and younger, turn into infants and finally vanish, in the state in which you, on the Great Earth, are born. Once you get used to this reversed image you will find it natural and orderly. And, if I may say so, the beginning and the end of our life are marked by a miracle, just as is the case with you on the Great Earth."

I confess this news shocked me and for some time I refused to believe in such a monstrosity. But, recalling many incidents that had heretofore struck me as peculiar, I was forced to admit that something of the kind was really taking place on Atlantis. What reassured me somewhat was Mr. Caday's assertion that I was exempt from this law. On the contrary, he suggested that I was valuable to them precisely because I was growing in the other direction and that they had special plans regarding me and my descendants.

Mr. Caday left, and life flowed on in the customary way. Only my relationship to Kara began to change: I was sorry for her and, at the same time, I was frightened. More and more often I found myself addressing Barbara in my mind and begging her to forgive me.

Some time later, Kara's clan was thrilled by a joyful event: their number came up at the State Lottery and they won a considerable sum of money. They celebrated with a formal dinner, and it was during this dinner, in the presence of many strangers, that Kara suddenly

announced that she was pregnant. There was no limit to the joy of all those present.

When Mr. Caday was informed of the news he ordered us to return at once to the city. We were taken to one of the most splendid palaces of the capital, where I spent several weeks waiting for an audience with the Magister. Our life was one continuous holiday, consisting of drives, meetings with important officials, entertainments, balls and shopping tours.

The stores of Atlantis are outwardly indistinguishable from museums. The showcases are decorated with utmost lavishness. But inside one finds coarsely finished merchandise, limited selection, and salesmen completely indifferent to the desires and tastes of the buyer. The advertisements are peculiar, reminiscent of puzzles; it takes considerable brain racking to understand what they are trying to impose on the prospective buyer. All advertisements conclude with this obligatory sentence: Do not buy this product, it is overpriced and of bad quality.

Thanks to a shrewd insurance organization all inhabitants of Atlantis may be considered millionaires. The population is divided into groups; the members of the groups pay one lump (monetary unit) daily to the bank of the State Lottery. The drawing takes place every morning – Kara and I went to this spectacle – and one member of each group must win first prize. (He continues, though, to pay his daily lump, without hope of ever winning again.) The authorities look upon all citizens as potentially rich men and open credit to the unlucky ones who have been waiting too long for their number to come up. The lottery ticket is inherited by the descendants and the eventual winners are paid the whole sum minus the credit advanced. I very much admired this remarkable system and regretted not being able to introduce it in my native Illinois.

A year on Atlantis equals four of ours; it runs from February 29 to February 29 – thirty to thirty-five of their years is quite common as a life span. Incidentally, our women, who usually conceal their age, would like this system. But on Atlantis no one ever lies, even when it concerns trifles. A peculiar feature of life there is an almost complete absence of

humor and games. Everything is serious and has one definite meaning. Art leads a wretched existence; whatever there is in the field of music, painting, poetry, is for some reason created exclusively by the inhabitants of a province called Lsah-Erey (Mr. Caday came from there).

Technology has reached a high level of development – but more about this in my scientific report. The Atlantans love all things synthetic. Even their milk is artificial, natural milk being used only as feed for cattle.

Medicine and dentistry occupy a paramount position in the life of the country, but surgery has almost died out as a result of the physiological and anatomical changes in the population. Appendix and tonsils, for instance, are atrophied. The blood system has certain peculiarities – it seems their veins function as arteries and vice-versa. Their organ of smell has almost vanished; the concept of smell is a symbol of indecency – it is taboo. Moreover, I noticed that they never sweat. When my mate, Kara, once felt an unfamiliar dampness in her armpits, she was terribly disturbed. As a result of this ridiculous incident, the local doctors prescribed a special regimen and complete isolation for her.

Problems related to family, sex and other social phenomena differ from our own due to that peculiar feature of their existence which makes the beginning correspond to our end, and the end – their old age – correspond to our beginning. Love is considered a shameful disease, a form of insanity; there are special sanatoria where those “in love” are treated. Citizens who deviate from the established norms perform a curious kind of penitence: they wear posters, much like our sandwichmen. Occasionally I came across such penitents. The text of the posters is usually something like “For some reason I feel sad today,” or “This morning upon awakening life seemed to me absurd and futile,” or “I crave tenderness, attention, and love,” or “My work bores me,” or “I want another husband.”

This system of penitence is part of their religious organization. The main god of Atlantis is Hihiraha, the lord of microbes and the embodiment of hygiene. His emblem is a double row of teeth and a toothbrush. The priests of Hihiraha also function as dentists. To brush one’s teeth twice a day is a religious duty, and particularly pious people perform this rite more often. Hihiraha’s bust, an enormous head of

transparent green stone with two rows of resplendent teeth, stands in the Atom Temple. During services the Great Priests, suspended on swings, polish Hihiraha's fangs with brushes. Everything associated with teeth is sacred; those which are extracted or fall out belong to the god and are returned to him. There are sects of fanatics who knock out each others' teeth as a sacrifice to Hihiraha. Needless to say, as a Christian I was indignant at such savage rites and absolutely refused to take part in these practices.

Several weeks of compulsory idleness went by and I was still waiting for the promised audience with the Magister. Kara was no longer with me; she was staying at our villa outside the city. September, considered the hottest month on Atlantis, was approaching and with it the great holiday of the Atom. The inhabitants of the city were preparing to go on vacation: all castes and classes left for several weeks, but for different resorts.

Despite the rational organization of life on the island, I longed more and more for my native country and for Barbara. Once I dreamed that I had gone to the drugstore on Main Street and ordered an ice-cream soda... I awoke with tears in my eyes. Sometimes I would walk in the park at night: the trees rustled, the city was quiet in its sleep, and a strange bluish phosphorescence illuminated the sky. I fancied this was the remnant of refracted light from the real sun, coming from there, from above! And I was ready to crawl on my knees for a thousand miles, to do the most menial chores all my life, if only I could return to my own country.

Finally, the day of the audience came. After various hygienic preparations, I was dressed in a red cloak with a blue hood and, in this garb, barefoot, Mr. Caday at my side, I descended a marble staircase into an underground hall which was inlaid with green stones and lit from below by an even, yellow light. In one corner hung a splendid curtain embroidered with sharp-pointed stars. Slowly, the curtain opened. On a dais, I saw a man wrapped in a blue cloak, his face covered with a faintly colored mask, his head bent under the weight of a crown studded with gems representing the structure of the atom. All around him hung groups of grinning masks.

In accordance with their etiquette, I bent my knees, put the palms of my hands on them and in this pose approached the most eminent ruler. I heard a listless, barely perceptible murmur:

“How do you like Atlantis?”

“Oh, Magister,” I answered, “I like Atlantis very much.”

“What do you like most here?” I heard faintly.

I answered: “The governmental institutions.”

This apparently gladdened the Magister: he stretched out a hand and tapped me on the cheek. I noticed that his hand was hard and dry, with dark spots such as one finds on the hands of chemists who have to work with strong reagents.

“What do you dislike here?” was his next question.

“The lack of odors,” I said frankly.

Then he took a mask from among those that hung around him and handed it to me. I quickly put it on.

“You may go,” he said. “For the time being you will be under the orders of Director Caday. But I hope that you will begin to supervise his activities in the near future.” The curtain closed, concealing the Magister from our eyes. We backed out to the staircase.

According to Mr. Caday, the audience was a brilliant success; the mask I had received was one of the highest rank and, automatically, made me an important official. Caday was very excited and insisted that I come to his apartment, where he at once brought out a bottle of Rocco.

“Well, it’s in the bag, you are one of us and you belong to the Atom Committee,” he blurted out. “I’m sure some day you will be Magister!”

We drank. Caday talked incessantly. I learned that only the Magister knew all the secrets of atom technique and that he exercised absolute power. By pressing a button he could extinguish the sun or burn down the island. It was his prerogative to name his successor and to decide when that successor should assume office.

“But wait a minute,” I finally interrupted, unable to restrain myself any longer. “Why are you preparing me, a foreigner, for the most important position? That seems very odd to me.”

“Don’t you understand?” Mr. Caday cried in an irritated voice. “Don’t you realize that all of us, here, live backward. We are born as old

men with all their experience and wisdom, and then we move back, become infants, and leave; and our accomplishments are gradually destroyed, together with us. On the Great Earth, life is growth and accumulation of creative treasures, while here, with a few exceptions, it is impoverishment, a process of eternal leakage and involution. Shakespeare's sonnets and Mendeleev's table, deprived of the experience from which they stem, have no meaning and become a set of hieroglyphs. That's why we are in such a hurry: we must reinforce, perpetuate and interpret all discoveries, even if only in the form of a digest of digests. But you, what you do is not subject to this law of disintegration. People like you are our salvation, they are indispensable for Atlantis. Now Kara will give birth to a child that will live in the same direction as his father. Have you ever studied the life of corals? The polyps grow in one spot and multiply, but a larva occasionally detaches itself from the colony and becomes the source of a new life. Well, for us you are such a larva..." Mr. Caday kept taking gulps from his cup; his talk grew more and more heated: obviously he was angry and embittered. Soon he began to gossip. It appeared that the Magister was quite interested in women; moreover, he devoted entirely too much time to photography, even developing his own negatives; hence the spots on his hands.

But I was not listening to him. I was in despair. I felt like a man buried alive. "So that's what it is," I murmured to myself, "so that is the well-organized Atlantis. A rational society! And yet, on earth, life is development, enrichment, accumulation of experience, and not diminution, impoverishment, regression. The direction of time does have a meaning."

From that moment on, a deep sadness took hold of me. Nothing could cheer me up and I often thought to myself: rather die than live like this!

After the audience with the Magister I was taken to a place in Lsah-Erey, where the upper classes usually spent their summer vacations. Lsah was unlike the other parts of Atlantis; flora, fauna, and even the landscape resembled more closely those of the earth. The natives of this region reminded me of certain races of Oceania or the Malay archipelago; they were relatively musical, sang some lovely songs and danced quite well.

Near Lsah was the place where on rare occasions people from “above” were picked up, and where I, too, was washed ashore. From my reading, I knew that the equilibrium at the outskirts of Lsah was not quite stable: nearby was the stormy current that connected Atlantis with the surface of the Ocean ... the breath of that air, the emanations of that energy affected the life of the entire adjoining region.

Then I conceived the bold idea of traveling back to earth: I would be saved by a miracle or perish. And I decided to talk to Kara. As a result of her pregnancy she had temporarily acquired a number of new physiological reactions and was even beginning to distinguish odors.

She did not disappoint me; she understood my state of mind and displayed a magnanimity rare even in our women. But she refused to escape with me; the idea of becoming the first lady of Atlantis, mother of the future Magister, was too tempting. Together we worked out the plan for my escape.

Part of the program of the Atom Festivities was an obstacle race in a special type of amphibian car which jumped like a flea, with startling speed. I expressed the wish to take part in the tournament. It turned out that special permission from the higher authorities was required. I was in despair, but within a few hours Mr. Caday informed me that permission had been granted. (In fact, his role in the affair is not clear. I suspect he wanted to get rid of me.)

The race was run along a circle which, at one point, came close to the zone of Oray, a fog, or vapor, emitted by the very borders of Atlantis. From there I had only ten miles to go to reach the wall of water which bounded the island – ten miles of continuously spuming and bubbling vapors. I had to leave the prescribed trajectory and travel that distance before the authorities would have time to take the necessary measures. The car was so fast that one minute would be enough; but that much was indispensable – they had devices which could stop the car from a distance.

The great day came. The most prominent people of the island, officials, exquisite ladies, gathered to watch the race. Orchestras played, loudspeakers blared. The cars were brought to the starting point; mine was canary yellow, with a green mushroom. We advanced by abrupt

leaps (I shall describe the engine elsewhere). As I came closer to the end of the arc, Kara, as had been agreed, suddenly told her neighbors that she was feeling the pangs of the approaching birth. The speaker at once announced this to the public. For a moment all attention was focused on her. I steered sharply to the left, each second throwing me closer to the coveted gap of salvation or perdition (perhaps: salvation and perdition). At the very border of the eternal bubbling I heard the bestial roar of the crowd who had discovered my stratagem. Another few seconds, and chaos, a roar as of a Niagara of exploding lava seized and drowned me...

I awoke in a motorboat. Two men were vigorously rubbing me and feeding me brandy. "Where am I?" I asked, opening my eyes. But I had already recognized the sky, the smell and the colors, the sea, and the contours of the lovely shores of our earth.

"Santa Monica," said the man at the stern. And seeing my astonishment, he added: "Los Angeles. We will soon enter the harbor and you will be given medical care."

Two days later I held Barbara in my arms. I told her everything that had happened; she understood and forgave. Soon we were married.

At night, after work, I tell my wife about my extraordinary adventures in the sub-oceanic world, and upon her insistence I have begun to relate in detail all the wonders I saw and dangers I lived through. According to Barbara, these notes will interest the public at large, as well as specialists in technology, art and natural sciences. She thinks that it is possible to build an apparatus that would enable us to reach the shores of Lsah-Erey (she would like to see Kara, if only for a moment).

The reader probably recalls that I sank in the Atlantic, but emerged in sight of Hollywood; scientists will have to investigate this puzzling circumstance too.



Poetry

**Three “Trefoils” from *The Cypress Chest*
(1910)**

Innokenty Annensky

Translated from the Russian
by Devon Miller-Duggan and Nancy Tittler

Translators’ Notes

I’m fairly sure the assigners-of-housing at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton parked the Tittler/Feingold family next door to the Miller-Duggan/Duggan family because our two-year-old daughters (now grown women) were two weeks apart in age. The “littles” got on famously, which left their mothers with a lot of time together while their husbands – the Primary Investigators – were off doing their Work. Pretty soon after moving in, Nan and I had a Rooney-Garland moment of, “Hey, you’re an expert on a Russian poet I know nothing about, and I have an MFA in poetry, am having a dry spell, and have never translated anything more complex than a German menu, so why don’t we translate your poet while the girls are doing two-year-old stuff?” I didn’t warm to Innokenty Annensky’s poetry initially – too much “languishing” and not enough flash – but the work itself was interesting, and as we went along, I began to see a straight line from the deeply embodied emotions of Annensky to Akhmatova standing in prison queues in Leningrad, where the air, the stones, the faces of the waiting are all an anguished gray. Annensky understands that suffering is concrete and bleeds into

all the physical world. His poems are remarkable for their acceptance of, and affection for, the frangible intersection between place, things, body, and spirit, even though he writes in the same urban landscape that defined Baudelaire's "modernity." Annensky is gorgeous in the Russian – his rhymes typically lush. We chose not to work in rhyme, opting instead to work toward precision of language, tone, and music. – *Devon Miller-Duggan*

A teacher of classical languages and literatures, Innokenty Annensky came late to poetry: his first volume of verse, *Quiet Songs*, was published under a pseudonym in 1904, and his second volume, *The Cypress Chest*, was published posthumously in 1910. Highly regarded as a bridge from Pushkin to modernism, from French Symbolists to Russian Acmeists, dedicatee of Anna Akhmatova's poem "Teacher" and revered by Osip Mandelstam and Boris Pasternak, Annensky is little known outside Russia. In their appreciation of the intrinsic value of art and the word (the weighty Russian "slovo"), their evocation of emotional nuance and their concern with art's endurance, Annensky's lyrics are imbued with the anti-utilitarian spirit of the Silver Age, yet he refuses alignment with any aesthetic school or philosophy. Annensky is no late Symbolist poet-priest, mediating between reader and arcane knowledge. His verse is grounded in the physical world and its resonance with human emotion. The "Trefoil" designation he assigns to his lyrical trios, suggesting the three-lobed botanical form, announces this essential link. – *Nancy Tittler*

Trefoil of the Crowd

*

Prelude

I'm not afraid of life. Its bracing noise
permits our thoughts to burn, to shine.
Anxiety, not thought, grows in an unpeopled haze,
and flowers in night's crystal chill.
But moments invade my torpor
when human touch torments my soul
and I tremble among you, tremble for my solitude,
a match in the wind, sheltered by a cupped hand ...
Grant me an instant ... For that instant touch me not.
I go on my way, groping ...
Remark my rattled gaze in silence,
not silencing the surrounding others.
It's better so. If only I might go unnoticed,
perhaps in the haze, perhaps in my creative grief.

* *

After the Concert

The black skies fell into the street
but even this night can't turn the heart
from its fatigue ... dying fires, misted voices –
is this all that's left of the dream?

O, how sad her satin dress,
the eery white of her skin between black straps!
How I pitied her unmoving eyes,
her hands in snowy kid, submissive and prayerful!

And how much spirit was scattered
among the restless, the decadent, the unweeping!
What sounds poured out, nursed in silence,
lilac sounds, tender sounds, starry sounds!

Just so, from a string snapped in agitation,
both fragile and fiery among moonbeams,
sometimes amethysts roll onto dewed grass
and perish without a trace.

* * *

Buddhist Mass in Paris

to F. F. Zelinsky

1.

Columns wound with yellow silk,
gaudy frame for robes of pêche and mauve
fluent among incense and the lisping bells,
the strange rhythms of thousand-year words
gentled by autumnal gilding –
you came alive in my memory today.

2.

The basalt mongol priest moved within the forms
and the secret word melted slowly
in the temple built capriciously amid museums
so that the demoiselles might play with black fans
and, foreign to the mystery as their vernal irises,
listen only to the interpreters.

3.

Flashes of silk caress my dissipated eyes.
Of this sacrament I understood only the music,
but the more I learned to grasp the harmonies, the more
I breathed the rhythms, the swing of the thurible.
And I was ashamed of my pale prose
for that musical and mystic vision.

4.

The liturgy ended. The hall awakened.
The mongol priest offered flowers, smiling.
And, breathing the alien fragrances,
singers, ladies gingerly lifting their trains, and diplomats
hurried to leave,
to hear *La mascotte* or *Carmen* in the evening.

5.

And still a shrouded word lived in the air,
born of the soul, in torment, in ecstasy,
so that clean hearts drink paradise in her...
And it was strange to me, terrible, to see
how veils dropped over smiles,
how fingers dropped the gods' tender flowers.

Fiery Trefoil

*

Amethysts

When, igniting blue,
the blood-red day rages,
how often I call to the dusk,
the chill twilight of amethysts.

Let no scorching rays
fire the violet facets.
Let only the candle's shimmer
pour liquid and fiery there.

And, purpling and shivering,
may the glow persuade us
that there is not our mere bond,
but our radiant meeting.

* *

Blue Grey Sunset

The blue-grey sunset leaned closer,
the air swayed, tender, drunken,
and the blurred garden
grew somehow more green.

And, repeating the Invisible
in clouds of muffled sadness,
in air and full of rain,
the trumpets played, so softly.

Sudden as a blazing peal,
something breaks the distance open:
slashing the clouds,
the copper sun laughed.

* * *

January Fairy Tale

The witch's mask glittered,
her crutch beat time ...
My New Year's Tale,
my last tale. Isn't it you?

My lips didn't pray for fortune.
The stillness filled with shadow
and goblets of opened lilies
breathed an otherworldly anguish.

And easing our extinguished visions,
the anguish-flowers spoke:
"We are as we were, always the same,
we are eternal ... What are you?"

Silent! ... Or is it better to dream
while the coals still smolder?
This January sun is not so scorching,
so calescent its crystal.

Nightmare Trefoil

*

Nightmares

Are you waiting? Anxious? This is madness.
Are you letting him in? No!
Think: A crazy man knocks at your door
after spending the night God knows where,
God knows with whom. He's ragged, he talks wild,
one hand's full of rocks and any minute,
any minute he'll open the other
and rain dry leaves all over you.
He intends to kiss you, to leave tears
in your tangled braids if you manage to hide
your crimson-hurt face from his lips.

.....

Listen! I was only trying to scare you:
That one is far away... I lied.
And the complaints, whispers, knocks –
they're all the blood's rustling, pain's voice...
One of us hears it...
Or have the winds been imprisoned and begun to howl?
No! You're calm... it's just that
something pale touches your lips... I'm stupid...
This was for someone else...
now I understand it all: fear, weariness,
the moist shimmer of your shielded eyes.
Are they knocking? Are they coming? She stirs.
I look – she's turned the lamp low,
it's rosy... Now she's unraveled her braids.

Innokenty Annensky

The braids shower down... Now
she comes to me... we're in fire... one fire...
Her hands tangle me, pull me down,
her hair pricks and caresses...
This is only a man's mind, proud,
not worth trembling hearts or rosy, moist heat!

.....

Suddenly, I changed utterly...
The bed... the lit candle – the lispings, mournful rain.
I had slept and dreamed.

* *

The Kiev Catacombs

Green candles melt,
a censer flickers, dim.
Something settles
up to its shoulders in earth.

Soundless lips at the tombstones
pray for breath.
Stooping from the cross,
someone offers sallow water.

“Will it be soon?” Patience...
The ears fill with ringing.
The black of the corridor
muffles and congeals...

No. I don't want to, I don't want to!
What else? Neither people nor path?
A breath guts the candle...
Hush... You must crawl...

* * *

That and This

Like stone, the night won't melt.
Only ice weeps.
A flame streams through the body,
its flight a wonder.

But the ice matters,
melting uselessly on my head:
forgetting to consider
there are only two pillows.

And if the lantern light sickens,
wavers on the axe's slickness,
you must lie down in smoke,
in the blue-gassed haze of the fire.

But the heart floods with comfort,
and drowns until dawn.
It forgives everything ...
If it is only *this* and not *that*.

Alexander Blok, trans. from the Russian by Betsy Hulick

The Twelve

Alexander Blok

Translated from the Russian
by Betsy Hulick

Translator's Note

Avril Pyman, in her masterful biography of Blok, noted that there are only more or less unsuccessful translations of this signature poem. I hope the present offering falls into the first category. Here and there, for the sake of the verse, I have added a detail not in the original; but I have been guided overall by a wish to convey the poem's atmosphere and the poet's tone.

* * *

1.

Early dark.
Swirling snow.
Biting wind! What a wind!
What can withstand
its voracious howl
ahurl across the world?

Hoarse-throated wind
spitting out snow.
Unwary feet
on treacherous ice.
Uh oh!
Over you go!

Billowing banner
lettered in red
strung overhead:
“All Power to the Constituent Assembly!”
Granny can’t credit her eyes.
She shakes her fist.
She rails and cries:
What’s it mean? Where’s the sense!
Assembly? Power? Constituents?
A scandal! Disgrace!
Yards of fine cloth
gone to such waste:
Our boys go barefoot, wear rags.

And on she goes
pitching through drifts
like a flustered hen.
“Mother of God!
Bolsheviks!
They’ll drive you to an early grave!
Deliver us, Lord!
Amen!”

Scourged by the wind,
nipped by the frost,
his nose in his collar –
where roads meet and cross
stands the Bourgeois.

Who's that over there
with wind-whipped hair
heard muttering: "Ha!
Treachery! Lies!
Russia's in shambles!
No doubt he scribbles
and speechifies,

And there, sidling past
a drift, in his cassock –
Comrade Priest, Psst!
Missing your flock?

Think how you waddled
with hirsute face,
the cross on your belly
shedding its rays
on the populace.

And there, a fine lady
in furs, confiding
in the friend beside her –
"We cried, how we cried" –
when suddenly – oops!
Over she topples!

Help!
Your hand! Pull me up!

What delirious wind!
It rages! Rejoices!
Clutches at hems,
flips passersby,
pummels and snaps
the broad banner:

Alexander Blok, trans. from the Russian by Betsy Hulick

“All Power to the Constituent Assembly” –
carries across raw voices:

“We held a meeting, too
here, in this house;
we discussed, debated –
reached conclusions,
passed resolutions:
ten roubles a quickie –
twenty-five for the night,
no room to bargain ...
Time to turn in ...”

In the dying light
the street empties out.
A vagrant loiters.
The wind whistles ...

Hey, girly,
Come over here!
Give us a kiss.

Bread!
What lies ahead?
Move along there.

Black, black, is the sky.

Rancor, black and heavy,
seethes in the breast ...
Sacred, black rancor ...

Comrade! Keep an open eye!

2.

The wind pirouettes. The snowflakes fly.
Here come twelve men – marching,

their rifles slung over their backs.
Everywhere bonfires, sparking and crackling.

Home-rolled fags,
caps crumpled flat;
to complete the picture
all it needs are a convict's rags ...

Freedom, freedom,
Right on, and no cross!

Rat-a-tat-tat!

Comrade, it's cold! And how!

“Vanka and Katya are off swilling vodka ...
Her stocking is crammed with government bills!”

“Vanyushka too has socked it away.
Once one of us – an army man now!”

“You bastard, sold out to the bourgeoisie.
Try kissing my girl, you'll see!”

Freedom, freedom,
Right on, and no cross!
Katya is up to no good with Vanya.
Now what, Katya, what can that be?

Rat-a-tat-tat!

Everywhere bonfires, sparking and crackling...
Rifles slung over their backs...

Keep step with the revolution.
The enemy never sleeps. He is tireless.

Comrade, steady your gun!
Ready your gun! Take heart!
Let's shoot Holy Russia where it hurts!

Shoot good old Mother Russia
stick-in-the-mud Russia
in her fat stinking butt!

Right on, and no cross!

3.

Our dear boys have gone away
for to join the Red Guards,
for to join the Red Guards
for to stand in harm's way.

Oh, sorrow & grief!
Oh life! How sweet!
A tattered greatcoat,
an Austrian rifle!

You of the Bourgeoisie,
weep, weep
come the worldwide fire:
We'll feed it with blood,
fan the flames, watch them climb
higher & higher.
Bless us, O Lord, in our time.

4.

The driver shouts, the snow whirls.
Vanka and Katya fairly fly through the dark.
In front a little lantern
swings from the harness.
Wheeeeeeee – What fun! What a lark!

In a military greatcoat,
with a foolish sort of phiz,
Vanka twists his mustachios
twirls his mustachios,
cracking jokes as he goes.

How broad-shouldered he is!
Our silver-tongued Vanka,
our sweet-talking Vanka
holds his honey girl tight...

How she gazes at him.
Her teeth are pearly white.
Ah, Katya, my plump Katya,
with your little pumpkin face...

5.

Katya, my Katya,
the scar on your neck
is fresh from the blade;
under your breast
the welt's slow to fade.

Kick up your heels, higher! higher!
What a great pair of legs she has!

How fine once her underwear was!
Try wearing it now, just try!
Once only officers had her!
Who's having her now? Oh, my!

Go to it, girl, like a bitch in heat.
Do your pulses race? Does your heart skip a beat?

Remember the officer, Katya?
He didn't walk away from the knife.
He didn't walk away with his life.
Memory fuzzy? Yes? Draw a blank?
Too long ago for you to keep track?

Better sleep on it, skank.
Clear it up on your back.

Gray gaiters once smartened her feet;
she fancied French sweets back then.
Back then she stepped out with cadets.
Now who's in favor?
Boys from the ranks.

Right on, sin and no regrets.
Balm for the soul. Amen.

6.

They gallop along pell-mell.
The driver lets fly with a yell ...

"Stop! Stop! Andryukha, help!"
Petrukha, round in back. Hurry!"

Rat-a-tat-tat! Rat-a-tat-tat!
Snowdust ascends the sky in a flurry!

The driver and Vanka leap out and run ...
“Now once again! Ready that gun!”

Rat-a-tat-tat! Rat-a-tat-tat!

... ..

“Steal my girl, will you? There! Take that!
Got away, the scum. Just you wait.
I’m not through with you yet. We have a date!”

But what about Katya? Oh, Katya’s dead.
Katya caught a bullet in the back of her head.

Happy now, Katya? No word, not a peep?
Then lie in the snow, a carrion heap.

Keep step with the revolution!
The enemy never sleeps. He is tireless.

7.

Their rifles slung over their backs,
they take up the march once again;
only the killer’s drawn face
is hidden away from the men.

Faster! Faster! He quickens his pace,
his scarf tightly wound round his neck.
Again and again, the scene replays.
It won’t go away: The needle is stuck.

“Hey there, Comrade, lighten up!
Cat got your tongue? Why so low?
Petryukha, hey! What’s the matter?
Thinking about Katya? Don’t. Let it go.”

“Comrades, brothers, what have I done?
I loved that girl, I did, I loved her.
What times we had out on the town,
knocking it back and getting it on!

“Thanks to that look in her eye,
so fiery it was, so hot,
thanks to the purple birthmark
fixed on her shoulder, I shot
the girl dead, I caused her to die:
I sent her into the dark.”

“Petya, you dumbass, quit sniveling.
Spare us the bleeding-heart shit.
What are you made of? Where is your grit?
Forget it. It’s no big deal.
Get a grip on yourself. Be a man!

“In times like these, times of crisis
we can’t go holding your hand.
Stuff a hundred times worse than this
is on its way, pal. Get real.”

And Petya relaxes his pace,
straightens his back, lifts his chin.

Good humor returns to his face.
A bit of fun can’t count as a sin.

Lock up your windows and doors
Today is a day for looting.

Yield up your cellars' rich stores.
The rabble is after free booty,

8.

What's the score?
Grief and more!
What deadly tedium!

I'll pass the time
without reason or rhyme.

Head want scratching?
Trousers, patching?

I'll pull some weeds.
I'll shell some seeds.

I'll stab, I'll slash.
The blood will splash!..

Fly, fly away like a swallow,
my Bourgeois gent, come tomorrow
I'll drain the cup of your blood;
that for my beauty with the coal-black brows.
Now let Thy handmaid depart in peace...

Oh, Lord, how boring!

9.

The city's din has died away
Silence wraps the Nevsky's spire

The streets have cleared – without police,
there's nothing to bar the way.
What's keeping us, Comrades? Let's go:
Never mind, the wine won't flow.

Where roads meet and cross,
stands the Bourgeois,
his nose in his collar;
crouching at his side,
its tail between its legs,
is a dog with a mangy hide.

The Bourgeois waits, like a hungry dog,
silent, in a questioning stance,
while the old world, like a mongrel cur
with its tail between its legs,
shadows him at no distance...

10.

The force of the blizzard lets rip.
Lord! Feel it blast! Feel it bite!
Two men four paces apart
are lost to each other's sight.

The snow swirls in a funnel,
in a pillar, lifts in air.

“God what a storm! Holy saints, preserve us!”
“Petya! You're babbling, you fool!
When were you helped by a prayer?
Use common sense. Keep your cool!
Don't you understand?
Katya's love has left its trace:

Her blood is on your hands.”
“Keep up the revolutionary pace.
The enemy is nearing.
Soon he’ll be here.”

Forward, forward! Workers, march!

11.

Declining then to call
on the saints, on they go
with no regrets,
twelve hearts equal
to whatever may befall.

Their tempered bayonets
fix an unseen foe...
in dead-end alleyways
where dusty currents blow
and feathery banks of snow
snatch at boots and won’t let go.

The windwhipped flag
flaunts its red
to smarting eyes.
The measured tread
of tramping feet
repeats, repeats.
The deadly foe
will stir, and wake, and rise.

And night and day
relentlessly
the blizzard beats into their eyes...

Forward, forward! Workers, march!

12.

On they march, with even tread.

“Who’s there? Hands up! Come out!”

It’s only a flag, the red flag up ahead
in the wind’s wild whirlabout.

A snow bank rears its frozen head

“Who’s there? Hands up! Come out!”

It’s only the hungry stray dog
limping along, half dead.

“Beat it! Mangy cur! Get lost!

Or I’ll stick you with my bayonet!

You too, Old World, buzz off!

Or I’ll give you what stinking dogs get!”

It snarls and lays its teeth bare,
a starving wolf, a shivering cur,
tail tucked under, but holds its ground.
“Hey, answer me, you! Who’s there?”

“Who’s waving about that red flag
up in front?” “Look! It’s already dark!”
“Listen! Running footsteps!” “Hey!
Who’s hiding in the alleyway?”

Never mind, I’ll get you anyhow.
Hiding will do you no good.
For the last time, show yourself – Now!
No way this ends without blood.”

Rat-a-tat-tat! Only the echo
ricochets off stone walls.
Only the blizzard's long laugh falls
on hip-high drifts of snow.

Rat-a-tat-tat!
Rat-a-tat-tat!

They keep up a martial pace.
Behind limps the starving cur.
With the bloodied flag, up ahead,
hidden by turbulent snows
safe from the bullet's hard nose,
over the gale, with gentle tread,
over the roof of scattered snow-pearls,
leading them onward,
wreathed in white roses, goes
Christ the Lord.

1918

How We Buried You I Don't Remember

Marina Eskina

Translated from the Russian
by Ian Ross Singleton

For My Father

Sorry that, on the way home
from the burial, I probably counted crows.
How we buried you I don't remember,
how the casket was lowered into the hole
my eyes don't know.
It was a summer day. Those who stood there ...
I don't recall,
material
for dreams now.
Since then, no matter whom
I bury, I bury you. Your tomb,
your stone, with its laconic dates,
stands at attention, like that soldier
forgotten by eternity.
The forest makes a swirl
only to fall back before
the disorderly order.
Above, an indigo slope
piles up just out of view.
But down here? Wild turkeys, a whole slew.
A sign that I'm not talking to myself?

Marina Eskina, trans. from the Russian by Ian Ross Singleton

So many summers have passed,
and this last
doesn't mean the strange dialogue's through.
If you could, you'd joke too.

2017

Alexander Galich, trans. from the Russian by Dmitri Manin

The Mainland Queen

A Labor Camp Ballad Written in a State of Delirium

Alexander Galich

Translated from the Russian
by Dmitri Manin

At dawn, when the blizzard dies down at last,
And the taiga sleeps like a rock,
And it's still an hour and a half till the rouse,
And that is nothing to mock
And the inmates sleep like it's their last time –
Jacket over your head and go! –
And the guards sleep, too, like it's their last time –
'Cause they learned from us to lay low.
And the big shots sleep, their eyebrows sleep,
Moustaches, bald spots and all,
And the boots and the hats, and the guard dogs sleep,
Forgetting the yap and the brawl.
And the wheelbarrows sleep, and the shovels sleep,
Shady pines step back and away,
And it's not yet time, not yet time, not yet time
To begin the glorious day.
And the tower jack alone is stuck in the dark,

But he doesn't give any farts
For the sleeping masses – the kid's making love:
He whistles and jerks off to Mars.
And at this precise hour the darkness quakes,
And black anguish sweeps on the breeze,
And it's then that The Snow-White Louse awakes,
The Mistress of detainees.
We called her the Queen of the Continent,
Or else, the Queen of the Freeze!
No one knows where she drew her power
Or whence she came to this land.
But she certainly was the first to arrive
And she'll be the last to stand,
When the bonfire swallows all barrows and bunks,
And foregoing their wolfish ways,
The archfoes, the guards and the inmates, line up
Side by side to piss in the blaze.
First for themselves, and then for those
Who sip cranberry brew with Christ,
Who froze in the ground, who caught a stray round,
Who broke through the river ice,
Whom the Kolyma whipped on the butt
Up to steaming sweat, through and through,
Oh, how they'd piss – face up and eyes shut,
Like a turtledove drinking dew!
And the ragtag horde will then step aside
To the call of a silent fanfare,
And Her Majesty Snow-White Louse will come
To enter the raging fire,
And a myriad sparks will fly in the air
As an ominous, fateful sign,
And forever to stay, 'cross the Milky Way,
The Lousy Way will shine!

They say that in nineteen and thirty-seven,²
When hope was running dry,
When the frozen corpses on river ice
Were stacked up seven feet high,
And the taiga creaked from valiant labor
On its victorious roll –
That was the time when the Queen found love,
Such love that is once and for all.
He had volunteered to go to Gulag
And serve in the guard, and so
For him to be fooling around with the Queen
Was totally a no-go.
He carried a pouch with his Party card,
His cash and a garlic clove,
But she was the Queen, she couldn't care less
What he wanted, if she was in love!
And when one night he fell in the shaft –
The scoundrel got his pay –
She wept by his side on the rusty snow
All night till the break of day.
They came in the morning to bury him,
But he was nowhere to be seen,
And nobody figured where he went –
That secret belongs to the Queen!
And they tell a tale of a certain bloke,
A big shot from the central command,
Who came to declare a war on the Queen,
To call, as it were, her hand.
He set everyone on a march for a roast³
With slogans – he made quite a stir.
Though if he were but a smarter ass,
He'd strike a bargain with her:

² 1937, the infamous year when Stalin's purges peaked.

³ Heat treatment of clothing to kill lice and nits.

To break their bread and blow their brass
In a windfall or in a squeeze,
But a boss just can't be a smarter ass,
Because – that's the way it is.
Because he thinks in his arrogant mirth
That he has a million's worth,
And his every word's worth a million words
And his every step on this earth.
But when you're alone, and the night is drunk
With a blizzard as heavy as lead,
Then you are alone, so run for your life,
Because you're as good as dead!
Because the guards will not rescue you,
And your million won't save your soul!
... They say all night long the Zone⁴ was flowing
With a blood-curdling, mournful yowl.
They found him later with one boot on
And a terrible grin of fright
On a bluish face, and a swollen neck
In a noose of white lice, drawn tight...
Since then, no marches to the roasting house,
No slogans and cheers, and she's
Smiling quietly there, The Snow-White Louse,
The Mistress of detainees.
It was not for nothing they hailed her then
As Her Majesty, Queen of the Freeze.

One day all those who've made it through
And who didn't make it through,
We'll throw a parade to give her her due,
For we know how much she's due!
All over the continent's lows and highs,
All over the barren soil

⁴ "The Zone" is the inmates' slang for the camp territory.

Her Majesty's loyal subjects will rise
Celebrating their valiant toil,
Her Majesty's tributaries of all
Eras, of every land ...
It doesn't take a whole lot of smarts
To wield the whip and the brand,
It doesn't take a whole lot of smarts
To shoot the unarmed as you please!
But we know for sure which authorities
Were the real authorities!
They give us time in the prison house,
But you give us eternal peace,
Your Majesty, The Snow-White Louse!
The Mistress of detainees,
Our Majesty, The Snow-White Louse!
The mighty Queen of the Freeze!

ca. 1971

The Queen of Spades

A Ballad Adaptation of Alexander Pushkin's Short Story

Ben Holland

Snow was falling steady, sky bursting at the seams
Three Gamblers played a game of death in 1817

Lilly was an orphan, an unwanted baby girl
Abandoned at a station she came into the world
Brought up in a brothel where the wretched came to smoke
Who laughed to hear when "Opium" was the first word she spoke

Jonah was a gambler he was born to hold a card
With a smile quick and warm, with a heart cold and hard
Raised without a mother by a crooked drunken wreck
Who'd leave his boy for days often tied up by the neck

His father never liked him beat him black and blue for sport
And all the scars and broken bones were the only lessons taught
If the bottle didn't kill him Jonah surely someday would
But his liver beat him to it and he shut his eyes for good

He watched his Father dying, no tears, no word, or prayer
He didn't even dig a grave just left him lying there
Now old enough to chose to, he joined the national guards
By day he played at killing, by night he killed at cards

Ben Holland

One night he heard them talking of a woman long ago
Of a card playing Countess, one he'd like to know
They said she was a devil, a demon with a deck
She'd leave opponents broken, sometimes swinging by the neck

They said she had a secret, three cards to beat them all
She'd beaten barons and crippled kings, even helped a nation fall
Jonah listened closely, he heard the Countess lives
He'd transfer to her county and her secret would be his

The Countess of Boldino was the rich and worthy kind
Made beggars out of Princes, more than one had lost their mind
But her days of youth were long gone, in her heart it only rained
The fires of love were over, only ash and dust remained

She never wanted children, took too much time and care
But she knew her years were numbered and she'd yet to name an heir
She called out for her driver and they took a trip to town
They searched the darkest corners of the darkest streets around

They were just about to turn in, put off by the rain
They saw a flower in the gutter and Lilly was her name
The Countess smiling kindly said "I'll free you from this mess"
And back inside her chambers, she received a servants dress

You'll one day earn my fortune, till then you'll have to serve
If you think a title comes for free, my dear you have some nerve
The seasons passed like dancers, still the Countess made no will
But Lilly kept her patients; she had a role to fill

She lived behind a window, inside a velvet room
In service to the Countess, she withered in her bloom
Jonah now a soldier in the Countess's pay
He'd yet to make his move, but this could be the day

Through the Countess's window, he saw a girl his age
He pulled his pen and paper and with lies he filled the page
He waved up to the window and got down on one knee
He slid his card beneath the door for she would be the key

The letters soon were flying and spoke of love and ties
Lilly's all so sweet and true, Jonah's a pack of lies
They agreed upon a meeting at the big midwinter ball
They'd wait till every single soul was drunk inside the hall

The wait seemed almost endless but the day was finally here
All she longed to tell him she could whisper in his ear
Lilly took a silken dress from the Countess's past
She braided up and bowed her hair, she'd feel real love at last

You're dressed above your station said the countess with a glare
I pulled you from the dirt but you'll always be down there
"I'll let you shine for tonight, tomorrow there's work to do
Oh this strange ironic life where I rely on you"

All the Lords and Ladies came in the fashions of their day
They twirled and talked of politics and drank the night away
The Countess made a speech, took a bow, and left the room
Lilly left the latch off and with this she sealed their doom

Jonah followed after, subtle as a snake
All that he'd been scheming, now close enough to take
The Countess saw him creep in, she didn't turn around
She was taking off her make up in her golden dressing gown

"I've come to learn your secret" said Jonah with a gleam
"And I'll shoot you in a heartbeat if you even think to scream"
The Countess like a statue, her face seemed so serene
Her body was as still as ice, eye's distant in a dream

Jonah took her shoulder, the Countess dropped her head
He felt her neck for signs of life but the Countess was dead
He ran and climbed the staircase and opened Lilly's door
He scowled without a word and he paced across the floor

"I've saved myself in waiting" said Lilly looking pale
"I see you have your doubts, but my love will never fail"
No shred of guilt felt for her or the body lay below
"This world's just filled with empty lies" he said and turned to go

"Your Mothers less than living, took her secret to the grave
All my plans are wasted so there's nothing here to save
All my efforts useless and all my struggles vain
Don't preach to me of love, or I'll teach you of my pain"

He went back down the staircase leaving Lilly's tears behind
"I hate to play the common thief, but I'll rob the dead dog blind"
He found her as he left her, heard barking from the yard
But in her hand he newly saw three upright playing cards

The three, the seven, the ace of spades, lay face up on her chest
He smiled and this was all he stole tucked inside his vest
Jonah looked back at the corpse, it winked a wrinkled eye
He laughed it off and left the scene, he'd seen the old dear die

"Blood for blood" said Lilly low, and stood up from her bed
"I've nothing left to live for now my only reasons dead
Foolish heart that loved a man as cruel as fire to skin
I'll take a walk and pay the debt for it's wicked fatal sin"

The frost a cloth of diamonds lay gleaming on the ground
And from an empty heaven the snow came falling down
She lay down on the cold earth and felt her sad heart slow
And soon her sobs and pain were gone all buried in the snow

Jonah ran in laughter through the wind and through the cold
He burst into the tavern said "I've come to claim my gold!"
He swaggered to the table, they shuffled up the pack
And all upon the three of spades he placed a golden stack

The three indeed the winner and Jonah drew a crowd
He bet his life upon the seven so certain and so proud
The seven did come after, a fortune now secure
His head said take the money, his heart said go for more

"I'll bet you everything I have, all on the ace of spades
And I could buy a kingdom for all the games I've played"
Silence covered everything, and no one moved a hair
The dealer moved in closer and the last card cut the air

He turned the third card over, sweat streaming from his skin
The card was the queen of spades; it winked its eye at him
Jonah's heart exploded in a beat skipped fifty years
He died that very instant, no time for grief or tears

So on that bleak midwinter night, three gamblers lost and gone
But people come and people go, and the snow keeps falling on.

2017

Slovinky, I and II

Patrick Meighan

Slovinky

Katherine, Mamicka, youngest of eleven,
Katherine who breathed,
Your history already wiped.
You taught me kpustnica, cabbage soup,
And paska, that raisiny bread that sweetened
Easter mornings. Crumbs
Buried like your name, SHIMIK,
The block letters on your headstone, Katherine.
Your son, half Slovak. Your name is my forgotten history.
Cousins old enough to be uncles and aunts,
Young enough to argue,
Debated the place of origin, Czechoslovakia,
Borders scrambled, salted, and rearranged
Like the eggs you cracked – yelling of war and politics –
Into a caste-iron skillet sizzling, you spat words
With the grease of klobasa.
No one remembered our village.
Seeing the past I never saw, I doubt
We are of Bratislava, the capital in dreams
I do not remember. Now as I age I scramble eggs
And try to conjure its gardens and turrets.
Pride of peasant stock gives me hope
You came from a village buried in foothills

Much like the town where you comforted me
Through childhood's cracked shells.
Scanning your geography, Katherine,
My eyes stop on Slovincy, and I see a cog,
Something familiar, as if remembered,
Of a family scrambling eggs
In a village that mirrors our Appalachian village.
I don't care to know the facts
Wikipedia spews, the demographics
Of mashed potato or economy
Of eggs and salt. Slovincy, I whisper, Slovincy,
Slovincy I shall never see,
But which last night I swear I left.

Slovinky, Part II

In Slovinky the houses lean over streets like old women arguing lean over canes. Trees record the earth, their branches laden with out-of-season plums. The streets are rivers full of carp whose scales are schoolgirls' pleated skirts. To go barefoot – hello butterfly wings crunching under my toes! In the market insulted fish slap the faces of their mongers while apples bear worms with bushy Stalin mustaches. In Slovinky, soda tastes of malt. Hello, soda! Police bribe the parish priest for the street-value penitence doled out in time released capsules. In Slovinky beggars freeze under the August sun. Hello, beggars! Hello, sun! The ghosts are vomited from the bellies of dark gull.

2017

“The game of soccer, the unfinished”

Slava Nurgaliev

Translated from the Russian
by Yevgeniy Sokolovsky

The game of soccer, the unfinished
flights of the ball abruptly snatched –
game of surprise – as if Fellini
were the director of the match.

It's always beautiful, this picture.
The ball is kicked with great intent –
the long-awaited prey is captured
by the keen goalie in the end.

The brief captivity is finished –
the ball escapes the gloves at once –
the speckled little thing does relish
its geometric cancan dance.

The ball is energized as ever,
its surface sleek and well-defined,
oh, it would caper on, however
the dour whistle draws the line.

1989

Don't Tread on Me

Gerard Sarnat

i. Exfiltrated

To the wonder of Gesundheit Sarnatzky
as my moniker would've been ...
off the boat, dad's dad's Polish *zky* guillotined by blasé paper pushers;
post Versailles ... *nom deDeutsched* to forestall he's a Jerry;
which led to one *fermished* accidental Jew
– pallid carrot-topped Gerry Sarnat,
good health to you, *merci beaucoup* ...

ii. Roll Call of Our Dead

Most of their immigrant names came off passenger manifests
which were scribbled in totemic books at embarkation points
by ships' clerks who spoke the various native languages.
My grandparents' Castle Garden port of entry
had multilingual agents on hand just near welcoming bands
past a cabbalist's *tchotchke* stand where Mamele Sarnatzky
haggled hard for Daddy's first big boy new American pants.

iii. Skidel Missive Smuggled To Parisian Publisher

“Please allow me to introduce myself
I’m a man of wealth and taste
I’ve been around for a long, long year
Stole many a man’s soul and faith”
– from the Rolling Stones’ “Sympathy for the Devil”

Bien sûr,

Shtetl dawn, Cossack devils lock me into the Swan Scythe
with a lantern of wan hope – supposedly to compose that great novel
about our Pale of Russia. But despite breaking literary testicles
to create their authorized expurgated version, all I jot here
in the stench of butchered fowl or neighbors is *sprezzatura*.

Kind sir, can you get *moi*, my *yenta* and nine kids visas for France?

May health be with you, Gesundheit Sarnatzky/Gerard Sarnat

Four Poems from 1922

Marina Tsvetaeva

Translated from the Russian

by Mary Jane White

For some – there are no laws.
At this hour, when our common dream
Is righteous, nearly sacred,
For some there is no sleep:

Let them look – in the innermost-
Reticent petal: you are not to be found!

For some – there are no rules:
At this hour, when every mouth
Is dry with the latest betrayals –
For some there is no water:

They torment themselves – with a clenched-
Fist – they pound sand!

For some, an unbending –
Life comes at a price.

June 25, 1922

To Berlin

Your rain dulls my pain.
Beneath the collapse of shutters going to ruin
I sleep. Hooves along the trembling
Asphalt – like so much applause.

We were so pleased with ourselves – having met.
With our abandon, our golden-mornings.
With our veritable fairy-tale orphan status;
And you had mercy on us, you, ugly pile of buildings!

July 10, 1922

Marina Tsvetaeva, trans. from the Russian by by Mary Jane White

You'll see for yourself – in time! –
How, cast out on the straw,
She had no need of fame, nor
Of Solomon's treasure.

No, lacing her hands behind her head,
– From her nightingale's throat! –
The Shulamite sang: not of his treasure –
But of his handful of beautiful red-clay!

July 12, 1922

A light-silvery mold
Over brakes and pools.
The curtain breathes – through its opening
A vacillating and diffuse

Light... Like falling water on display,
My veil. (Unless I order you – don't move!)
So at times were Persian demons given to steal
Their favorites from others who slept.

From those with no command of time
– Sleep! – those who suffer light-headedness.
You who overlook my incantations,
Sleep, as weaker ones, unequal to myself!

Sleep. – I will be the fabrication of your mind
From which I soothe away all irritation.
So at times were the Muses given to come
And make their favorites of certain mortals.

July 16, 1922

Three Poems from *Columns*

Nikolay Zabolotsky

Translated from the Russian
by Dmitri Manin

Translator's Note

Columns, Nikolay Zabolotsky's first poetic collection, created a literary scandal when it was published in 1929. It subverted both the world it depicted and the language used to describe it. Full of ostensibly illogical images – roaring fish, automobiles grabbing a street by the gills, an infant building porridge from grains – these poems were radically free and subversive, inspiring both thrills and confusion. In addition, *Columns* demonstratively breaks with traditional “poeticity” by employing decidedly un-poetic language, ranging from vernacular speech, to the clichés of naïve poetry, to officialese.

One way of understanding *Columns* is by analogy with the work of the Russian avant-garde painters, such as Mikhail Larionov, and of the Cubists. There, we also see the rejection of traditional aesthetics in favor of naïve, unschooled techniques, as well as displacement and recombination of the elements of the world in new and strange juxtapositions.

Zabolotsky kept going back to *Columns* throughout his life, revising the texts and adding new poems. Some of the translations in this selection follow the original 1929 version, others come from the final, 1958 version.

Immaturity

An infant builds a porridge out
of tiny bluish grains of wheat;
his twofold fingers nimbly route,
like letter blocks, grains to their seat.
Thus, crumb by crumb, he fills the pot,
hung like a bell on a bell tower
and slowly swinging; it is hot
and rings with its rectangular power.
The child across the thicket clammers
and plucks the leaves from hazel trees;
his open palm sticks out and trembles
above the treetops in the breeze.
Girls waft towards him, a cloud-borne flock,
and one of them takes off her cross,
a little pendant from her neck,
and falls down quietly on the grass.
The pot swells, burbling underfoot
on the live body of the blaze;
the girl reposes in the nude,
while flames consume her cast-off lace.
– I'm still an infant, not matured –
the child in a soft voice replied –
how can I sail to you, be moored,
when I am not enamored blind?
Seeing your beauty brings me shame;
so cover up your attributes
with a white cloth, observe my flame
and don't anticipate abuse! –
He took a paddle and a bowl
and wisely gave his meal a stir,
and thus he taught the wretched soul
a lesson drawn from living lore.

Foxtrot

His sky-blue shoes are all pizzazz,
his socks befit a dazzling dandy:
in cloud-puffs of Hawaiian jazz
the hero hovers like a candy.
Below the glasses coo away,
below it's neither night, nor day,
below, as in a priestly trance,
the maestro does his pagan dance.
He flaps his arms about, to stick
into the void his pointed stick,
along his chest in cardboard splendor
the frills of his cravat meander.

Hurray! Hurray! The hero soars,
Neva beholds Hawaiian magic!
He makes his legs into an "X,"
he makes his arms into a pretzel,
his fluid spine arches with flair,
but all the while he lacks a lass,
and Cupid flies away, alas,
his dainty foot flailing the air.

The dance roars on, a unicorn,
and matrons show off ever smarter
the crossroads of smooth legs, adorned
with a siskin on a rosy garter.
Look on, look on! – the siskin laughs,
the matrons, though, have skipped away;
and still the foxtrot booms and puffs,
a brazen forest in the bay.

Thus, playing on till closing time,
for the delight of multitudes
man bore a child, the most sublime
of cripples, an effeminate Judas.
Do not disturb his morbid rest
with blaring music, let him slumber
with hatchling sign across his chest,
a sickly seedling, weak and somber.
But up above these wretched shores,
the hero, wine and song's apostle,
atop a woman boldly soars,
shooting at nothing with his pistol!

Vagrant Musicians

He strode, resentful of his lot,
behind his back a load
of gold, a horn tied in a knot.
Two others briskly followed.
One clutched a fiddle's darkened shade,
he was a hunchbacked dimwit,
all day his bow creaked and complained
like an ever-sweaty armpit.
The other one, a heavyweight
and a champ on the guitar,
lugged a huge sacrum with the great
song of the splendid Queen Tamar.
And it had seven iron strings,
and seven pins, and seven shafts,
dangling like little angled things,
made by a hand skilled in the craft.

The sun was setting on the broadways,
street coaches rushed along in throngs
with stringy horses held in harness
and drivers poised like philistines.
And then, the magic curl and bell
sprang up inside the windowed well.
The muzzle bellowed, its first sound
was a deaf eagle. It hit the ground
and with a boom came to a close.
Another eagle then arose.
Eagles turned into cuckoo birds,
and cuckoos shrank to tiny curds,
they choked the throat and made their fall
through all the windows in the wall.

The hunchback tucked the violin
under his chin and molded
on his misshapen face a grin
with a finger oddly folded.
He took his screechy bow and swung,
the sad, disfigured bum,
across his fiddle tightly strung:
– Tilim-tum-tum!

The system then set off in order.
Tokens of fancy quavered.
And all who listened were rewarded
with clear tears, shy and wayward,
when eager gents and damsels
in cardigans and underpants
propped up their heads on windowsills
to the din and thunder of the band.

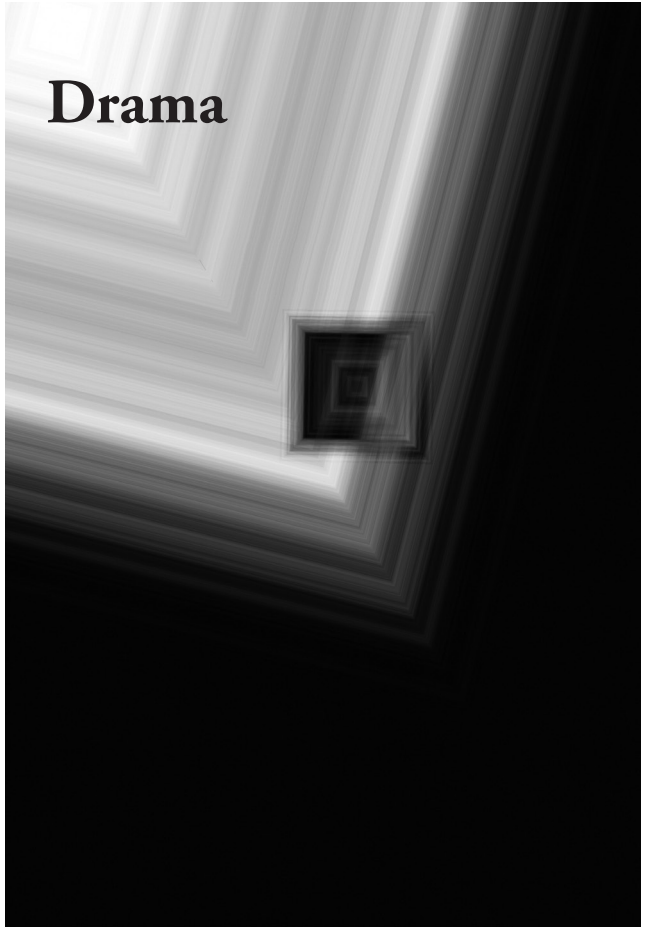
But then the sage of worldly passions
and champ on the guitar
held up the sacrum, finely fashioned,
and with the sweet song of Tamar
he parted valiantly his lips.
And all fell silent.
And the sovereign sound,
muffled like the Kura's rumble,
resplendent like a dream
swept over...
And in this song Tamar came into sight,
on her Caucasian couch reclined.
Beside her, goblets full of bright
wine, sparkled well into the night
and young lads also stood around.
Lads stood around
and waved their arms,

and all through the night one could hear
a fervent and passionate hum ...
– Tilim-tum-tum!

The singer, who was stern and strong,
toiled in the courtyard on his song;
by an exalted dumpster pit
he labored, full of grace and grit.
Round him a system of stray cats,
a system of pails, firewood, windows
hung in the darkening world and cut
it into thin prismatic kingdoms.

What was this courtyard, but a chimney?
A tunnel to a distant land,
where the heart was withering within me,
where fate had me exiled and banned.
Where through the attic window, by
the moonlight, trembling to the core
a stray cat looked me in the eye,
a spirit of the seventh floor.

Drama



Fortune

A Play in Five Scenes, in Verse

Marina Tsvetaeva

Translated from the Russian
by Maya Chhabra

Cast

Armand-Louis, count Biron-Gontaut, duke of Lauzun, blond, Sèvres. In the first scene outside of age, for he is in the cradle, in the second 17 years old, in the third 28 years old, in the fourth 29 years old, in the fifth, keeping to the letter of the law, 46 years old. But Lauzun did not keep to the letter of the law.

Dame Fortune, in the form of the Marquise de Pompadour – the age of Fortune

Marquise d'Esparbès, 23 years old

Princess Izabela Czartoryska, 30 years old

Marie-Antoinette, queen of the French, 20 years old

Clairette – maidservant, 17 years old

Rosanetta, the porter's daughter, 16 years old

Nanny, 60 years old in the first scene, 88 years old in the third

The butler, an old man

The executioner, in the prime of his life

“Au Dieu – mon âme
Mon corps – au Roi,
Mon coeur – aux Dames,
L'honneur – pour moi”

– ancient motto

First Scene

Horn of Plenty

Ce fut donc à la cour et pour ainsi dire sur les genoux de la maîtresse du
Roi que se passèrent les premières années de mon enfance...
Duc de Lauzun. Mémoires ⁵

The meeting takes place on April 13, 1747, in the hôtel of the counts of Biron-Gontaut. The counts' nursery. Early age. Candles. In a lacy cloud of a cradle rests the newborn Count Armand-Louis Biron-Gontaut, future duke of Lauzun. At the little linen cupboard, the NANNY and the BUTLER are talking.

BUTLER:
How is our countess?

NANNY:
Weak – it's fate.

BUTLER:
And that little baby count of ours?

NANNY:
The little count's asleep.
Full and asleep – and such a cutie.
Well, you could put him in a showcase!
Angel!

⁵ "It was thus at court, and as it were, at the knees of the King's mistress that I spent the first years of my childhood." Duc de Lauzun, Memoirs

BUTLER:

And Himself?

NANNY:

Don't blurt this out in front of anyone.

So I saw him – sideways, out the corner of my eye –

With the breviary – though his standing's far above ours!

Using the servants' entrance ...

BUTLER:

Could it be to the chapel?

NANNY:

And there up till now.

BUTLER:

Whoa!

NANNY:

And when I was sweeping his dressing room

Under the wardrobe – Heavenly King! –

All in shreds – his Sunday wig!

I've scarcely recovered.

BUTLER:

Seems he loved her

If he ruined his wig because of her.

It's a pity about the little countess.

NANNY:

An angel incarnate!

From birth she didn't know about their rank

There – she was naughty, she sang,

She called me "old Ma."

"Happy first son to you," I said this day past

“Happy first to the count, and to me – happy last.”
And sobbed. Then she beckoned me
With her finger: “Buy him, Nanny,
A horse, and a sword of tin.
Don’t take one step, not one step away from him!
Bring me up a faithful servant
To the Lord God and the king.
(looking at the child)
Even sleepy he laughs! Lively little thing!
Little angel! Takes after Mama! Happy little thing!
Little mouthie, nosie! All the size of a fist!
Like I could eat you up! Oh, how
We dreamed of this son!
Of all brides ...

Enter a servant.

SERVANT:
The countess has passed on.

BUTLER:
Kingdom of God!
(exits)

NURSE:
The crown. The end.
(crying)
I decked them out under the wedding crown!
Little sunshine! Dear God! The meek angel!
(above the cradle)
Here we are, sonny, little orphan,
Sleep, my little God-given son.
I will sing lullabies – not for the first time ...
(sings)
Cradle to the right,

Cradle to the left.
But we are marked with a crown.
It will be us, like our forbears,
Who go with the king to attack,
And to the ball with the queen.
– Cradle to the right,
Cradle to the left. –
To the hunt with the king,
To dine with the queen,
And who needs the boy?
The queen needs him,
The king, the queen.
By the queen he will be given
The rose from her white breast.
“Remember my rose.”
– Cradle to the right,
Cradle to the left. –
“When the terrible hour comes
For the king, the queen...”
Cradle to the right – and the left,
Cradle to the right – and the left...
(*nods off, drops her cap in her sleep*)

*In a pink silk whirlwind, FORTUNE rushes in, in the form of the MARQUISE
DE POMPADOUR.*

FORTUNE:
All sleep, alone in the night
My winged foot hastens.
My glance is like the heavenly gates,
But they say that I am blind.
(*bending over the cradle*)
Hey, baby.
Reign, baby.

Nanny's sleeping, wet-nurse sleeping,
Mother lies there, not breathing.
But Fortune has come –
You'll be safe, you'll be well-fed!

Over bushes – of blackthorn
Boldly run – barefoot!
You are Fortune's son
And lover.

With pink dust I
Sprinkle your tiny eyes
With pink chains I
Ensnare your tiny legs
(raises a horn of plenty over her head)
Soar, horn of plenty!
Pour, roses, in an incarnadine stream
To this cradle.
(the cradle is hidden under roses – catching the most beautiful, the last, in flight – and wagging her little finger at it)
Rose, rose,
Hide the thorn!
Boy, fear
The throne rose.
The rose is blood,
The rose is captivity,
The rose is inexorable fate!
Pluck all roses, but the throne
Rose – fear it, Lauzun!

The rose, in a fearful hour,
May become
Your burial robe.
(to the nanny, who has only just woken up and doesn't yet understand what's going on)
Well, Nanny, did you get enough sleep?

NANNY:

(throwing up her hands)

Sweet Jesus! The Marquise
de Pompadour! And me without my cap!
(hurriedly putting on her cap)

MARQUISE DE POMPADOUR:

While you slept, I sang lullabies
To your little chick.

NANNY:

(with a sigh)

We lost our mommy.

MARQUISE DE POMPADOUR:

Yes, I know, I know, that's why I came
Straight here, passing by death –
(pointing to the cradle)
To admire
Life. Be our future
What it may – let it be welcome! What's past – forgiven!
(bending over the crib)
Fair child! God grant you
Grow and flourish – more beautiful than the golden morn!
Farewell, Nanny.

NANNY:

But let us make you at home?
And take a look at the deceased?

MARQUISE DE POMPADOUR:

At the tears?
No, I have no desire to – and the king is waiting.
Ah, I have scattered all the roses.
(to the Nanny)

Marina Tsvetaeva, trans. from the Russian by Maya Chhabra

My sighs and condolences

To the unhappy widower and all her kin...

(kissing the child on the forehead)

A kiss from Fortune herself to you – and with it

The most terrible of gifts – charm.

First ray of dawn.

CURTAIN

Second Scene

Baptism by Fire

Vous avez beaucoup d'avantages pour plaire aux femmes; profitez-
en pour leur plaire et soyez convainçu que la perte d'une peut toujours
être réparée par une autre.
Duc de Lauzun. Mémoires ⁶

A charming pink boudoir of the 18th century. On the dressing-table, by an oval mirror with cupids and doves, are cases, perfume bottles, powder boxes, jars of rouges. On the floor, leaning against a pink couch, is a guitar with pink ribbons. Roses on the ceiling, roses on the carpet, roses – in clusters – in the vases, roses – in garlands – on the walls, roses everywhere, roses all over. All rose. On the little table are two champagne flutes, in one – unfinished – is a rose. Evening. Candles burning. The MARQUISE D'ESPARBÈS and the duke of LAUZUN are playing chess.

MARQUISE D'ESPARBÈS:

(moving her knight)

From paradise to paradise, from captivity to captivity...

A chain of pink betrayals, Lauzun!

What's at court today? No news?

The king still hasn't changed ... sides?

Do re mi fa ... re mi fa so ...

(she overturns the chessboard)

⁶ "You have many advantages in pleasing women; take advantage of those to please them and be convinced that the loss of one can always be repaired by another." Duc de Lauzun, Memoirs

I'm sick of the chess match.
I want something else! – Only not with you!
What kind of opponent can one be, if the razor's
Never once yet brushed his lips?
With you, it's nice listening to the drawn-out wail
Of an oboe, and whispering prayers,
And playing chess, and drinking chocolate
From the very same cup.

LAUZUN:
Are you joking?

MARQUISE D'ESPARBÈS:
Neither dolls nor lambs have amused
Me in a long time.

LAUZUN:
(*standing*)
Is that a dismissal?

MARQUISE D'ESPARBÈS:
Don't bite your lips!

LAUZUN:
I staked my own life on it!

MARQUISE D'ESPARBÈS:
You grow up, you grow up – and you're just as stupid!
What does it have to do with life, once all love is a
Question of a pin, cleverly unpinned
At the right time, without superfluous requests.

LAUZUN:
Am I replaced?

MARQUISE D'ESPARBÈS:

Serene Highness Count Biron!

Not just Biron, not just de Gontaut and Duke of

Lauzun – but my Love

Of yesterday: don't bite your lip bloody

And don't thrust your little claws in my heart.

(raising her finger)

Without briars, you can't have a briar rose,

You can't have love without betrayal.

You're irreplaceable as mon cousin,

But replaceable as a lover!

– Replaced! –

LAUZUN:

(grabbing hold of his head)

Well! Off to die!

MARQUISE D'ESPARBÈS:

Don't you dare! You'll be sorry!

It's splendid – opening your career

With the Marquise d'Esparbès herself!

You're a wonder!

LAUZUN:

I don't want wonders!

I'll call him out!

One of us will die!

(rushing about the room like a tiger)

MARQUISE D'ESPARBÈS:

(catching him by the hem of his escaping doublet and pulling him to her)

Your mouth's

Not a mouth – it's all kisses!

Your gaze is like a purebred horse's.

But hear me out, without cursing:
You're too young for me –
You need a grandmother – and a nurse!

LAUZUN:
Who is he?

MARQUISE D'ESPARBÈS:
Why?

LAUZUN:
Condé?

MARQUISE D'ESPARBÈS:
The vanity of names!
What have names got to do with the thickness of your skin?
Cry if you're stupid, and laugh – if you're clever...
A lover is dear, but Love is dearer.
You're so nice!..

LAUZUN:
(bending over her)
Ah, it would be nice to plunge
A knife in your breast, and listen to the groans
At your very mouth...

MARQUISE D'ESPARBÈS:
Once again I marvel at
The poverty of the male lexicon.
What beggarliness! I love, I will kill –
I will kill is I love... No, our vocabulary is richer!
I'll rise, glance, conquer... Glance –
And not take...

LAUZUN:

Marquise, I'm almost crying.

MARQUISE D'ESPARBÈS:

I'll take and not give back ... I'll give back and again
Gather in a cupped hand, hold a moment – and cast away...
– Nice vocabulary?.. Don't cry, my Love!
Here's my advice to you: get on a horse,
Ride full tilt, let the coastal wind
Strip from your curls and heart the dust
Of powder and memories.

LAUZUN:

(throwing himself to his knees, hiding his face, crying)
But still, I'm yours.
And still – at some point – you – loved me.

MARQUISE D'ESPARBÈS:

Even yesterday! –Have done with expecting
Good to come of follies.

LAUZUN:

A corkscrew's driven into my heart.

MARQUISE D'ESPARBÈS:

(playing with his hair)
– It's a game!

LAUZUN:

And tomorrow?

MARQUISE D'ESPARBÈS:

A new game!
There isn't any tomorrow – only now!

LAUZUN:

How will I face tomorrow morning?

MARQUISE D'ESPARBÈS:

In tears

But the next day, laughing. While we're young
Everything's nice, everything's hollow, everything's a swing
Of the blind wheel of Fortune!

– Farewell!

LAUZUN:

Forever?

MARQUISE D'ESPARBÈS:

You're doing it again?! "Forever"

Is not in the female vocabulary.

(looking him in the eyes)

Who knows how quickly

These two heads, lying deep in the snow

Of a single pillow, will be illuminated by Dawn?

And I'll drink chocolate with you

From the same cup... and my finger

Will whisper in your dear ear again...

(whispers something in his ear, laughing)

LAUZUN:

Come back!

MARQUISE D'ESPARBÈS:

It's all irrevocable, sweet boy!

(she dips a rose in the champagne flute and sprinkles it on Lauzun's hair)

With champagne's golden froth

I sprinkle this hothead,

That he may forget "I love, I will kill,"

That he may bend the knee laughing,
To eternally fly away from captivity
Like a small divinity.
That Helen may fight for
Him, not he for Helen!
That having leapt up, like this froth,
Like froth he may melt away, so instead of
Lie, curiosity, tenderness, flattery, betrayal –
We may simply say: Lauzun.

CURTAIN

Third Scene

The Late Guest

Je sens derniers soupirs sur des lèvres qui brûlent encore de tes
premiers baisers.
Duc de Lauzun. *Memoires*.⁷

The bedroom of Princess Czartoryska in Povanski, near Warsaw. A dark, murky chamber. A night lamp burns. The stove is lit. On the night table are bottles with medicine, a glass of water with a white rose in it. In the armchair – like a charming ghost – is thirty-year-old IZABELA CZARTORYSKA. Next to her, holding a spoon and a glass in her hands, is Lauzun’s NANNY.

NANNY:

Well, that’s all drunk up! Now the wizard sleep
Will come up to us on velvet soles.
– Who’s not sleeping here? –The little princess isn’t sleeping!
Welcome to Princess Izabela’s!
And sleep lies down, like the Palatine prince,
At these illustrious feet, and with a wolf’s fur coat
It covers our little legs. And I’ll go
And light a candle in the chapel.

PRINCESS CZARTORYSKA:

Nanny, it’s stifling!

⁷ “I sense last sighs on lips that still burn with your first kisses.” Duc de Lauzun, *Memoirs*.

NANNY:

For an absent friend...

PRINCESS CZARTORYSKA:

Nanny, I'm going to die!

NANNY:

Who's going to die? What did the physician
Say to us recently? He's smart, even though he's a heathen! –
An if we regularly, every hour, swallow
The medicine and at eight on the dot
Withdraw under the canopy, but mind you – not to lie
Grieving, sleepless, but mind you – not to think!
And more importantly – not to cry! He constantly repeated
Up to a hundred times – don't cry!

PRINCESS CZARTORYSKA:

(indifferently)

I'm not crying,
I'm simply dying.

NANNY:

An if we'll
Drink some more milk – at New Year's
His Serene Highness Adam⁸
Will seat us in his sledge – hue dada!⁹ – jingling –
Like an arrow – to Warsaw – to the king's – to the ball!

⁸ Prince Adam Kazimierz Czartoryski, politician and patron of the arts, was the husband of Izabela Czartoryska. A candidate for the Polish crown, he withdrew in favor of Stanislaw August Poniatowski.

⁹ French for "giddy-up!"

Marina Tsvetaeva, trans. from the Russian by Maya Chhabra

PRINCESS CZARTORYSKA:

Not in the sled – in the hands of black-clad footmen
Not at the ball at the king's – in the family crypt.
– How's my son?

NANNY:

He fell asleep.

PRINCESS CZARTORYSKA:

He didn't cry?

NANNY:

No, sweetheart!
His little hands go under his head and he blooms
Like a rose.

PRINCESS CZARTORYSKA:

Two forces still hold me
To the world – my son
And the sun. Death comes, like a black raven,
At the black hour of midnight. – Give me the case
Where the letters are ... But no ... no, it would be better, nanny,
If you'd lay out the cards for me ... no, better if you'd sing me
A tune ... No, better if you'd tell me –
(quite a different voice)
How he was when he was little, how he ate, how he slept,
How he tore his clothes, how he looked under the bed for the pussycat ...
How he let a dove go free ...
Everything, nanny, everything, from the first little tooth –
To the first pink note!
Was he a naughty child?

NANNY:

(proud and enjoying herself)
Oh, and how!
You'll never find a joker like him!

Moon: fetch, Gypsy: dance, horse: stop...
Everything, everything was to his liking – if only it was new.

PRINCESS CZARTORYSKA:
Whatever did he play?

NANNY:
He took cities,
He kidnapped beauties... For all that, capricious!
But how he adored his little girlfriends!

PRINCESS CZARTORYSKA:
(*smiling*)
Even then?

NANNY:
But how he broke their toys!

PRINCESS CZARTORYSKA:
As today – their lives.
– Fiery?

NANNY:
Oh! –At the least provocation – hoofbeats!
Like a whirlwind – and a rose for his cockade!
Not for nothing were we commander
Of the queen's guard at just twelve years old.

PRINCESS CZARTORYSKA:
But tender?

NANNY:
Like silk! But a moment – and in a wrath,
He shakes like a leaf – and blood at the throat. – That dove
And seraph – that enraged lion,

The Marquise de Pompadour
Nicknamed him: Cupid and Mars.
Together they studied the whole little book
With the pink garland. I remember something: Ars ...
Grammar, it must be.

PRINCESS CZARTORYSKA:

“Ars amandi”...

– Was he her reader?

NANNY:

Reader, chick,

Kitten, sunshine ...

PRINCESS CZARTORYSKA:

Oh no, enough!

Sing me a song, nanny.

NANNY:

As you wish. About what?

PRINCESS CZARTORYSKA:

Let it be both amusing – and painless!

NANNY:

(she sings on the floor by the stove)

The first snow has covered the tracks,

A raven tears the bone.

An ember falls from the stove:

It means – a late guest.

Why does the grumbling granny

Heat the stove at such an odd time?

That’s the late guest hurrying

A good horse.

We don't need a trumpeter with a trumpet,
Don't trumpet, trumpeter!
That's passion making it on time
At a gallop for a late dinner.

Why is there laughter in the stately castle,
And the thundering of hearts?
Why has the prince's mommy got on
A headdress with seven tiers?

Whose black cloak
Is bent over the cradle?

That's the late guest for
Pani Izabela ...

*The doors are wide open. Through the room – in a windswept, stormy
traveling cloak – the whirlwind.*

PRINCESS CZARTORYSKA:
(with a cry of her whole being)
Lauzun!!!

LAUZUN:
(already at her feet – abruptly)
A thousand-verst gallop!
Racing – fire in the window!
I thought – I'll die!

PRINCESS CZARTORYSKA:
(pushing him aside)
On the forehead.
On the lips is forbidden.
*(she raises him up, sets him in front of her, and, covering her eyes with her
hand, smiling)*
– Sun. –

Marina Tsvetaeva, trans. from the Russian by Maya Chhabra

LAUZUN:

I'd have crawled on all fours!

My love! – Pani!

NANNY:

But not even a

Glance for me?

LAUZUN:

(leaping toward her)

Nurse!!!

NURSE:

(admiring)

Exactly like a river reed!

Where there's a reed, it's wet!

(wipes her eyes on her apron)

LAUZUN:

(to Izabela)

How wide your eyes are!

Have I changed?

PRINCESS CZARTORYSKA:

(with a smile)

You've grown...

NURSE:

(sobbing)

Something's tight in my chest...

Some sort of stormy hour.

(exits)

LAUZUN:

(to Izabela)

I got a letter.

Aren't you ill?

PRINCESS CZARTORYSKA:

(in the same blissful tone)

– Mortally! –

What? You've seen prettier corpses?

Ten weeks of fever!

All's well. You're here.

Don't forget:

(laying her hand on her heart)

I'm Polish.

LAUZUN:

What of Prince Repnin?

PRINCESS CZARTORYSKA:

He forgave.

LAUZUN:

And Prince Adam?

PRINCESS CZARTORYSKA:

He too forgave, but both of them are going gray.

They wander around far-off cities.

– But you don't even ask about your little son?

LAUZUN:

(hitting himself on the head)

What a head! – Son! – Yours and mine!

My son with you!

Marina Tsvetaeva, trans. from the Russian by Maya Chhabra

PRINCESS CZARTORYSKA:

How often I looked out the window
With him...

LAUZUN:

Does he have curly hair?
Is he good? Looks like me?

PRINCESS CZARTORYSKA:

(blissfully)
Like the sun. –

LAUZUN:

(in ecstasy)
Attack! Sabres shining!
Son and father!

PRINCESS CZARTORYSKA:

(continuing)
He weighs no more than a little bird.

LAUZUN:

Does he laugh? Does he say “papa”?

PRINCESS CZARTORYSKA:

(inexpressibly)
Child!
He’s just going on four months!

LAUZUN:

(at her feet)
And the older ones? And my darling?

PRINCESS CZARTORYSKA:

Those?
I’m no mother to those – You’re not their father!

Let the Virgin Mother in passionless purity
Stand watch over their unhappy childhood!
(*feverishly*)

Why, I would dry them out into sand,
I would bury them up to the neck in snow,
If I could just only know that for a single hour
These cheeks here are rosier!
(*caresses Lauzun's face*)

LAUZUN:

(*confused*)

It frightens me to listen to you!

PRINCESS CZARTORYSKA:

A monster – not a mother?

All right, I'll burn with shame, like old straw!

Judgment isn't far off!

(*bending toward him, who closes his eyes*)

– Do you want to sleep,

My little one? Ah, you can't know

What pain and paradise it is

To say “my little one” to this big one.

(*silence*)

I always walked to the park in the dew.

I always listened to hoofbeats in the night.

Do all women love you?

LAUZUN:

(*innocently*)

All of them.

I don't know what it is in me.

PRINCESS CZARTORYSKA:

I know, friend. Was I not steadfast?!

Three kings attest it. –Charms! –

Look me in the eye and begin: when,
Whom and where... Let's start with Lady Sarah.
Charming?

LAUZUN:
(embarrassed)
Not as much as you –
You funny thing...

PRINCESS CZARTORYSKA
And the one who was friends with
The dandy Tissot? And the star from the Neva?
Oh, don't get your hot head chopped off!

LAUZUN:
Where could you have?..

PRINCESS CZARTORYSKA
Carried by the wind!
– Oh, I'm weary.

LAUZUN
Love, from what?

PRINCESS CZARTORYSKA
From happiness and from coughing.
(takes a rose from a hospital glass and proffers it)
– Do you want a rose
Of my country? –
Forgive me these tears,
My godforsakeness and my god.
(laying her hands on his head)
Rainbows are roses, rainbows are roses are crowns,
Are a generous stream on the forehead and locks of Count
Biron!

Sooner or later, but – the throne of my Poland
Will be yours – in merriment, in passion, in glory!
The throne is before you!
– Just as, in this breast,
The Duke of Lauzun defeats King Stanislaus.¹⁰
Now go.

LAUZUN:
Already?

PRINCESS CZARTORYSKA:
The flower has withered.
Let the young boy read in the old
Dictionary. Armand-Louis Biron-Gontaut Lauzun.
He walked
Where Fortune led him.

LAUZUN:
(*standing up*)
Then the Polish throne?

PRINCESS CZARTORYSKA:
Yes, Count Biron.

LAUZUN:
We'll dash off a report to Catherine
Immediately.

PRINCESS CZARTORYSKA:
(*pulling away again*)
No, don't kiss! There's no need! It's not allowed!

¹⁰ Stanislaus II Augustus (Stanisław August Poniatowski) was the last King of Poland. Through his mother, he was connected to the Czartoryski family. He was elected king in part thanks to the influence of Catherine the Great, who had been his lover.

Marina Tsvetaeva, trans. from the Russian by Maya Chhabra

(with sad irony)

There are impassible strongholds.
Sometime – in about thirty-five years –
You'll understand –

LAUZUN

(childishly)

Well, just once! For luck!

PRINCESS CZARTORYSKA:

...What it cost me now not to take
From your lips – the last communion.
And on Carrara marble – instead of
Ornaments and other eloquence –
Let it be thus: "Lauzun loved her."
There's no need for – Izabela Czartoryska.

CURTAIN

Fourth Scene

Feather and Rose

Vous êtes ma reine, la Reine de France!
Duc de Lauzun. Mémoires. Ch. IV.¹¹

The action takes place in 1775 – in the blissful time when “all shepherdesses were beautiful, and all shepherds spoke true” – in one of Marie-Antoinette’s small apartments, at the Trianon.

MARIE-ANTOINETTE, in comedy-rural attire as “La Reine Laitière”, pins an enormous scarlet rose in front of the mirror. At a certain distance, holding the ends of a lacy apron with the tips of her fingers, posed in an unfinished curtsy, is the queen’s favorite servant, CLAIRETTE. Flowering chestnuts in the window. Dusk.

MARIE-ANTOINETTE:
Clairette!

CLAIRETTE:
My lady?

MARIE-ANTOINETTE:
Look!
What do you see?

CLAIRETTE:
The fairest rose
In the fairest breast – blood and marble.

¹¹ “You are my queen, the Queen of France!” Duc de Lauzun, Memoirs, Ch. IV.

MARIE-ANTOINETTE:

(laughing)

Oh, close up it isn't marble. And nor is it snow!
Is there a man on Earth, Clairette,
So stubborn in his pride
And such a bitter foe to bliss –
That he wouldn't pluck – this rose – straight out –
With his lips?
Clairette, do you have a lover?

CLAIRETTE:

I had one.

MARIE-ANTOINETTE:

He fell out of love with you?

CLAIRETTE:

I fell out of love.

MARIE-ANTOINETTE:

To whom does the radiant honor
Of being loved by Clairette belong now?

CLAIRETTE:

This sweetheart
Doesn't know I'm sweet on him.

MARIE-ANTOINETTE:

Who is he? Jacques?
Joseph? Germain? Well, tell me quickly!

CLAIRETTE:

(tugging at her apron in embarrassment)

I don't dare name him ...
Eagles fly high ...

MARIE-ANTOINETTE:

Here's a modest one! –But naming him would be more fun...
Will you ask me to the wedding?

CLAIRETTE:

No.

MARIE-ANTOINETTE:

Any reason?

CLAIRETTE:

He gave the wedding bouquet away,
Flower by flower, before the wedding.
– Petal by petal.

MARIE-ANTOINETTE:

(laughing)

Here's a ruffian!

CLAIRETTE:

He doesn't spend a single night at home!

MARIE-ANTOINETTE:

Well, we'll wean him off wonders!

Clairette! Do you hear thunder?

CLAIRETTE:

No.

MARIE-ANTOINETTE:

The rose didn't quiver?

CLAIRETTE:

No.

Marina Tsvetaeva, trans. from the Russian by Maya Chhabra

MARIE-ANTOINETTE:

(pointing to the rose)

Who seems

Prettier?

CLAIRETTE:

Comparison is superfluous!

MARIE-ANTOINETTE:

(clutching her heart)

How quiet! But here in my breast, it thunders so,

That it seems it could be heard in Schönbrunn itself!

(to Clairette)

So you didn't say – who? Joseph, Germain?

Well, we'll even scold him ourselves!

On the threshold of the open door, in full hussar uniform, with a helmet in his hands, imperceptibly approaching – LAUZUN! In the same instant as his appearance, CLAIRETTE freezes in evident – like two and two makes four – delight.

MARIE-ANTOINETTE:

How pale you are! What's the matter with you?

LAUZUN:

(clutching himself by the forehead)

I'm still not sleeping –

Insomnia!

MARIE-ANTOINETTE:

Layabout, I'm glad to see you –

Like the Sun! –You were afraid – of the king?

LAUZUN:

Me?

MARIE-ANTOINETTE:

Today you're a good boy – I praise you:

Today, for the first time – you come unheralded.

Sit down – right here – why on the chair?

(she points out the edge of the couch to him, but Lauzun continues to stand)

Like an English jockey? – Sit next to me! –

How's the new horse?

LAUZUN:

I'm afraid I've cheated:

For the first time, I come unnoted – but with notes.

(takes from his breast a page folded in four)

MARIE-ANTOINETTE:

(with not quite joking annoyance)

Notes! My brain is withered

To a pea from your memoranda.

–And how long, Lauzun, will I be waiting

For the other sort of notes?

– I'm joking!

(extending a hand)

About what?

LAUZUN:

(giving her the paper, with animation)

A question considered from all

Points of view and decided in excellent form:

The Comte d'Artois – on the Polish throne... ¹²

¹² The Comte d'Artois was Louis XVI's younger brother, who later ruled France as Charles X. The Polish monarchy was not hereditary but elective, and it was possible for foreigners to be elected king by the Polish nobility.

Marina Tsvetaeva, trans. from the Russian by Maya Chhabra

MARIE-ANTOINETTE:

What did Stanislaus do to you?

– Clairette, leave.

CLAIRETTE, not tearing her eyes away from the seated LAUZUN, leaves.

LAUZUN:

(fervently)

What did Stanislaus do to us? Stanislaus sleeps,

Your majesty, like a cat on the throne.

MARIE-ANTOINETTE:

I'm not majesty, and you're not a count.

We're good friends – and at the Trianon.

I'm Antoinette, and you're Armand.

Hothead – Lauzun – a trophy of the

Dissolute Czartoryskis! – Their pockets are empty,

So they need to take up a crown.

– Drop it! –

LAUZUN:

As you wish.

MARIE-ANTOINETTE:

(irritated)

Drinking wine,

And turning in the whirlwind – that's all a count needs to do!

But the royal purple is no domino!

The Comte d'Artois is good for a masquerade,

For a cotillion... Opening a ball with him

Is charming... Playing at power is harder

Than playing at forfeits.

(raising her eyes to Lauzun)

But there is one: without a throne he combines

A king's greatness and a dandy's charm.

Lauzun!

LAUZUN:

I'm paying attention.

MARIE-ANTOINETTE:

Would a throne please you?

LAUZUN:

(simply)

What for?

MARIE-ANTOINETTE:

Charming and subtle!

Why a throne for you? Even without it,

The whole world's in love with you – and every chit of a girl!

You smiled – a good sign!

Not in vain does the enemy expend arrows!

It embellishes you amazingly –

Like the habit of being beautiful.

LAUZUN:

(like an explosion)

Like a barrel of gunpowder, mutiny

Will explode in Poland, all the grievances will blaze up...

I foresee a union –

MARIE-ANTOINETTE:

(dreamily glancing out the window)

The evening is strangely cool...

LAUZUN:

Between Antoinette...

MARIE-ANTOINETTE:

And?

LAUZUN:

Between

Antoinette – and Semiramis!¹³

MARIE-ANTOINETTE:

(shortly)

Catherine called you?

LAUZUN:

Calls.

MARIE-ANTOINETTE:

It's dangerous to serve two mistresses.

– How happy she is!

LAUZUN:

(continuing)

Russian ice –

And the rose of France!

MARIE-ANTOINETTE:

(hiding her face in her hands)

How unhappy I am!

– Where to?! –When?! –To the wolves?! –Into exile?! –

To the snow?!

You've got drunk on the country wind!

LAUZUN:

(not hearing or seeing anything)

I'm no Lauzun, if I don't end the century

With universal and feminine autocracy!

¹³ The Assyrian queen known in Greek as Semiramis was famed in legend for her cleverness and courage. Lauzun here uses her to refer to Catherine the Great, who took a leading role in weakening and partitioning Poland during the second half of the 18th century.

The world will explode like a gunpowder depot
And here – above the smoky ruins –
I foresee a new coat of arms worldwide:
An eagle! And eagle with the double heads
Of Antoinette and Catherine!
The universal rose's Cavalier.
I want the pink century
To be crowned with a rose.

MARIE-ANTOINETTE:

(drily)

I'm not Voltaire.

I don't put up with learned women.

(bending to Lauzun's hussar's helmet, lying near her on a chair)

Ah! A new feather! Voltaire, Diderot,

Do you see how I busy my mind?

I am not Semiramis!

(to Lauzun)

But will you give me

A feather in remembrance?

LAUZUN:

I'm moved and confused ... A simple plume

From a hussar's helmet ...

MARIE-ANTOINETTE:

I'll show up at the first dance

Wearing it. – Adorable egret! –

Lauzun! Lauzun! Semiramis is madness!

Lauzun! Lauzun! Lauzun! Stay!

I talked to the king.

If the Lord gives us an heir

We will choose you as his tutor.

Marina Tsvetaeva, trans. from the Russian by Maya Chhabra

LAUZUN:

Thank you for the honor, but the fact is ...

MARIE-ANTOINETTE:

What?

LAUZUN:

(confusedly smiling)

I'm as much a tutor as I am a preacher.

MARIE-ANTOINETTE:

(almost pleadingly)

So do you want to be first equerry? Anything,
If only you wish it! –Perhaps you'll
Order the moon from the sky? I'll get it!

LAUZUN:

(confusedly)

I am mute

Before such generosity...

MARIE-ANTOINETTE:

Without bread,

The common people can't go on – nor I, without you.

Without you, Paris is deserted for me.

You're the sweetness of my dreams and the pleasure of my eyes!

– Lauzun, I am also a commoner!

We can't and mustn't be apart!

What means must I employ

To keep you?

LAUZUN:

The most difficult of requests

Makes my chest grow tight ...

MARIE-ANTOINETTE:

Finally!

– Ask.

LAUZUN:

I don't dare.

MARIE-ANTOINETTE:

Dare!

LAUZUN:

My stormy life

And the tongues of courtly snakes are to blame that ...

– This attention to my

Person – the world interprets it amiss.

And I, as a faithful servant ...

MARIE-ANTOINETTE:

My friend!

LAUZUN:

Yours – to the last drop of blood ...

MARIE-ANTOINETTE:

(standing up)

Lauzun! At the gossip of servants,

I just raise my eyebrows.

You see my brow – it's clear!

The pure are brave before judgment.

Innocence is my safe-conduct.

I only know one answer to

Zealots at keyholes – the whip!

Lauzun! You are a knight and a proud man –

Let them interpret to their heart's content!

LAUZUN:

And how many devoted hearts
Has idle talk already ruined?

MARIE-ANTOINETTE:

Lauzun! What do I hear? From whom?
Where is your glory "Most fearless of all!"
They will not ruin you alone!
We'll crash down like a double tower!
They will ruin me, ruining you.
– Lauzun! – Our fate is the same!
Let the whole universe be against us!
By Christ's flesh and blood,
I swear: the abyss that swallows
You – will swallow me too!

O base, unworthy race!

LAUZUN:

To avoid worries,
You ... won't moderate your
Bounties to me?

MARIE-ANTOINETTE:

The other way around,
We increase our bounties a thousandfold!

LAUZUN:

I will ask again ...

MARIE-ANTOINETTE:

Already
Granted, child. What's the matter?

LAUZUN:

(pointing to the feather)

I'm afraid that my white comrade-in-arms
Is not to the king's liking.
I'm afraid the king ...

MARIE-ANTOINETTE:

(annoyed)

Same old song!
The king! The king! Or did you forget
That Lauzun's feather is
Dearer to me than all the Bourbon lilies!

LAUZUN:

So good a king ...

MARIE-ANTOINETTE:

It's for his good deeds,
Lauzun, that he isn't liked! Just out of the forest –
Locks to mend! – The evil taunt:
I was a daughter of the Caesars,
My husband proved – a mechanic!
– What to do?

LAUZUN:

Live without change.
God is the lord of such unions.

MARIE-ANTOINETTE:

(with a sigh of her whole being)

Oh, if you knew, Lauzun,
How the King of the French bores me!

LAUZUN:

All that's left is for me to ask ...

Marina Tsvetaeva, trans. from the Russian by Maya Chhabra

MARIE-ANTOINETTE:

What?

LAUZUN:

That you not ride astride,
Like a boy... That you also not
Undertake gaming on too large a scale
In secret from the king.

MARIE-ANTOINETTE:

You could have asked for
Worlds. –You're proud,
You royal incorruptible!
(feverishly and tenderly)
Lauzun! Lauzun! I'm not kind,
In the world, I'm reputed to be a proud woman,
It's time for you to leave soon ...
In return for Lauzun's feather
Do you want – the Austrian rose?
I'd give you my heart in return,
But you're the whole universe's lover.

MARIE-ANTOINETTE proffers the rose. LAUZUN kneels. The queen inclines towards him. His head on her breast. – A second of silence. Then LAUZUN stands up.

LAUZUN:

(pressing his hand to his heart)
To the end of my days, I...
(with lowered eyes, he retreats to the exit)

MARIE-ANTOINETTE:

Lauzun!
(Lauzun raises his eyes)
You're as forgetful as you're unforgettable.

CURTAIN

Fifth Scene

The Last Kiss

J'ai été infidèle à mon Dieu, à mon Ordre et à mon Roi.
Je meurs plein de foi et de repentir.
Paroles du Duc de Lauzun sur l'échafaud.¹⁴

An individual cell in Sainte-Pélagie prison, January 1, 1794, 5 in the morning. Total darkness. From the darkness, the voice and footsteps of Lauzun.

LAUZUN:

Dun-dun-dun-dun. Still once more, let's walk
To the beat. – Dun-dun-dun. So then, comrade
Year ninety-three – off my shoulders!
And with it, even my head! That's what you deserve,
Hothead, dissolute year,
That's what you deserve for the triple lie,
Of Liberty, Equality, Fraternity!
A lifetime till dawn!
In the freezing cold, without light –
There's little joy
In this henhouse!

At the door, someone fussing with the key. The door opens. On the threshold, a charming 16-year-old GIRL. Pink dress, white kerchief. In her raised hand, a candle in bronze candlestick.

¹⁴ "I have been unfaithful to my God, my Order, and my King. I die full of faith and repentance." – words of the Duc de Lauzun on the scaffold

LAUZUN:

Who and from where,
Sweet miracle?

GIRL:

I'm Rosanetta,
The porter's daughter.

LAUZUN:

Clearly it's true that
The roses in your apron,
Lady Fortune,
Are without number.
– What's the matter with you, poppet?

ROSANETTA:

The porter's ill.
I'm sent for your
Last wishes.
(efficiently and joyfully)
Perhaps you'd be pleased to leave a letter for your relatives?
Maybe you'd be pleased to have a lock cut off in memory?
Everything you want – ask,
Today's the very day:
Everything is permitted you now!

LAUZUN:

My hands are too frozen to write,
My whole head doesn't suffice
To give a hair for each in memory!
Brr! What freezing cold!

ROSANETTA:

What then do you want?

LAUZUN:

I'll order from you –a morning dinner!
A dozen oysters and a glass of wine!

ROSANETTA:

A dozen?

LAUZUN:

Oysters.

ROSANETTA:

You'll eat them without a fork
And knife?

LAUZUN:

(lovingly)

A little Eve is always
True to herself. Yes, child.

ROSANETTA:

I'll bring you a whole bottle of wine!

LAUZUN:

And a mirror too!

ROSANETTA:

Well, well, pal!

LAUZUN:

And a new candle!

ROSANETTA:

It'll be morning soon!

Marina Tsvetaeva, trans. from the Russian by Maya Chhabra

LAUZUN:

And a hairbrush...

ROSANETTA:

(removing a comb from her hair)

Here's a comb

Of mine for you, meanwhile.

LAUZUN:

And also a shawl.

ROSANETTA:

And what else, pal?

LAUZUN:

A little bit of powder...

Well, that's all now. Forgive me for detaining you.

ROSANETTA:

I'll bring you fresh cuffs. –

(clapping her hands)

You'll be handsome, as if for a ball!

See you soon!

She runs to the door.

LAUZUN:

Rosanetta!

ROSANETTA:

What's your pleasure, citizen?

LAUZUN:

(a little embarrassed)

No flatterer am

I, and no liar – I will wait for you eagerly!
– Why didn't you come before?

ROSANETTA:

Father

Didn't tell me that you were so beautiful!

ROSANETTA can be heard taking the corridor at a run, then, still running – comes back – she forgot to lock the door. LAUZUN smiles.

LAUZUN:

Young wives,

Young maids,

You're all goddesses,

All queens!

At a tender age

There are no differences:

Antoinette –

Or Rosanetta!

Thus in the kingdom

Of the god Cupid

– Strange fact! –

Everything's inside out.

All the peasants there

Are queens,

All the queens there

Are peasants...

(somewhere it strikes 5 o'clock)

Well then, to sum it up. 5 o'clock.

And exactly at six they'll come for me, and

On the Place de Grève – gloriously, publicly,

Facing Paris and the universe

In the person of Lauzun, the century will be decapitated.
What will we say for the edification of posterity,
Lauzun – and the Century?
I am not an admirer of monologues. One must
Manage without words. My sword and eyes
Spoke splendidly for me.

And all the creations of glorious Voltaire
Spoke more poorly to the heart of women
Than my silent mouth – with one chuckle.
Yes, more than one will say on the coming night:
Today at six in the morning – by the hand of Samson –
With Lauzun they beheaded – Love.

Yes, many tears will be shed this night
By beautiful eyes. – How I loved
The tears of young women. First at the
Darkest depths – of the eye, and then at the root
And on the edge of the eyelash, then with silver
Dew along the round cheek –
With a silver brook in a valley of roses!
O, salt of a tear kissed away!.. O oft-repeated
Thudding of teardrops on a satin
Camisole... O last tear,
– The cloud has indeed scudded past, indeed the sun is everywhere –
Suddenly falling on our hand
The last pearl...
(he looks at his hands)
Is it really possible that even my
Hands are chapped? Devil take this
Freezing cold! – Too bad for you, hands...
Yes, gentlemen of the aristocracy, everything
Could be forgiven you by the friends of the people –
But they'll never forgive you your hands!
(flaring up)

And I, Lauzun, with my hand, white as snow,
I raised my wineglass to toast the rabble!
And I, Lauzun, pontificated that under the sun,
The courtier and the woodcutter have equal rights.

What was I born for? To be the delight of queens
And the support of kings. As a child, I played
With the fleur-de-lys. – Well then, my young lion,
What will you die for today? –For the Vendée? –
– No, I will remain in the Louvre’s gallery:
General-en-chef against the Vendée.
Yes, old world, we flew into the abyss
On the same horse, and with the same rope
They’ll bind our hands, and against this wall
There’ll be the same sentence for us – you and me:
Weighed, found wanting.
(raising his face to the window)
But somewhere doves coo,
But somewhere it’s a nice day...
– Yes, pity such a head
Is under the guillotine’s knife!
(stretching)
It would be nice to put it off
For one little year...

ROSANETTA:

(at the door)
Sir citizen –
Help me open it!
(entering)
Thank you. The tray’s in the window.
The rose – at my breast...
(she threads the rose into his buttonhole and, gradually unloading her apron)
Here’s the powder box, a little candle,

The cuffs... Here's the brush for your hair...
Here's the mirror... In the apron – no room left at all!
I had to take the rose between my teeth.
– Nice, huh?

LAUZUN:
(*gently*)
Only your little mouth
Is gentle enough for the flower!

ROSANETTA:
(*over the rose*)
What's that here?

LAUZUN:
A dewdrop.

ROSANETTA:
Are you crying? – Ah, I have a short memory.
I forgot the shawl! Instead of a shawl,
Would you like a kerchief, citizen?
(*she takes off the kerchief and gives it to Lauzun, remains thus with bare
shoulders, and sits down on the windowsill*)
We'll remove the dewdrop like this.
(*she kisses the tear*)
The flower is even more
Fresh, watered by the heavenly dew – !
Three down, three up – at a run – by six floors!
Oh, my head is spinning and my heart aches!
(*she presses his hand to her heart*)
How it thumps – do you hear it? The whole house could hear!
No, you can't hear it like that! Put your ear to it!
No, like this, closer... Well?!
(*she presses his head to her breast*)

LAUZUN:

(laughing)

It roars like thunder!

ROSANETTA:

Six floors in one breath!

– I forgot to ask: what's your name?

LAUZUN:

Armand-Louis Biron-Gontaut Lauzun.

ROSANETTA:

How long!

What on earth, darling, did the court condemn you for?

LAUZUN:

For that name.

ROSANETTA:

Old Nick made them do it!

(she jumps off the windowsill)

We should do like this: you sit now,

And I go and say, that their chief judge

Is a chief rogue...

LAUZUN:

And I?

ROSANETTA:

And you're innocent!

LAUZUN:

A vain effort, child.

ROSANETTA:

No, I must!

I'll go this very hour!.. Or else my heart

Will burst out of my chest!

LAUZUN:

(admiring)

Well, why aren't you a princess?

ROSANETTA:

(confusedly)

You're a prince yourself?

LAUZUN:

For the time being – a count and a duke.

ROSANETTA:

What, both at once?

LAUZUN:

Yes.

ROSANETTA:

And nobody

Even told me.

LAUZUN:

(placing his hand on his heart with a smile)

Well then, is it calm on the left?

– Not too much!

ROSANETTA:

So, Count Biron-Gontaut,

Duke of Lauzun – like that? – could it be because,

Because the queen loved you?

But how could anyone not love you? –And “citizen”
Doesn’t suit you. –Exactly like in the painting
Of “Cupid’s Hours” – A royal son
In both figure and face...
A dewdrop again?
– Oh, full-out rain!
I want to help you!
I’ll shout my lungs out! Even force
Won’t pull me from the tribune!

LAUZUN:
Where is day here, where’s night?
The republican chief Lauzun and the jailer’s
Daughter. O wheel of Fortune!
(he takes Rosanetta on his knees, gently)
Child, stay!
Child, don’t cry!
We don’t know
Where the dream is, where reality.

A plague of Brains
Sent brains
Crackbrained.

Where’s Sunrise here,
And where’s Sunset?
The whirlwind tears along – worlds are spinning!
It’s not just heads, child,
Child – worlds fly!

Who’s the accused? Who’s the judge?
Who here is condemned? Who’s the executioner?
Where’s life? Where’s death?
Where’s blood? Where’s mud?
Where’s the thief? Where’s the prince?

Marina Tsvetaeva, trans. from the Russian by Maya Chhabra

Where are you? Where am I?
Oh, this life is lighter than smoke!
And therefore, my Love,
Don't cry, don't cry, don't cry.

But two unshakable things are
Here, in a world of treason ...
Let Biron-Lauzun die –
Nevertheless, the roses will bloom!

And in the same way, the support of the hero
In battle will be – Birth and Blood ...
Remember, Rosanetta, here are
Two eternities – the Flower and Honor,
Two: Valor and Love!
(takes – with the gesture of a connoisseur and juggler – an oyster)
And we eat oysters – like so!

ROSANETTA:
You swallow them, without chewing?

LAUZUN
(serving her an oyster)
Well, one, two, three ... all together! – On the beat!
– Thus! Bravo!

ROSANETTA:
I don't understand at all!
(she chokes)
Brr ... Slippery! Like a snake!

Oof! My tongue's frostbitten!
And in my throat – it's as big as a house!

LAUZUN:

You're not used to it – I'm used to it.

(pouring out a glass)

Pour wine quickly!

And sing me the song "The Little Bird in the Net,"

Or "The Maiden in the Garden"

Do you know how?

ROSANETTA:

How could I not know by now!

All women know how to sing!

LAUZUN:

Yes, because they're birds!

ROSANETTA:

(she hums)

– Your little eyes gleamed a little bit,

And it got light in the city.

– To be more beautiful than the golden sun,

Darlings, is our trade!

– As if it smelled like rose...

Didn't you yawn, beauty?

– In order for this rose not to wither,

You must take it from the bush.

– Where are you running to, my quarry,

The wolf will catch up all the same, after all!

– To resist a while for decency's sake,

Darlings, is our sacred duty!

And, obeying this custom...

(she hides her face in her hands, through tears)

No, I can't!

Marina Tsvetaeva, trans. from the Russian by Maya Chhabra

LAUZUN:

(taking her hand from her face)

What's the matter with you, birdie?

ROSANETTA:

(sobbing)

When I look at your charming mouth ...

I've already held back twenty times ...

It's burning my whole soul ... Today's New Year's ...

I don't want to part from you!

LAUZUN:

(showing his head)

But who will comb my hair?

ROSANETTA:

(already beaming)

Me!

LAUZUN:

And who

Will powder it?

ROSANETTA:

Me!

(putting the lace cuffs on him)

First one cuff,

Then the other ... These aren't hands, they're milk.

They're silk, these aren't hands. It's obvious at once – a little count.

Let's play like this: I'll be the mother,

And you my fair-haired boy.

LAUZUN:

Faster, child! Dawn comes like a thief!

ROSANETTA:

(entirely absorbed by his curls)

Living gold under the powder!

(keeping one lock apart)

What a round silk cocoon!

It does lie straight in my hand!

I have a request ...

LAUZUN:

Your wish

Is my command.

ROSANETTA:

Permit me to put

A lock in my locket!

Even the smallest one!

LAUZUN:

(laughing)

Even all of it!

ROSANETTA:

The little comb isn't scratching you?

What delicacy! Like in a dream!

Like a three-year-old child's!

(she combs, powders, wipes the mirror with her apron)

Just a second! I'll wipe

The glass ...

(she shows him the mirror)

Well?

LAUZUN:

(kissing her hand)

Magnificent!

Marina Tsvetaeva, trans. from the Russian by Maya Chhabra

ROSANETTA:

(clapping)

And there's light in the room,

As if the sun had risen.

(covering her eyes with her hand – as once the Princess Czartoryska did)

Don't you dare shine like that! – I'll go blind!

– You're not a sorcerer?

LAUZUN:

Anything's possible.

– No, darling, it's not we who ensorcel...

ROSANETTA:

I was born to love you!

LAUZUN:

How should I thank you

For this morning?

ROSANETTA:

(raising herself on tiptoe)

With a kiss.

(on his chest)

I so longed to be here at your breast!

LAUZUN:

God grant your mouth

Will be just as sweet to someone.

ROSANETTA:

I kissed the Sun on the lips.

LAUZUN:

Bloom, bloom in your own circle

More scarlet than rose, whiter than lily,
O, Rosanetta!

ROSANETTA:

(crying)

I can't bear

That this head – in the snow...

I can't bear you being executed!

LAUZUN:

(gently pushing her to the door)

Be a clever girl, go!

ROSANETTA:

(insisting)

I shouldn't

Go downstairs – at least...

LAUZUN:

Child! It's striking six now!

ROSANETTA:

... Will you take me to the door?

LAUZUN – gallantly and tenderly – as if carrying out a pas-de-minuet – leads ROSANETTA to the exit. ROSANETTA is already behind the door.

LAUZUN:

Faster!

ROSANETTA:

(behind the door)

I'll take out the key now!

Press yourself to the keyhole!

Marina Tsvetaeva, trans. from the Russian by Maya Chhabra

LAZAUN:

(at the keyhole)

My whole ear

Is stuck out.

(the sound of a kiss)

ROSANETTA'S VOICE:

Did you hear?

LAUZUN:

(with a melancholy smile)

It doesn't burn,

Fortune's last kiss.

(the stamping of little running heels – pouring wine)

To our meeting, Doctor Guillotine!

Six o'clock. Heavy footsteps. The jingle of a key. At the doors – a strapping fellow with a list in his hand.

EXECUTIONER:

(stumbling over each word)

Is citizen Armand-Louis Biron-Gontaut Lauzun here?

LAUZUN:

(standing)

Here!

(pouring the rest of the wine in a glass)

Drink, man. A glass of wine's good

For dirty work.

EXECUTIONER:

(drinks and puts down the glass)

Your obedient servant.

– Well then, citizen Armand-Louis Biron-Gontaut Lauzun!

Marina Tsvetaeva, trans. from the Russian by Maya Chhabra

LAUZUN:

At your service, friend.

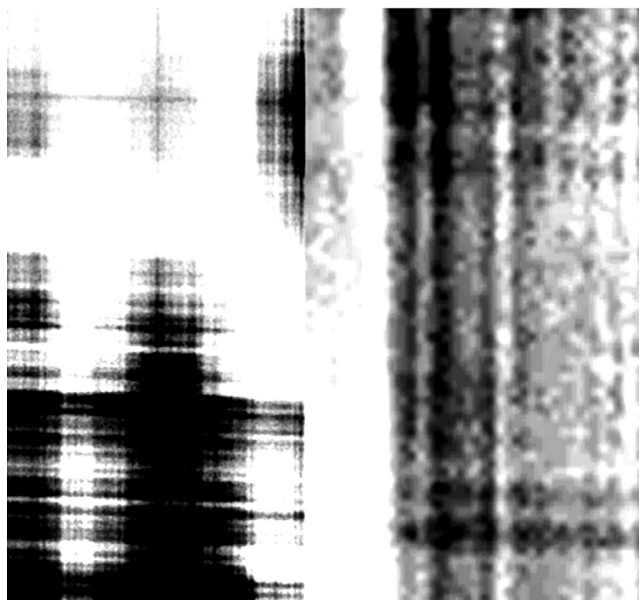
(and – a rose raised high over his head)

Vive la Reine!

CURTAIN

Moscow, February 5-24

The Art of Translation



Rhyme and Reason in the Poetry of Georgy Ivanov

Stephen Capus

Most readers of poetry will agree that an important criterion of the success of a translation will be its fidelity to the original poem from which it derives. However, this consensus immediately gives rise to the rather more difficult question of what exactly constitutes fidelity in the translation of poetry.

In Anglo-Saxon literary culture there is a long established tendency to locate the substance of a poem in its content – in its sequentially unfolded meaning – and to consign poetic form, and above all rhyme, to a secondary, decorative function. A celebrated affirmation of this prejudice against rhyme is to be found in Milton's preface to *Paradise Lost*, where he defends his decision to compose his epic in blank verse:

[R]hyme [is] no necessary adjunct or true ornament of poem or good verse, [...] but the invention of a barbarous age, to set off wretched matter and lame meter – graced indeed since by the use of some famous modern poets, [...] but much to their own vexation, hindrance and constraint to express many things otherwise, and for the most part worse, than else they would have expressed them.

The suspicion of poetic form, in Milton's preface directed against rhyme, but now extended to encompass form on all levels, can be seen to exert an enduring influence on contemporary attitudes to poetry in translation. According to a pervasive current of opinion, poetic form and content are two distinct, separable elements in the poem's constitution, with the former being relegated to a subordinate, decorative role, and

the latter designated as the locus of the poem's true identity. On this view, what makes a poem a poem is its distinctively poetic content. In attempting to communicate to this poetic content, poetry may make a greater use of the expressive resources of language than prose, it may have more resort to concrete imagery, allusiveness or ambiguity, it may allow itself a greater imaginative and logical freedom, but these remain no more than embellishments of an essentially linear form of exposition. If formal features, such as rhyme, meter or syntactic parallelism are allowed a role beyond the purely ornamental, their contribution is still confined to a series of discrete effects – a pregnant rhyme here, a suggestive rhythm there.

When, to the foregoing considerations is added the conviction that the English language, on account of some mysterious, quasi-metaphysical entity variously referred to as its "essence" or "genius," isn't suited to rhyme or formal meter, the conclusion is clear: formal attributes, as merely supporting features of the content of the text, can be safely omitted without detriment to the translation, which is produced in essentially the same way as that of a passage of prose: by the scrupulous reproduction, so far as is possible, of all the shades of meaning of each successive element in the verbal sequence of the text; and if the translator is still troubled by an awareness that, after all, formal elements are present in the poem that he's proposing to translate, and perhaps ought to be acknowledged in some fashion, he should do so in a way that doesn't offend the essentially free, informal spirit of the English language: formal devices should be deployed sparingly, discretely, "where possible," through the use of half rhymes and approximations of formal meter.

And yet this view of the art of poetry translation is surely undermined by the patent failure of so many translations that have been produced in accordance with it. All readers will have had the disheartening experience of reading a translation whose author has blithely ignored the formal characteristics of the original, while diligently laboring to find accurate equivalents for each word of the original, only to end up with a version that fatally lacks whatever quality it was which made the original poem worth reading.

The explanation of the failure of so many of the translations produced according to this procedure is that poems do much more

than develop a linear content of a vaguely poetic kind. This isn't to say, of course, that poems don't frequently exhibit the kind of sequentially unfolded content described above; and such poetry can often be translated with great success without regard for the formal features of the original text. A distinguished example is provided by Martin Bennett's translations of the early work of the 20th-century Italian poet Pier Paolo Pasolini.¹⁵ Pasolini's civic poetry is indeed notable for its use of traditional verse forms such as *terza rima*, and yet alongside such formal elements Pasolini's poems also display a powerful narrative/reflective thread that, in combination with a degree of lexical/syntactic parallelism, serves as their central structural principle. The discursive links provided by the narrative/reflective spine of this poetry mean that it's able to retain its cohesion and momentum even when rhyme and meter are sacrificed in the process of translation.

However, many poems construct meaning according to quite different principles. In these, the poet derives from the synchronic structures that belong to *langue* – the system which underlies the individual act of verbal expression, or *parole* – formal patterns based on relations of similarity and contrast, and superimposes them upon the relations of contiguity which underpin the poem's narrative, argument or description. These patterns, embracing sense, sound and grammar, constitute the paradigmatic axis of the text. Displayed vertically, as well as horizontally, they intersect and enrich the poem's syntagmatic axis, represented by its progressively unfolded linear content. In poems of this kind formal features such as rhyme and meter now play a central role in the construction of meaning, in that they enhance, on the level of sound, the patterns of similarity and contrast articulated on the semantic level. The omission of rhyme and meter in the translation of this poetry can result in the dissolution of the compositional integrity of the text.

In poetry, then, meaning is articulated not only along its syntagmatic axis, but also through its paradigmatic structures. The distinctive way in which poems articulate meaning has been characterized concisely, albeit

¹⁵ Pier Paolo Pasolini, "The World's Hub," trans. Martin Bennett, in *Modern Poetry in Translation*, No. 15, New Series (1999), 134-136.

rather abstractly, with reference to the function of rhyme, by the Russian critic Yuri Lotman:

Something profoundly different from the usual linguistic process of information transmission occurs here: instead of a temporally consecutive chain of signals serving to convey certain information, we find a complex signal, spatial in nature, a return to what has already been perceived. Series of verbal signals and individual words (in this case rhymes) which have already been perceived according to the general laws of linguistic meaning take on new meaning when they are perceived a second time (here the perception is not linear, as in speech, but structural and artistic).¹⁶

To a far greater degree than in prose, the value of a word in a poem is relational in character, being determined by the position it occupies in the paradigmatic structure of the text. This is why a translator can no more produce a faithful translation by diligently copying all the senses contained in each word in the linear sequence of the original, than a painter can produce an authentic work of art by mechanically rendering each leaf and blade of grass in the landscape before him. Rather, an effective translation is achieved by grasping and expressing the significant structures of the original text, in the constitution of which formal features such as rhyme and meter are likely to play an important role.

The work of the 20th-century Russian poet Georgy Ivanov is an example of the kind of poetry in which paradigmatic structures predominate over syntagmatic. In Ivanov's poems the discursive elements of narrative, description, observation, and argument are sometimes underdeveloped to the point where his texts can seem like little more than a parade of *non sequiturs*. Instead, his poems are concerned to convey, through delicately woven patterns of meaning and sound, based on relations of similarity and contrast, an atmosphere, a mood, a state of mind – typically, the disenchanted, nihilistic frame of mind experienced

¹⁶ Jurij Lotman, *The Structure of the Artistic Text*, trans. Gail Lenhoff and Ronald Vroon (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1977), 123.

by Ivanov and his fellow Russian exiles in France from the early 1920s, compounded with the sense of existential crisis that permeated French culture in the mid-20th century.

Many of Ivanov's most characteristic poems are based on this compositional principle. For example, in the poem translated below as "In glittering lights, lace collars, clouds of smoke" ("V dymu, v ogne, v siyan'i, v kruzhevakh"), the low degree of progressively articulated argument is counterbalanced by a high degree of patterning on the level of grammar and sound. The opening quatrain consists of little more than an apparently random list of nouns preceded by the preposition "in" ("v"), and linked by the conjunction "and" ("i"); while the two lines that make up the concluding couplet, though united by rhyme, meter, and a parallel grammatical structure, depict two events – the one temporal and mundane, the other timeless and cosmic – which bear no obvious relation to one another, beyond that of contrast.

The low level of sequential development in the thought of the poem is reflected in the relative scarcity of words denoting syntactic relations. Instead, what unites its disparate components and, in so doing, highlights their common semantic core – which is the motif of ephemerality and contingency – is the repetition of the formal patterns through which they're all integrated into an encompassing structural whole. The equivalence of the series of nouns presented in the opening quatrain is affirmed by the syntactic and morphological parallelism, iambic meter, and abab rhyme scheme that welds the four lines into a formal unit. Similarly, the equivalence of the two contrasting events depicted in each of the two lines of the concluding couplet – women laughing at a ball and stars wandering through the night sky – is affirmed by the common grammatical structure of the two lines, as well as by their common prosodic structure. The semantic equivalence of the quatrain and the couplet is then explicitly stated by the adverb "tak": lights, lace, smoke, witticisms – women laughing at a ball – stars wandering through the dark – all are equally contingent, ephemeral events that are destined for ultimate oblivion.

In a poem such as this, then, rhyme and meter, together with other formal elements such as grammatical parallelism, play a crucial role in the

construction of meaning. And this is why, unless these formal elements are preserved in translation, the poem is in danger of losing its semantic cohesion and dissolving into a series of unrelated parts. The translations that follow attempt to acknowledge the centrality of rhyme and meter in the structure of Ivanov's poems.

*

With the abstract convolutions of a Persian rug,
With the intricate splendour of a peacock's tail,
Evening after evening blossoms far above
Inanely – and yet not without a purpose, all the same ...

Near a bridge the petals of an apple tree appear
Pale blue beneath a spectral moon by Verlaine.
The beauty of the earth has endured a million years,
Its endless absurdity is with me once again.

All this is as it should be, and still I draw breath;
I note down poems when I hear them call.
The fabric of a bridge, the blue-green weft
Of a peacock's tail – do they matter after all?

*

Shall I write about all of the eminent fools
Who subject the fate of mankind to their rules?
About all of the rogues who are honored with wreaths
Of immortal glory? But why?..

Underneath

This bridge in Paris the world is at rest;
And as for tomorrow – I couldn't care less ...

*

Where have they vanished – who can say –
The snows of yesteryear? Given away
As a gift to April, they've turned into cold
And turbulent streams, the scent of the rose,
Into clusters of violets and daisies, the surge
Of Spring in luminous waves through the vast
Unrest of the earth – into lyrical words
And that senseless question which Villon once asked.

*

In glittering lights, lace collars, clouds of smoke,
In ostrich feathers, fans and vapid effusions;
In faded flowers, gossip, insipid jokes,
In sinful dreams and infantile delusions:

Thus women idly chatter and laugh at a dance,
Thus wayward stars are hurled through the night by chance ...

*

Russia is happiness, light ... But who can tell
If Russia isn't perhaps an illusion as well:

If the dawn above the Neva never glowed
And Pushkin never lay dying upon the snow,

If the endless fields of snow aren't all there is
And neither the Kremlin nor Petersburg even exist?

The snow, the endless snow – but the night is long
And the never melting snow goes on and on.

The endless snow – and the night grows darker still
And never ends, and probably never will.

Russia is dust. And Russia is silence.
But perhaps it's also terror and violence:

The bullet, the rope, the dark and the cold
And the music which penetrates deep in your soul;

The bullet, the rope, the convict's pitiless dawn,
Rising above the nameless and unknown...

“Malinovka Heights”

Ruminations on Translating Ivan Goncharov’s *Obryv*

Stephen Pearl

The Title

In a letter to a friend, Ivan Goncharov (1812-1891) remarks that he had originally intended to entitle his book “Raisky” or “The Artist,” but had changed it (without explanation) to *Обрыв* (*Obryv*), a word which embraces both the notion of a “bluff” usually overlooking a body of water, and a “break,” “rupture,” or “severance.” Many have also read into this word the significance of a historical watershed or turning point in Russian history where the old Russia was giving way to a newer one, a “perestroika” in which the most radical and far reaching change was the Emancipation of the Serfs in 1861. This leaves the translator in a quandary further complicated by the fact that all previous English translations of this novel have borne the precedent setting, but misleading title: *The Precipice*.

The problem is that there is no single word in English that covers the two divergent meanings of “Obryv.” One could simply ditch the geological feature meaning of the word and use a word like “The Watershed” or “The Turning Point,” which would at least convey its “break” or “rupture” significance in Russian history. This, however, would mean failing totally to do justice to the part played by the

geological feature of that name in the story and it is in *this* sense that the word is used no less than 144 times in the story when the characters are depicted going up and down it, thus playing a part so prominent that it that the “Obryv” almost amounts to that of a character with its own doom-laden significance for the fate of the star-crossed lovers (Vera and Mark) – a drama that is played out on and around the “Obryv” itself.

The alternative is to lose the “watershed” or “turning point” significance in favor of retaining the “geological connotation,” which is unmistakably intended by the author as the physical backdrop to the story, and is its primary one. The reader may still feel free to infer an intention on the part of the author to depict a Russia at a turning point, and on the brink of a historical transition.

After much brain-racking and soul searching I finally decided to break free of the strait-jacket imposed both by the Russian title of the original, *Obryv*, and the inappropriate title chosen by previous translators, *The Precipice*.

“Malinovka” is the name chosen by the author for the fictional village that forms part of the estate owned by Raisky and run for him by his great aunt Berezhkova, and is situated on the top of the hill that overlooks the Volga – hence “Heights,” a word which will no doubt put Anglophone readers in mind of Emily Brontë’s novel *Wuthering Heights*, with its appropriately doom-laden overtones.

Chekhov is reported to have said that if you introduce a romantic suicide precipice on page 33, somebody had better jump off it at some point in the novel. I can only surmise that at the time he expressed this thought, he had not actually read the book, since if any of the *dramatis personae* had actually attempted to jump off the “precipice” described in this one, they would at the very worst only have succeeded in twisting an ankle, while if the geological feature in question had actually been a “precipice” they would all be dead by the end of the book. While a precipice implies a sheer drop, the “Obryv” that features so prominently in the book is a hillside of such a gentle gradient that not only are the characters depicted strolling up and down it without even getting out of breath, but Tushin is shown driving up it a coach and pair containing two passengers!

Hence the need to find a suitable replacement for *The Precipice* as the title, because while you can certainly kill yourself by jumping off a “cliff,” the best – or worst – you could hope for if you tried to “jump off” Goncharov’s “Obryv” would be to sprain the above-mentioned ankle.

Years before I thought that I would one day be translating Goncharov’s *Obryv*, which is set in Ulyanovsk (formerly Simbirsk), his home town, I saw the actual “Obryv” of the title with my own eyes. It was no more a “precipice” at that time (2008) than it was at the time Goncharov was writing his novel in the mid-19th century. It did, however occur to me at the time that it was unlikely that previous translators of *Obryv*, the book, had actually set eyes on the geological feature of that name, and therefore had no qualms about choosing to entitle it *The Precipice*, and blithely allowing its characters to stroll up and down it unscathed.

If you step over a “precipice,” you will, if you’re lucky, only break your neck. In *Obryv*, all the characters including old ladies, and young ladies with long skirts, petticoats and parasols, are continually strolling up and down it through trees and shrubbery, and sitting on benches to read. So, it may be an “Obryv” – whatever that is – but it’s no “precipice”!



If only Goncharov had stood by his original intention of calling the book “Raisky” or “The Artist”!

The Use of Relationship Titles in *Obryv*: The Grandmother/Great Aunt Problem

“The old ladies [...] soon started calling Raisky by his first name, and addressing him as *mon neveu* (my nephew), and he started calling Sofia “cousin.”

In fact, Raisky was only a distant relative – a first cousin once removed.

“It was his guardian, also a first cousin once removed, who had long ago arranged for him first to serve in the army and then in the civil service...”

Tatiana Markovna lived together with two of her *great nieces*, aged about six and seven, Raisky’s *second cousins* – left in her charge by their mother whom Tatiana Markovna loved like a daughter.

The key to what may appear to be the perplexing use of relationship nomenclature in this novel is the fact that the Russian for “cousin” is “двоюродный брат (*dvouyurodnyi brat* / brother)” for a male cousin, “двоюродная сестра” (*dvouyurodnaia sestra* / sister) for a female cousin, and by the same logic “двоюродная бабушка (*dvouyurodnaia babushka* / grandmother)” for a great aunt, and “двоюродный внук (*vnuk* / grandson)” for a great nephew.

Whether because the quadrisyllabic adjective – “*dvouyurodnyi*” – is just too much of a mouthful, or because Russians feel closer to at least some of their cousins than do English speakers, there is a pronounced tendency on their part – often confusing for outsiders – to settle for the simple “брат” (“brat” = brother) for a male cousin and “сестра” (“sestra” = sister) for a female cousin, and in the case of Tatiana Markovna, “бабушка” (“babushka” = grandmother) for a great aunt.

Goncharov tells us: “He (Raisky) had been orphaned when still a child, and placed in the care of an indifferent bachelor guardian (a first cousin once removed), who soon handed him over to Raisky’s great aunt...”

Tatiana Markovna refers to Raisky as her “grandson” on several occasions.

Technically, the two sisters, Vera and Marfenka, are Raisky’s distant relatives – second cousins – but it isn’t long before they are referring to him as “брат” (brother), and he is referring to each of them as “сестра” (sister).

Although Raisky’s passing interest in Marfenka, and his “passion” for Vera is by no means platonic, there is no suggestion that any of the parties concerned (or the author for that matter) regarded this as in any way incestuous. How any of this escaped the notice of the ever vigilant and censorious Tatiana Markovna who loved the two girls as her own daughters and what she would have thought of it must remain a mystery.

Goncharov wrote: “His *great-aunt* had her own fortune – her share of her family’s wealth, and had inherited her own hamlet; she never married, and after the death of Raisky’s *parents, her niece and nephew*, she went to live on this tiny estate with her two little orphan girls, her *grand nieces*...”

At one point Tatyana Markovna says: “If, God forbid, I’m no longer around, my *granddaughters, your sisters*, or rather *your cousins*, will be left alone. You are their closest relative and protector.”

“Passion” Passim

Goncharov tells us almost everything about Raisky, except for any reference to what might be taken either as someone sexually repressed or as a sexual predator – of the drawing room persuasion. One or the other is strongly suggested by his insistent, persistent, intrusive, ungentlemanly, and often objectionable attempts to bring up the topic of “passion” in the course of the endless conversations he conducts with the various women with whom he comes into contact and is attracted to. These “passion intensive” conversations

raise a question. What is Raisky's objective? The sheer satisfaction of winning a debating point, or as a means to seduction through attrition. One can only hope he achieved at least the former, the latter he never achieved, except in one instance at least, when it was "thrust upon him."

There is clearly a strong autobiographical element in the novel, and it would be hard to tell where the author's depiction of himself ends and where that of Raisky begins. This makes it hard to determine whether in these conversations the author is intending his readers to regard them as distasteful, or is simply revealing something about his own conduct in his dealings with the women in his own life. In the end, the reader may come to feel [s]he is reading about a composite character – a Goncharaisky, neither of whose halves ended up in a settled relationship with one woman.

Where the two halves do part company, however, is in the author's depiction of Raisky as an incorrigible dilettante, while he himself stayed true to his chosen vocation – as an author.

Sex is always hovering in the background, but it would seem that the nearest Russian literary language of the time could come to it was about as near as "an agricultural implement" comes to being called a spade. So it is not surprising that this hot-blooded, 35 year old man of the world, after a university career and military service, is never shown to have had any sexual experience, except once, unmistakably, although not explicitly, with the wife of the only friend he really cares for.

Passion ("страсть" – "strast") appears to be a major preoccupation of Raisky, and the word is constantly on his lips – and on his mind. At times, it veers very close to the meaning of "sex," and almost explicitly so when Raisky says: "No, what I want is passion that is down to earth, genuine, animal passion, with all its traditional attendant dangers. 'Yes, passion, passion!' he cried aloud, moving around the garden and inhaling the fresh air."

The word "секс" ("seks") now probably has acquired a post-Soviet meaning pretty close to its meaning in the Anglophone world, but such a word, of course, could not have existed for this purpose

in Goncharov's day, any more than it could have existed in English Victorian society.

I began to feel increasingly uncomfortable translating the word "страсть" as "passion," a word that is used far less frequently in current English, and largely in contexts such "he has a passion for golf."

This discomfort was particularly great, for example, when Raisky, so fond of talking about "passion" as if he were talking about a refined emotion, so lyrical, poetic, uplifting, and high flown that only someone of his own higher sensibilities could feel it, comes right down to it in the passage quoted above with "animal passion."

This kind of talk will just strike the Anglophone reader as exaggerated, inflated, and rather ridiculous. And I doubt whether this was the effect intended by the author. His Russian readers of that time would know better how to decode this word.

Goncharov seemed bent on exposing unattractive sides of Raisky's character. Was this: a) because, to the extent that these passages may be considered autobiographical, they were a kind of self-flagellation, or; b) because he didn't see this behavior as unattractive or reprehensible, and thus had no hesitation in casting his hero in this light? I have in mind his long-winded, distasteful, "propagandist" dialogues, or overtures, with all those women who seem resistant to his charms, apparently designed to win over their hearts, minds – and bodies.

These attempts at seduction often seem to be explained away, excused, or sanitized by his quite uncarnal "love of beauty." Are we readers meant to believe that he, "Goncharaisky," is being self consciously hypocritical, or actually believes this humbug?

By contrast, how refreshing it was to hear the beautifully timed, precisely modulated, brief and pithy words of my favorite comic actor, Walter Matthau, addressed to Carol Burnett in the movie *Pete 'n' Tillie* (1972) as they emerged from a Chinese restaurant after their eleventh date: "How about coming up to my place for a spot of heavy breathing?"

However, the cost of daring to use the word "sex" or "sex drive" for "страсть" in the translation in certain contexts, would be far too high, its effect far too disconcerting, and too serious a breach of Victorian literary decorum.

The Frequency Factor

What I call the Frequency Principle in translation can be enunciated as follows: Whenever the apparent equivalent in language B of a word or expression occurs significantly more or less frequently than its counterpart in language A, that should be seen as a warning to examine the apparent equivalence more closely. It is usually a sign that the apparent equivalent is just that, an *apparent* equivalent, and should be replaced by a true and more precise equivalent.

Russian, for example, makes much more frequent use of the intensifiers “сильный” (“sil’nyi” – “strong”) and “сильно” (“sil’no” – “strongly”) than their *apparent* equivalent, “strong” and “strongly,” in English, and to talk of having a “strong cold” or even being “strongly disappointed” or “indignant” would be jarringly unidiomatic; here the natural – and true – equivalent would be a “heavy” cold, or “highly” indignant.

A case in point: the conspicuously frequent use by Goncharov of the words “задумчивый” (“zadumchivyi”), “раздумье” (“razdum’e”), and “тихий” (“tikhii”) whose “dictionary” equivalents are (“pensive”/“thoughtful”) (“thought”/“contemplation”) and (“quiet”/“gentle”), respectively.

The question is whether Russians, or Russian characters in 19th-century fiction, and in the works of Goncharov in particular, are so often much more “thoughtful,” “reflective,” or “pensive” than the English, or the characters in English Victorian fiction.

This, however, is not a clear-cut case of “false equivalence.” It may be simply that when, in the course of dialogue, interlocutors offer no response, and simply remain silent, or lapse into silence, at one point or another – a very frequent occurrence in this book – Goncharov feels the need to ascribe to them a more “significant” reaction.

However, the fact remains that an Anglophone reader who took seriously and at face value the extraordinarily frequent use of “zadumchivyi” [“thoughtful,” “pensive”] in this novel might, rightly or wrongly, be left with the impression that Russians are a lot more

“thoughtful” than native English speakers, who on the whole only lapse into silence in conversation when they simply have nothing to say.

Purple Passagery

Purple passages quite frequently interrupt the narrative in the “Natasha” story, and in other extended and overwrought soliloquies in Raisky’s youthful “purple prose” either in the form of thoughts put into his head, or words put into his mouth by the author. Is this just a case of Goncharov simply “being himself,” or could it be that here in fact he is “sending up” or “guying” his own youthful literary excesses, as he did in “The Same Old Story” with Aleksandr’s poetry (apparently samples of the author’s own early attempts), which was discarded in the trash can by his uncle?

Serfs

A single telling, casual remark by Tataiana Markovna reveals so much about the status/plight of those serfs who were house servants without plots of land, or indeed virtually without any other possessions – even after the Emancipation Manifesto of 1861 abolishing serfdom.

“In her presence he (Raisky) gave three hundred roubles to Vasilisa and Yakov to distribute among the servants, and thanked her for her ‘friendship,’ her ‘pampering of him,’ and her ‘helpfulness.’”

“What an ugly lot!” whispered Tatiana Merkovna, “all guzzling away!”

“Never mind, granny, why not just let them do what they want...”

“I’d be happy to get rid of the lot of them. The two of us, Vera and myself, just need a manservant and a maid. But they will have to stay – I

mean *where else can they go?* Thoroughly spoiled – they never have to worry where their next meal is coming from!”

Quite an ironic remark, considering that Tatiana Markovna and her family never have to “worry where *their* next meal is coming from” precisely because of the total, unquestioned and unquestioning dependency of these house serfs on their masters. Yakov and Vasilisa, for example, would otherwise be doomed to share the plight of total destitution and vagrancy that befell Zakhar after the death of his master, Oblomov.

Fortunately, it is not the job of the translator to judge which of the two sides in this symbiotic relationship is the parasite and which the host.

The Compass Translation Award:

Russian Poetry in English

The very word “Compass” implies not only adventure, but audacity. It is with this audacity to translate at times stubborn verse that numerous Compass applicants approach their mission. As they translate the poetry of famous Russian authors into English, their approach may vary and their command of versification may be driven by different professional backgrounds. Yet, the Compass contestants are united by one common question: how would the poet himself convey his Russian poetic text in English, had he possessed command of this linguistic medium? A task of Sisyphus, no doubt.

The Compass Award (www.StoSvet.net/compass) is now in its seventh annual season. Every year is focused on the translations of a particular Russian poet, with prior competitions dedicated to Nikolay Gumilev, Marina Tsvetaeva, Maria Petrovykh, Arseny Tarkovsky, Boris Slutsky, and Bella Akhmadulina. The 2017 competition was dedicated to the poetry of Maria Stepanova, one of the most prominent and politically engaged Russian poets of our time. With more than a dozen poetry volumes to her name, she is also an accomplished journalist and a defender of the freedom of the press. Stepanova is the founder of *Colta.ru*, an online publication that is often likened to *The New York Review of Books*. She is the recipient of several Russian and international literary awards.

Alexander Veytsman,
Compass Competition Director

Maria Stepanova (2017)

First Prize: Dmitri Manin

Saturday and Sunday burn like stars.
Elder trees foam and fizz.
By the railroad crossing's striped bars
A communal wall hovers.
Past it are slabs, like canvases, dank in the dark,
And the moon cherry
And tiny tightly-packed crosses, a darned
Sock or a cross-stitch embroidery.
Yellow dogs pass here at an easy trot,
And grandmas come to comb sand,
Giant women grind their temples into the rock
Wailing and thrashing to no end.
But these are times, indistinguishable like stumps,
Like my pair of knees:
At the sun one stares, in the shade the other one slumps,
Both are dust and ashes.
But these are nights when the nettle-folk stands guard
Among the pickets here,
And the gentle May enters his peaceful orchard
Raining a tear.
And between hand and hand, between day and night
There is unpersonal, brightly burning, eternal
Quiet.

Second Prize: Zachary Murphy King

The Women's Locker Room at "Planet Fitness"

Nothing in common but warmth and fleece,
Lonesome keys and nine orifices,
Filled with what? moisture, pleasure, shit;
Covered by a mouth; closed by sleep.
Baking up: blood, tears, kids and wax.
Surrounding: their being or another's flesh.
I enter, sit, from the nine of mine to
Remove. I stood to be. And head to the pool.

Pink and yellow, big like babies,
Nakie-nude, towels to the neck –
Crossing the floor are flocks of girltrees.
Each to the shower, languidly leaning its trunk.
Like types of wine and species of aves
They must be classi- or curiosified:
Here's collarbone plates; there: sails of shoulder blades.
We must catalogue each footarch height.

Soon these ones won't be. Soon they'll be replaced.
Here'll be wound in velvet, there: the stage refaced.
Visitors will stare amazed, not hiding tears,
At the combos of bones, skin, and black braided hair.

Some pretty boy on hand
Or baddie good'un
Plays in the kiddy garden:
Touching your plum,
Partaking of a pear,

Gathering, in his mouth, water:
Bequeathed to carved and jumbled wintertime,
The animal won't recognize his brother's mind.

This water pole might become ice,
Reason – an infection, air – gas,
Love-Doves will go and stride
In closed ranks through shooting stands.
And the door that opened on the swimming cube
Will open just a tad, like a zipper on a boot.
And we step out of slippers, nails and crowns,
From watches, juxtaposed rags, our voices' sounds.

And into nostrils, mouths and ears, like kettle steam, out
En masse we pile, souls
Who broke the lock.

But like in forest school: the noisy surplus
Of creams, muscles, hair, armpits and lips.
Self-tanner and shame, as from vixens' bores,
Look at our body surfaces to the lenses of pores.
But like in cattle cars, where squares of steam and lengthy howls
In narrowness and lusterlack roam-wander,
Unreachable, the sky becomes a brother.
And someone sings in the shower room.

In summer camps, in July's blue shorts,
First hanging back, then straightening spine and neck,
My first I, scowling like a bullet,
Makes its very first step.
And furrowing the landscape, like crushing paper in the hand,
I look at it as almost through the sky. And lie
Down, like ball lightning does in fields:
With a single revolution of the wheel.

Third Prize: Jamie Olson

The last songs are gathering,
warriors on an invisible front:
they are leaving the area,
escaping a few lines at a time
to meet at the rendezvous point,
where they glance around warily.

They've become so dried out,
you can't soften them with water!
They've become so wild,
they no longer speak Russian.
But with their old and nimble hands,
they pass around bullets.
In the dark, with their knowing fingers,
they sort through AK-47s.
They sigh and tug gently at letters
lodged in a wound. Towards morning,
steering clear of the guard post,
they move out into the sleepless city.

And keep silent while the cannons thunder.
And keep silent while the muses thunder.

AUTHORS

Innokenty Annensky was born in Omsk in 1855. After graduating from Saint Petersburg University, he taught classical languages and literature, serving as headmaster of a gymnasium (an elite secondary school) in Saint Petersburg from 1886 to 1896 and then as headmaster of the prestigious Nikolayev Boys' Gymnasium in Tsarskoye Selo until 1905. There he taught the poet Nikolay Gumilyov, who held him and his verse in the highest regard, as did Gumilyov's fellow Acmeists Anna Akhmatova and Osip Mandelstam. Annensky's first volume of verse, *Quiet Songs*, was published under a pseudonym in 1904, and his second volume, *The Cypress Chest*, appeared a few days after he suffered a fatal heart attack in 1910.

Alexander Blok was born into the Russian gentry in Saint Petersburg in 1880, and graduated from the Historical-Philological division of Saint Petersburg University in 1906. After the success of his visionary first collection, *Verses About the Beautiful Lady*, published in 1904, his subsequent books gradually moved towards a closer engagement with the urban reality of contemporary Russia. He celebrated the October Revolution in his most famous poem, *The Twelve*, but quickly became disillusioned with the new regime. He died in 1921.

Maya Chhabra graduated with a B.A. in Russian and Government from Georgetown University in 2015. Her original poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in *Abyss & Apex*, *The Cascadia Subduction Zone*, and *Mythic Delirium*, among other venues. Her novella *Toxic Bloom* is forthcoming from Falstaff Books. She would like to thank Eugenia Bronfinan and Anatoly Belilovsky for their assistance and feedback on this translation.

Stephen Capus studied Russian at the University of Birmingham and the School of Slavonic and East European Studies, London. His

translation of Miklós Radnóti's *Letter to my Wife* was included in *Centres of Cataclysm*, published by Bloodaxe Books in 2016.

Marina Eskina was born in Leningrad, now St. Petersburg. She graduated from Leningrad State University. Her poetry and translations are published in Russian and international periodicals, almanacs, and anthologies. She is the author of three books of poetry in Russian, the last of which is *The Strange Ally* (*Strannyi Soiuznik*, 2014), and a children's book in English, titled *Explanation of a Firefly*. She is a finalist of the first poetry competition, "Criteria of Freedom," organized by the Joseph Brodsky Memorial Fund. She has lived in Boston, MA, since 1990.

Yuri Felsen is the pseudonym of Nikolai Berngardovich Freudenstein (1894-1943). Hailed as "the Russian Proust," Felsen was almost unanimously acclaimed by his peers as one of the most original and significant figures among the young "forgotten" generation of émigré writers who emerged in Paris during the interwar years. Following the Nazi occupation of Paris, he was deported and died in the gas chambers at Auschwitz.

Ben Holland is a songwriter living in South London. He has a deep interest in Russian literature and has adapted Pushkin and Platanov short stories into song. His music can be heard at www.ben-holland.co.uk and the song of this poem can be heard at benholland.bandcamp.com/track/queen-of-spades-3

Betsy Hulick has translated Gogol's *Revizor* and *Marriage*, Chekhov's major plays, and narrative poems by Pushkin ("Count Nulin" and "The Tale of the Golden Cockerel"). The two threads of dialogue and verse are combined in her translation of Alexander Griboedov's *Woe from Wit*, forthcoming from Columbia University Press's Russia Library series in Spring 2019.

Alexander Galich (Alexandr Arkadievich Ginzburg, 1918-1977) was an eminent playwright, poet, bard (singer-songwriter), and Soviet

dissident. He is best known for his songs, which blend searing political satire with tragedy and lyricism.

Bryan Karetnyk is a Wolfson Scholar at University College London. He has translated several novels by the Russian émigré author Gaito Gazdanov, including *The Spectre of Alexander Wolf* (2013), *The Flight* (2016), and *The Beggar and Other Stories* (2018), and is the editor and principal translator of the Penguin anthology *Russian Émigré Short Stories from Bunin to Yanovsky* (2017).

Georgy Ivanov was born in Kovno Province in 1894. He attended Saint Petersburg University and was an active, though minor, participant in the cultural life of the capital up until his emigration to Western Europe in 1922. It was only after settling in Paris in 1923 that he began to write the poems on which his reputation rests today. He died in the South of France in 1958.

Zachary Murphy King is a poet, translator and doctoral student in Russian literature at the University of Chicago.

Isabella Levitin was V. S. Yanovsky's wife and translated much of his work, including *No Man's Time* and *Of Light and Sounding Brass* from Russian into English. She also translated some work by W. H. Auden, including "Letter to a Wound," into German for *Merkur*.

Dmitri Manin is a physicist, programmer, and translator. He has published over 30 scientific papers, and his poetry translations into Russian from English and French have appeared in several books.

Patrick Meighan's poems, translations, and reviews have appeared in such journals as *The Common*, *Inflectionist Review*, and *Alexandria Quarterly*. His chapbook *Poems for a Winter Afternoon* was published in 2018. He teaches writing and literature classes at several colleges.

Devon Miller-Duggan has published poems in *Rattle*, *The Antioch Review*, *Shenandoah*, *Margie*, *Christianity and Literature*, *Gargoyle*, and *The Massachusetts Review*. She teaches Creative Writing at the University of Delaware. Her books include *Pinning the Bird to the Wall* (Tres Chicas Books, 2008) and *Alphabet Year* (Wipf & Stock, 2017).

Slava Nurgaliev was born in Moscow in 1964. Twenty years later he graduated from the Moscow Institute of Culture. After serving in the Soviet Army as a Russian-German interpreter he defended a PhD thesis on German books in 18th-century Russia. He moved to Germany in 1997 and now divides his time between Russia, where he teaches German, and Austria, where he teaches Russian and theatre.

Jamie Olson teaches in the English Department at Saint Martin's University, just outside of Olympia, Washington. His translations have appeared in *Cardinal Points*, *Crab Creek Review*, and *Ozone Park Journal*. He writes about poetry, translation, and Russian culture on his site *The Flaxen Wave*.

Stephen Pearl grew up in the UK, where he graduated from Oxford University. He worked at the UN, New York, as Interpreter from French, Russian, and Spanish from 1962, heading the English Interpretation Department from 1985 to 1994. His published literary translations from Russian include work by Israelyan and Goncharov, and letters by Tchaikovsky. He was awarded the Goncharov Prize by the Governor of Ulyanovsk Province.

Delia Radu read Romanian and French Language and Literature at the University of Bucharest, the city where she grew up. Highlights of her work in Romania include the translation and preface of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, writing for the weekly cultural magazine *Dilema*, and teaching theory of literature at the University of Bucharest. Since 1999, she's been living in London and working for the BBC. Her first novel, *The Book of Becoming Mothers*, was longlisted for the Mslexia Novel Prize in 2017.

Gerard Sarnat, MD, has won prizes and been nominated for Pushcarts. He has authored four collections, and his poems have appeared, most recently, in *Gargoyle*, *Margie*, *Main Street Rag*, *New Delta Review*, *Brooklyn Review*, *Los Angeles Review*, *Voices Israel*, *Tishman Review*, *Fiction Southeast*, *Junto*, and *Tiferet*.

Ian Ross Singleton is a writer, translator, and professor of Writing at Baruch College. His short stories, translations, reviews, and essays have appeared in journals such as *New Madrid*, *Digital Americana*, *Midwestern Gothic*, *Fiddleblack*, *Asymptote*, and *Ploughshares*. His short-story collection manuscript, *Grow Me Up*, was a finalist for the 2017 Tartt Fiction Award. He was a student at the University of Michigan and earned an MFA in Fiction from Emerson College. He has been a judge of the Hopwood Award at the University of Michigan and has taught Creative Writing and Literature for New York Writers Workshop, Prison Writes, the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute at San Francisco State University, Cogswell Polytechnical College, the Cambridge Writers' Workshop, the Prison University Project, and the PEN Prison Writing Program.

Yevgeniy Sokolovsky was born in Kyiv, Ukraine, in 1974, and moved to the United States in 1992. He graduated from Columbia University where he pursued a major in Russian Literature and a concentration in Mathematics. Currently he works as an academic librarian at Berkeley College, New Jersey. His translations of Russian poetry have been published in various literary journals in the United States.

Nancy Tittler is Senior Instructor of Russian and Director of the Russian and East European Program at Binghamton University, SUNY, where she teaches Russian language, literature, and cultural history. She holds a PhD from Yale University.

Marina Tsvetaeva, one of the major Russian poets of the 20th century, was born in Moscow in 1892 and emigrated in 1922 (Berlin,

Prague, Paris). She returned to Russia in 1939 to join husband and daughter, both of whom were arrested soon after her return. She committed suicide in Yelabuga in 1941. In addition to poetry and essays, she was also the author of numerous verse dramas, grouped into the unfinished Theseus trilogy and the six-part *Romantic Pieces*. *Fortune*, part of the latter cycle, was written in Moscow in 1919, during the Russian Civil War, and published in Paris in 1923.

Mary Jane White holds an MFA from the Iowa Writers' Workshop and has received NEA Fellowships in poetry and translation. Her translations of Tsvetaeva have appeared in a number of journals.

V. S. Yanovsky, a medical doctor and one of the leading Russian authors of the First Wave of emigration, was born in Poltava in 1906, escaped to Poland in 1922, and came to Paris in 1926. After emigrating to the United States in 1942, he befriended W. H. Auden, who wrote the foreword to his novel *No Man's Time* (1967), which was translated into English, like much of his work, by his wife Isabella Levitin (this time working with Roger Nyle Parris). His other works include *Of Light and Sounding Brass* (1972), *The Dark Fields of Venus: From a Doctor's Logbook* (1973), *The Great Transfer* (1974), and a brilliant memoir of the Parisian émigré literary scene, *Elysian Fields: A Book of Memory* (1983, English trans. 1987). He died in New York in 1989.

PRE-SUBMISSION GUIDELINES FOR TRANSLATED POETRY

Boris Dralyuk

Before sending poetic translations to Cardinal Points, think about your audience. Our intended reader is a person sensitive to English as it is spoken, susceptible to the effects of verse, and at least somewhat familiar with the Anglophone poetic tradition. These are the people who browse through the poetry shelves at the local bookstore, who open literary journals and flip to the poetry section, who see a box of text with an unjustified right margin in their newspaper and consider giving it a read. In other words, any poetic translation you choose to send out into the world must be good English – and good English verse, at that.

Things to avoid:

1. Unnatural phrasing. If one can't imagine a native English-speaker saying a certain phrase to another native English-speaker, then the phrase must go.
2. Poetic inversions (at least when translating most post-18th C. poetry).
3. Padding to fill out metrical lines.
4. Forced rhymes.

Many translators of Russian poetry believe it their duty to hew closely to a poem's original form. It serves to remember that, to today's

Anglophone reader (and not just today's, really), the persistent use of exact rhyme produces a comic effect, especially when coupled with a clangorous short-lined meter like the trochaic tetrameter. If you want your translations to appeal to Anglophone readers, consider loosening the metrical grip — which doesn't necessarily mean abandoning meter, just playing closer attention to rhythm, diversifying the lines, leaving some ictuses unfilled. The original meters are often a trap: they don't mean the same thing for an Anglophone reader as they do for a Russian, with the trochaic tetrameter being a case in point. If you find that you need to add words in order "to fill out" a line, then your line is too long. And don't contort natural syntax in order to fit a rhyme scheme.

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Dmitri Manin's translations of Nikolay Zabolotsky's "Immaturity," "Foxtrot," and "Vagrant Musicians" appear by permission of FTM Agency, Ltd.

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