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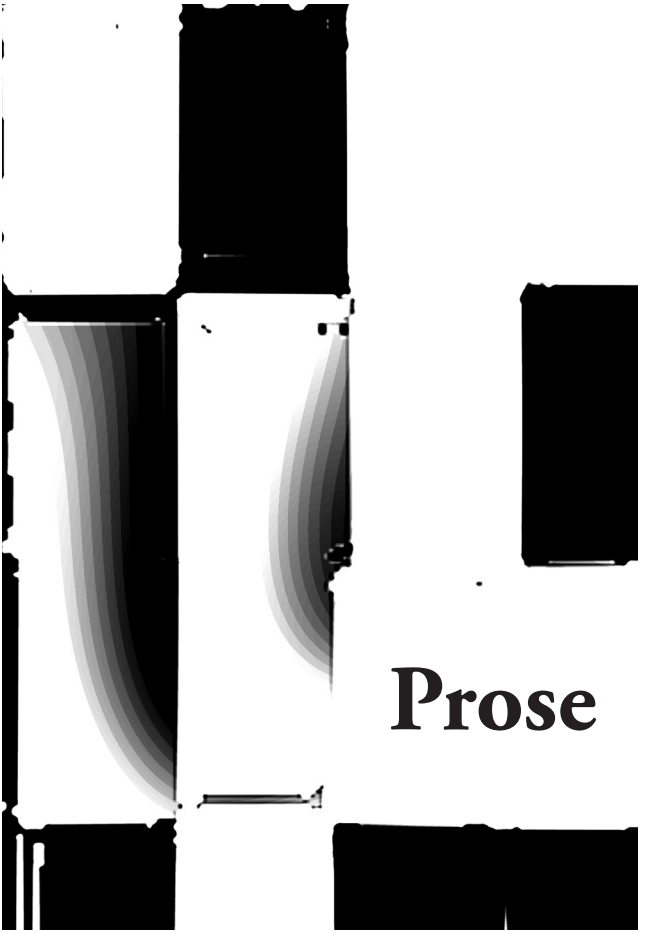


Prose

A Miracle

Yuri Felsen

Translated from the Russian
by Bryan Karetnyk

Translator's Introduction

On 13 February 1943, Nikolai Freudenstein (pseud. Yuri Felsen) arrived at Auschwitz on transport No. 47 from Drancy internment camp. He was, in all likelihood, sent straight to the gas chambers. With this event, a figure who had been described, almost unanimously by his peers, as one of the most original and significant new writers of the Russian diaspora began a sharp plunge into obscurity, from which he is only now emerging.

Born in St Petersburg in 1894, Freudenstein escaped Russia in 1918 with his family. By the late 1920s he had become a protégé of the emigration's foremost critic, Georgy Adamovich, and was associated with both the "Paris school" and the *prustiantsy*, a set of émigré writers who had adopted Marcel Proust as their artistic model. In 1930 he published the first instalment of a grand literary project, fashioned after Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*. Variously titled "A Romance with an Author" (*Roman s pisatelem*) and "The Recurrence of Things Past" (*Povtorenie proidennogo*), the project encompassed, by the time of Freudenstein's death, three novels – *Deceit* (*Obman*, 1930), *Happiness* (*Schast'e*, 1932) and *Letters about Lermontov* (*Pis'ma o Lermontove*, 1936) – as well as a handful of short stories. Influenced also by the high modernism

of authors such as James Joyce and Virginia Woolf, Freudenstein's writing stood at the forefront of aesthetic and philosophical currents in contemporary European letters and won accolades from such diverse (and often irreconcilable) figures as Zinaida Hippius, Vladislav Khodasevich, Georgy Ivanov and Vladimir Nabokov.

The following story, "A Miracle" (*Chudo*), was first published in the journal *Vstrechi* in 1934, and was the last of seven stand-alone pieces written by Freudenstein. These stories often acted as a creative laboratory for the author's aesthetic and thematic experimentation. In "A Miracle" we see Freudenstein's creative trajectory well on the approach to the apex it would reach towards the end of the decade: here the fine metaphysical description and psychological introspection are matched by a subtle refinement and precision of language, while the thematic preoccupations with addiction and deceit resonate throughout Freudenstein's wider oeuvre.

* * *

I was recuperating after a serious operation. The joy, such that convalescents experience, was long gone and had given way to the neurotic boredom of interminable waiting. Those who are often ill know this impatient reckoning of days and hours, the alarm if the time of discharge is again postponed, the irritability brought on by the slightest inconvenience, the distrust of doctors, who seem to want only to cash in.

I had my own reasons regarding this last point, though they were hardly serious or rational. I found myself in a new, clean French clinic, in a spacious and expensive double room, whither friends had borne me one night in a semi-unconscious state. Of necessity it seemed I should leave the clinic a pauper, that I was being "exploited," though the care was conscientious, even exemplary.

The second bed lay empty, and all I had for company was an old, businesslike physician who visited me daily and a nurse who for some reason or other would "pour out her heart" to me. Tall, stately, no longer in the first flush of youth, with a faded, inexpressive ashen face, she would

complain at great length of the intrigues of her "*copines*," of the quarrels between the doctors, of their cavils and their iniquity. Clinical errors malevolently revived her, no matter how sorely the patients paid for it. Another persistent theme for my entertainment and encouragement were her tales of terrible torment and death, wherein she revealed an uncommon ingenuity.

All this was related to me evenly and with quiet dispassion, and in the same wise, without raising her voice, she would unduly extol herself, her experience, her medical successes. Man gradually adapts himself to any companion fate casts in his path – on a ship, in a barracks, in prison. And so I grew used to hearing out attentively the dismal tales of "sœur Marguerite" and lived for the clinic's intrigues, in a monstrous reflection of my new acquaintance. I worried that the cleaner was stealing from me, that the cook didn't know how to prepare food properly, that the chief physician had confused a stomach ulcer for appendicitis, and so my indignant remarks fuelled the sister's loquacity and her inspiration.

I forgot the existence of that former, carefree world, which had disappeared for me immemorially long ago and to which God only knew when I would return. Newspapers and books arrived as though from another planet and told of legendary things. Only on occasion would I longingly cast an oblique glance at the empty bed by the wall. I would imagine that my prospective neighbour would once again bind me to that authentic, remote, alluring life to which I was still denied access. In anticipation I dreamt – evidently having been starved of people – of friendly chats with him, of his relatives and visitors. My acquaintances, in the wake of those first turbulent days, gradually forsook me. Besides, our visiting times coincided with their office hours.

Then, one day, my wish for a neighbour was granted. I was astonished by the exceedingly fussy preparations. In the morning the mattresses were hauled out and shaken in the corridor. The linen was rearranged and changed several times. Two ladies came: a wrinkled, wizened old woman and a slender, elegant, blue-eyed blonde of around thirty, wearing a short waist-length fur jacket that imbued her movements with a certain graceful chic. They examined the room and the bed solicitously, the younger lady pulled back the blanket and fluffed

the pillows while the older one, manifestly embarrassed, suddenly turned to me with a strange request to remove to the general ward for two or three days. The sister answered for me, vouching for my composure and restraint. After the departure of both ladies, she and her much detested *copines* exchanged anxious whispers.

My curiosity had been piqued, but what sœur Marguerite conveyed to me ere long seemed unsatisfactorily sensational. The piece of nonsense in store was a straightforward operation to remove some abscesses. The patient was a gifted and wealthy engineer; his mother, the owner of some factories; and her companion, his *amie*, who was now his fiancée. It was obvious that the matter was not quite so simple, and my repeated insistence induced the sister unwittingly to give away the secret. The engineer was an inveterate morphinist. It was the consequence of a wound received back on the front line and had been going on for more than a decade. He had reached a staggering number: twenty-four injections per day. The syringe accompanied him everywhere, and the injections were done even through his own clothing, which had resulted in a great deal of suppuration and the need for an operation. Monsieur Morin had been a patient of all the clinics where they battled with a predilection for drugs, and our staff harboured the vague hope of curing him for ever. Naturally, the ambitious Margarita ascribes the initiative, as well as all conceivable future achievements, to herself.

It was no wonder that this touched me acutely. After my own operation I had experienced unremitting, unbearable pain, and over the course of ten days, every evening before sleep, that same Margarita would inject me with morphine. I cannot recall another so blissful and happy state that could compare with what you begin to feel several minutes after the injection. Somewhere inside there slowly spreads a sweet warmth, your head is enveloped by a clairvoyant drowsiness, pain seems to dissolve, and purposely you try not to fall asleep, so that this inimitable condition may endure without end.

I would awake towards morning (already prepared for the requital) with the anguish of an unhabituated drunkard emerging from inebriation, but an anguish that was tenfold and irremediable. A fierce cold penetrated my body, no matter how warmly I was enswathed. The

pain would return, fortified by bitter comparison – just moments ago I had dropped off so serenely. The day ahead seemed vast, that vespertine joy almost unattainable, and yet those long diurnal hours were spent in sheer enervate anticipation of the evening. So as to deceive time, to foreshorten it, again and again I would take to counting up to a thousand, would call to mind verses from memory, and found it impossible to attain any peace. The dear doctor, a punctilious, polite old boy, with a ribbon in his buttonhole, panicked by my formidable passion, worked busily to eradicate it, tormenting both me and the sister.

That is why I sympathized doubly with this man, who was unknown to me and doubtless broken by suffering. I knew the agony of morphine dependency, as one scarcely grows used to it, as well as the agony of ridding oneself of it. Of course, in comparison with Morin I had a benign child's ailment, and the more monstrous the tests devised for him loomed, the more acutely did he pique my sympathy and curiosity.

He appeared immediately after breakfast, accompanied by both ladies, and I was taken aback by the contradiction between his behavior and his appearance. A tall, slender Frenchman of almost hackneyed elegance, sparkling chestnut eyes, little moustaches – a picture of smartness and grooming. And at the same time there was a gloomy taciturnity that reached a level of contempt and impudence. He rejoined his companions monosyllabically and with express reluctance; he did not so much as nod to me. I immediately apprehended that no friendship would come of this, that my solitude would be yet reinforced.

By and by they left him alone, and he took an impossibly long time changing into his patient's gown with his back turned towards me. After around twenty minutes Margarita came in with both ladies, bid them wait, and conducted him to the operating theater. The women talked quietly among themselves, occasionally asking me whether I was satisfied with the treatment, the care, the food, though they did not inquire as to the nature of my illness. They were interested solely in what was applicable to Monsieur Morin; I personally did not exist for them. I felt a little insulted, but I overcame myself, deeming the inattention of others natural. By contrast, I admired the fiancée with delight, her strong bewitching hands, their involuntarily graceful gestures, her blonde hair,

which tumbled out from under her little peaked cap, and thought, not without envy, that, were I in Monsieur Morin's place, I would cure myself post-haste of anything for the sake of such a charming girlfriend.

The operation was concluded swiftly, and the patient, so wan and mute, was gingerly born in on a stretcher. The sister and doctor beamed, averring that everything had gone according to plan. Their delight was imparted to both ladies, and involuntarily I felt aggrieved on their behalf, for Monsieur Morin reacted with icy indifference to their cheerful and ardent congratulations.

He spent two weeks in the clinic, and still never took any notice of me. The ladies were permitted to sit with him far longer than was allowed by the hospital's rules. He continued to reply to them monosyllabically and discourteously. In their absence he would read some technical manuals or lie still in his gown, on top of the bed sheets, always on his left side, his face to the wall.

And yet, the treatment seemed to progress successfully. Margarita, in an agitated whisper, would tell me how his doses of morphine were being gradually lowered, how they duped him with injections of pure water. I could attest in all earnestness to the fact that he had altered even externally, that his eyes had become more limpid, his cheeks fuller, the color of his face more healthy. Together we railed against those institutions where he been previously, where they took money, promising deliverance from narcotics, and where they gave nothing in return. Monsieur Morin would turn away from us in contempt, neither hearing nor seeing our secret whisperings. The only thing that struck me was his passivity, his absolute, unquestioning obedience. He would languidly eat everything the nurses brought him, meticulously observe the discipline of the hospital, extinguish at the first bidding the electric light in the evening. Only just before his departure did he strike up a conversation with me – grimly, drily, without the slightest amiability of tone – opening with a compliment, which I had neither anticipated nor merited:

"I should like to thank you before I leave, strange as it may seem, for not having thrust any unsolicited advice on me. Ever since I developed this unhappy mania, everyone whom the urge strikes has felt it his duty

to edify me. It's the same thing if you aren't set up, if you haven't found a job: thousands of well-wishers take you under their wing, just don't expect a single practical word from any of the them."

I could have objected that my tact and non-interference had arisen from his hostile inapproachability and there was scant need to commend me for this. However, I immediately broke my discretion and could not help offering some "unsolicited advice." I told him everything I thought of him:

"You're a lucky man, they tend to you so lovingly. What a charming fiancée you have. Do you truly not want to make her happy?"

"Your reasoning, my friend, is grounded in casual observations, very far from the true nature of things. But allow me to give *you* some advice. Do not believe Margarita; she is a narcissistic halfwit. She has the felicity to alter events to her advantage. Life is easy for such fortunate fantasists."

I recalled my innumerable conversations with Margarita, and with shame I saw that he was right. Everything I am now writing about her was essentially prompted by Monsieur Morin, and then I recognized, as though a humiliation, my foolish credulity and his insight. I do not know why, but he continued his frank confession:

"I am married, I have a remarkable wife who is spirited, intelligent, gifted and beautiful. She left me several years ago in the belief that I would never be done with this vice, that we should never have a home and family. This is an honest '*témoignage de pauvreté*.' I, too, should have acted thus in her position. The lady who comes was the governess of my late sister. As you can see, my mother was destined for a great deal of grief. She needs to share with someone the terrible worry she feels for me. She has taken to believing that the sympathy offered by my fiancée" – I could hear the ironic quotation marks in Morin's tone – "is noble, kind and disinterested. Perhaps she isn't mistaken. In any case, I won't go into details, nor shall I deprive her of these last illusions. My rule is to agree, not to argue, not to object. That way the outside world remains somehow acceptable; I haven't the energy to fight. Sometimes, without good cause, I hope that everything will clear up, that my wife will forgive me and that an idyllic end to my misadventures is near. Obviously, I love

her just as I did before. But forget all this, it's quite improper of me to go on like this."

He turned away again and spoke with me no more. Only when leaving did he cast a melancholy smile my way. This was ostensibly enough to secure the ingratiating favour of both ladies.

After they left, practically the entirety of the hospital's staff gathered in my room. In came the sisters, the nurses, the thieving cleaner. They summoned the cook and even some of the convalescents. Margarita boasted more than ever. In detail she described her "method," calling on me to corroborate at every opportunity. I, too, was at the center of attention, though I felt strangely ill at ease. Margarita was congratulated – none too sincerely, but amicably enough – and everyone was left with their respective memories.

She was not able to boast of her achievements for long, however. When they cleaned out the room and the bed, between the mattresses they found two empty phials of morphine and a third, half depleted. I should not have suspected another demure sister of mercy to have at her disposal such a stock of the choicest curses.

All this, almost forgotten, history was revived in my memory with extraordinary brilliance, when just the other day, in the evening paper, I read that the engineer Charles Morin, an inveterate morphinist, had killed his wife and shot himself without leaving a suicide note. I regrettably never did manage to find out who exactly his wife was.

Daydream Insurrection
In Five Chapters

Viktor Ivaniv

Translated from the Russian by Ainsley Morse

CHAPTER ONE

He slept beneath a velvety fleece blanket, all night flailing violently about, while Mihas slept deeply and at immoderate length on the hotel room's neighboring bed. They discussed placidly the fact that the hotel didn't do breakfast, but this was already after awakening. And the thought occurred as to how they would pay for the hotel, he was about to exclaim and sat down, but then remembered – in such a way that sent him up to the ceiling and shook the dull chandelier – that there was money, a lot of it, but all in large bills with round numbers. And when they went down to reception from the fourth floor and he began to lay out the money in order to pay for himself and for Mihas, it turned out they had no change. Still, they found change, they gave him banknotes, but these were matchbox labels, candy wrappers, chewing-gum inserts, little stamps, and then they gave him yet another, still weightier stack, thicker too. And in response to his question they said, your city lies far away from a certain state where they use this kind of money, but ours is a bit closer. And he leapt up and internally sat back down from the thought that this was a swindle, a screw, a betrayal, but then Mihas was saying: whatever, we'll get rid of the loot, exchange it, it's a big city, we'll figure it out. And then the fatter and denser stack opened up and inside there were old newspapers, thin, dry, yellow, with the letters smeary, like

you could wipe them away with a finger, something like the old Soviet workers' papers, but in the margins there were Arabic numbers – here a hundred, there five hundred – traced out in hooked handwriting, people paste over their windows with this kind of newspaper. He had to leave that evening, the train left at ten, and he still had to buy a ticket.

And they went out, there was nothing else to be done, into the city, and first and foremost they looked for a newspaper stand, and in its place found a scrap-paper receiving point, but then discovered it was closed. And all the streets were scattered with these ancient newspapers, and the wind swept them up, while at the windows someone was watching him and Mihas through special slits, the whole town was two-storied, and the houses there all had maculate dilapidating walls too, the trees strewn with leaves and stained dry undershirts hanging on clotheslines in the courtyards, and from both the second and first floors, it seemed a silent someone was watching them frowningly, and there wasn't a soul on the streets.

So they walked along Mackle Street – they read this on a swinging sign – to Musculature Street, and there they found a basement shop that said they sold bronze bonzes and other castings. And he felt a bitter taste in his mouth, as if from the breakfast butter or like he'd licked flypaper. And the owner of the little shop came down from the first floor and said that he can only exchange their money for food and drink; the little gods are not for sale. As if we effing need those gods, said Mihas, tell us how to find a shop we can get some grub at. Go, answered the bust owner, two blocks, Herring and Linen to the left, then you'll get to Buckwheat Street, and just past it another side-street, Holepunch, but on the right. You'll find everything there, there's a cafeteria and a sandwich shop and a hot dog place, and it has a smoke-shop – they sell tobacco.

They turned onto Herring street, it smelled like castor oil and there was a man standing on the corner in a rumpled hat and trousers with red stripes down the sides. Are we going the right way, they asked him, he answered, I really can't say, I forgot, the house numbers have worn away, and the letters of the street names have peeled off, and the poplars have dropped their leaves, I'm wondering where I might find a rake, I'm a street-cleaner, I'll sweep up.

Take a load off, says Mihas, while he was thinking to himself, we ought to just take off for the train station now, but Mihas said – you can always buy a ticket up til three hours from departure time. They turned left again, it must be Linen Street, and that was right, all the windows were hung with some kind of raggery, patched pants, and shirts; a stout woman was standing on a balcony and hanging things. Citizeness, are we going the right way, they asked, and she shook out a pillowcase like a sail and pinned it to the line, then sized up some pantaloons and hung them too, in the form of a split fish, with a wooden clothespin. Looks to me, sweeties, like you're going the right way, but I never leave this building. What, grandmamma, you don't know what street you live on, what house number? No, she answered, last time I was out in the courtyard was, let's see, the year before last. So you can't smell the magnesium, it's powerful as hell, did you wash your clothes in it? No, sugar, I'm just trying on my old costumes here, the ones I was sashaying around in who know how many years ago.

They spat and continued down the alley, and they saw – a street, with streetlamps bowing towards one another and a broken traffic light. They had just started crossing the street when such a wind rose up that it lifted them and carried them two blocks over to the side. As soon as they stepped down onto the sidewalk, the wind fell, and Mihas said that probably all the side-streets here were parallel, come on, there's no signs anyway, let's go, and then we'll turn left, there'll probably be a central square or something. And they turned.

They walked and walked, there were endless buildings, like factory complexes, and a fence stretched on and on, and there kept on being nowhere to turn left. They'd been walking an hour already, two, three, and he periodically checked his watch to see the time, counting, then Mihas suddenly said, hey up there I can see something, either a park or a square. And they quickened their steps and the square was already close, and there was a kiosk ahead that seemed to be open. Breathless, they knocked at the little window, peering out of the darkness the saleswoman appeared, and she exchanged their stickers for cigarette boxes, and the bottle labels for half-liters, and the sandwich-spread labels for sandwiches. And they took everything delightedly and walked

to the square, where there were forty identical benches, and they sat down, time to have a drink and a bite to eat. Mihas looked around and said, hot damn, there's the train station. But he was overcome by sleep, the sun began to bake down, and at first Mihas sat on the bench where he'd conked out, and on his head there was a beer-moistened towel stolen from the hotel room.

Mihas was a tough guy, sturdy, sleep came not to him, and he said, OK, for now I'll split our money in half and go buy a ticket at the train station, you go on dozing. And he took all the little stickers for himself and left him the rest, the fat stack of newspaper, and left him there lying on the bench.

Dream

The train station approached the green benches, set its elbows down on their backs and breathed in your face with such tenderness, whispered in your ear, let's go. And in his dream he stood up and saw three winding staircases scampering about in front of him, then coming together, and at balcony-level, two-thirds of the way to the ceiling, situated beyond the tier with the railings there was a little bitty hotel for through-passengers, there they were, standing in caps and hats and looking down at the fountain spouting in the center of the hall, and they threw coins into its depths, and look, some of the men were leaving their rooms with suitcases and leading ladies by the hand, and coming down the two staircases into the waiting area, and then going to the trains.

But the staircase took them up higher, and now they were walking up to the train station clock whose gears are turning with a muffled creaking, the arms on the clock face moving slow and smooth, and sometimes, if the trains are running late, mincing along with little steps, and if they're running early, but no, trains never run early.

And the staircase went up higher and narrows and then led out into a tower room with four vaulted windows. And now he was looking out one window, then another, then the third, then the fourth, and he

saw that four great broad avenues flowed together into the train station square, and there were tens of thousands and crowds of people hurrying in a welter in different directions. And he aw yet another staircase leading to the roof of the tower, and he clambered up there, stepping along the red roof-tiles, and he saw the city spread out before him like four palms clapping. And he could see all the streets down to the tiniest speck and dust-mote, all the streets and the whole city. And branching away from the four avenues there were streets, lanes, alleyways, dead-ends, little streets, narrow lanes, alleys and dead-endlets. And it all moved so quickly, hurried along, whirled so that his head began whirling too, and then he lost consciousness and flew down head-over-heels. But then it turned out that he was pinned to the spire of the tower by his cuffs and collar, and that he could neither move a muscle nor twitch or jerk his way free – he was stuck there.

He was waking up, his legs numb, gone to sleep, and he was knocking over the empty bottles next to the bench with a foot, and rummaging through the remains of the sandwiches half-wrapped in the remaining tattered newspapers, and he was waking up from the thought that Mihas wasn't there.

And the train was departing in four hours forty-five minutes.

Bus Two

He rode to Basilisque Street with twenty rubles in his pocket, the only reason he went there was to look into the eyes of a certain girl, he hadn't seen her for three years. And she had such tender, laughing eyes, he thought, and when he saw them – exactly, they were tender and laughing, just like in the Church when the deacon climbs up to the pulpit and observes his flock, and sees this sort of laughing, tender eyes in his flock. She was sitting in the office and sending a letter to somebody, then turned towards him with a certain apprehension. I wanted to find out when your conference is, he said, please give me a program, I want to listen to the speakers. And her eyes swam like golden fish, glancing cunningly and glimmering.

Say, what's that little book you have there, the one in color, he asked, can I have a look. In the picture a cheerful kind woman was showing a sugared apple to her child, and the little book was written in the French language. And she said to him, take it, read it. Well, I'll be going, thanks for the program, he said, we'll talk more later, and, if you want, we could go somewhere for lunch.

And he went to the bus stop and got on the first bus to downtown that showed up. True, it wasn't the first bus, it was a number two. He'd ridden the thirteen to get there, standing up, and the windows were pasted with little violet curtains, and a little rain was misting, plashing in small puddles. But the bus was going right the whole way, then clattered along Mt. Olive and Hospital streets, and then suddenly turned onto Periwinkle, where he'd been walking the previous week. An endless factory stretched out along Periwinkle, and girls didn't walk there. Yes, he thought, now we'll enter the tunnel, where the cars all light themselves up with headlights, and there are two white openings at both ends. Last week he'd gotten soaked through with mud in this tunnel, and his shoes had slipped along through the puddling mud, and he kept looking back towards the bright spot to see if anyone was coming. And so now he was riding through that tunnel, sitting to the right on the back seat in the corner. And he thought, OK, now I'll ride as far as the circus, and then go to the train station from there, no, he corrected himself, first I'll ride as far as the train station, then go to the circus. Next to him, as became clear through their conversation, a carpenter was talking with his wife and little son, sitting there next to him, right next to him, and the wife got off at her stop, and he thought, one more and it's my stop. The little son was uncomfortable sitting in his seat and kept calling it a "sheet"; when he started fiddling with the screws on the seat handles, he kept saying "cut yourself," and smiled with eyes blue as the Earth.

The word "cut yourself" pecked him suddenly like a rooster, and he remembered that yesterday his friend Miltosh, who took a lifetime to get anything done, had stopped by to see him, and carried in death tied to his shoulders, brought it in and put it down in the middle of the room. And of course it had to be that he was only realizing this now. After all, Miltosh had pulled his monk's hood down over his eyes and

right away started greeting him very nicely, but nearly threw him to the ground through trickery, in his friendly embrace, and also right then a fashionably-dressed woman had walked by in auburn leather, auburn fur, auburn blue jeans and auburn herself and, turning back, said: there are corpses walking around the park and no Cops to get 'em. And at the same time the bus had turned in towards the mall, and gone past it on to the Circus, not via the train station but along Paralysis Street.

Getting off, he turned and saw Maria-Deborah and her mother, who was sitting like an aged nun in profile, while Deborah-Maria slept with eyes open like a serpentarius and, getting off, he'd nodded to them. A circle of seven little Gypsy girls dressed in black fur coats and black and white kerchiefs stood on Train Station Central St. and silently and, it seemed, their shoulders gyrating, they swayed and exchanged winks. On the corner of Lenin Street and the train station plaza his friend was waiting, at the good store. Terror increased along with the cold as he approached the train station thermometer, above the tower clock with the numbers thrown like dice across the tableau. He stopped and started peering around for his friend, but the friend was nowhere to be seen. His heart was already on a silver, maybe a platinum, tray, and then he leapt in four directions at once and flipped over across his own axis. And he started singing: o mister moon, o mister moon, oy and oy, show your face you'll croak, show your face you'll croak, oy and oy, aktaber yourself, you're your own yob, we don't steal, we don't steal, Voloskida. Five minutes passed and then his friend's call rang out – he was already on the other side, next to the All the Best store.

You a moron or something? asked his friend, I walked right past you, fifteen feet away and missed you, said his dear friend, when they'd moved towards each other for the third try, hugging the hour and counter-hour arms. Here, take what you asked for, the magazine, and he started chortling. Well, I'd better get going.

And he slogged back across Lenin and saw the sign for "Oficina," that is a pharmacy. In front of him in line there was a man wearing the exact same jacket, just a different cap. The smell of ammonium chloride filled the air and he nearly fell into a swoon at the word "medication expiration date," pronounced by a granny standing ahead of him, like

how it had been in childhood at the mention of the word "blood." He asked for the standard volume of valerian extract, but they would only give fifty grams over the counter.

Left without valerian, he went out into the freezing cold and plodded along Jaws street, and started singing about the ace of diamonds, he walked through the place where Erevan fell, the one who was crushed by a car, and then his relatives, being unable to pay for it, had unhooked him from artificial life support. Then the Circus, the Church, and "I'll slice you, slice you till it spurts" came into his head, and he thought, I'll defend myself with this thick plastic-rubber fountain pen with gilded accents, and shove my dear friend's magazines into their mouths. Then the trees went running off in different directions, then the garages and burning dumpsters took off flying, then he veered into the courtyard of the building next to his, where Miltosh said some granny'd been murdered that summer, exactly two meters away from where his pensive dear friend, lost in thought, had walked by. And now here was his own courtyard, where a sideboard lay upended, smashed in by the wind or vandals – the one they'd taken out yesterday, he and Miltosh.

They'd dragged out the sideboard, bought a year before the death of his grandfather in the city of Riga, which he'd visited with grandmother – he knew its every little fork, every butter knife, every teaspoon, every little postcard, every sugar-cube, every little baby-shoe, every lens and every greeting-card with condolences. And just now he'd fallen upon it as if it were a coffin, and kissed it, while Miltosh said: farewell cupboard, hello youth, and repeated: farewell youth, hello cupboard. And that was just it, he was still twirling his cap on his pointer finger, his head started spinning and then hurting, but this cap was the ultimate "Hello Goodbye." And the thought flit past – about his dear friend, once while he was sleeping soundly in his apartment, five guys had raped the neighbor girl right in her room. And the next thought – how Leo the gravedigger had been killed right at his own building entrance, for a pack of cigarettes. At the entrance there was an enormous, very solidly built man with slightly staring, that is bulging-out eyes, like he was waiting for someone. Like if you asked, he might say: I'm waiting for you. What magazine, what fountain pen, his heart dropped and he slogged into the

building entrance, opening the buzzer. OK, he said to Miltosh, don't forget to grab the stuff I brought you.

Tulle

Tulipov put his room in order, hung up tulle curtains. There were five calendars lying on the table: one of German silver, one embroidered, a rough homespun, a nickel and an Orthodox. He tore off one page every morning, read and chewed it up until the red, black, orange, lovely pale blue or yellow sops came out, and then spit out the pellets. He did this with one page every morning, but sometimes he was more impulsive and chewed through a whole calendar in mere seconds. He wore a watch with an armless face, casting a line of shade from the imaginary stick that was always waving before his eyes. Yes, and then he looked out the window, where on the other side of the street people were sunbathing naked in the windows, and he thought about the golden summer that had flown past so imperceptibly.

And here it was offering its sheaves to him, its fringes of sashes addressed to the finest ornithologist, cryptologist, anatomic pathologist, oneirologist and mysticologist, and he ran his fingers through them like the wind tosses the ripening rye. He poured himself a full teapot and started gulping it down from the spout, so that the teapot fit inside him completely. He would spend days in the kitchen looking out the window, and in the evening would plant himself on that same stool to figure out crosswords and rebuses, then put the answers into a little envelope so as to take it the next morning to his s/b, subscriber's box. Ah, no, it was the *answers* he would pick up from the box, and the little envelopes he put into the dark blue and white mailboxes.

But that was in the mornings; at night he would lay himself down in bed up against the wall and all night he would listen through the electrical sockets to the conversations of the neighbor men and women that carried through – when they would fight, when they were tender, when they'd make up, when they'd argue. And in the morning he would meet them on the stairs, beneath the stairs, out in the yard and in the

street when he was walking to the post office to send off his rebuses or get the answers, which usually didn't contain any winnings.

And so today he set off for the post office across the street, Magog Street, and dropped the latest rebus into the mailbox, but in his s/b he found a letter that wasn't from the solved-riddles section – opening this letter, he felt a pang in his breast of sweet rapture. The letter inside was from Militrisa Silvercarper, the famous star singer, written on vellum paper with a flower-shaped monogram of her name in the form of Aquarius. It turned out that he had solved some extremely difficult rebus about the secret wish of a star singer from another land, and today was the last day that he could agree to a meeting with her. This was written in a disarming tone, and he had a whole day still to call the number indicated, only one day, once and for all. Because at the post office at first they'd put the letter in the wrong box, and it had been taken off to another city by mistake.

And Tulipov dashed off at breakneck speed towards home and spasmodically dialed the necessary numbers on the rotary. After the long heart-stopping tones of the buzzer, the polite voice of an automatic lady promised to connect him, and indeed, after two or three exhausting seconds the voice of a radio announcer told him, Mr Tulipov, you are invited to an audience, there is an airplane ticket waiting for you at the airline office and a hotel room reserved for you in our city. Miss Silvercarper strongly urges you not to be late. The surprise was such that Tulipov even lit up a long-saved Golden Leaf cigarette.

Throwing heaps of things around the apartment, flinging up his heels and waving his arms around in the whirling junk, he eventually found his grip and packed everything carefully inside and, without eating breakfast but having shaved for the first time in many months and showering twice – before gathering his things and afterwards – he rushed to the airline office in order to go straight to the airport from there – accomplishing all of this in a terrible state of agitation. Having elbowed his way through the line and giving a few people a sound thrashing, he seized his ticket and bolted to the train station, where he got on a light-rail train going to the Airport station, which previously he'd only ever ridden past.

In the train he sat between a pregnant woman and a nun, while behind him some little yo-boys were playing cards, and out of habit he began to listen to their exchanges, and the queen of hearts beat the ace of diamonds. Lost in listening and looking out the window, he dozed off, and woke up as his stop was being announced, Airport station. Squeezing helter-skelter between the crowd pouring in from the platform, he fell out onto the same platform and, quickly orienting himself by the signs, found himself alone in the line for registration. And within an hour he leapt into the airplane.

Fop

Fetsyk was walking down Soda street, turned onto Horse-breeding and at the corner stepped into a café where he'd never been before, or hadn't noticed as he rode past in public transport – this was where the trolley line intersected with the tram line. He walked past the pruned hedges, past the clipped poplars, and on the corner he blew his nose so loudly that a little lady and her poodle took fright and nearly barked in unison.

He was unknown in this café – usually they would put out a shot as soon as he appeared. He'd only just come in when he saw everyone turn to look at him, so they took a good look and then their gazes skewed, turned down and away. And the buffet, or really just the bar, was looming in the depths, in a dark-cognac half-darkness frightened off by yellow lamps. But he didn't examine those present and charged ahead to the bar. Behind the bar stood a lovely maiden, that is, barmaid, and asked how she could help him. Instead of his usual vodka and herring he asked for cognac, coffee and a croissant. Meanwhile everyone was once again staring at him in stupefaction.

He sat down at a table and paid absolutely no attention to the man sitting opposite. The man was slurping onion soup with great concentration, pausing occasionally to drink lemonade. Time flew by imperceptibly, flapping its dark firebird's wing, releasing a cognac twilight outside the window.

After his fifth shot – vodka by then – and his fifth espresso, he was about to start thinking about the check, or rather he had started thinking about it after the third, but after the fifth he felt a powerful need to shit, and he barely made it to the WC, though he had time to notice the little black, nearly bulging brown figures on the door, like African toys, and he went through the door of the stall, but at first couldn't get a hold of either handle, and so opened both doors. Before this he'd managed to ask for the check after all. And so, he paid up, pulling a stack of company money from his pocket, and then quickly shoved it back in, but he'd still waved it around good. And having turned away, he checked to see if the tip was there, and then he saw the man across from him and the dull fixed gazes of the people sitting around, although up to this point he'd thought he was sitting in the cafe by himself. And leaving he heard, you come back now, while his seat-mate got out his cell phone and called someone. Moving in the thickness of the night street, boiling into the night air, moving along the way metal moves through dense liquid, he made his way mechanically toward his building, passing a few blocks as if along a red celluloid triangle, and when he was already in front of his building he lit up a fifth cigarette, and only then did he stop singing.

And his window on the fourth floor was already alight, and his feet were doing all sorts of tricks, and his arms were swinging in a figure-eight shape. Towards his voice and the light four guest-workers came running, so it seemed to him, but in fact they walked up calmly. What he said to them he couldn't remember afterwards for a long time, and never did remember. But they took out a turn-screw, a Finnish knife, a chisel edge and a dirk, and first they took away his cell phone, while he, spinning in figure eights, like a fitness exercise with his hands on his waist, all at once caught at the knife blade and screamed heart-rendingly and wailed harrowingly and implored wildly like a bittern. Imperceptibly the windows of the whole building lit up, really more like in the whole inner-courtyard, dogs began howling, cats began yowling and some guy from the fifth floor shot four times from a bird gun, and after that the guest workers scattered, and his wife came down from the apartment, put him in a car and in a quarter of an hour they were already putting in stitches and sewing up the lacerations, but he didn't remember any

of that, he remembered the lamp, the mask, the white masks of the four swarthy doctors looking at him through slits, and then, when the light suddenly flashed on and the voices of his neighbors to the left and right came to him like the roar of a subway in his head in answer to the question "where am I," he woke up, and his first movement was to place his hand to his neck.

CHAPTER TWO

Illuminat

The luminescent pipes beneath the ceiling began humming and then buzzing when Fetsyk tried to tear his head away from the pillow – but it plopped back down like a heavy weight hitting the bottom. It was hard to move a muscle, and he discovered that he was lying on his side, though he'd already forgotten what position he'd been in when he came to. His stomach and back hurt. A nurse appeared, bending over and bowing to all of the sick men in the ward. But he couldn't see how many cots there were, just the nodding nurse's head and part of her face, a rounded cheekbone and virginal chin, and then there appeared two white – whiter than her uniform – hands, clamping down, and then he felt a prick, evidently she'd given him an injection in the thigh, and he finally got a good look at her face. Be patient, this'll hurt a bit, the stern words flew at him, and he saw her loving brown eyes, and the oval triangle of her face beneath laughing eyes.

Five minutes later she took away the bedpan. What time is it, he asked his right-hand neighbor, who answered: nine o'clock. So why is it so dark outside? Where the hell are you from, asked his left-hand neighbor, and the right-hand one started chortling: here in December the sun doesn't even come out til ten, and it gets dark starting at two – you hear this, Klavka, he's lost in time. But then he fell silent, because the rounds were approaching along the corridor, like a little boat with a white

smokestack, and the head doctor came sailing into the ward, while the first, second and third-tier doctors peered in from portholes. Angeline's coming, chortled his neighbors quietly. And in direct proportion to his gradual entrance, the ward was swinging around at a 90-degree angle, and stopped only when the doctor fixed his gaze on Fetsyk.

So, my patient, you have lacerations of the stomach muscles, the abdominal membrane, and the back muscles. It's a miracle the internal organs weren't hit. And only now Fetsyk saw that he was sitting with arm outstretched, its hand wrapped in a cotton gauze bandage. They also sliced up your hand, we put your pinky back in place. And you have alcohol poisoning.

This here's a nice one, he was raging the whole night, fell into delirium right on the table – the words came over to him from the corner – all beat up, he was falling down the whole way here before he finally passed out. Only now he had a good look at the man, with his purple face, crimson in places, with its slits for eyes and mottled reddish-blue arms hanging to either side of the cot. Now he's asleep, the anesthesia took effect, he's got necrosis in his foot tissue.

His left-hand neighbor brought supper, shuffling in his slippers across the smooth floor. They got good food here, he said. I had some nice broth with my bread, but this guy here gets fed through the IV, he fell off a crane at the construction site, been lying here for three weeks already. You got off easy, they put some serious stitches in you – deep cuts – but they all say the important organs weren't hit.

Monsoon

And the train was departing in four hours forty-four minutes. He wanted to light up, looked for the lighter and couldn't find it, but among the scraps he'd stuffed his pockets with he found a piece of paper folded into a square, which he unfolded and on it could be made out the crest of an unknown country, and then also these little numbers and letters – they seemed engraved – that made up his last name, his initials, the train's departure time and the date of arrival into his home city, but

twilight was already gathering and he couldn't make out the date, but it was there for sure, registered, that is.

On winged feet he leapt up off the bench and headed for the kiosk to exchange stickers for matches, but then he couldn't find the stickers and started to suspect that Mihas had made off with them. And he was walking towards the train station, it was so close by after all, but nothing doing – he'd been walking for an hour already, twenty minutes, ten minutes, and the station seemed to stay at the same level all the while. Then, feeling his strength, he went and galloped towards in with gigantic strides and still couldn't gallop all the way there. And three gravel paths led to the station, he was going along the central one, and all around the trees were darkening and it seemed that the branches were beginning to droop ever lower, and here was a pile of windfallen trees and great gnarled snags sticking up, the roots interweaving, burdock catching hold of his trousers at the ankles, and the park was transforming into a forest before his very eyes. And he sat down then on a damp hummock, and grew sad.

And he was sitting there on the hummock with his feet sticking out in either direction and suddenly sees that Fetsyk was sitting next to him on the hummock, and he stuck little curtains onto two bushes and came in from the other side, stuck his head out and said ingratiatingly: get a light from a firefly! And indeed, the fireflies all flared to life and he lit up, while Fetsyk went on talking to him, protruding out from the little curtains, but in such a way that only his legs and head were visible, and he said, so do you remember Val Crackerjack, he was sitting in a little armchair in my slightly dark – you know, like how beer is sometimes – little room, and suddenly he says – I see letters on the wall, and at first he got all agitated, and then whacked himself upside the head. I said, what are you talking about, are you totally cuckoo? What letters? And he was already rolling around on the floor, gripping either a file or a soldering iron in his mouth and mumbling away, I caught something like: give me a torch and a finger. Well, I obviously didn't even think about calling up the loonybin, I'm not that kind of guy, and I took it upon myself to fix him up. I told him, now I'm going to plug that file into the socket, and stick some solder in your mouth and pour resin in your ears so that

puss comes pouring out of you hot and steaming. Well, he quieted down right away, kicked off onto the bed and lay there till he got it out of his system.

But you know, continued Fetsyk, when the trolley is leaving from the Church of Christ the Savior, it seems that Christ the Chronometer is racing to catch it, but when the trolley's approaching, CC backs away as if an elephant with five heads and eight paws is shifting nervously from nave to nave. So then if a little dog gets hit by a car, then the church falls like a cardboard box, that is, like four cardboard boxes, one falling into the other. Hey now, take a peek at my inscription, my little tattoo here alongside thumb and forefinger, and he wiggled all of the little fingers of his palm, and on the tip of each one was a little mark, a little star. He was reading, reading the inscription, but it was like the accordion-folds of a bus, like the little trailer cars of a trolley, like trams being towed along, all of the letters flowed into each other and now it went dark, turned into blackness, and all around blackness blacker than the blackest night was encroaching, as if someone had spilled crude ink and he was drowning in it, and losing air, and in a second he'd start blowing bubbles.

And now the little bubbles started flying out like lavender-magenta spheres, and in each bubble there were little tiled houses, and in the houses little steeds and roosters, self-important and not at all wild, and there was ochre, ochre on the walls, ochre, oh crap, and the doors were thrown wide and he was thrown out, onto a bench by the train station, he lifted his head with half of it still asleep, but shook it off and looked at his watch, and the train was departing in four hours forty-three minutes.

The Hour Hand Flees from the Second Hand

And now he was going up the stairs, and on the third floor he heard Uncle Yura-the-boxer's voice, he recognized it from the first floor, when the intercom slammed the door with a squealing. And he climbed higher and higher, and got to his apartment, behind double doors, and went in, and crashed down to sleep. His mouser Muza settled down into his slippers and also slept.

But then, before he could start dozing, he cast half an eye over his pad, got up to go get something to drink in the kitchen, glanced into the living room and the bathroom and the toilet, and couldn't find her swaddled mummy, the one Miltosh had put in the middle of the room, it wasn't in any of the closets or on the shelves, not in the cupboards or the clock or the mirror. And then he rubbed his eyes with Gold Star ointment, treated his cuts and pimples with mumiyo and mercury chloride, and drank bergenia tea with a tasty piece of pie that Miltosh had taken a gigantic bite out of. He took off his watch with the little starlets on the darky-blue heavens in the shape of a rounded square, and wound up the alarm clock, and put his hand beneath the pillow, for the first while thrashed around and couldn't get to sleep.

And then sleeping he flailed around, he spun and whirled like a top. And then he saw that a woman in white was leaning over him and pulling him by the hand, and squeezing too hard at the elbow, like that time they were taking his blood in the hospital, and now she wanted to prick it so that his arm would go numb and fall off. But the right-hand nurse woke it and sat him down and took his left-hand palm into her own and embraced it like one clock-hand, and directed it now in a circle, now clockwise, then against the second hand, and traced little crosses and circles and stars in the air around his head, and traced him awake, like a hypnotist with silent lip movements, or a butterfly mixing soup with a ladle, and then he finally plunged into quiet healthy sleep.

In the Airplane

Tulipov climbed up the airplane ramp – after the ticket check, after check-in, after donning the little blue shoe-covers – even when boarding, no one had pushed or shoved. All he heard was the pure English of the crew's greetings and the security rules for passengers. The plane was soon dashing along the runway, and slowly and heavily, then lighter and lighter, it took off, and Tulipov didn't even have time to look at the groves and meadows, collective fields and state lands of his home country, before the plane disappeared from view. Only Tulipov's

shadow didn't fly off with him and remained on the ground, waving at him. Only she saw the gleaming point at its zenith.

It had begun back in the airport, this other, somehow unknown state, as if one were already between the sky and earth, and somehow this thought tensed and tightened the head, but it passed easily. Yes, and only now he, Tulipov, noticed that he was flying in this airplane completely by himself. Slightly on edge, he glanced out of the little porthole window and noticed that he was sitting in the emergency exit row. For some reason this distressed him, made him uneasy, what if the little door opened and he was burned up, shaved clean from head to heels by the cold and supersonic wind. But then his ears popped and a pleasant voice rang out, in Russian and English, saying that dinner would be served. The sky went bluer, growing darker, and a pile of pinkish clouds made him feel that the flight was happening upside down, good thing it wasn't brakeside down, thought Tulipov.

And then a special carriage came rolling up and dinner appeared, a foil-wrapped rectangular platelet with two wings flew out and opened up on its own, and after it leapt out the sauce, jam, butter – in the sealed packages that he'd loved since childhood. Having eaten his fill, he wanted to help clear up these capsules, but it seemed two invisible hands quickly took everything way and the little trolley clattered off.

He looked out the window, and even with a certain faith at the little door, and the food had calmed and even cheered him, and he felt satisfaction in his belly. Bored of looking out the window, since night was pressing down, he decided to read a bit of his favorite book and got out the old yellowish copy of Prishvin's *The sun's larder*, and found himself again striding through the sun-drenched sleepy bog, until he came to the hazel hillock, and then it was as if a couple of tender hands reached out and closed his eyes from behind the seat.

And at first he dreamed that he was dancing and singing with homeless ladies beside a burning trash barrel, and for some reason he was sticking out his left and then his right foot in time; then morning came and he was banging down the steel door of his friend Fetsyk's entryway, having called ahead, now we'll get there at three a.m., but he was calling from the guardhouse at the brick factory, and dashing from

there to the train station which was all lit up by dumpster fires. But now morning was coming and a woman on crutches came running past the entryway and asked him at the top of her voice: Did the Other One come running past here? And then he noticed Fetsyk's friend Cobra, who had woken up and was standing on the second-floor balcony and saying: Tulipov, go home.

And then he was running home and on the way ran into Benjy, who said to him: Tulipov, remember how you used to say that there wasn't yet anyone on earth who could get the better of Tulipov, well here he is, and from under his arm he pulled out a swaddled bundle of yarn on a carved wooden handle.

And there was no way he could run all the way home because the dive bars that circled his building in a perfect octagon and the public toilets had all been taken away and placed anew in one division, in one cell, in one field. And then he saw a mailbox flying and pouring out all its letters, like a helicopter scattering leaflets, and now he, Tulipov, was jumping and trying to catch that one cherished letter with its invitation to the audience, and he was tearing after it along the path and there was no way he could catch hold of it.

Speak of the Devil

Ah me, Cobra-Octobra, he thought, sitting on the bench, and covered his head with his hands, wanted a smoke but there was no exchanging those stickers for boxes at the kiosk – that's how it is, sometimes you realize you're missing something but there's no one around to ask for help, you went and slept through everything, even the train, and you've drunk your conscience away with Mihas the Carcass, but now Mihas went and split like the gingerbread man, cut and run, just try going to find him, find-blind, and where is Mihas now, and what can you do, that's the last we've heard of him.

Like that time, dragging along behind the consumptive's black coffin, and his black prickly beard had grown sharper and those eyes that used to gaze on the tops and backs of heads had now closed, and a

little old woman feigning woe dragged behind the coffin and wailed for no apparent reason – the coffin was on a sled – it fit onto a child's sled, and the dogs were barking. And there was a blizzard and the snowstorm stormed, and the factories of Kirov were black on the horizon and suffocating smoke was expelled by the full black sky.

Then the old lady wailed enough to get some vodka, and went off to waltz around the city, singing roulades of old prison songs, and eventually got all worked up and began to show everyone her shame; afterwards she crawled off somewhere under the scaffolding of an unknown building and spent the night there dead to the world, and the yellow buildings with pale-blue windows on Palace Street stood, and then for five minutes the sky cleared, and afterwards once again – snowstorm, blizzard, whiteout. In his head like gobbledygook sounded the heavy, unkind words of the evil woman from the conservatory: good riddance.

In the cemetery then they buried in a bare clump of earth, and drank vodka with shellfish, and turned dark and ruddy after a sleepless night in his kennel. And there wasn't even money for a horse, he had to drag the sled himself, not exactly like lying on a bier.

He'd been released home from the tuberculosis hospital a day before, allowed to die by tenderhearted doctors. In the hospital the hallways had been full of black people, and his bed was out in the aisle, and his chest only whistled, and he couldn't rasp out a single word, they all just coughed between themselves.

His buddy (remember, Cobra-Igobra), he'd picked up pneumonia in windy Moscow, then spent almost a month in the Meshalkin clinic, then his heart stopped the night of the 21st day and ceased beating in his sleep. Was it easy to die, see if you can find out, there's no one left to ask.

And a buddy of that buddy, in a black vodka blur threw himself off the tower of the Ark fortress in Bukhara, we'd been there once with my deceased mother, in that fortress, we'd eaten sweet apples, peaches and fruits. Our school hostel was circled round by a white wall, and later we would go off to walk around the city and the Uzbek men and women, resembling cotton flowers, were sweeping the streets with the

hems of their dressing-gowns, and we formed lines to get on the metro, but you didn't get in and got lost on the street instead, back then they still turned the whole town inside out looking.

Later you were standing in Karl-Marx-Stadt, where your father had been re-stationed, at a window thrown open by a storm, and you wanted to jump down out of terror, but a little soldier walked up and spoke with you until your mother came.

All of these thoughts were dashing pell-mell, revolving in Cobra's head while he stood on the bench, and suddenly he shuddered in fright, as if someone had stamped on a paper bomb five feet away. Before him stood Mihas, speak of the devil, his eyes bulging, a stifled "A-a" in his mouth and, breathless, waved with wobbling arms; he leaned down as if over a window and with a cry for help gazed at Cobra with black-red uncomprehending and questioning eyes. I got totally fucked, barely got away, after a few deep breaths, said he.

CHAPTER THREE

Milter-Millie-Milk Skin

Benjy came down through the entryway around two, carrying three bags of reeking trash to the dumpster; on the third floor two workers were smoking into the cat-shaped ashtray, and by the time he tramped his way to the second, they went their separate ways back to the apartments where they were working.

He cut across the courtyard, then the first school entryway, beneath the watchful sunshine. The trash started to smell, but he turned into the third courtyard to avoid repeating the path of the Komsomol column from Mylnikov's house, Mylnikov who'd been killed on the 1st of May in '89 and buried on the 4th. His classmates had carried the coffin on their shoulders then, but in the third courtyard Larisa's grandmother's coffin had once stood. In Mylnikov's courtyard there

was a girl in a brown jacket sitting on a bench, to her right a scruffy guy in a quilted coat and beside him, lying on a sled, the black mock-up of a little boy missing an arm. The girl, Mylnikov's girlfriend, looked at Benjy. Pansies were blooming in car-tire beds, and already starting to shed their blossoms. Three pigeons flew into the dumpster and he placed the three trash bags there. He was on the verge of tears.

The corps was marching. By the green cupolas he paid the musician. There were people everywhere, familiar and all amped up. In the metro, when he entered, a girl from his old kindergarten class walked past. He threw his Wings – pulled out from behind his ear and smoked all the way down to the filter – into a trash can.

The right-hand door of the chapel was open, as he'd noticed back at the four-green-horned Kriachkov building. Bypassing the underpass and incorrectly yanking at the handle, he went inside and placed three candles: for eternal rest, and remembered that he only had one parent – one for Nikola, and for his heavenly protectors – as he'd been advised.

But he felt like carrying out his intention and, having bought cigarettes, he still went into the dumpling shop in the yellow-red Khanin house. Clinking glasses with the plate, which held a lemon slice given for free, and looking at his watch, he downed a glass of Laplandia vodka. A Laplander lady and a Finnish girl – he did it again on the corner of Communist Street, where in his grandmother's former apartment, the last one, on the corner, a lightbulb burned on tiers behind transparent glass.

And when he was already at the corner of Ugritsky and October Streets, on the shady side something like wings started moving behind his back, and he took off flying above the city, sometimes descending, swooping in like a hawk, and he spread out latticed shadows, letting thousands of faces pass through his gaze, striding as two shades, leaving the brim of his baseball hat on the crown of his head, scanning all of the streets and intersections. He was looking for Mihas, but as the reader already knows, Mihas wasn't there.

A thermometer, old and black, hung in his great-grandmother's window, those same blinds at the Euro-window in the living room, the same October sunny square amber smoke seemed like melancholy

women gazing with quiet bright sadness, one of them smoking and breaking apart book spines, the other eating prepared pork in aspic. And it smelled like Job's tears, which he and his great-grandmother used to collect in the woods, and in the courtyard of the building that stretched out to cover the whole block the green and white garages were gleaming, the fans had fallen silent and the hundreds of U-turning cars moved evenly along forty-four roads, while all the cupolas shone gold above the boulevards, with an even, blinding but not burning light. And he was at Waterman and in the water dormitory, and at the Waterman swimming pool, and he looked up at the bronze back of the head of Lenin, about to throw a spare.

At the entryway Alevtina – former president of the cooperative – was whispering with Danya's roommate, but when he pressed his hand to the button on the intercom, Maria Alekseevna appeared; she did not immediately recognize him.

It was four, the cat was waiting for him, yawning, and as soon as the news started on the radio, and three Viennese chairs stood in the room, and his grandmother with her two daughters gazed into their cards, and it was very, very quiet, and the upper window was letting in fresh air, and once again there was an hour left till mother would get home, like in school. The ruble he'd been given shimmered through the hole in his pocket, and the sun, like a pool of yellow oil, beat against the window of the citadel with its blue cat's pupil.

Landing in Moonlight

Tulipov kept trying to catch the cherished letter and couldn't catch up to it, at that moment someone took their hands off his eyes and he saw that the emergency door was opening, and his seat was being shoved toward the exit, in wildest horror he tugged at a certain handle on his clothing, the one Fetsyk referred to as "ophetish," and gazed upwards, and saw the disappearing plane, and at that moment a transparent parachute opened, and he fell, and saw only one little star, immobile and unblinking, and then lo next to it another little

star slowly lighting up, while the parachute was already collapsing and covering him over.

And he took a long time to untangle himself from the straps, then saw that he was sitting in a boat tugging him along a swift canal, and heard the sounds of ever-louder music behind him, and the stars grew larger and seemed to drop large-caliber tears that soaked his cheeks, and he realized that he, Tulipov, was crying. The tip-top-stories of buildings were swaying in the water all around him, and in those buildings warders were gazing at him from the tip-tops, from their hatches, and all his membranes were shuddering from the music, and the leaf-shaped rustications were resounding and tracing penny-pikes in the air.

And the windows lit up, but they were closed with velvet curtains, and all that could be seen were little triangles of yellow light, and in them a hand with a ring, the hem of a dress, and he wanted to peer in as if through a keyhole, but he couldn't crawl up to the little window because the little boat was tugging him on further, and then they were coming up to a park all lit up, and there ascetics were swallowing alcohol wicks, and then he turned his head all the way around in a circle and saw, finally, that right before him in the boat was sitting a live yellow unstriped tiger, sniffing his beard and then his boots.

Then the tiger dragged him by his two pantlegs out of the boat and sat him down upright and said to him: Tulipov, wake up, look around. And he woke up and looked all around him, and saw two intersecting canals X, which were cut in two by the new little boat, so that they came together in the angle V, and then the boat launched out into a lake, and some man was holding a round lantern, and then the boat came to a halt in the middle of the lake, and the man dropped the lantern, and the moon flared up over the lake. And the man came out of the boat and said: Mr. Tulipov, I have been charged with accompanying you to the hotel, you are to have an audience tomorrow, you must get a good night's sleep.

And they went up the self-propelled staircase, came running out onto a certain floor, and opened up the first little door, and lo Tulipov was already sleeping, while someone carefully untied his shoelaces and gently took off his shoes.

Bamboo and Baboon

The dark-blue-fulvous sky above the high-rises – the sky swimming with petroleum – was only just darkening when the storm-clouds began to play at bouts-rimes. The streetlamp in front of the hospital burned. The neighbor to the right woke up and he and Fetsyk began whispering amongst themselves. I got no belly, no liver, no stomach, no spleen, but I'm alive, and they said I will be for some time yet. Tomorrow they're letting us out for our first walk. Only, they'd better give me my ophetish back quick, though Fetsyk, and noticed a familiar flannel shadow on the chair. What's an ophetish? – aw, just my shirt, my Fetisoff tee.

But they only let me out into the hallway. The one who had gone out raving, Raphe, he quietly woke up and listened, listened, then said: my dad and son died last year. First I buried my son, then my father. The boy had moved out to live with his mother, he got killed right by the front door of the building, and my father, my father fell down at home.

Yeah, what's your name anyway, Pashka, and you, I'm Sashok, and you, I'm Fedya, and him, that guy, who – me? The neighbor to the left woke up and whispered hoarsely, you can call me Petro. My dad too, almost the same thing happened as with yours, fell over with a heart attack, but then he got up and started thrashing around in the ICU, asking for booze and a smoke, they really had to work to get him back down, and then one of those, a psychologist came to calm him down. But he's still alive and back to smoking already.

I'm going to go off and do a number one, Fetsyk decided, and, swaying, looked out into the hallway. Only, in the nurses' station to the left and in the middle, where the nurse kept the pills in their white plastic boxes, there was Klava sleeping sitting up, so he turned toward the left-hand nurses' station. Where do you think you're going? You want your sutures to open up? And beneath his shoulder was suddenly her shoulder, when the ozone sparks started exploding in his head.

From here you're on your own, she said. Don't lock it, you'll get dizzy, and then he came out, staggering, and she led him, limped him

back to the ward. That's it, now go to sleep, no, I'm going to tell the doctor, she said, switching out the lights and casting a glance at the others, their blankets pulled up to their eyes.

My buddy's father died last year, Sashok continued the conversation, this buddy he lives in England, keeps a bar there, but he couldn't come back home – his wife wouldn't let him. And his mother said, I bought an icon, and they brought her some bamboo. And get this, the bamboo came back to life, but the icon split in two, right through the face.

Ah bamboo, said Petro, I know bamboo, you baboon! And right then rain began to rustle, as if someone had brushed against the Filipino bead-curtains in the hallway at auntie Nura's, and they went on whispering till morning, until the sun rose, and the wheels of the housekeeping nurse with her galvanized soup-pot and chipped enamel teapot came rumbling down one side of the hallway.

Bucket Number 15

When he saw Cobra conked out, Mihas steered off toward the train station to get tickets, but as he walked he pondered till he conjured: how about first I get some more wrappers, and he set off a little to the left, to the left and then – he turned completely to the left, and indeed, he saw – off in the distance the street widened and something was glinting there, like the wing of a dragonfly. And he quickened his pace, although he was waddling. And he paid no attention to the nameless streets, and they were already clasping him in their sleeves, and he found himself in a square where the buildings were like ears of corn, and in the middle of the square was some kind of statue wearing a pointed fireman's helmet and mustaches, actually huge mustaches. The mustaches were what was glinting. And all around shop windows, shop windows bearing treasures innumerable. Well, he broke some glass and started raking in the treasure, it was just like banking a fire, there were pearls and jasper and corals and gold.

He raked together a good pile, then went over to the other side and saw a smoke-shop, took a giant fine cigar there, and poured himself

a coffee from the coffee-pot, lit up, and then he saw cognacs of all sorts, and fruits. So he opened up his bag and stuffed it full, and suddenly heard a bell, like in the theater, went out – and it was the fireman blowing into his whistle, because the wrappers and labels were smoldering on Mihas' cigar. And people came pouring in from all sides with buckets of sand and stakes, coming right at Mihas, but Mihas-the-bass was slippery and quick, somehow squeezed his way out between the arms and legs, and yelled to the fireman – catch the thief! And himself ran off with a bucket on his head. Only then did they wake up to the fact that this bear had gone and set a fire, and on top of that run off with the loot, and they tore off after him and were roasting his heels with burning stakes.

But he fled, charging forward up hill and down dale, and flew between the two-storied houses, imagining the cries of the enraged crowd right behind him. But he sensed that the burning shit was still hitting the fan, looked down, and his sneakers were smoldering, and he started to stamp them and saw that he was stamping into foul yellowish hot dust.

And suddenly this dust flared up around him, and his footprints were ablaze, and he was tearing along like a house on fire, and he saw the bank of the creek, and barely, already at the point of total exhaustion ran into the water up to his waist and stayed there relaxing, how many hours – he couldn't say.

And he saw there was a little broken bridge, and twenty paces away a ford, and he crossed the creek and went into the forest, and sat down, short of breath, on a log. And he suddenly heard horses whickering, and on a bright clearing he saw a herd, and campfires and tents. And pretty Gypsy girls came out to meet him and stood all around him. And an old Gypsy woman came out and said, well, Mihas, to what do we owe the honor of this visit?

Slightly taken aback at the sound of his name, but shaking it off right away, Mihas said: I came to barter. And he got out the golden watch and ropes of pearls, and said, I want to trade these for Russian money. At that word the old Gypsy midwife Stara raised her brow, and winked her right eye, and whispered something, and seemed to make a salting motion with her hand.

And Mihas saw that twenty Gypsy men were standing around him, and tickling him with sharp long knives, and taking away the watch, the pearls, the sable coat, everything he'd knocked off in the city. And they tied his leg to a far-off forest tree, and to his other leg they tied a bucket with the number 15, and Stara tied the watch onto her round right dark-skinned wrist and looked at it, shaking it a bit to see if it suited her. Afterwards the tents were taken down, and the Gypsy men and women and little Gypsy kids withdrew in a friendly and businesslike manner.

But one little Gypsy came back and said, tomorrow we'll cart you off to the city to see you dance a bit before the people, and if you try to get pig-headed, we'll butcher you.

Gollywhopper

The little Gypsy left, Mihas pulled and jerked, the chain wouldn't snap; he pushed the little tree, and the tree wouldn't crack, as if it were a stake hammered into the ground. And the blinds weren't down in his self-closing eyes, like they were held up by twenty forest creatures, but they couldn't scare him. Then he rolled his eyes around and hey let's yell, let's sob out bitter tears. He cried out a creek's worth, but still didn't feel any better.

And he fell asleep, finally. And he dreamed of his grandfather, whose apartment he'd lain in after the old man's death, catching zeppelins from the window, and his friends came to see him, Tulipov, Fetsyk and Cobra, but he lay in the middle of the room naked, wearing only underwear, holding an unfinished bottle of vodka, and in the other hand a hunk of bread. And the little apartment's door was open wide, and the window was open. And his friends, attracted by the wild music, stood around him and watched in amazement. His grandfather stood for a while, said nothing and left.

And his great-grandfather came along and crossed the creek that Mihas had cried out and said: Min, get up, we'll cook up some fish soup, I'll give my steed some hay. And Mihas, like a needle lying in the

haystack, didn't turn a hair, his great-grandfather sent a shot up into the sky, then one into the earth, blew his nose and left.

And the middle brother of his great-grandfather came up to him, and coughed like shrapnel, and covered his mouth and nose with his sleeve against the gas. And he said, Miha, get up, I jumped out of the trench, come help me carry my comrades out of the minefield. Well, Mihas slept on and didn't blink an eye. The middle brother of his great-grandfather took up a handful of fresh earth, flung it down to the ground and left.

And his great-grandfather's older brother came to him, he swam across the sea that Mihas had cried out, and like a steamer-smokestack he boomed, get up, Mishka, the sea is burning with buckshot, put it out, let the comrades from down below rise up. But Mihas went on snuffling. Then his great-grandfather's older brother bing-bang-boomed like a mine himself, and left.

And his great-great-grandfather came up to him, deaf, white-haired, with a single black tress tumbling across his forehead. And he lit up a Bulgarian cigarette, and said: get up, Mishenka, but Mishenka wouldn't get up, and his great-grandfather spat on the floor, stamped his foot and left.

…

…

And he slept on. And his ancestor came – festers covering his hand, and a mole hiding in his beard, - more like a macule, and said: stand up, Mihail, onto the front with you, but Mihas wouldn't get up and went on snoring. The ancestor farted, as if shooting off a cannon, and left.

And further on he snored still louder. And then lo he heard an obnoxious squeakyish squeal, and a little mosquito came flying up to him, and squeaked to him in the highest pitch possible, guess the answer to my riddle, if you guess right, I'll unchain your chains and bucket, but if you try to swat me, I'll bite you, my name is Malariana.

Mihas swatted and missed, and the little mosquito bit him, and he found himself bound entirely, the paralysis tore through even in sleep. And then plop a thought dropped onto his head, like a biting flea, and he thought to himself, Malariana, you can't bite, because you are a Gollywhopper, a Gobbledegook, a Crane-fly and Water-strider!

And Mihas woke up, he was lying beneath a great oak, and an owl was hooting, and there was no chain, and his whole body still felt asleep. And he began to roll along the grass, around the tree, wore himself out good, then crawling, crawling, on all fours, squatting, doubled-over, he went on around the oak. And suddenly he saw before him his grandfather's tin cup and spoon, that he'd lost thirty years ago near Bolotnoe and gone looking for every year afterwards. And he picked them up, bent over to get the cup, and taxied off with it toward the bench, where Cobra was sitting, his head in his hands, his legs spread wide and sneakers apart.

And the train was departing in four hours forty-two minutes.

CHAPTER FOUR

Familyness

Benjy woke up in the middle of the night and discovered his left hand inside a guitar, and when he'd freed it, the strings began singing, and little Vlaha the guitar began swaying like a pendulum. An hour later two little starlets lit up around yesterday's big one. He woke up from the cold – in Larisa's apartment, where flimsy action figures were standing on a stool, sort of like those first ones he'd made out of molding clay after watching "Short Circuit," and which his friend had let melt down in the sun; on Larisa's bed there were woolen horsies, donkeys, canvas dolls, and in the next room her hefty grandmother was groaning and keening – he woke up and pulled on his sweater. In his sleep he'd been talking with his buddy, the one he'd parted from at the good store, his friend had run off to catch the Moscow-Irkutia train.

He woke up, ran to the store to stock up on "Until Breakfast" cigarettes, a Pepsi-Lite adorned with Sagittarius and Capricorn, wrote a few couplets, had a couple breakfasts, made a couple calls – it had

snowed in Moskav, and he started neatening up, because he didn't want to. He picked everything up, or more like lumped everything into small piles, and smeared the dirt across the floor, like always, cleared away the cobwebs, didn't touch the spider, he even got all sweaty, cried a little over his dog, no joke, the first time since January 31st of '99. He talked a bit to the birdies, made friends with a fly. And started to wait.

His mother came back first, drove away the foul fly, his auntie – second, they sat together, talked a while, had only just gone out into the hall when the doorbell buzzed, and came into the room right away, they didn't even let him greet them. Venus and Marina came in arm-in-arm with Maria Morevna. They sat and talked a while, recalled Benois' Madonna, and the Madonna Litta, whose reproduction had now migrated into an album and auntie's armchair.

Merry-Muza with her name-mate got spooked first and tried to bolt, and then Venus fondled her some, they wouldn't let him smoke, they looked at barefooted Princess Maria, auntie the doctoress informed everyone that Angelina's talk had gone brilliantly.

They drank some tea, he ate a piece of candy found on the floor just beforehand, they all ate some sweets, and little Mary-Maria took a bite of a gingerbread, a shaped one like in long-ago childhood, you end up with a chip, a fingernail moon, and see, there's a new lunar gingerbread in your hand. A photo for memories, young mama, and then Venus looked into his eyes like the she-wolf from the cartoon about Prince Ivan.

He went down to see them off and thought – nothing'll help, neither the muzzle of the cigarette behind his ears, nor the sweater that his buddy's wife had washed in the consecrated washing machine, nor the Sampo-brand Finnish matches, everything is just in your hands, your legs, your head.

And when he went back, he helped the neighbor lady from below take out her glass bottles too, then back up to the second, and just in case, he said to somebody – we have twenty seconds for everything, but he heard the back-and-forth calls of the sentries, the scouts and the patrols, and saw from the balcony a sea of signal flares.

No Way No How

Cobra leapt up like a little soldier from the bench as soon as he saw Mihas collapsing onto it, and turned all the way around. While Mihas caught his breath, Cobra began pondering a plan, but couldn't think of anything. Mihas had already frozen with a mug in his hands. Water, he asked. And then Cobra took the wet towel off his head, and squeezed out some water, mixed with sweat and the smell of beer. Salty, said Mihas.

Where were you, asked Cobra, and Mihas told him, laid it all out, the full confession. So where were you, and Cobra grunted in surprise, waiting for you here, good thing I hadn't left already, I dreamed that I saw Fetsyk in the woods. Where are the wrappers? – asked Cobra. No wrappers left, just labels. Well, let's go out into the world seeking charity. Only let's start out to the right this time. Let's get dressed up, do a little song and dance, and we'll go on singing, and do a dance. And they took the mug and went off to the right of the train station.

They walked and walked and people kept lighting, lighting lamps, and in this washed-out light behind the windows covered in newspapers, behind the dusty blinds, they could see one sad apartment with only a single lamp burning, a naked man standing there gurgling water from a teapot inaudibly. And in another apartment, across the way, unknown people were getting into bed, now they were stroking one another and lying there, suffering further. And the streetlamps were all bent over, standing there all random and alight.

But then they got to an intersection, and Mihas said, sit down and play here, and I'll do a dance, then I'll play and you dance. And Cobra tugged out a flexible blue comb, and here we go a-whistling away on the teeth through a scrap of tattered newspaper. And Mihas started off so miserably, but then every more cheery, cheery, and he was buzzing away through both nostrils, and making soap-bubbles through Cobra's little trumpet. But no one came walking by, no one came over.

And then they traded places, and Mihas took out his three-tiered harmonica, and harped on, honking through it, and Cobra started out tap-dancing, tapping his crown, then croaked out a little cuckoo voice, then cried out like a cock, and hurdled his knees up to the second floor,

but no one could be persuaded to tune in, no one would lend an ear, as if he wasn't reaching a single one of them.

And then they got down together, kicking up their heels, dropping into squats, blowing through their drippy nostrils like pan-pipes, and they bounced around the street, twirling head over heels, and from the next block over they heard a siren, scented the burning of a steam engine, and saw the train crossing in the pedestrian zone.

And then, just when they wanted to take off, they were hailed, and the heavy hand of a nasal, lisping big booby fell onto their shoulders, got out a silver ruble and beamed with rotten teeth, and extended a shaking hand, and pointed somewhere – at the comb, the harmonium and the trumpet, and the mug, and in exchange with its other hand showed four coins, and jerked its hand away, and again jerked it in its faint foolishness and even with a certain mockery.

And meanwhile the train was departing from the first track.

Slipper

Fetsyk put the tray on the cart, where just a second before a plate of gruel had been steaming, and tea, and turned into the hall, when he saw Petro, with tubes sticking out of his nose, dragging his IV, but he restrained himself from any questions. Petro reached out the ends of his fingers sticking out of the cast. Klava finished her shift and left.

On his cot he got out a book, turned a few pages and got into the story without noticing it. You've got guests, echoed a voice, and leaving, he noticed lying on Sashka's bed a little grain sack. Dried fruit, Fetsyk figured out by the smell.

They coming for me soon? – he asked his wife with her net bag, checkered in navy blue and black, like for a change of shoes. You mean, discharge you? – asked his wife. Tomorrow or the day after, whenever the doctor says.

They went outside and sat down on a grey bench, cool as a pillowcase, and she took his hand. The storm-clouds dispersed, a little sun peeked in and hid again. When they were walking out, there was a

breath of fresh breeze. They were silent awhile, not even looking at each other. She walked him back to the door, which closed, returning him to the world of hospital smells of medicine and kitchens.

The sun evenly lit up the length of the hallway from the nurse station, and even the little wheel of the cart in the operating room was sparkling. He stopped at the nurse's desk with the telephone and started examining the sepia photograph mounted below glass, where some men in hats and false beards were standing beneath an oak.

And he began waiting for evening, until the cinnamon-colored lamps were lit, and he fell asleep, forgetting the slipper on his foot.

Round Trip

Benjy woke up, this was the third time, instead of yesterday's three stars – one big one and two little ones – a cross without a nought was shining, and this cross was arranged like a little lilac flower, but the white kind, like an iris, a little asterix made of eight dashes. But when he woke up for the fourth time…

He and his mother went off to market for vegetables, they wanted to cross under the rails through the tunnel, but when they had thrown out the bag with the old blue coat, the newspapers and the trash, plus the box from the new TV, when they had passed the little hill where he used to play soccer with Danya, and then the pot of kasha blanketed the whole kitchen with smoke, where there was still a Lysva stove, a Mir fridge, which had all burnt up during the eight-house fire in Keys, when their summer kitchen had burned down too. Meanwhile his auntie was asking him to come help wheel the new oven into the dacha, because ovens had stopped driving themselves around long ago.

But they didn't end up going by the tunnel under the railway, which let out somewhere right on Viennese Street, where his great-grandfather with his sister and wife, and where the tram used to run.

And they made their way there, variously running across roads and crosswalks, keeping their eyes peeled for cars til they got to 905, where the market stood fenced off in the street. But what if the Riga relatives

called, the thought occured, and he regretted not going that time to see the well-remembered spots, the burnt-down, demolished buildings, at Kamenka, oh and by the First, Second and Third schools, at the outskirts of Soviet Street, where the laquered green kindergarten was, on the flip side of the Nevsky Church.

At the market a VIA song was playing, and old men and women, old ladies and not so old, were walking around and crowding into lines for the trucks, and it smelled like honey, Emirates tea and vegetables. He remembered that Anton, his Riga nephew, caught a fever in Tunisia.

Arguing with his mother, he put on his backpack, in such a way that people looked at them, but before that he had helped Miriam, her face turned toward him, on the second try successfully cramming cabbages into the bag.

After a quick lunch he dashed off to Lexy, having lost the change in various pockets for the beggar-woman, who for 12 years now had been singing: *Playse haylp, for God's sake*, and put fifty kopecks into her hand. She moved away, but not in a black, rather her navy-blue raincoat. It was a balmy day. There flitted by a girl's hair on a cheek, the automobile taxiing behind his back, toward the German visas, the edge of the Pentagon, a sneeze in the window of the Youth liberry, and further – shoe-heels stamped and heels flashed past the RegExeCom., past the street-cleaner slowly raking leaves, if only he could make it by two, before the screening starts at the Cinema. And already, maintaining the same fast pace, past the Nevsky Church, and along the left-hand edge of the gaze of the leader of the Revolution, who had pushing aside Red Street, he turned toward the theater.

But Lexy hadn't recorded the film, and the recording wasn't ready, and his triune wife and child had gotten sick, and he was looking with the eyes of an oncoming cold. Too bad you're not coming to the screening, yeah, gotta run, stuff to do. But he needed to make a call.

And striding slowly, so that the sun, which he was running after in his race against time, was now scalding and roasting his spine, while he walked slowly past the street-cleaner, now gathering up the leaves into a black barrel on a cart, past the vegetable market by Sverdlov, past the RegExeCom, where he and his dearest friend had fought on the front

steps one dark night, and where he had first lost control over himself, and not only didn't stop after someone cried out "his nose is broken," but only after the security guard had roared, do you know where you're fighting, from the steps of the RegExeCom, and how afterwards they took him through the dark-blue-ruddy night from the First Clinic to the City Hospital, and the split by a direct full-force kick lip of his friend, and the violet-colored mornings by Kirov, where the Stalinist communications center had burnt down. And heading there, beyond the market, where the number five trolley was headed, and where Nickit and Rez are, past the Mayakovsky monument and the Poker bust.

And his friend's grandmother, who died 5 months and nine days ago, and his prayer for the dead for nine days in the graveyard, and the final half-glass of vodka. And baba Liza, who uncle Yura had found a week afterwards, there was no telephone, he had come back from a business trip, and the shade Danya saved from the three-shaded chandelier, the one that fell down onto the couch cushion.

And the same underground passageway Schrei had run through, a teacher at the First School, after goosing him, and disappeared before the turn.

And further on the familiar young and cheerful monument to the Leader, with a bird sitting on his crown, and a bird sitting on the fur hats and Budenny hats of the ensemble, and one on the lady worker's corn-ears, and the bare cheek-bone and eye-ball of the statue, whose skin was gleaming in the sun.

And the park offset around the statue, where they'd stood, his kindergarten, one fine April day, and had looked at the dark-blue shadowy stripes of the branches, and the soft cracks, where he had fed one of the birds then, and two deaf beauties, putting out their unfinished papirosen.

And the beggar woman *Playse haylp, for the Sake of God* in the tram on the way back, and a little more change in her plump hand, and the hemp smell in the flower kiosk, and the Lombardo security guard, stubbing out his butt, and Ogorenko, carrying out construction materials and coals at the first entryway, and four smells coming from auntie Nura's apartment, tobacco, tea, coriander, onion and egg.

A Round Down the Block

Hearing the bell in the farewell air, the nearly-taken-aback Cobra and Mihas seized the dummy on both sides and dragged him along down the block, letting just the tips of his sandals bounce slightly along the ground, and they ran down the street for a long-long time till they reached the crossroads, fearing the train would either run past or run them over.

And so they ran to the bare-planks crossroads, but it turned out to be scaffolding for the tram line, and it wasn't a crossroads at all, but a viaduct. And they seized their blockhead for help, and ran like harnessed sled-dogs through the viaduct, but it twisted 90 degrees around and they found themselves on a staircase, and banged his head down every single step, but it didn't hurt, because he just tinkled with laughter and didn't understand all the way.

And they ran all the way to the building of the East-West train station, and they were buying a ticket, but a line of four people formed in front of them and the tickets were taking a long time to process. And then their turn came, and Cobra fished two dark-red passports out of his pocket, his own and Mihas', and they shook four silver coins out of the moron, which was exactly what they needed for two tickets.

And they burst out of the little station, but the train had already left, had flown past four stations, and now the footboard of the final coach was right about to slip away from under their feet…

Protection of the Virgin

As is said in the Maykop, the May First chapel, the Pentecost-Friday Krasnoyarsk chapel, take off the bright shroud and turn it to white brocade, and may the cut of your garments be light, protect us all, who have been and not been, in your most holy hands, o Blessed Mother.

Amen.

CHAPTER FIVE

Luggage Crate

Now they crawled up onto the footboard, while the cretin flying after them on suspenders was also crawling into the train-car after them. Inside they had just dimmed the lights, everyone was getting ready for bed, see, but here was one free compartment. They got settled, set the fool on the table, and began to arrange their things, in anticipation of the ticket collector checked their tickets, travel insurance included, and started looking out the window.

In the window, which darkened as they watched and gradually began reflecting the compartment itself, they saw the beginnings of a bridge across the river, and they felt it under the feet, the wobble. Their feet felt the light bridge rails of the construction, like sled runners, as if they had to drag it and ride now uphill, now downhill.

And forgetting the fool, they laid down to sleep, but then they were riding out past the middle of the bridge when they heard the noise of the approaching ticket men, that is, ticket lady, before they could even manage to fall asleep – didn't work.

And the ticket lady came into the compartment and asked right away, what's this scarecrow business you have here on the table? Where's his ticket? It's bad enough you didn't order bed linens and are fouling up this clean, soft leather compartment, you also had to bring that thing with you. Dimwits.

But Mihas piped up. We'll stash him in the luggage crate, there's holes there, right? Well, the ticket lady hesitated, and then said. They're unhooking this car at the first city after the bridge anyway, go ahead and stash him, let 'im ride. And they put him into the crate and were already taking the lid off its hook when they saw that it was their friend, also named Benjy.

Shave and Wash

And Benjy was glad, grinning ear to ear, hearing not a one of Mihas' and Cobra's curses, who were swearing amongst themselves and giving him a good tongue-lashing, and they were wrangling with the ticket lady too, he recognized them and, beside himself with joy, was trying to embrace them and leap out of the luggage crate.

And the ticket lady said to them, wash him. Ha, let him wash himself, like we should wash him too, coddle him good. Well, give him something of yours to wear, said the ticket lady, let him sit in the WC for now. And Cobra found some soap, and Mihas found slippers, scissors and an electric razor, and they suddenly saw that Benjy was watching them with understanding and appreciation, which made them very confused, and then terribly annoyed, and they burst out in friendly guffaws. Here, get soaped up, cut your hair, wash yourself, change your clothes, Benjy, and you have 5 minutes to do all of it, because after that they're locking the toilets, well, ours is the last one they close, so maybe you have like five extra seconds.

And the hour-hand had evenly completed its circle in a loop, but not a noose, when Benjy returned coiffed and shaved, in half-and-half Mihas' and Cobra's clothes, and threw his rags into the trash bin, and took out a pack of Primas from his pocket and said, I saved this, Cobra, you gave it to me when we parted, and took out a bronze lighter, and said, I saved this, Mihas, from that time when I stole it from the reception at your place. Oh, but I searched everywhere for it!

And the train was already approaching and it was starting to get light, and the contours of their familiar home city were becoming faintly visible, as they saw looking out the window of the vestibule of the last car, taking deep drags of their Primas and letting out the smoke through six nostrils.

And then when it was already close to ten they rode into the train station, and got off the train, and saw Fetsyk coming up to meet them.

Train Station of Daydream Insurrection

Fetsyk threw himself up out of bed and remembered that he was supposed to be meeting someone at the train station, but who exactly he couldn't remember. In his checkered bag he found his duds and even sneakers laid in by his wife, quickly got dressed, groomed himself a bit, and while the new nurse and security guard slept, exhausted by the night shift, he quietly scampered out of the hospital and leapt into the first tram, which carried him down along five long streets, ejected him on the sixth, and swung away toward the Konstantinov battery.

Meanwhile, Petro, Sashok and Pashka were pretending to be asleep, all the while keeping one eye on him. They had cobbled together a sleeping potion and added it to the supper-pot, then hid in their wards, assembled in chambers, and while he slept, held a war council. And for the time being they refrained from a decisive answer, having resolved to dig in their heels.

And Fetsyk rolled up in the tram and strode into the Insurrected Train Station, walking carefully as if by instigation or just by intuition and came out by track five, platform of the seventh streetlight.

And he saw them coming toward him from the uncoupled train-car, hanging back a bit til everyone else had gone past, his buddies, his cronies – Benjy, Cobra and Mihas.

And they saw the motorcade driving right up to the side-track, and watched as a beauty came out, a singer-songbird-czarina-damsel, and watched after them a long time. And in the train station coffee shop, Benjy planked down from his tattered pocket the fifth silver ruble, the jubilee gold, and started to tell his story.

Little Door, Waggon, Bed Curtains, Drappe, and Two Hands

Tullipov woke up and stretched drowsily, and saw that he was draining cherry juice from a wine glass, while invisible tutors were arraying him, prettifying and dressing him up.

And after breakfast and café with a little cognac they left the house with the little roof-ridge and followed the Maltese with its tiny tailet across the mother-of-pearl bridgelet, and then got into the waggon and flew off with a little breeze.

And the pearl stringlet led to a tiny castle, and down along the lightning castle they descended to a little tower with five golden, silver, bronze and dark-sky clock-faces.

And they landed on the unruffled carry-on surface of the little lake, and beneath the sun they slid towards the vestibule with its dark-blue bed-curtains.

And they passed through the curtains as if through a turquoise blueprint, knowing the taste of oxygen and prussic acid in-and-out like muscadine. And they could see a little gingerbread door there, and Tulipov reached out a hand and opened it and saw eyes unhanded, weaned by slender arms.

Benjy's Story

I flew but down from the cell cloud
Now Benjy's told it all out loud

October 2007

My Father, the Miner

Valery Zalotukha
Translated from the Russian by Raisa Shapiro

It was fall, early and cold – it even seemed for a moment that my mother's tears had frozen on her cheeks, though I know that couldn't have been the case, it wasn't cold enough – no, I mean, of course it was cold, but not *winter*-cold, and anyway, tears don't freeze even in winter. There probably were no tears. They had to run out eventually. For the two weeks I'd been home, she'd cried and cried non-stop, and now she was crying again.

When someone cries like that, you say they're sobbing. She was sobbing tearlessly, silently, wrapping me in her arms and pulling me closer. It made me uncomfortable. Everyone stopped and stared at us and no one went into the carriage – they seemed to forget they were supposed to board the train. My mother sobbed and said something quickly, a lament, something like, "My sunshine, my joy, what am I going to do without you? What am I going to do," as if I'd already died and wasn't right there in front of her.

My father reassured her, tried to calm her down, and eventually started cursing – first at the crowd, then at my mother. After that she quieted down and let me go, and we climbed the steps into the train car. We went to our compartment, set down the suitcase, and looked out the window. My mother was still standing there, staring up at me, her head tilted back. It was fall, early and cold.

My mother's scarf slid off her head and lay there on the wet, dirty pavement. The wind ruffled her uncombed hair and the hem of her old unbuttoned raincoat. My father gestured with his hand, indicating that she should pick up her scarf, but she didn't understand and kept staring,

staring at me, standing behind the soot-stained window pane. And when the train lurched forward, she started to run, like people run alongside trains in the movies, except she wasn't doing it right, it was off somehow – she was plain, my mother, and graceless.

And when the pavement ended, she took a step, like she was descending into an open cellar, like there wasn't any ground under her feet, and she fell just as gracelessly as she had run, waving her arms. My father saw this (I saw my father see this), his face twitched, he shot up out of his seat, pulled the door open with a jerk (I saw his face in the mirror on the door), and stormed out.

I was left alone in the compartment. I sat down on the leather seat. I looked out the window. It was raining outside. The rain left long quick-flowing trails on the glass and scattered cold droplets on everything outside the window: on the sad leafless trees, the gray two-story buildings, the darkened slagheaps, the small smoke-blackened factories, the soggy rain-distended ground that had long since grown used to being patient.

But in our compartment (I liked the word "compartment"), it was warm and cozy. The car swayed gently, the wheels clattered, and I wanted to ride and ride like this for the rest of my life, listen to the clatter of the wheels, and look out the window forever. What a life that would be! You could even climb onto the top bunk and look out the window from up there – so I did just that. I lay on my stomach and looked out the window, then rolled over on my back and stared at the plastic ceiling for a while, then tried to switch on the light but the bulb was burned out, and then … my father came in.

"Lying about, gathering dust," he said in a tired voice. "Let's pick our beds, then you can lie about for as long as you'd like."

I clambered down and sat on the lower bunk. Of course, now I really *could* do whatever I wanted – my father probably wouldn't even yell at me. But I had a healthy dose of fear about him, even disliked him, although he didn't beat me. (Actually he'd lashed me with a belt three or five times, but now he wouldn't even do that.) Regardless, I obeyed him and sat on the lower bunk, across from my father.

My father was silent. He was thinking about something. I knew, of course, what he was thinking about – or rather, what he could have

been thinking about. But maybe he was just sitting there and staring at the table's smooth plastic surface. There was nothing for me to do, so I started examining my father, trying to be discreet about it. I liked to observe people in general, and especially liked observing my father as he shaved. He would boil water in a teapot over the electric stove, pour the boiling water into an old half-liter glass jar, a really old one – it had gone grey from dried soap and there was shaved hair stuck to it. He would dip the shaving brush in the water, swirl it around on a piece of home-made soap in a dish, and lather up his face.

Then he would take the razor and start to shave. His beard grew quickly and his hair was coarse, so he found shaving difficult. I'd sit on the other side of the table, behind the mirror, and watch my father pull faces (he wasn't actually pulling faces, of course; it was just easier for him to shave that way). I found it hysterical and would always start pulling faces myself until he chased me out.

And now I was sitting across from him and examining his face. My father's a miner, so his face is sort of gray – there's no real comparison for that color. His lips and chin are standard-issue, except for the scar above his lip. A colt split the skin there with its hoof when he was still little and lived in the village. My grandmother (my father's mother) thought his entire face would be disfigured, but it was fine, it healed, there was only a scar.

My father's nose was big, slightly hooked, and his cheeks were big, but his eyes were small. Well, not that small – they were just deep-set and hidden, so deep-set you couldn't even make out what color they were. His eyebrows, meanwhile, were big and bushy with a reddish tint (whenever mother was in a joking mood, she'd call them red cockroaches). My father's forehead was large and straight, lined with three deep unbudging wrinkles. His hair was ordinary, mostly gray, but still thick and coarse. He was constantly combing it back, and it was constantly falling forward.

I had examined all of him there was to examine. Outside the window it was already dark, and there was nothing to do.

"You want something to eat?" my father asked.

"No," I answered.

"Come on, you'll be hungry later."

"You go," I offered, "and when I get hungry I'll come too."

"Alright, stay here, I'll be right back."

He left, and after a while the train stopped and two people entered our compartment: a man and a woman. For some reason they didn't have any bags with them, except for the small purse in the woman's hands.

"Hello," she said.

"Hello," I said.

But the man didn't say anything, he just helped the woman with her coat.

"You by yourself?" He asked this so unexpectedly and with such malice that I shuddered.

"No, with my father."

He said nothing and began easing the woman's coat off her shoulders. The woman sat down and looked at me. The man sat down and looked at me too.

"And are you and your father going far?" he asked.

"Very far… to Moscow. We have a whole night left."

"We're getting off soon," he said and looked out the dark window.

"Do you live in Moscow?" the woman asked, smiling. (She was beautiful and I liked her immediately: her face was white, with a birthmark on one cheek, her lips were bright red with lipstick, her eyes were large and luminous, and her hair was a luxurious chestnut under a shiny headscarf. The man I didn't like: He had a bald spot. He wasn't old, but he was flabby and mean. People like that are always mean.)

"No," I replied. "We don't live in Moscow. We live in a settlement, where the mine is. My father's a miner, so we live there, right next to the mine." I wanted to keep talking with the woman, so I continued: "We're going to the institute to see Professor Novikovsky, have you heard of him?"

"No, I've never heard of him," the woman answered, smiling again.

"He's a famous doctor, an oncologist," I explained. "The doctors found out I have cancer so we're going to see him for an operation." I wanted to talk to her more, so I told her the truth. I saw how her face

had changed, as I knew it would, because I'd seen it happen lots of times. (When I told my father I'd overheard the nurses talking about me in the hospital, heard them saying I had cancer, he forbade me from mentioning it. But everyone in our building and everyone on our street knew I had cancer and that I'd been sent to Moscow for an operation). I knew what the woman would say. She'd say: "My God, you're just a little boy."

"My God, you're just a little boy," she said and started shaking her head, gazing at me. "How old are you?" she asked at last.

I replied that I was twelve and that I was in the fifth grade, except this year I hadn't gone to school because I was in hospital – and then I understood that I shouldn't have told her the truth, because now there was nothing left for us to talk about.

If I'd been a grownup, we'd have probably discussed the disease, the nature of it, how earlier no one had even known it existed – but with a kid, what was there to talk about?

"Where is your father, anyway?" the man asked.

"He went to get something to eat in the dining car, but I wasn't hungry."

He fell quiet and the woman said nothing, just kept looking at me and shaking her head.

"Maybe you should go join your father," said the man.

The woman have him a displeased look.

"Uh-huh," I agreed. I got up and left the compartment. The man shut the door behind me and clicked the lock.

"Why did you do that, Vasily?" I heard the woman say. "You shouldn't treat a sick boy like that."

"But I've waited so long for this day, Lera," he said, the words tumbling out like a tongue-twister.

"Doesn't matter. You shouldn't do that."

"But Lera…"

"And besides, a train! You should've rented a hotel room."

"Have you lost your mind? Everyone in town knows me. This is the only possible place and we only have an hour."

"No, I can't do it here. If we were alone…"

"But we *are* alone."

"What about the boy?"

"He won't come back, don't worry."

"He'll come back. I can't do it like this."

"Come on, Lera, don't be stubborn, you promised, and I've waited so long…"

"It doesn't matter what I promised. A woman can promise a lot of things."

"But Lera!" he almost shouted.

Then they stopped talking, but a little later she spoke again, taking a different tone. "Can you really not understand how hard this is? I'm a mother, I have a family. Do you not understand that it's my first time doing this?"

"I have a family too," he shot back, offended. "Don't you think it's just as hard for me?"

"Hard for *you*?!" the woman asked.

"No, Lerochka, darling, you misunderstand me," the man pled.

She burst out laughing, loudly, so loudly that it seemed the doors to all the compartments would swing open and the people would spill out. But the doors stayed closed and the people stayed put. Her laughter died down, becoming soft and tinkling. I edged away from the door and set off toward the dining car, to my father, trying to keep my balance (the car was rocking violently). My father was at a table. In front of him sat a plate of sliced pickles, a glass, and an empty transparent carafe. He caught sight of me and his mood seemed to lift.

"Son," he said, "I was just getting ready to go look for you. Come sit down," he indicated the seat next to him. I sat. "Are you hungry?" he asked and immediately added, "What would you like?"

I didn't want anything, so he ordered for me, flagging down a passing waitress. "Grapes. Three kilograms… And another 200 grams," he said, pointing to the carafe.

The waitress nodded disapprovingly and soon brought us the grapes in a paper cone and the carafe of vodka.

"We have to stay here for an hour," I said.

"Okay," my father replied, for some reason accepting this, no questions asked. He poured himself some vodka and downed it. (My father drank like all miners, which is probably a lot, but he got drunk less often than the others.) The grapes turned out to be delicious – huge and yellow and sweet. I tore them off the stem, popped them in my mouth, and looked out the window. It wasn't raining anymore – we had passed the rain already. There was only the black sky and the pale winking stars. The train clattered along, softly and steadily. There was no one but us in the dining car, or maybe it just seemed that way to me, I don't remember.

"Dad, tell me a story," I said. My father was startled. This was the first time I'd ever asked him to tell me a story, just like that. He hadn't fought in the war because he'd still been a boy then. I was wildly jealous of the kids whose fathers had fought in the war and would now tell them all sorts of stories. What could my father tell me?

He was quiet for a long time. Maybe five minutes, maybe ten. Maybe longer. His large square palm lay motionless on the table. His hands were covered in all sorts of scars and scratches. Sometimes I asked my father about them, but he didn't like talking about that and would snatch his hands away. I ran my finger along one long thin scar and asked, "Where's this one from?"

"What?" He stared uncomprehendingly at his hand. "Ah, this one – this one I got when I was your age. We were sneaking onto some old man's property, old man Grisha, to steal apples from his orchard – he had these big juicy apples. But one time he'd been watching and waiting for us, and caught one of the guys. I went for the fence – but it was topped with barbed wire. I grazed my hand coming down the other side."

"And these ones, on your fingers?"

"These…" my father reminisced. "That was in the mine. Don't you remember – I stayed home and worked on the bulletins? A hunk of frozen dirt broke off and got me – first my nose, then my arm. Yeah, that was in the mine," he said definitively. And then he put his hand on my shoulder and pulled me close, really close. We sat like that for a long time.

When we returned to our compartment, there was no one there. My father brought sheets, pillows, and blankets and made our beds on

the top and bottom bunks. I was afraid that he wouldn't let me sleep on the top bunk, but he didn't say anything. It was nice on the top bunk. I burrowed under the blanket and imagined myself on a deserted island, in a warm little hut with a thatched roof. Then I remembered the man and woman and wondered where they had lain, on the top bunk or the bottom.

Then I thought about Tanya, the nurse from our local hospital, where I had spent a long time. She loved me a lot, more than she loved the other kids on the ward, and I loved her too. I told her I'd marry her if I didn't die… I thought about death a lot. Sometimes I was scared, sometimes I wasn't. It depends on how you look at it. Death is when you don't exist. And I didn't exist before I was born, either. Does that mean I was dead? Well, that wasn't bad at all. But on the other hand…

I woke up just before dawn, looked down, and saw my father. He was sitting at the table, gripping his head in his hands, hard enough that his fingernails had turned blue. I heard him howling, quietly and bitterly, the way I imagined wolves howl when they're surrounded and about to be killed…

And then I fell back asleep.

In Moscow they ran lots of tests and Professor Novikovsky pronounced that I didn't have any cancer, after all, just some nonsense that wasn't even worth mentioning.

At the station, as we were leaving Moscow, my father was drunk. He walked along the platform kissing our train, its dirty sides, the doors, the windows. Everyone stared at him, pointing and laughing, but he just went on kissing, kissing, kissing... My father…

February 27, 1975

SPECIAL FOCUS:
THE PROSE OF ELENA SHVARTS

A Few Words on Elena Shvarts

Thomas Epstein

Below is a modest selection of the Russian prose of Elena Andreevna Shvarts (1948-2010) in English translation. Shvarts, it should be said from the outset, is best known as a poet. Indeed to the reader of contemporary Russian literature Shvarts is considered one of the leading poets of her generation. She herself insisted on her poetic vocation and on the unique nature of the poet's work. As she wrote in a short essay, "A Poetics of Living Spirit":

Essentially, poems mediate between the intellect and the super-intellect. Like a tool or instrument, the poem assists in the discovery of a form of knowledge (beyond philosophy and logic) that cannot be obtained by other means. The poem can go anywhere – it can soar into the heavens, bore into the bark of a tree or down into the flesh. No longer obedient to the will of its creator but to its own logic and music, the willful poem obtains its image by fastening onto an object of interest.

While prose for Shvarts was a more humble tool (it always came after poetry, was justified *by* poetry), she did nevertheless write a lot of it, and in an impressively wide variety of genres: from the journal she kept – and ultimately preserved for posterity – beginning at age eight; short fiction and personal essays in her late teens and early twenties; several longer narrative fictions (one of which is in the selection below), the first of which she wrote at age thirty; a profusion of unconventional autobiographical-memoiristic-essayistic prose (not infrequently about poetry) that she regularly engaged in during the last twenty years of her life; a 500-page biography of the Italian poet Gabriel D'Annunzio

published in 2010; finally a novel she was actively contemplating before the fatal illness that cut this idea short.

The selection below draws on several strands of Elena Shvarts's prose legacy. The first piece is an excerpt from *Face of the Visible World* – the selection includes nineteen of its forty-six sections – comprised of a cycle of memoiristic miniatures. Exemplifying Shvarts's writing as "poet's prose," this piece gave the title to her 2003 prose collection, published by Limbus Press and winner of a Gogol Prize. Although firmly anchored in her real-life experience, the work is a multi-layered, non-chronological mosaic of memories recounted in extraordinarily dense and laconic form. Three intertwined subjects predominate: childhood memories in the narrow sense, almost always associated with family members; life as a poet, from her pre-teens to the 1990s; and life with mother, the privileged personage who unites the entire piece and, in a real sense, centered Shvarts's actual life. It is here that we get glimpses of life in Soviet Leningrad's literary underground (underground meaning the culture that evaded the coercive systems of Soviet literary legitimation, defined by submission to censorship and direction from above, emblematized in the Writers' Union). Shvarts was a leading figure in this underground or "unofficial" culture. We also see how tragically typical was Shvarts's family experience – Stalin's Terror (her grandfather executed, grandmother imprisoned), her mother's subsequent orphanhood, accidental family and families, finally miracle: the story of Shvarts's mother, Dina Morisovna Shvarts, whose talent, charisma, and persistence rocketed her to the heights of the Soviet theater world.

In an important sense, the fate of the mother determined the daughter's. As chief dramaturg at Leningrad's most famous theatre (the Bol'shoy Dramaticheskoy, or BDT), Dina Morisovna was in everyday contact with leading figures in Leningrad's literary and theatre worlds. Thus Elena Shvarts's innate literary genius became known in artistic circles at a very early age (by the time she was thirteen). This precocious revelation, and nuturing, of her poetic gift more or less determined the course of Shvarts's visible life: with her mother's financial, intellectual, and moral support (Shvarts lived with her mother, including during Elena's two marriages, until her mother's death in 1998), Elena Shvarts

devoted her entire life to poetry. Everything for her was a catalyst for inspiration or its absence. It was this gift and burden that made her seem so "strange" and unpredictable both to others *and to herself*. The frequent unabashed egocentrism of the poet and the prose writer; the confessions alternately sublime, grotesque, occasionally tawdry; the scandals and the spirituality: all of it comes from a sense, first learned before age ten, that she was less a "person" than a vessel for an awesome Mystery that transcended herself and the world.

The other two pieces are more explicitly literary and fictional, although the short story titled "An Odd One" is in fact part of a cycle of non-fictional miniatures (seventeen in total) describing Shvarts's experiences at international literary festivals beginning in 1989. Or not exactly *Shvarts:* at the outset of the cycle she tells us of her decision to use a "not I" or literary double, whom she names Tina Diamond, to narrate. "An Odd One," as you'll see, takes this personage to the boundaries of the real.

The last piece, "Concerto for Literary Assistant," was Shavrts's final work of sustained prose, written in 2007. In part homage to Gogol and an addition to the Petersburg text of Russian Literature, this admittedly dark tale of human emptiness and betrayal is simultaneously the funniest, most generous, and light-hearted of her prose works. And don't miss the 'cameo' of little Lenochka herself (you will recognize her from the description in the section "Modes of Transport" in *Face of the Visible World*).

For those acquainted with Shvarts's poetry (she has had two books of poetry in English translation published, both by *Bloodaxe*), the prose initially sometimes comes as a shock: an Apollonian-Pushkinian calm and clarity of vision from a poet more frequently associated with the ecstatic and Dionysian. Yet in spite of the relative simplicity of her prose syntax, the restraint in her lexicon and diction, and the laconicism of her story-telling, Shvarts's prose is subject to the same "poetic logic" that governs her often wildly imaginative, rhythmically extravagant, multi-dimensional poems. While the prose and poetry are not one, they feed and comment on each other in important and fascinating ways.

From *Face of the Visible World*

Elena Shvarts

Translated from the Russian
by Thomas Epstein

We are such stuff as dreams are made on . . .
Shakespeare

The Angler in Childhood

When I was about eight I dreamed of being a fisherman. I remember a tattered volume, "The Young Fisherman's Handbook" or something of the kind. What exhilarated me then (and for my whole life) were words – in this case fishing nomenclature, which to my ear sounded with sharpness and antiquity: ide, chub, and lure. . .[1] Whiskery fish – catfish and burbot – especially enchanted me… At the same time fish blood, fish skin and scales – indeed everything about a real fish – slightly nauseated me. In childhood I hardly ate any fish, and I positively detested meat.

I began by saving up for the fishing rod, then begged for additional money from my mother and aunt, and spent a long time eyeing lures and sinkers. Although I didn't understand what attracted half-blind fish to them, I was fascinated by their shimmering colors, glistening like Christmas ornaments. Leading a small band of fisher-boys into a store I finally bought the fishing line. Everything was ready.

Morning came. With the bamboo pole slung over my shoulder I set out on my expedition, promising my communal apartment neighbors

– and everyone else I met along the way – that I would share my catch with them. There were ripples on the Neva. Leaning over the parapet with my pole I cast the line into the water, staring longingly at the sinker in hopes of a bite. I used bread for bait. From what I had learned, when the sinker began to bob I should yank on the line. But nothing happened… Tedious hours passed this way, until Mama[2] finally came to see how I was doing. Finding me dejected and shivering, clutching my – empty – pail, she said, "Time to go home." But I was ashamed to return so ingloriously. "We'll fix that," Mama said. On Kalyaeva Street there was a fishmonger – she entered his store and returned with a large pike, which she fastened ceremoniously to my hook. From that moment I swept down the street like a conqueror. Some didn't believe I could have caught a fish that big in the Neva but others did. As I entered the kitchen of our communal apartment I sought out the astounded glances of my neighbors and triumphantly tossed the fish on the kitchen table, no longer myself doubting that this was my catch: with a kind of inner vision I could even see the fish leaping out of the Neva waters directly into my hand, soaring in an arc.

Several years later a relative of mine, Uncle Lyosha – he lived in the Far East, was a real hunter and fisherman – took me fishing on Lake Kavgolovsky.[3] We rolled on the lake's steel-blue waves for hours as he fished and fished, not infrequently yanking on his pole to toss a panting, palpitating fish into the boat's stern. The fish smelled of mud, slime, and death. Uncle Lyosha was having a great time, he didn't want to stop. I finally was able to convince him that we had caught enough. Ever since then the very idea of fishing has nauseated me. Nevertheless I still find Sergei Aksakov's classic "Notes on Fishing" a pleasant and congenial read, as if it had no relation to baiting hooks and the murder of fish.[4]

Mode of Transport

As a young child I had the habit of suddenly refusing to walk any further. I would just sink into the snow, unwilling to budge. No matter how much mother cajoled I lay there mute, full of childhood defiance.

In the end she'd have to use her foot to move me down the street – and sometimes for a long distance. Rolled like a log, I alternately faced upward into the sky and down into the snow. Passersby jeered at me.

It seems I was born to roll and tumble. Once, returning home from a friend's (Layma's) house, I slipped on her seventh floor step and tumbled down the stairs. On the narrow staircase I quickly gained momentum. Bundled in a winter coat and wrapped in scarves I couldn't move a finger so let myself plunge, strangely unperturbed. On the small narrow landings it seemed my body turned on its own and my revolutions resumed. Finally one of the guests took it on himself to leap the stairs, catching up and rescuing me.

I also have a distinct memory of a time when Mama and I were walking home from the bathhouse on Tchaikovsky Street. Black-framed portraits of Stalin (I was thus not yet five) hung everywhere, even on the walls of the bathhouse.[5] Merry and energized from the bath I gripped Mama by the hand, skipping and humming. Suddenly she tugged hard at me and whispered, with a kind of guilty and gloomy bitterness, that I had to stop, I must stop – otherwise jail.

On Redness

This happened at kindergarten summer camp. Having fallen behind my classmates I was wandering alone out behind our dormitory when I suddenly came face to face with a rooster who also appeared to be wandering aimlessly. Slightly smaller than me, his plumage was orange, violet and red. Our glances, at the same level, met and froze in a cold stare. Then, abruptly, the rooster's body quaked and he charged at me like a bull (except that this one was red). I turned tail and took off, running on the red-brick path as fast as my legs would carry me but certain that he was gaining on me – he would overtake me and peck out my eyes. Terrified I lost my balance, scraping my knee on one of the bricks as I fell and covering my face with my hands. Because of the scrape I too was turning red – the color of everything perilous.

The rooster took a victory lap around me and departed.

A Horrifying Metamorphosis

Mama decided to tell me about the life of Peter the Great. Inspired by its drama, she began waving her hands in the air, staring ferociously and wide-eyed at me. She leapt around the room, demonstrating to me how large he was.[6] Planted in a corner of the couch, I listened raptly as she told me about how he had built St. Petersburg and constructed ships. She was nearing the end of the story when she mentioned that Peter had killed his own son, the Tsarevich Aleksey. I was shocked. "How did he kill him?" "Like this!" she shouted, reaching toward me with suddenly sinister hands. "He strangled him." As the merciless hands came closer and closer to my throat, my kind and attractive mother was transformed into a cruel and grim monster. At that moment a terrifying thought raced through my mind: everything up until now has been a deception, now begins reality, now the end is here: everything good in the world was just pretend, a sham. I shrieked in fear and horror, a kind of fear and horror that I never felt before or since. Laughing, my mother succeeded in calming me but it was a long while before I felt like myself again, before I could put the horror of that instantaneous transformation out of mind. Since then I have always suspected that the true face of the world is like that: cruel, smiling, merciless, and majestic.

The Fan

When I was about nine I became a hard-core soccer fan and got into the habit of riding to the stadium by myself on the water ferry. I liked to sit as close to the action as possible, amid the spectators' shouts and clouds of swirling cigarette smoke. My neighbors were surprised to have me as a confederate. The useless white moon – like a melon seed – rose above the players running across the field, rose above the stadium itself – it was like the negative double of the power that riveted our feet to the ground and our eyes on the ball.

My Uncle the Boxer

Leonid Shenkman, my mother's cousin, was a famous boxer. A two-time champion of the Soviet Union. His further progress, however, was thwarted, for two reasons: first, he was Jewish, and the government was unwilling to allow him to go abroad; second, the Soviet Union was campaigning at that time against knock-outs in boxing, and Lyonya was a knockout king. He lived in Moscow but when he came to Leningrad for a bout he always took me to the fight. Berta[7] would iron his silk trunks and then he and I would head for the Winter Stadium. I sat among the spectators, swelling with pride: after all, that boxer was my uncle! In the huge stadium I watched him bob and weave in the tiny ring, exchanging loud, powerful blows with his opponent. He was victorious every time I was there.

Then his star began to fade. He visited once on my birthday, his nose broken after a defeat, and tried his best to joke and laugh – but he wasn't convincing, even though he was happy by nature.

The Key

Once, returning home after school, I was walking down the hall of our communal apartment, absent-mindedly jingling my house key when words suddenly began to materialize in time to the jangling of the key. Entering my room, I lay on my bed without getting out of my school uniform (comprised of a brown dress and black apron), listening to the words flowing inside me. Then I began striking the key in time against the bed's small iron posts that were crowned by round steel balls.

I have spent the rest of my life in something akin to this very state of mind – in expectant anticipation of chiming words.

Dress Rehearsal

Oh my God, those endless previews! The last run-throughs before opening night. I began going to them as a schoolgirl, continued

as a college student, and didn't stop after I was out of school. Mama, ever anxious during this period, would stand near the box-office with a handful of tickets that she would distribute to critics, theatre people, friends, and always to two very strange-looking gentlemen whom she called 'the omens.' They always showed up for tickets when word got around the city that the BDT was mounting an interesting play.[8] Abstracted and gaunt, they resembled escapees from the ward of a mental hospital.

My favorite moment came just before the curtain rose. There was a mysterious, gentle blue-green shimmer in the air, and the curtain's folds seemed to wave slightly. Some talking was still audible in the hall, whispering back and forth, a final rustling of programs. I would look up to see Mama and Tovstonogov[9] in the Director's Box. As a rule he would soon disappear but Mama always stayed – standing – for the entire performance. Watching the audience's reactions.

I usually watched the play relatively unemotionally. If I did shed tears (and it was rare), I did so sparingly. However on one occasion I sobbed uncontrollably, which drew Mama's shocked attention. It was during a run-through of Thornton Wilder's "Our Town," directed by Erwin Axer. Half the action of the play takes place in a cemetery, in conversations between the living and the dead. When I saw how the main character – played with expert other-worldliness by Lena Popova – rose from the grave and spoke in sorrow to her living beloved who could not hear her, I was unable to bear it: I broke out into loud desperate sobs, covering my mouth with my hands. Looking up toward the Director's Box, I could see Mama staring back down at me, surprised and gratified.

Conversation at the "Cabin"[10]

I was fifteen years old when I stood looking into Anna Akhmatova's large bright eyes. By this time, however, they weren't seeing very well. Seated with her back to the window of the famous "cabin," she motioned behind with a large, majestic hand that

resembled the gathered gutterings of a very large candle and said, "Get me my glasses." Being a proud and touchy teenager I took these initial words of our acquaintance as an insult. Instead of taking the glasses that were being offered through the window by someone's hands, I muttered under my breath, "Get them yourself." The glasses were brought out to her. We sat facing each other. Wearing a sky-blue raincoat and slight in stature, I had something Chinese or perhaps Japanese about me. (Within a year Tostonogov was to say of me: "Lena has started to look like a Japanese Princess.") I had been reading and writing poetry for a little over a year now, and in my overheated brain I had erected a cult of Tsvetaeva, Blok, Bely, and Khlebnikov (the works of the last two hadn't been re-published for decades[11]). I also adored Akhmatova, she too was for me an object of veneration, the last sacred relic of a great era.[12] I had felt certain that she would share my passion for Tsvetaeva. Hadn't she written a "Letter to Marina"? Akhmatova asked who were my favorite poets (although I could have arranged to be formally introduced to her through mutual friends, I had simply approached her gate and asked for permission to show her some of my poems). I answered "Tsvetaeva" and held out a short, worshipful essay about her that I'd written. Tsvetaeva's work had only recently been brought back into print,[13] and I was sure this event had brought joy to all. Anna Andreevna looked at my essay and commented scornfully: "She lacked taste." Her words shook and shocked me, and I mumbled in a faltering voice: "Taste is not the most important thing in poetry. And what exactly is taste, anyway?" She asked me to repeat what I'd said, and I repeated myself in the same half-intelligible manner. The conversation was turning out splendidly: she could hardly hear what I was saying while I, at this period of my life, spoke softly and not infrequently contradicted myself.

"And your poems?" she asked. I handed her a few typed pages. Her attention was immediately (and naturally) drawn to a poem – a rapturous and ridiculous one – dedicated to her. Among other things the poem said that there was no need to pray for her: the angels and God would take care of that.

"What?" she exclaimed angrily. "You're saying I shouldn't be prayed for? On the contrary: all Russia should pray for me! And you are calling on them not to pray."

Seeing that she did not – and did not want to – understand the flattery expressed in my poem, I stood up, outraged and offended, and took leave of her without a goodbye. Reaching the gate I turned back and saw her watching after me, perplexity and suspicion in her gaze.

I cried all the way home and immediately burned the poems dedicated to her.

Another Fleeting Encounter

There was yet another occasion when I dropped in on someone uninvited. At age nineteen, in profound spiritual turmoil, I set out unexpectedly – both to myself and others – for Koktebel, in the middle of winter. I didn't in fact care where I was going. I took no belongings, only a string bag in which I put my cigarettes. The Crimean ground was covered by a thin layer of pinkish snow, but the sea nevertheless pounded away, green and icy. Except for a few athletes in training, there was no one in Koktebel'. I rented a room in an almost empty and poorly heated hotel-dormitory, causing me to move the heavy metal bed close to the barely functioning electric heater. At night the soccer coach, with vodka and salami, tried to talk his way into my room. Fearing that he would end up knocking the door latch off its hinge, I sat up half the night with a pen-knife in hand, listening to the sounds of the sea.

It must have been out of boredom that I went to Voloshin's house, where I made the acquaintance of an already very old Maria Stepanovna.[14] She showed me the house, which at the time was being converted into a museum, and I saw the sculpted head of Tiye.[15] Maria Stepanovna served me tea and read poems of her beloved "Max." The next day I headed home. Even as the bus was pulling away a young man came running full-speed out of the museum, waving his hands, as if he wanted to tell me something.

Prehistoric Poetry Readings: A Brief History

The readings were almost always held in people's homes or apartments. I rarely read in public, at most once or twice a year. Some years I didn't give a reading at all. At the end of the 1970s things began to change, there was a kind of renewal: I began to be invited to Moscow to read in various artist's studios and literary salons. It was at this time that I made the crucial acquaintance of Mikhail Shvartsman and his wife Iraida. It might seem that this relationship has nothing to do with poetry readings but in fact it does, because this was my first experience of authentic selflessness and devotion. As Shvartsman was an artist striving for the new and the spiritual, part of his genius was expressed in a kind of estrangement and aloofness, or rather – in non-participation in this world, in total avoidance of the inessential. I myself had the same Romantic notion but it was important for me to see it in another person and in reality (others are in general more real to us than we are to ourselves).

Many more people gathered for readings in Moscow than they did in my hometown, but as a rule the Moscow audience understood poetry less well and was less responsive. Because the poetry of Petersburg was livelier and more diverse, its listeners were more refined and sensitive. Of course there were exceptions. Once in Moscow Olga Sedakova and I read together (her friendship and understanding of me were a priceless gift of fate)[16] in the mansion of an extremely successful artist. Rumor had it that he kept a white stallion in a stable in the inner courtyard.

Back home everything was considerably more modest – usually readings took place in someone's studio. Before the reading the hosts would give the reader something to drink. As soon as I placed the typed pages on the lectern I felt myself becoming a different person. To me, a poet reading has always seemed a kind of priest. The poem's music should permeate the poet's entire being, should course in the blood, moving hands and feet. It's similar to Steiner's theory of eurythmia but very difficult to carry out in fact. Actors don't succeed at it. Although a poet's reading may have an element of acting, it is of a different order. If at times I seemed to myself to be putting on an act, it was usually a

result of a kind of suspiciousness about myself. Later in life I realized that human beings, when extremely ill or at life's most tragic moments, often seem to themselves to be pretending. In some sense all individuality is a kind of pretending, or dissembling; but it is a precondition of existence.

During those readings someone would always tear up in rapture. If no one cried, I would consider the reading a failure. I had one remarkable acquaintance, a poetry lover by the name of Solomon Davidovich Tsirel'-Sprintson. He was already over eighty by the time I knew him but he was still extraordinarily spry and youthful, a former mining engineer who had spent nearly thirty years in the camps, a friend of Akhmatova and Arbenina.[17] For my readings he would erect a special platform in his apartment, a small stage on which to read; and before the reading there would always be an armful of fresh roses floating in the bathroom tub.

My first official public reading took place in the stagnant year of 1974, thanks to the efforts of the poet Ira Malyarova, who at the time was directing a series at the Writer's House on Shpaliarnaia Street, called "Evenings of Poetry and Music." The usual fare consisted of singers performing famous arias and romances or official poets reading from their government-approved work; but Ira was trying to slip past them at least one of the "unofficial" poets. (She would soon be chased from her post because of it.) In any case, she had succeeded in having me approved to read, ten poems and no more. As I was scheduled to be the last reader I arrived a little late and, to my great surprise, the crowd inside the room was already so large it was impossible to squeeze into the room. Someone alongside me asked: "What's up? Is there going to be dancing?" A voice from the crowd inside the room answered back, "Lenochka[18] is reading today." Suddenly terrified, my entire body literally shook for the one and only time in my life. People were crowded on the stairway leading into the hall, and in the hall itself they were "hanging from the rafters"; and it wasn't a small space, the hall could seat about five hundred people. I read ten poems and only ten, refusing to yield to the loud cheers for more (afterward Malyarova praised me for my resoluteness). Waving my hand at on one point during the reading I had inadvertently knocked a small bottle of vodka (to buck me up) from the platform on which it had been placed – although in my inspired

state I didn't notice it, the bottle had flown through the air and landed at the feet of the eminent critic Lydia Y. Ginsburg,[19] who was seated in the front row. At the very end of the reading a man – who had the look of a KGB agent – stood up and proclaimed, "It's too bad we didn't suffocate her in time." But in fact it wasn't yet too late. I am not referring here to the unpublishability of my work in the Soviet Union but to the explicit threats of prison I received following their publication in emigré journals. Having lived through the arrest of her own parents, my mother was terrified by this prospect. However, the only material consequence was the government's forbidding her to travel abroad with the BDT. When Tostonogov approached the authorities to find out why, they informed him: "She's done a bad job raising her daughter."

I had no further public readings until the advent of "Club-81." I can still remember its opening night, filled with the dread that we would all be arrested on the spot.[20] It took place in the Dostoevsky Museum, in the same auditorium in which I later had my first extensive one-person reading (in two parts), the first such reading in Soviet history for an "underground poet." Many people said that "Club-81" was in part the creation of the KGB, conceived on the model of the Zubatovsky clubs[21]; but I can't see what the KGB had to gain in giving a poet such as myself the right to read in public whatever she wanted.

Before "Club-81," all readings were in homes and apartments – about twenty people would show up, they would listen, cry, and then drink. I rarely went to other people's readings because in fact I seldom went out at all. Igor' Burikhin[22] had a remarkable way of reading, or more exactly, of chanting his poems; indeed he chanted or sang them in a virtually liturgical manner – that is, a deep spiritual ardor sang out *through* him.

I Punish an Anti-Semite (Severely)

It was toward the end of a mostly monotonous party at an acquaintance's apartment: suddenly in walked a boisterous and exuberant artist-type who immediately set to determining the ethnic identity of

everyone in the room. In me he recognized a half fellow-countryman (my Cossack blood), the discovery of which launched him on a rant that landed well beyond the banks of the river Dnieper. Then his glance fell on a young Jewish girl and his eyes glowed with excitement, like a falcon sighting a hare. "And you: you're a Jewess!" he exclaimed, delighted with his own perceptiveness. When she didn't deny his assertion he started hurling insults and taunts at her, saying that all Jews were vermin, parasites. People tried to calm him, to get him to quiet down, but to no avail: in the end the young girl ran from the apartment in tears. The now self-satisfied victor stretched out on a sofa. Seized by rage, I went looking for a weapon of vengeance and found it in a teakettle that had just come off the boil. I grabbed it and poured boiling water over his stomach.

He jumped up shouting, threatening to kill me but people came between us … The anti-Semite had been punished but I didn't feel happy either.

A Love Child

Every time that Sofia Markovna Yunovich – a premier set designer and friend of my mother – called for her but found me on the other end of the line she never failed to retell a story, in slow and painstaking detail, that often brought me to tears.

"Le-noch-ka," she would begin, pounding out each syllable. "I was at the train station to meet your mother on the day she returned with you in her womb. She was radiant with joy, bathed in a halo of bright light. I think that's why you were born the talented poet you are."

Mother too always told me: "You're a love child." Sometimes, at wit's end after one of my escapades, she'd mutter: "Cossack blood." It's true that she returned pregnant with me from a beach resort in southern Russia (apparently I was conceived at the seashore on an August night). There she had a passionate and stormy romance with my father, whom she never saw again (I never saw him). Yet from all appearances he was deeply in love with her, tried to get her to come to him in Kiev – although, truth be told, he never mentioned that he was already married (this she

only learned later). He even had the insane fearlessness to propose to her. An historian by profession, he had spent the just-concluded war years in command of an entire regiment. In childhood I yearned for my father, for the idea of my father; but then, at age thirteen, finding myself in Kiev, I called him. At the other end of the line I heard a female voice, telling me that he was out walking with his daughter. From that moment on the yearning, and the desire to make contact with him, disappeared. Looking back now I think I was lucky to have been raised fatherless. Later, already in early adulthood, I had a dream about him. Wearing a white shirt he said to me "I am your father," and then jumped out a window. I wrote down the content of the dream and the date: years later I learned he died on that day.

Later still, in adulthood, finding myself in Kiev with my mother on one of the theatre's tours, I arranged to meet with my father's younger brother – my uncle – at our hotel. Pretending to be a graduate student I mentioned my connection to the Soviet historian S. B. Okun, who oddly enough had directed my father's dissertation and was also the husband of one of my mother's closest friends, Angelina Korobova. ("Why do they all look so familiar?" she had wondered after the dissertation defense. "Why do they look like Lena?" She didn't yet know who my father was.) My uncle, by now old and jovial, came dressed to the nines. He spoke to me playfully, petting my dog and telling me his cat had only recently died. He confessed that the cat's death had perhaps been harder for him to bear than his brother's. I waited a moment and then said bluntly, staring into his eyes: "Your brother was my father." The shock seemed to turn his very eyes white, there was a long silence. "You look like him," he finally spoke. He asked me not to tell his children, so as not to cloud their image of him. He also said: "Don't judge your father by what you see in me." Then he shared their family history with me: three brothers – two professors and one laborer-alcoholic, although the last had the best health of the three – who had been raised in a shack by a poor widow.

Their mother had been a beauty, the daughter of a rich man who got the crazy idea to give her hand in marriage to the first suitor who could drink a full bowl of vodka and still be able to hold a rational discussion about business. Rich men, self-styled Adonises, muscle men: all lined

up to drink their bowlful, all fell under the table. Only one, Emelyan Dzhezhula, was able to drink it up and calmly continue the conversation. No wonder he turned out to be a horrendous alcoholic who drank up all his wife's dowry and then died, leaving her with three little boys and not a cent.

Ancestors

On my mother's side – the Jewish side – the most distant ancestor I know of is my great-grandfather Aba, who worked as a blacksmith (a very rare profession among Jews) in a brewery in Kovno.

My grandfather was politicized early, he joined the Bund and was forced to emigrate at age 17. He lived first in Germany, then in France. Having myself recently been in France, it's strange that it took me a few days before I remembered that my grandfather had lived here. He returned to Russia, volunteered for the army, apparently was among the troops that stormed the Winter Palace, then served in the Red Army in Siberia. At that time my grandmother was working as a nurse in Siberia. It was there, in Barnaul, that my mother was born. My grandparents marched with the army, at the rear, pushing my mother in a baby carriage to which a live chicken was attached – their only worldly possession. For a time they had a dog but it was left behind by a train on which they were riding. They often remembered and lamented the loss of that dog. In 1937 my grandfather was executed and my grandmother arrested. Berta adopted my mother and her sister, for which Berta was kicked out of the Communist Party. Berta's fiancé, in fear, broke off their engagement. My grandmother only returned to Leningrad from exile ten years later. Since she was not granted permission to live in the city, we moved with her to Soltsy.[23] I was two when she died. I loved her intensely and remember her well in spite of how young I was. By then we had returned to Leningrad, onto Kalyaeva Street, and my grandmother was sick and in bed. I turned and looked at her, she gazed back at me. This is my earliest memory. When her second eldest daughter, my Aunt Rosa, gave her injections I would raise my tiny fist at her, believing she was

torturing my grandmother. Her suffering and love imprinted a deep and almost unconscious but nevertheless intense pain in me. After her death I donned my hat and went to the door as if we were going to visit her in the hospital. I stood under the door handle as if waiting for someone to open it. No one moved but neither did they ask me to stop standing at the door. Finally Berta said: "She's not there." "But she'll be back?" "No," Berta answered, lowering her eyes. I didn't ask again but I understood. My grandmother had had another daughter, her youngest, Lilia, who had survived the war but died at age sixteen on Liteiny Prospekt when she lost her footing on the running board of a moving tram. I was in part brought into this world in exchange for her death. Having failed to wait for Lilia to come home on the day of her death, my mother forever hated it when I was late so I made it a practice always to call her in such cases, from anywhere.

My great grandfather on my grandmother's side was a tailor from the village of Rositsa, near Vitebsk. I even have a photograph of him, taken with his entire family. In it he's wearing a large round hat, has a long beard, his gaze solemn and stern. I don't know from what tribe or stock he descended. I hope from King David. One of his distant relatives was a rabbi.

On my father's side I know of an ancestor who lived in the 17th century. God knows how many generations back that is. What I do know is that a certain Dzhedzhali, brother of a Crimean Khan (they were all Ottomans, that is to say of royal blood), fled the Crimea to serve Khmelnitsky.[24] He became one of Khmelnitsky's colonels, the highest rank in the Cossack military. I read in Kostomarov[25] that in the Hetman's temporary absence on important business my ancestor Dzhedzhali was given the opportunity to take his place. Being a wise man he declined, while the officer who stood in for Bogdan was beheaded as soon as the latter returned. Afterwards my ancestor sinks into historical obscurity, his descendants intermingling with Ukrainians and – I've been told – Gypsies.

Thus it's possible that while Khmelnitsky was busy slaughtering Jews with fire and sword, other ancestors of mine were fleeing in terrified bewilderment from him. Such a mixture of blood… My inner

contradictoriness and desire to argue with all and everyone, including myself, likely has a genetic basis.

I Beat a Blind Man

Grigory was blind, extremely sharp-witted but venomous.[26] He had the reputation for being a poetry connoisseur. He also had the ability to recognize people from far off. Sensing me he would point a finger in my direction and say: "Something's dripping." This got on my nerves. Moreover, he often called me at home just to denigrate my poems or to say something repulsive. This went on for years.

One evening (it was on Krivulin's birthday), during the most tempestuous period of my life, I found myself face to face with Lena Ignatova, to whom I owed an apology for my behavior during a recent scandal …[27]

Falling to my knees I apologized and asked for her forgiveness. Upon hearing my words I immediately felt a certain falseness in them. Lena nevertheless forgave me, we embraced, and were still on our knees when Grisha acidly commented: "Ah, forgiveness … on bended knees … I know these two brilliant poetesses!" Jumping up I shouted, "No you don't know any brilliant poetesses!" Suddenly recalling all his dark, insulting phone calls I slapped him across the face – once, and then again and again. For everyone in the room except me the underlying cause of the outburst was a complete mystery.

People tried to pull me off him. Seized by another wave of fury I lunged again at Grisha. Now enraged too, he punched out furiously with his fists. Three men finally managed to get hold of me, pinning my hands behind my back; but a young woman came up to them and began to accuse them of "torturing" me. Startled by her accusation, they momentarily relaxed their grip. I lunged at Grisha again … I don't know how it would have ended if not for the arrival of a friend who convinced me to leave the premises.

There exists a Gnostic school that teaches that the soul must live in a multitude bodies, until it exhausts all joys and all sorrows; until it

commits every possible sin and carries out every righteous act. If beating a blind man is among then, then it will surely take a very long time to complete the list.

Rage

In my youth I had the strange ability to arouse extreme, irrational wrath in strangers. Once in a bathhouse in Tbilisi I nearly had my eyes scratched out by a group of old and ancient ladies, all because I apparently stepped into the wrong pool. They were upon me in a flash, with terrifying grey claws… Another time, on vacation with Mama in Yalta, I went to the market to buy some things and tried to enter a store that was just closing. I stuck my hand between the shutting door and its frame in order to find out why the store was closing so early. The vendor seized my hand, squeezing it, and I used that squeezed hand to try to punch him in the face. Opening the door he and a few of his fellows began to thrash me but good, almost fracturing one of my ribs. I tried to give it back to them in kind, enraged by their incomprehensible and unjust violence. I escaped with my life.

Scenes from a Life

My husband Zhenka's[28] insane jealousy was the cause of innumerable drinking bouts. During one of these profligacies he nearly strangled me to death; his hands circled my neck, my tongue began to swell, and I was already turning my thoughts to God, acknowledging the imminent end, when he suddenly unclasped his hands. Later (well after the ambulance had left) I asked him why he hadn't finished me off. "Because I remembered how good a poet you are," he ingenuously answered. Sometimes he even kicked me. I would throw him out of the house but later would forgive him, God knows why.

One time my friend Nika[29] and I were going to visit some friends, and I didn't want to take Zhenka. Drunk and agitated, he accompanied

us uninvited for much of the route, several times trying to stomp on my foot to make me limp and therefore give up the idea of going out. At last he succeeded in stepping on the big toe of my right foot, twisting the heel of his shoe as if he were stomping out a cigarette in rage. He achieved his goal – I was now limping (moreover, the injury proved to be permanent) but I didn't change my plans.

Vampilov[30] was at the party, and so we sat together. On the other side of the room sat an unbearably tedious couple. They sat endlessly, silent and sullen. At last I couldn't take it anymore: I grabbed a pint bottle of vodka off the table and hurled it across the room, landing just above the couple's head. Pandemonium broke out, but at least the boredom was broken. Vampilov took me aside and asked, "What's with you? You're young, you're pretty and talented – why the rage?"

I could have told him that I was behaving like a Zen Buddhist; that I was trying to disrupt the gloomy boredom, the falseness of a mechanical relation to life. Because life is neither boring nor gloomy; the people around us are ultimately a kind of miraculous vision, or like clouds that pass, never to return. Come to think of it, Vampilov himself disappeared sooner than most of the rest of us – he wasn't sparing of his own life. Or perhaps I threw it because powerful forces were stirring within me, unable to find any other way out.

A House-Spirit[31] *Disturbed*

One time my poodle Yasha and I were wandering in the forest around Kostroma when we happened into a meadow of sunflowers at the foot of an abandoned Ukrainian village situated on a hillock. There we found two peasant huts in ruins but with their stoves intact. Next to one of the houses stood an astonishing Chinese apple tree, gone wild and covered with tiny red apples. Below us the forest stretched as far as the eye could see. Curious, I entered the hut, wondering who had lived – and perhaps died – there. Apparently I awakened the house spirit.

On the way back I walked along the edge of the forest while Yasha, alarmed, ran ahead. Suddenly someone sneezed just behind my ear. I

sped up but this invisible something caught up with me again, sneezing mockingly. I didn't leave it behind for quite a while.

The Tram

Mama often recalled how when she was still a very young girl she and Papa were riding somewhere together by tram. When their stop came Mama absent-mindedly remained while Papa exited. Suddenly Mama found herself completely alone on a tram crammed with hurrying people. She didn't know what to do, she felt lost and forsaken. But at the next stop Papa, gasping for breath, burst in through the open tram door. He had run the entire length between stops, catching up with the tram. I like to think that this seemingly insignificant event is the very model of the loss I have undergone and the future reunion on which I am counting and of which I have no doubt.[32]

An Odd One

Elena Shvarts

Translated from the Russian
by Thomas Epstein

Wherever I gave public readings – whether in Copenhagen's Glyptotek, on 30-something street in Manhattan, or in a Serbian backwater – he was there: a peculiar but particularly attentive listener. His eyes, heavy and plum-colored, reminded me of a French hare. But he was Georgian. His facial expression was uncanny: simultaneously alert, aloof, and yet blazing with a wild and fiery astonishment. At last he approached me (this was in Finland) and said, "My name is Alexander Karloff. Yes yes, no need to laugh: I am a distant relative of the famous horror actor, and I am just as horrifying. What's alarming about me is that I love poetry more than anything in life. You know better than I do that poetry is dying. I completely agree with what you said during the reading: poetry has undergone a cataclysm. Free verse all sounds the same, the miracle of poetic individuality has almost completely disappeared, and the music of verse is in decline. I myself don't write poetry, I never have. But poetry is the most important thing to me in the world and I want to see it continue. I have no doubt that poetry is eternal, now and forever. Some authentic poets do remain out there – I agree they are few, but there are some; and you were wrong to say that they only write in Russian. I am not a poor man and I want to organize my own poetry festival. My intention is to invite the world's greatest poets, whom I have ceaselessly sought in every corner of the globe. Would you be willing to take part? I am counting on it." "Where will you hold it?" I asked. "And will I be paid?" Truthfully, I didn't care where it was to be

held: I just wanted to travel. He answered: "I consider myself a world citizen, I live for travel. This festival (yes, let's call it that) will be held not on dry land but at sea. In the ocean to be exact, somewhere off the west coast of Ireland, on a ship I own." "Are there funds to get me there? You know, I am not a rich person," I answered, already deliriously happy. "Of course we'll pay. Do I need to send you a formal invitation for the visa?" "You do, yes. I'll be waiting for it. What's the name of the your ship?"

"Twilight," he answered.[33] Dusk was falling. As he headed in what seemed the direction of the Gulf of Finland (was his ship awaiting him there?), he turned back to gaze at me one last time, his strange heavy eyes rolling pensively in their sockets. I received my invitation in early fall and in October landed in Belfast, which was swarming with soldiers. At the airport I was unaccountably taken for a terrorist – the valiant female security personnel made a meticulous search of my person and belongings, trying to ferret out a bomb.

Belfast floated in a grey fog. Directly across from my hotel window was another window, framed by a brick building. The enormous face of a young man stared impassively at me from it. Bewildered I looked more closely and realized that this was no violation of the rules of nature, not an angel or giant staring at me, but a window-sized photograph pointed out onto the street. Below me schoolgirls walked, wearing variously-colored smocks (depending on the school they attended). Soldiers too, seeming both bored and nervous. I took a walk in the Botanical Garden and then visited a museum but all I remember of the latter is a dinosaur skeleton. The bed in my tiny hotel room, like in a Parisian garret, was squeezed in next to the shower stall so that when I showered drops of water splashed onto my pillow and onto the television set, which on this particular day was celebrating the Anglican Church's decision to consecrate women as priests. Fine with me. The only complication I could see was when she was having her period but of course someone could replace her on those days.

I had already been to Belfast once before, at a little poetry festival where one of the participants was a member of the IRA, or at least so he hinted. Belfast in my mind was associated with the poet Prigov, an excellent – meaning easygoing – traveling companion who had

nevertheless brought me to tears at a taxi stand.[34] And it's not easy to reduce me to tears… Prigov was explaining to me that talent and genius no longer mattered; and he was making the point in regard to a great artist, my close friend M. M. Shvartsman, who was still alive at the time.[35] Prigov opined: "Whether or not he's a genius, God alone knows. What I do know is that he's not connected with the major galleries or art dealers, he's not truly rich, and his students won't get rich either – they won't have the money to start a museum devoted to his work, where it could all be gathered together in one place. He'll be left behind…" A light rain was falling, and still no taxi. My tears blended with the rain as we stood there – I hoped fervently that Prigov would be proven wrong. It's strange how often we remember cities by a single image, a snatch of conversation, the intonation of a voice, even a smile . . .

Two days later a Lincoln pulled up at my hotel and drove me off through monotonously endless fields, toward the ocean. We stopped by a port near some desolate fishing grounds – sand and fish remains everywhere. The plaintive cries of seagulls. I boarded a waiting cutter that wheezed its way for about two miles offshore, to where the ship – oddly circular in shape – waited. "Ahoy, Twilight!" the seaman shouted. A gangway, which required a long steep climb, was lowered from the ship. Mr. Karloff, leaning overboard, offered me a hand. "Am I first?" "Greetings Tina! No, you're second to last. We're expecting the last one later this evening, then we'll head for the open sea."[36] He turned with difficulty in the narrow passageway as he told me this, leading me to my cabin.

"Rest now, you're probably tired from the trip. Dinner is at six." In a corner of my cabin, on a stand, was a model of an Egyptian funerary boat, like I'd seen in the British Museum and in Berlin – gloomy vessels loaded with deadly cargo plying the Nile for Osiris. Under the porthole on a small table I saw booklets and a program of some kind. Picking up the program I saw my name and those of three other participants printed on it – poets from Japan, Butan, and America. I didn't care, I'd seen it all… One of the poets, the American Charlie Silvers, I in fact knew somewhat. He'd even dedicated a poem to me, although we'd met only once, and briefly, in Boston. He was a descendant of the Plantagenets,

modest and unassuming, and he worked as a librarian. I liked the few poems of his that I'd read, but I don't know English well enough to make an authoritative judgment – it's such a rich language. Beyond the porthole window the relentless dark-green sea emerged from behind a veil of fog.

All Together

Standing on the lower deck, I saw a boat approaching. Although it rocked slightly, the man being transported on it stood ramrod straight. Clean-shaven and dressed in bright yellow, his arms were crossed and he seemed to be muttering to himself, completely detached from what was going on around him. Nevertheless he sauntered smartly up the gangway. "That's the Tibetan poet," Karloff told me. "It's true he lives in Butan, he was even born there: his parents fled Tibet after the Chinese invasion." "So he's a monk?" "Yes, an anchorite. Some even say he is the reincarnation of Milarepa."[37] "What's his name?" "Ling Tsering. He inhabits a cave, devoting himself to spiritual contemplation and poetry writing. I was able to read some of his poems in translation by a Tibetan who teaches in Cambridge. This professor even succeeded in getting a book of Ling's verse published, called "The Mandala of Fire" or "The Fiery Mandala," I can't remember which."

"How did you convince him to come if he's a hermit? The poems themselves are surely not written for public reading." "That's my secret. But I can tell you this much," he added, his eyes blazing up. "The survival of the village in which his parents live will not depend on the barley harvest for the next couple of years."

"Compassion brought him here? You hooked him with that? You're a real psychologist." "No, I'm a fisherman." (He wasn't very good with jokes.) "Mr. Karloff, when does the reading take place?" "Tomorrow." "And where is the audience?" "Later," he mumbled, "I'll tell you later." "Will I have to depend on the barley harvest?" "No you won't, I can promise you that," he shot back at me somewhat ominously, then sped off to meet the Tibetan.

Leaning against the ship's handrail I glanced sideways at the bowing yellow form that resembled a candle flame in the wind, then I gazed farther off, back toward the coast of Ireland. I didn't in fact care whether we had an audience or not: I could as easily read to the heavens alone as to a large, restive crowd. Only in Russia could I count on a responsive audience.

At this period of my life only poetry writing seriously mattered to me (although it sometimes seemed to me that I'd already written what needed to be written) – poetry writing and how I would make ends meet without a steady source of income. (To tell the truth, the latter didn't actually concern me all that much.) I was already a 'loose cannon,' I feared nothing and hoped for nothing, at least not in this life. And still I couldn't help but wonder: how will the audience get here, by boat or helicopter? But neither were there stewards nor sailors on board.

For dinner we were served perch à l'Orly and a white wine. The Tibetan, however, was served a separate dish, tsampa, in a silver bowl into which he plunged his fingers, emerging with finally rolled pellets that he politely offered to us. I didn't particularly like the dry-roasted barley flour but I praised it and he smiled blissfully. The strangest thing about this fellow who had lived his entire life in monasteries and a cave was that *nothing surprised him* – it was as though he were already familiar with everything. Although a mountain dweller, he didn't even seem to find the ocean astonishing – he smiled on everything with the same accepting smile. The American too was radiantly joyful. The Japanese poet amazed me most, beginning with his very strange appearance. Although his neck was wrapped in an enormous blue scarf, it did not fully disguise a massive growth – a sudden thought, which surged and was suppressed in the same instant, rushed through my mind: a second head? – that sprouted on his neck. Of course bicephaly is known to medicine – but its victims do not generally survive. From time to time he would place a small piece of fish under the scarf, and a mumbling sound also occasionally came from underneath it. For the most part we discussed the next day's reading and how the poems would be translated. "Unnecessary," Karloff informed us. "The reading will take place at twilight, when the sun's rays are level with the sea." After dinner

everyone except Ling had a smoke – cigars for the most part, although I had a Moro, which is a cigar-like cigarette. If gluttony can be compared to a form of ritual sacrifice honoring the belly, then smoking can be compared to the lighting of incense in worship of something far finer in the self. Karloff put Beethoven's "Heroic Symphony" on the record player. Charlie and I discussed Mandelstam and Emily Dickinson long into the night.

Catastrophe

The movement of the ship woke me.

Toward evening a steward brought me a note saying that the reading would take place at seven. The hall was small but picturesque. Busts, perched atop narrow columns, lined the walls and the back of the stage: eyeless Horace stared off somewhere, up toward the ceiling; wrapped in a kerchief, poor Shakespeare couldn't see a thing; Rimbaud, Pasternak and Tsvetaeva were inexplicably painted in bright colors, and seemed to seek out your glance: and all resembled Nefertiti. Off in a corner was the same ominous boat as in my cabin, except this one was much larger and had orange sails. I approached Karloff and asked him which poems he wanted me to read. "Whichever ones you please," he answered. "I know your poem 'A Parrot at Sea.' That would be a good one. I remember its last stanza by heart: 'And the blind darkness and the grey / Disheveled ocean dissolve / The tiny reddish-golden / Green and light-blue bundle.'" "Fine with me. In what order are we going to read? Because I like to read last." "Whatever you wish," he answered distractedly, preoccupied with his own thoughts.

There were several rows of chairs in the hall. At present, however, only four seats – in the front row – were occupied, by the readers themselves. Karloff came on stage and began to speak: "My dear ones. My dearests! I searched for more than two decades, I sought you out over the whole planet, picked you from among hundreds and hundreds of poets. When I began my quest I thought, 'there are no authentic poets left.' But I found you – even if you are not many. Maybe there's another

one hidden somewhere, but I hope not. I hope I've found all of you. You see," he continued, and he suddenly blushed, lowering his glance. "The most important thing in the world to me is poetry. But you yourselves know that poetry is dying – that this holy word is now used to designate fragments of bad prose. The music of poetry and its rhythms – hieratic, prayerful – are disappearing. The intoxication, the charm, the madness have evaporated, perished. You are the last ones capable of expressing the mystery of life in the dance of the word. And there are also almost no listeners left capable of properly appreciating your art. That is why tonight you and I are the whole audience. The rest of the world does not deserve you.

"The world does not understand that if poetry dies the world itself is doomed. Let us not drag out this agony. Let us perish, and poetry with us. I propose to you that we perish, disappear, dissolved in the universal ocean.

"Let us read poems to the very last minute – drink all you want (he pointed toward a table in the corner), smoke all you want, and read… read… I will die with you, your last worthy listener!"

He took his seat – pale, calm, resembling Alistair Crowley: in his facial expression the same combination of suffering and mercilessness.

Taking the stage Ling chanted a kind of visionary poem that was part prayer, part song. Silver smiled ardently. The single, slit black eye of the Japanese poet's second head darted out from beneath the scarf and muttered something.

Karloff brought out a few bottles and glasses. I drank some Chartreuse and tried to go out on deck to watch the sunset but I found the door locked.

Nothing to do but return to my place and listen to the strange guttural recitative. Karloff, concentrating on the Tibetan, rocked back and forth in blissful intoxication. Next was the Japanese poet's turn. While he read the second head incessantly whispered in his ear but the poet paid it no mind: banging unpredictably and not quite in time on a tiny drum which he had pulled out of his kimono, the poet read – as if in self-oblivion – a poem called "Reflection of Blood in the Morning Dew." After a cigarette I took my turn; and then it began, we each had a second

turn, a third, round and round. Marsala wine, rum, Lacrima Christi, all did their job: everything began to float in a haze. The ship began to pitch oddly. My thoughts were jumbled. In truth, at the heart of poetry lies something fatal for its lovers. Silvers was the only one whose poems I could understand. Still smiling ethereally, he read a poem – quite a good one – about green fish that passed themselves off as people.

I shouted at Karloff: "You really had it right! Defining poetry apophatically we could say that to the end it remains incomprehensible, indivisible, the remnant of a miracle, incredible, un– …"

l noticed that water was seeping under the door. Karloff noticed it too and suggested cognac. "Aren't you terribly frightened?" I asked him. "No, I am happy – totally happy for the first time in my life." "What about the crew, where are they?" the Japanese poet asked worriedly.

"Don't worry about them. They lowered a lifeboat a half hour ago and are already far away."

I have only a dim memory of what happened next. The Japanese's second head squeaked: "But I want to keep living!" The door suddenly broke apart, the sea rushed in, and we were swept away in a whirlpool . . .

I awoke amidst waves, the Japanese poet's large brass censer in my hands. It helped keep me afloat. Nothing, no one else around me. Raising my head above a wave I realized I was reciting a poem by Mikhail Kuzmin: "Perhaps, amidst benevolent seas / I will bail tenderness from my pail / So take it, as yours / And take my life too."[38]

A few hours later a helicopter appeared out of nowhere to rescue me.

Farewell Karloff, farewell poetry. We'll see no more festivals of this kind.

2000

Concerto for Literary Assistant

Elena Shvarts

Translated from the Russian
by Thomas Epstein

How Semerkin became a Literary Assistant. His First Review.

Ivan Ivanovich Semerkin, his felt boots scraping against the icy blue snow, rushed toward the mailbox. Above the city, through the dark blue curtain of twilight, he glimpsed a hope. A promise woven in the fabric of the heavens. O, the blue radiance… Mouthing these words he tossed the letter in the mailbox. Its lid made a clanging sound as it opened, then froze soundlessly back into place. The envelope read:

Nikolai Gogol
Donskoy Monastery
Moscow

Please: deliver to the author in person

Turning onto Tchaikovsky Street Ivan Ivanovich hurried into the entrance of a large, dark 19th century apartment building and headed immediately for the kitchen of his communal apartment. There he boiled water and placed his teapot on a circular table covered by a lace table-cloth frayed and yellowed with age. Removing a pint flask of vodka from the shelf in the sideboard assigned to him, Ivan Ivanovich added half the liquid to the tea, then a slice of lemon and, thinking that he had concocted a perfectly Dickensian grog, sat back to enjoy the beverage.

As he did so, Ivan Ivanovich recollected that today he would have to give his final answer to Varvara Porfirevna Balamutova – she who once upon a time had been nothing more than the wife of a Soviet Commissar but was subsequently transformed into a more than passable author of books for young adults. Ivan Ivanovich had himself taken to writing reviews and on occasion seen them published in the newspaper "The Stakhanovite."[39] One such review he penned took up a book entitled "Young Fighters of the Resistance," which turned out to be a product of Balamutova's lively pen. Soon after the publication of his review Varvara Porfirevna called him and invited him to her house.

Surprisingly, the woman who answered the door was tall and stately, her lively and imposing manner had something regal in it – not at all the relic he had expected to find, knowing of her exploits during the Civil War.[40] From earliest childhood he had harbored tender feelings for the aged – they somehow reminded him of frail flowers withered and wilting in their vases, soon to be unceremoniously plucked and tossed away. Ringing the doorbell he had already been preparing for that habitual, almost pleasurable feeling of tender compassion – but it was not to be.

Dispensing with all formalities she had immediately offered him the job of literary secretary.

"Your official salary will be paid through the Writers' Union. I'll throw in something extra," she tried to convince him. "Don't assume the job is simple. It requires effort and creativity. You have no idea how many letters a day I receive from readers. You'll also have to sort through my papers. The job will keep you busy about two days a week – but you'll still be eligible for full benefits. Why would you want to waste your time in that film studio anyway? There's nothing there for you but trouble."

She was right about that. After returning from the war Ivan Ivanovich had gotten a job at a publishing house, where he wrote internal reviews, but was soon let go. Through friends he then got another position, also as an editor, this time for a studio that produced documentary films. The atmosphere there was grim, ideological vigilance everything – nothing outside the party line was to make its way onto the screen. The job had absolutely nothing creative to it. However, on the first job he

had developed a passion for writing reviews – and now he couldn't stop. Working for Varvara Porfirvena would provide him with a lot of free time for such activity – that's what attracted him. It would be like having a job but also being master of his own time. Ivan Ivanovich decided to accept the offer.

Varvara Profirevna received him in her large home office. On a small table stood a carafe of vodka. A sabre, a possession of her long-dead first husband, hung on the wall. The hostess offered her guest a cigarette.

"So Ivan, have you thought it over?"

"I have. I've decided to accept your proposal."

"That's what I call a wise decision. Let's drink to it."

Although Varvara Porfirevna was a handsome and full-bodied woman with roots in the Russian gentry, she had spent her entire life playing at being something else; a hard-driving coarse matron of a woman, which she of course was not. In this internal theatre of her imagination she saw herself as Gorky's Vassa Zheleznova.[41] While the result had nothing in common with Gorky, Varvara Porfirevna's constant striving to be Vassa, to adapt herself to this role, gave her own life a certain strange consistency. The role was like a ballet bar on which she constantly practiced. She was delighted that Ivan Ivanovich had agreed to become her literary assistant – she was not only bored by herself but felt compassion and even pity at Ivan's reserve, his extreme thinness, and his constantly trembling hands.

Like a shadow Varvara Porfirevna's husband tried to slip by unobserved but she called out to him:

"Hey Mitiunia, aren't you going to at least say hello?"

"Sorry, I thought you wouldn't notice me," answered her ever shy and retiring husband.

They drank a glass of vodka. Afterward, clearing her throat, Varvara asked in a low and intentionally coarse tone of voice:

"What's up with your hands, Ivan? Do they always shake that way?"

"Yes, always. It happened in the war. From a wound."

Ivan fell silent. The memory was painful. His friends and acquaintances knew only that, soon after finishing his studies at the

university, he had had a war experience – on the Pulkovo Heights above Leningrad – that caused his hands to shake permanently. He had fallen asleep at his post. Was suddenly awakened by a pistol barrel on the neck. The lieutenant seething:

"You bastard, I should have you executed for this. But I'll give you a second chance. Tomorrow morning you come out of the foxhole first and lead the platoon into battle."

Next morning, shouting "For our country! Hurrah!," Ivan leapt out of his foxhole and set off running. As if in a dream he ran through the horizontal rain of German bullets but did not immediately realize that no one was following his lead. Nevertheless, he kept running until a bullet passed through his helmet and tore off his ear lobe. Later, at the field hospital, he learned that the soldiers did finally go on the attack, took the Pulkovo Heights, then carried Ivan from the battlefield. Naturally no medals were awarded him – he had merely atoned for his guilt with blood. While it's true that only a modest amount of the mysterious, dark-blue liquid had been spilled on the dirty snow, it had been enough to carry off part of his mind. From that moment forward his hands shook.

After a second glass of vodka Varvara Porfirevna spoke again:

"Comrade Semerkin, I liked your review of "Young Fighters of the Resistance." It was quite intelligent – but you'll never get published. There's something about the way you write that doesn't feel like it comes from 1953 but from another time – and it's not clear what that time is. All in all, there's something bizarre about you. But not to worry: keep at it and you'll improve."

"Still, as long as my friend Osmerkin is at "The Stakhanovite" I've got somewhere to publish."

"But who reads The Stakhanovite? Why would anyone pick it up?"

"But you read my piece, didn't you?"

"Yes, I subscribe through my agent who sends me anything that's written about me. That's how I came upon your review. But really – who in their right mind would read that rag? I suggest you write a review of this book written by my friend, Admiral Krylatov: *To the North Pole and Back*." She held a thin volume out to him. Its cover had a photograph of a large ice floe on which a ferocious-looking bear's face poked out, glowering

menacingly. "Give it a try – if it comes out well I'll send it to "The Literary Gazette."[42] I'm an old lady, they respect me, they'll publish it."

Exactly what he wanted to hear. For some time now he could not resist the strange, almost maniacal urge to write reviews – or at least what he called reviews. He wrote them on everything he read – classics and contemporaries, poetry and prose, on the telephone book, a plant atlas, on a book called "How to Eat Well and Be Healthy." Review after review. He even wrote them on the weather! So of course he took up the Krylatov book.

First Review

Peter Mikhailovich Krylatov, the famed polar explorer and admiral, has written a book about his travels that will fire the reader's imagination.

Ice-floes, bergs, hummocks, and glaciers constantly threatening the ship with destruction; the perilous passage from one arctic station to another, shadowed at every turn by polynyas capable of sucking up the ship in the blink of an eye – all of which creates in the reader's mind the image of the universe as a terrifying abyss, and the book a narrative of humanity's heroic efforts to defend itself.

Some of the descriptions are unexpurgated and disturbing, such as the slaughter of defenseless seals and polar bears. Still, one has to acknowledge the author's descriptive powers.

Reading this book one is tempted to observe that many contemporary readers, were they offered the possibility of traveling to the North Pole, would choose to set out on an old-fashioned schooner rather than the admiral's modern ice-breaker. Why is that? Human beings seem to yearn for open vistas – without open space they pine and suffer. Yet while we may be at our happiest on the seashore, unending expanses without the possibility of shelter rapidly become unbearable. Even a sailor – or should we better call him a lunatic for endless vistas? – gladly takes refuge in a tiny cabin, whose prototype is an infant's cradle, where he can sleep soundly, gently rocked by the waves. (Sailing vessels are similar in shape to a crib; and a human being rocked by the sea is

akin to a musician or poet rolling on an inner sea.) Rocked thusly they become sleepers awake, returned to their cradles and able to recall life in the womb and even before the womb.

This combination of breadth and narrowness, of openness and confinement, is equally characteristic of the best of our large gardens and parks. Crossing a vast meadow to enter a cramped grotto is like descending into the grave – why would the soul seek such an experience? Is it not because for the unconscious the cave is less a grave than an image of the mother's womb? (I have already written about this subject in my review of the royal park at Pavlovsk; but as my review has not been published, I consider this comparison of the sailor to the poet and gardener not out of place here.)

The oneiric far-sightedness required of the mariner who seeks to make his way into the unknown is akin to the powers of poetic vision. No matter how distant the poet is from reality (and our Soviet poets are of course close to the real), he is nothing without eagle-like vision and the predator's ability to swoop and grasp fleeting feeling.

This book will without doubt be of immense interest to the broad mass of working men and women who dream – even if only with one eye – of seeing for themselves the North (and why not the South too?) Pole.

Conversation with a Cat. A Review of a Sore Throat

Semerkin had been meeting with Varvara Porfirevna on their scheduled days but he suddenly fell ill and had to take several weeks off. Luckily, with Varvara Porfirevna's help, he had managed to publish several of his old reviews, for each of which he received a modest honorarium.

Awaking each morning in his warm bed he had a hard time getting up to face the unheated room, from which he would scurry into the communal kitchen where many of the flat's inhabitants – ten rooms of them – were already busy preparing their own breakfasts. He would set his teapot to boil and then head downstairs to the woodpile in the courtyard to gather firewood – as much as he could carry. Balancing a

handful of logs in front of him he climbed back up the stairs, rehashing one of his habitual trains of thought while lugging the wood: that is, that our entire lives are essentially an act of transporting something somewhere. Life was a constant conveyance of burdens, both heavy and light. We tote bags, boxes, and sacks; strap on backpacks, lug suitcases; then we ourselves are packed up in a long wooden box and carted off. We are borne from the maternity ward, transported in sardine cans called trains, planes, and cars. The rest of the time we do the lugging – whether it be things, thoughts, even feelings. Tossing the logs on a raised metal grate in front of his white-tiled stove Semerkin was already composing a review of transportation. Eating too was a form of conveyance. As was drinking. And reading. Even conversation. Then there was the ultimate liberation – the conveyance of the final weight, the soul…

Semerkin devoted his evenings to treating his illness; a combination of traditional Russian medicine and conversations with his cat, named Moore. A calico, smart and very old. Ivan Ivanovich never tired of trying to get his obsessive ideas across to Moore.

Semerkin (pouring himself a glass while offering the cat a small piece of fish):

"'I'll drink while you eat,' as a poet – he died long ago, in emigration – said to his cat." Ivan Ivanovich smacked his lips while the cat synchronously gnawed at his fish. "Look Moore, we all know – and surely you know too – that God conveyed himself here to save us – to rescue us human sinners. I'm asking you to try to imagine this: a human being is finally born willing to sacrifice himself for sinners like you; for animals, wild and domestic. What would happen next?" (Ivan Ivanovich paused to take another sip.) "Then it would be an animal's turn to sacrifice itself for a plant; and remember, plants are fundamentally innocent. Moore, are you prepared to do this? Ask yourself, look deeply into your heart. Can you do it? Are you ready to do it?"

The cat cringed slightly and looked away. "Your way of thinking is just too far out," the cat thought.

"Yes! I can see: you're not ready, I'm not ready. But Moore, please listen anyway: after we find an animal ready to sacrifice itself, it will be the plant's turn. 'But sacrifice itself for what, to whom?' you ask. My

answer: 'To God.' Thus the circle of love and self-sacrifice will close. But where is this person? Where is this animal (is there such a cat? a dog?)? And where is the plant?" (He paused for another drink.)

"Way too many questions," the cat mused. Briefly meowing he jumped heavily onto the metal-framed bed, whose head and footboards were decorated with large nickel-plated spheres. A moment later Ivan Ivanovich also dropped onto the bed.

Waking early the next morning he began to mumble, staring into one of the spheres on the headboard. Reflected back at him was an eye – large, squinting, curious – behind which he could see a tiny monkey face. "Wow, look at me!" Ivan Ivanovich muttered. Nevertheless he felt somewhat better. Getting up to stoke the fire, he took a leaf of pink writing paper and began to compose his review of strep throat.

I must regretfully report that its author is all too popular. As a result, this crude virus is not beneath resorting to the most common methods to ensure its spread.

Perhaps only at a temperature of 101.5 can it be said that its meager palette of resources comes to life; but even here its work bears the stamp of an excessive, completely unjustifiable emotionality. This pathetic attempt to force the sufferer to acknowledge the fleeting nature of life by means of an acute increase of throat pain fails utterly to produce the desired result.

We know that our author is no neophyte – on the contrary he's an old hand, but he is also clearly inclined to infantilism, ready to use all his skills to push his victim toward childish emotionality.

Nevertheless, in spite of the above, he is less coarse and more merciful than many of his more brutal comrades. Therefore, without at all disclaiming the points detailed above, I would recommend his acceptance into the Union of Illness-Inducing Organisms.

While recuperating Ivan Ivanovich was visited regularly by his neighbor Grigory Sidorovich, who had lost both his legs in the recent war. His neighbors called him Grandpa Sidorovich or just Gramps although the invalid was still young. It was as though the only thing they

respected and valued in him was his ancestors – as if he himself did not exist at all. Only Ivan Ivanovich called him by his first name, Grigory. Grigory divided his time between the apartment house and hanging out at a local pub, which was frequented primarily by trouble makers, among whom he had made friends. From time to time Ivan Ivanovich would hear a loud knocking sound, which seemed to emanate from beneath the floor. Opening the door he would find Grigory, his powerful arms windmilling as he rolled his noisy little trolley, its wheels smeared with axle grease, into Ivan's room, usually taking up position by the warmth of the stove. As Ivan and the cat conversed, Grigory participated only with sighs. Usually Ivan Ivanovich would cover the strip of metal with a cloth napkin on which he would serve Grigory refreshments. By this time in the evening Ivan's words were addressed not only to the cat but seemed to bifurcate in flight, falling somewhere between the cat and Grigory. Yet the latter would only sigh in response, as if the war had taken not only his legs but his tongue.

"Imagine, just imagine," Ivan muttered thickly, "that our entire world and even universe is just a tiny little growth, perhaps nothing more than a tendon on the foot of some immense, unknown ant-like creature. And our wars, which often cover the whole earth, register in its nervous system as only the slightest momentary tick."

"Gross," sighed Grigory.

"The worst thing about this – if it were the case –we would be the only ones capable of hearing the music in music… Mozart, Mandel'shtam," (Ivan Ivanovich had already had the chance to read his poetry – a friend of his had inadvertently shown Ivan the poems and asked him not tell anyone[43]), "Michelangelo (all for some reason beginning with M); intelligible only to us. Horrible to contemplate!"

The cat meowed, swallowing a sardine. Grigory added:

"Nothing more to be said!"

"It just can't be true! Strange, though, that music is the one art form that requires performers to be experienced. All other art forms we can access directly. Well, in part it's also true of plays…"

"That's right," Grigory muttered, then added, "Pour me just a drop more!" Ivan Ivanovich poured but his thoughts began to grow confused.

His head drooped, then dropped on the table and he passed out. Grigory, rumbling and wheezing like a miniature locomotive, steamed out of the room.

If to the moment I shall ever say: "Ah, linger on, thou art so fair!"

On work days, after finishing with the relatively effortless task of taking care of Varvara Porfirevna's correspondence, Ivan Ivanovich stuck around to talk shop with her. The Writers' Union was to hold elections in the coming days – she was up for re-appointment but wasn't worried, expecting that it would turn out as it always did. Over a glass of vodka and a cup of tea their talk often turned to a variety of topics, including recently read books. On occasion Ivan Ivanovich would share with Varavra Profirevna one of his curious intellectual discoveries.

"Did you know, Varvara Porfirevna – and this is according to reliable sources – Edgar Allan Poe made a visit to Saint Petersburg in 1830. Apparently he was deported, after creating a scene at a local tavern. Amazing, isn't it?"

"And really true? That means he could have walked past Pushkin on Nevsky Prospekt."

"And neither paid any attention to the other."

"Maybe Pushkin thought to himself: 'Take a look at that foreigner – drunk and disheveled, walking along cursing…'"

"While Poe, casting a fleeting glance at the gentleman in side-whiskers, thought to *himself*: 'That's a strange Russian: he looks like an African and a Russian aristocrat at the same time.'[44] Gogol, that great bird, might even have brushed Poe with his wing."

Another time Ivan Ivanovich looked at his watch and exclaimed, "Oh my, I'm late! However, you may be aware that Saint Augustine asserted that time does not exist."

Varvara Porfirevna couldn't believe her ears: "How can time not exist?"

"Think of it this way: the past already does not exist, the future has not yet arrived, and the present is but a passage from one non-existent state to another."

With these words Ivan Ivanovich took leave of the dumbfounded Varvara Porfirevna. He exited the writer's apartment – the entire building, owned by the Writers Union, was inhabited by writers – to cross the vast and frosty Field of Mars, where in those days bands of thieves were known to lie in wait in the bushes for passers-by. At that very moment Varvara Porfirevna was calling out to her husband:

"Mitiunia, did you hear what Ivan Ivanych just told me? Time doesn't exist. It's an illusion, a fiction."

As he wandered across the Field of Mars Ivan Ivanovich began to have doubts about the plausibility of Augustine's words. Reaching home safely he wrote in his notebook:

Ah, linger on, moment!

Augustine asserted that time does not exist because the past has already vanished, the future has not yet arrived, and the present is the passage from one non-existent state to another. In other words, time does not exist.

However, if you multiply naught by naught something is produced: therefore every lived second is more important than all the seconds that precede or follow it. Something emerges on the border of this double nonbeing. Nonbeing merges with nonbeing to produce non-nonbeing.

Time, emerging from nonbeing (the future) and disappearing into nonbeing (the past), has what might be called a moment of doubt, of hesitation, during which it can overcome the obstacle, the barrier.

Is this gap a moment or eternity itself? Linger on moment, because you cannot linger.

If we could detach this so-called instant, whose foundation is the non-nonbeing of the nonbeing of past and future (two abysses), its remainder would be the real – ticketed for annihilation.

The energy released in the passage from one form of nonbeing to another produces a spark – the moment of lived experience.

Life's highest form of pleasure is experienced by us in this release of energy, this transitory spark. This is why living creatures cling so tenaciously to life. And it is in this experience that a gap or breach is created – for flight into eternity, to nirvana, into the ecstasy of creativity. In other words, the flow of inspiration leads outside of time. The creator so to speak drops out of time. And what is created remains in this explosive space; the creator's task is to reach it and transmit it to the eternally-perishing world.

"The Party Bosses Say No To Varvara."

Varvara Porfirevna wasn't listening to the person speaking above her. Everything was going according to plan; today, as expected, she would be re-elected to her leadership position. The speaker was just now trotting out the usual hackneyed phrases: "The Party has given us everything; the only thing it has withheld from us is the right to write badly. Comrades, we've been given the right to write well. Comrade Balamutova has herself made good use of this right but…" At this very moment Varvara's sarcastic neighbor leaned over and whispered acidly, "And what about those who have not taken advantage of this right? – which is virtually the entire Writers' Union. Should they be lined up and shot?"

A break in the proceedings was suddenly announced. Gathering in the Writers Union restaurant the writers began a heated discussion about the chances of the various candidates. A collective murmur began to rise gradually in the room, flitting from table to table, from bottle to glass: "*The party bosses are saying no to Varvara. Can it be? Can it be? Do your hear it?*"

Although the murmur itself did not reach her ears, Varvara knew something was up.

After the lunch break a writer–whose most important work did not take place at a writing desk in the Writers Union building but in the large grey structure next door–appeared at the dais.[45]

"It is true that Comrade Balamutova is an excellent writer, her books are beloved by the broad masses of young readers… But a writer

whose job is to educate the rising generation must exhibit special ideological vigilance.

"From the point of view of party discipline and ideological purity, Comrade Balamutova herself is irreproachable. However, in the person of Ivan Ivanovich Semerkin she has taken under her wing a fellow-traveller for her literary secretary. Thanks to her he has been able to sneak into print in our periodical press a series of articles that are ideologically at odds with the Central Committee's party line.

"For this reason I would ask Varvara Porfirevna to give us, her Comrades, an accounting of her behavior, and to choose a more ideologically reliable person as her literary secretary. Until such time as she complies with these requests I recommend that Comrade Balamutova not be included in the leadership of the Writers Union."

A deafening silence reigned in the hall. Rising to her feet and covering her face with a cloth napkin, her chest heaving, Varvara Profirevna made her way to the exit. Her entire ample body shook with emotion.

The next morning she called Ivan Ivanovich and asked him to come over for an important conversation.

The Periodic Table. A Review of Borscht.

Whenever he crossed this neighborhood Ivan Ivanovich made a point of stopping at a little square off Moscow Prospekt not far from the Fontanka River. This spot, modest and unassuming, might have become one of former capital's most beloved sites if only (Ivan Ivanovich thought) it had been turned toward the broad boulevard. Yet perhaps it had been built with an intentional reserve. There exist marvelous places, and marvelous people, that thrive on and in solitude.

At the rear of the unassuming square stands a small red-brick clock tower, part of a building – a property of the Institute of Meteorology – that once belonged to the great chemist Dmitri Mendeleev. During their courtship Alexander Blok would often accompany Liubov' Dmitrevna, Mendeleev's daughter, here.[46]

A large image of Mendeleev's Periodic Table is depicted in a painting on a side-wall across from the tower. Ivan Ivanovich had learned from an elderly acquaintance who had disappeared God knows where that the Table had been painted by a pupil – who hailed from Pskov – of the recently deceased Russian Modernist painter Pavel Filonov. The young man committed suicide soon after finishing the painting, unable to bear the series of interrogations to which he was subjected at a well-known establishment.[47] This was at a time when Filonov himself was being threatened with arrest, although for reasons never made clear the arrest was never made.[48]

The painting of the Periodic Table is exquisite, dominated by deep blue, dark red and rust colors. It astonishes and enchants. Indeed the colors – the aforementioned ones plus overtones of black and gold – seem to suffuse the Table with a mysterious expressiveness. Today, for the first time, as he stopped to stare and admire it as he always did, Ivan saw the letters of the first element, HE, and the last, RO, create the English word HERO. Might that not mean that heroism was a foundational element of the universe? In other words, wasn't voluntary sacrifice – he asked himself – a necessary component in the construction of the universe?

These thoughts suddenly brought to mind his Auntie Shura, a distant relative who worked–and seemed to be wasting away–as a cook in a cafeteria not far from where he stood. Delighted to see him she whispered, *"I've got something special for you,"* and disappeared into the kitchen. While waiting he tore off several small pieces of brown bread from the rectangular loaf on the table. Shura brought him a bowl of borscht – but not the borscht she served to everyone else.

Leaving the cafeteria he was already mentally composing his review: "The deep, muted solo played by the beets reached into the depths of the soul or body – impossible to discern which. In contrast the breezy bop of the accompanying carrots and cabbage seemed almost flavorless, without timbre. The sour cream, in the spirit of Hegel, attempted to overcome all contradictions. And for a time it worked, until the drumming of pepper and the syncopation of parsley entered the fray… No matter how high the beets tried to soar, the sobriety of

the dark bread kept bringing the borscht back to earth. With a look of well-earned self-satisfaction the conductor, Auntie Shura, quit the stage."

Arriving at Varvara Porfirevna's, Ivan Ivanovich immediately noticed that she was out of sorts: for a long while she sat in complete silence, wrapped tightly–shivering from time to time –in a worn, old shawl. Mitiunia cast an especially ghostly shadow as he slunk across the room and disappeared.

Relaxing slightly, she finally spoke: "Ivan, I wasn't re-appointed to the leadership council."

"How is that possible? Why?"

"It's because of you," she whispered tragically. "Apparently someone denounced you, and one of the folks from you know where hinted that it would be best if I were not re-appointed, given the ideological immaturity of my literary secretary. That's what happened."

Without a moment's reflection Ivan Ivanovich blurted: "Varvara Porfirevna, in that case I am prepared to disappear from your life immediately. Your welfare is my only concern."

"Ivan, you don't understand, that's not where I was leading – but perhaps it's for the best."

He parted warmly from Varvara Porfirevna and the deeply chagrined, shadow-like Mitiunia. At the door Varvara Porfirevna forced Ivan Ivanych to take three months' salary in severance pay. Then he was gone.

"Until a better day!" he called out to her, already descending the stairs.

Out of Work

For the next few days, having no obligations, Ivan Ivanovich read through the diaries of Valentin Bulgakov, Leo Tolstoy's literary secretary (and thus, Ivan Ivanych felt, his colleague), who served the great writer in what proved to be the last year of Tolstoy's life. For some reason Ivan Ivanych decided to express his opinion of the work by composing a short play comprised solely of direct quotes from the diary. Some works, he

decided, are best reviewed not in critical summary but by squeezing out their essence in the most concise form possible.

Here is the result:

A Concise Compendium of V. Bulgakov's book *The Last Year of the Life of Leo Tolstoy*[49]

The dark theatre of the absurd that was Yasnaia Poliana can be presented in a very few brief dialogues taken directly from Bulgakov's book.

Scene One

1910. Summer. Teliatinki.

Chertkov's room. Bulgakov enters.

Bulgakov: I've come to…

Chertkov[50]: I know why you've come! I know what you want.

Bulgakov: No, you don't know. I've come to…

Chertkov: No, I know exactly what you're up to. You've come to find out where Lev Nikolaevich's diaries are hidden. I know who sent you. I know all too well!

Bulgakov: What are you talking about, Vladimir Grigorevich? I never for a moment…

Chertkov: You're not going to trick me. Sofiia Andreevna is not allowed see them.[51] Here's what you can have (*he sticks out his tongue*). That's for you!

Bulgakov (*after a pause*): Vladimir Grigorevich, I came here to ask if I could borrow a pencil. But I can see you're in a foul mood. Your suspicions are absolutely unfounded. Farewell.

Scene Two

Yasnaia Poliana

Sofiia Andreevna: You can't live without him! You're in love like a woman. In love with Chertkov!

Lev Nikolaevich: Come to your senses, Sonia.

Sofiia Andreevna: It's so! It is. I read in one of your early diary entries…

Lev Nikolaevich: You read my diary without asking permission?

Sofiia Andreevna: You wrote about how you were attracted to a soldier! And now here you go again. You're disposed . . .

Lev Nikolaevich: Sonia, I can't take anymore… This is absurd. I can't go on like this. (*Tolstoy flees the room. Locks himself in the bedroom.*)

Sofiia Andreevna (*banging on the door*): Forgive me, I spoke unkindly. Please forgive…

Scene Three

September 20, 1910

The Remington room of Yasnaia Poliana.[52] Bulgakov and Mariia Schmidt are seated at a table.

Sofiia Andreevna rushes in.

Sofiia Andreevna: I've just burned the portrait of that damned Chertkov! (*Pause.*) The old man will be the death of me. He intentionally hung that devil's portrait for me to see! And then went off horseback riding.

Bulgakov: Lev Nikolaevich is going to be very upset.

Schmidt: And he has been so weak of late.

Sofiia Andreevna: Truthfully I haven't burned it yet – I just have everything ready. (*She rushes out of the room and almost immediately runs back in, holding pieces of the torn portrait.*) And now I'm going to throw them down the toilet! (*Runs out.*)

A moment later a shot is heard.

Bulgakov and Schmidt jump to their feet.

Bulgakov: Someone fired a shot.

(*Sofiia Andreevna enters carrying a smoking starter's pistol.*)

Sofiia Andreevna: I shot at it.

Bulgakov: Shot at whom?

Sofiia Andreevna: But I missed.

Bulgakov: Whom did you miss?

Sofiia Andreevna: I can't hear a word you're saying. My ears are ringing from the noise of the blast.

Scene 4

The night of October 27, 1910

The room of Tolstoy's daughter, Aleksandra Lvovna. A knock at her door. Lev Nikolaevich stands in the doorway holding a lighted candle.

Lev Nikolaevich: I'm leaving now… For good. Please help me pack. And take this letter. Give it to Sofiia Andreevna in the morning.

(*He exits.*)

Aleksandra Lvovna (*she reads the letter aloud but softly as she dresses*): "I can no longer live in the conditions of luxury in which I have been living and have decided to do what most old men my age do: abandon worldly life to spend my last days in seclusion and silence. I thank you for the 48 honorable years of marriage you gave me and ask you to forgive me for any wrongs that I have done you…"

And it all ended with his death at the train station in Astapovo.

Ivan Ivanovich took many walks during this period. Spring was in the air. Crossing Nevsky Prospekt he always looked up at the Singer Building, at the top of which was a form that reminded him of a little fist, and he shook his own hand back at it as if in reply. If only he could write a review of the entire city! Or just write to thank Peter the Great for choosing the site; thank the unjustly executed architect Eropkin for his design of the three grand boulevards radiating out from the Admiralty; thank Rossi, Rastrelli, Quarenghi[53]… There were so many to thank. Instead he wrote a humble review of a particularly special walk.

Orphaned Grounds

– the usefulness of anything comes from a surrounding emptiness.
Tao Ching

The city has certain strange places where it seems no human being has ever set foot. While generally in cities not a square inch remains outside human jurisdiction, tiny little preserves do exist, permeated with an aura of mystery. For example, the strange square-shaped piece of ground on the left side of the Kazan Cathedral (as you look from Nevsky

Prospekt), toward the Griboedov Canal. It is neither a passageway nor part of a residence. Its dense grass seems to glimmer with an unnatural brilliance. But of course such sites do not belong to the natural world. They are neither woods nor garden, not thicket or meadow. They merely resemble nature, like its weird negative or spectral double. This does not alter the fact that in some of these places, such as the slopes around New Holland, a wild world exists. Local cats go there to give birth and I've heard it said that a beaver–from who knows where–is also one of its inhabitants.

These are so to speak bracketed, parenthetical sites. Sometime they are even bracketed in iron. For example: the belvedere on the roof of the former Marx Publishing House, located on Izmailovsky Prospekt, which is enclosed on all sides by a wrought-iron grill. Only birds of passage would seem likely to land there, and that only on occasion.

The very sight of this kind of inaccessible location causes a strange feeling – as though someone or something lives there, but not people, rather non-people. Their enchanted forest, closed to humans.

Such grounds–or non-grounds–undoubtedly exist in other cities (of which I have had occasion only to read about): in London gardens, under the Spanish Steps in Rome, perhaps in a cul-de-sac off the main Square of Cracow (a space blocked by low brick walls on both sides, without a door or any other entrance)… They are not noticed, as if not even seen – they serve no purpose. They are like the gaps between leaves that Taoism teaches us to contemplate.

There are days, even entire eras, like this – quietly decaying, abandoned, fanned only by an other-worldly breeze. There are escheated people too. And "lost" generations. Am I not of this order?

The Magic Ruble

One day out of the blue the postman delivered a letter. Hesitating and uncertain Ivan Ivanovich passed the envelope back and forth in his hands. The return address read "Donskoy Monastery." No name affixed to it. Ivan began to recall more or less what he had written:

"Not wishing to disturb you and not counting on a reply I am writing to you anyway. Please allow me to express my awe and utter delight at your ability to have written–at so tender an age–a masterpiece as great as "The Overcoat." But it's not just your literary skill that awes me – in Akaky Akakevich you discovered something greater than America! You were the first to notice him, to pay attention. No one noticed the poor soul then, no one notices him even now.

"Your marvelous 'Overcoat' reminds me in part of a ghost story and in general of the whole Eastern tradition of tales about spirits. Russian critics read "The Overcoat" as the story of a hapless clerk or even mere copiest. They always fail to mention that your story is divided into two parts: in the first part Akaky Akakevich is alive; in the second he is a ghost. In this sense the story is structured like a set of scales. But which side tips the balance? The horror of "The Overcoat" is that after his death Akaky Akakevich wants only one thing: an overcoat. Overcoats. Turned spirit of vengeance he wanders around Saint Petersburg robbing passers-by of their eternal overcoats – an overcoat he needs in order to conceal his own emptiness. He takes shelter amidst a mountain of them, in a twilight zone without writing benches or ink. The overcoat is a sign and symbol of concealment, of a sheltering blind – but from whom and from what is he taking refuge? Beneath the shelter, behind the mask, lies only emptiness. Yet the little man's greatness lies precisely in this terrible emptiness: that was your great discovery.

"Please do accept my heartfelt praise, I'm sorry to have disturbed you.

"Oh, I almost forgot: I have a question for you. It's been on my mind for a long time. You see, I often find myself walking the same streets on which you rushed to work in some office or other – still an obscure, impoverished, sickly young man. At such times I think of you with love and sorrow: I try to picture you in your threadbare overcoat, try to send you good wishes from the future. Here's my question: Did you receive them? Did you feel this communication even though it hadn't yet taken place, and would take place only in the future? You did receive my messages, didn't you? You suddenly sensed a breath of kind-hearted benevolence blowing toward you from you knew not where. Something

like that, right? Can't our blessings and prayers for the long dead reach them even while they live? "

Was the reply in this envelope? Was it actually from him? Trembling Ivan Ivanovich slowly tore the envelope open. In it there was nothing but a one-ruble note. The bill looked somewhat strange but Ivan Ivanovich could not determine the source of the strangeness. He went down to the street and headed directly for the corner store. There he wandered the aisles indecisively, vaguely noting the ridiculous signs he had seen hanging there a hundred times before. In the vegetable department one of them read: "To ensure your physical and mental health: Remember fruit juices! Good for mind, body, and wealth!" And above the fish department: "Time to taste and enjoy! Fish are here. Ahoy!"

After a moment's hesitation Ivan Ivanovich reached into his pocket for the suspect ruble – he could feel it twitch in his hand – and asked for a loaf of black bread. The saleslady gave him the loaf, took the bill from his outstretched hand, and began counting out his change. Ivan, preoccupied, was already walking off when he suddenly realized that the ruble was back in his pocket. "Sir, come take your change," the saleslady called after him, but Ivan barely cast her a glance before fleeing the store. It was the magic ruble, from Leskov's short story![54] The ruble forever yours if you didn't take change for it. You could even buy something for a hundred rubles with it – you just had to take the one-ruble note from your pocket one hundred consecutive times. Ivan Ivanovich was overjoyed: "I don't have to worry anymore about making a living."

Death of a Tyrant. The End of this Story.

The next morning, March 5, Ivan Ivanovich was awakened by sounds of crying and wailing that reached his room from the communal kitchen. He wondered: *Has someone died? One of my neighbors?* Reluctantly rising he went into the kitchen to find all his neighbors gathered around the stove, weeping. Grigory was silently rolling his little trolley from one corner of the kitchen to the other, pushing off the wooden floor for speed.

"What happened?"

"It happened alright! Comrade Stalin has died. Go to your room and turn on the radio." Grigory was wiping tears from his eyes.

Ivan Ivanovich put on the radio. For a long time he sat in silence, listening as the broadcast alternated between announcements of the death and periods of mournful music.

"What in the world is going to happen to us?" he could hear them wondering beyond his bedroom wall.

He felt no sadness at the tyrant's passing – Stalin had been responsible for the deaths of millions of people, including relatives and friends of Ivan himself. But he could not celebrate the death nor even take pleasure in it. At times like this, when disquiet ruled his soul, Ivan Ivanovich sought peace of mind at the bathhouse on Tchaikovsky Street. Grabbing a change of clothes and a bar of soap, he went down to the street. Black-framed photos of Stalin, easily recognizable by his famous mustache, already hung from every building. By the Arsenal, at the corner of Tchaikovsky Street and Liteiny Prospekt, Ivan came alongside an attractive young woman, her face flush with health after the bathhouse. By her side skipped a little girl–surely her daughter, who couldn't have been more than five years old–, humming gaily. Suddenly the woman jerked at the child's hand and, seemingly as angry at herself as at the child for having to say it, blurted out:

"No playing today!"

"Why?" the little girl asked, bewildered.

"Not today." The woman looked around and behind her. The child gazed strangely at her mother, then quieted down. All the passers-by marched in silence, their heads down.

That evening, after the bath, Ivan Ivanovich again sat with his cat, trying to explain to him by analogy what had happened.

"How shall I describe it to you, Moore? Imagine a mustached cat who instead of mice devoured people. He fed on them daily, in their thousands, but was always hungry." (The cat, swallowing a last bit of a sardine, shuddered slightly.) "He is no longer hungry now. By the way, the hairs of his moustache were not white like yours – they were black as pitch. He must have had them dyed."

"A stupid explanation," the cat thought to himself.

"To your health, Moore! But I'm not going to wish him the Kingdom of Heaven. He reigned well enough on earth."

There was a knock at the door, as if emanating from under the floorboards. Grigory, sorrowful, rolled in. He held a bottle in his hands.

"Ivanych, let's drink to his memory."

As usual Grigory set himself up next to the stove. They drank but did not clink glasses – but they never clinked glasses.[55] Having had something to eat and drink Ivan Ivanovich suddenly felt an uncontrollable urge to tell his neighbor about the magic ruble. Grigory listened, but as though not understanding, in disbelief. Ivan Ivanovich felt faintly offended.

"Well then, take the ruble. Take it yourself and try it out – buy whatever you want, just don't take any change. The ruble will return magically to your pocket. Here, take it, it's a gift," Ivan said, surprised by his own generosity.

With unusual alacrity Grigory rolled up to Ivan Ivanovich, grabbed the ruble, thrust it in his pocket, and was gone.

That night Ivan Ivanovich awakened to terrible screams and lamentations. Going quickly to the door he opened to find Grigory being borne down the corridor, his head and face dripping with blood.

"Call an ambulance! Now!"

The fellows who had carried the invalid in explained to Ivan what had happened. Grigory had gone around bragging that he had come into a pile of money and some local hoods jumped him on the street, then beat him senseless about the head–for no apparent reason–with brass knuckles.

"And for what fortune? For a metal trolley! And a single ruble in his pocket! They killed him for a ruble!" The neighbors began wailing again. Grigory was driven off to the hospital, from which he never returned.

From that moment, Ivan Ivanovich began to waste away. "So much for gifts from the beyond," he thought bitterly. "And why did I have to inflict this cursed enchantment on someone else?"

Varvara Profirevna called to offer him his job back but Ivan Ivanovich told her that he was ill again. She described her triumph in

great, excruciating detail: how she had gotten herself re-appointed to the Writers Union leadership, having brought to the session the saber that had belonged to her first husband, who had gone by the name of Citizen Commissar. All she did was put the saber by her side and rattle it from time to time. The saber certainly created an impression, although no one spoke a word about it – everyone just gazed at it, as if bewitched.

"I'm glad everything turned out well for you," Ivan Ivanovich said.

He stopped writing reviews and no longer spoke to the cat.

From time to time, however, it seemed to him that the end of the world was approaching. The Last Judgment: some would be cast into hell, others soar to heaven, while he, Ivan Ivanovich Semerkin, would be forgotten amidst the chaos. There he would be, sitting (it's possible, isn't it?) swaddled in a cloud, as if it were his overcoat. Floating amidst the infinity of space he would write a review in the air with his fingers, called "On Everything That Happened."

"The author of this drama," he muttered, "*can be accused of many things but has to be given his due on one: the absolute originality and breadth of his fantasy*."

Doomed he will be, to write reviews for eternity – some positive, some negative. But like almost all his earthly works, no one will read them.

2007

Notes for Elena Shvarts's texts

[1] The Russian words – transliterated – are iaz', zherekh, mormyshka. The ide and chub are large, northern freshwater fish.

[2] Elena Shvarts's mother, Dina Morisovna Shvarts (1921-1998), was the chief dramaturg of Leningrad's most prestigious theater, Bol'shoi Dramaticheskii teatr (The Great Dramatic Theater). For forty years, she was professionally inseparable from its Managing Director, Georgii Aleksandrovich Tovstonogov.

[3] A large lake about fifty miles northeast of St. Petersburg.

[4] Sergei Aksakov (1791-1859), Russian writer who is in one of the central inspirations for the Slavophile movement.

[5] Stalin died March 5, 1953. Shvarts was born in May, 1948.

[6] Peter the Great (1672-1725) is believed to have been 6''8".

[7] Elena Shvarts's 'second mother,' Berta Israilevna Rubina (1898-1980) in fact adopted Elena's mother, Dina Morisovna, in 1937, after she was orphaned. See below, the entry "Ancestors."

[8] Bol'shoi Dramaticheskii Teatr (The Great Dramatic Theatre), Leningrad-Petersburg's most prestigious theatre.

[9] Georgii Aleksandrovich Tovstonogov (1915-1989), legendary figure in Soviet theatre history, he became Managing Director of Leningrad's Great Dramatic Theater in 1956 and held the post to his death.

[10] The poet Anatoly Naiman in his book "Remembering Anna Akhmatova" (Henry Holt, 1991) writes: "I caught her in her relatively

comfortable years. The Literary Fund had allocated her a *dacha* at Komarovo, a little weather-boarded house, which she called, good naturedly rather than disparingly, her Cabin, as she did the little hut near Odessa where she had been born … She once said that one had to be a rare architect to give such a house only one living-room. Indeed, there was a tiny kitchen, and a room of average proportions if rather dark, and all the rest was corridors, a verandah, and a second porch." (translated by Wendy Rosslyn, pp. 3-4)

[11] Beginning in the 1930s not only people but entire swathes of history and the arts "disappeared" from official Soviet life. This was the case with all the Russian Modernists. As indicated in the text above, in the 1950s and 60s some small steps were being taken to ameliorate the situation. But it would not be until perestroika that the floodgates of memory opened completely. For a time.

[12] The other four had long been dead (Tsvetaeva in 1941, Blok in 1921, Bely in 1934, and Khlebnikov in 1922).

[13] That is, in 1963. Thus Shvarts was fifteen years old at the time of the encounter.

[14] Maria Stepanovna Voloshina (née Zabolotskaia, 1887-1976) was the wife of Maximilian Voloshin (1877-1932), an important Symbolist poet and thinker. Thanks to the Crimean setting of his home, Voloshin's charisma, and Maria Stepanovna's efforts to preserve the home as a museum, it became something of a pilgrimage site for the Russian counterculture.

[15] The wife of Pharaoh Akhentop III. Voloshin kept a copy of her bust in his studio and wrote a famous poem about her.

[16] Olga Aleksandrovna Sedakova (b. 1948) is a major Russian poet, essayist and translator. One of the few Moscovites with whom Elena Andreevna found a common language.

[17] Olga Gildebrandt-Arbenina (1898-1980), actress and artist, muse of several important poets.

[18] Diminutive of the name Elena.

[19] Lidia Yakovlevna Ginzburg (1902-1990), major literary theoretician and cultural figure.

[20] The establishment of Club-81 (Клуб-81) in 1981 signaled a fundamental change in the relationship between the official and unofficial cultures of Soviet Russia. By acknowledging and partially institutionalizing independent culture, the Soviet authorities, while trying to channel the movement, implicitly acknowledged its legitimacy. At present there are no English-language studies of this fascinating episode of late-Soviet life.

[21] Sergei Zubatov (1864-1917) was a high-ranking Russian official who initiated the establishment of a union movement, essentially under government control, that tried to persuade workers that reform, not revolution, was their best hope for improving living conditions.

[22] Igor N. Burikhin (b. 1943), Russian poet.

[23] A village outside Novgorod where Elena and her family lived for a short time.

[24] Bogdan Khmelnitsky (1595-1657) was a Cossack leader (Hetman) who led a successful rebellion against Polish rule in the Ukraine.

[25] Nikolai Kostomarov (1817-1885), renowned Russian historian.

[26] Shvarts here is describing Grigory Kovalyov (1939-1999), famed for his photographic memory of poetry. He was co-editor, with

Konstantin Kuzminsky, of the *Blue Lagoon Anthology of Modern Russian Poetry* (9 volumes).

[27] The poets Victor Krivulin (1943-2001) and Elena Ignatova (b. 1947) are major figures of the Leningrad cultural underground.

[28] Evgenii Venzel' (b. 1947), poet, first husband of Elena Shvarts.

[29] Nikolai Tovstonogov, son of Georgii Tovstonogov.

[30] Aleksandr Valentinovich Vampilov (1937-1972), Russian playwrite and prose writer.

[31] The Russian word is домовой (domovoy), derived from the word for home. The role of the Russian house-spirit is akin to the Latin Lares and Penates.

[32] An obvious reference to the death of her mother, in 1998.

[33] "Twilight" is in English in the original.

[34] Dmitri Alexandrovich Prigov (1940-2007), a leading artist and poet of the Moscow Conceptualist School and therefore one of Elena Shvarts's aesthetic adversaries.

[35] Mikhail Matveivich Shvartsman (1926-1997) was a major abstract-religious painter. He is mentioned above, in the section "Prehistoric Poetry Readings."

[36] As mentioned in the introduction, Shvarts makes explicit use of a fictional double, whom she calls Tina Diamond (Тина Бриллиант), to narrate this cycle of road trips

[37] Tibetan yogi and poet of the 11th century C.E.

[38] From his poem "The Prophetic Number Twelve" ("Двенадцать – вещее число," 1925).

[39] Named for Alexei Stakhanov, who in 1935 in a single shift mined more than one hundred tons of coal, fourteen times the daily norm. The Stakhanovite movement and its formal organization sought to inspire super-human productivity in *all* spheres of labor (here presumably literary).

[40] The Russian Civil War took place in the early 1920s, that is thirty years before the action of this story.

[41] Owner of a line of ships, Vassa Zheleznova is the tragic, grasping heroine of the eponymous play by Maxim Gorky.

[42] The most official and prestigious literary weekly in Soviet Russia.

[43] After his arrest in 1934 Mandel'shtam's poetry was outlawed in the Soviet Union until 1973.

[44] This is a reference to Pushkin's African ancestry. His maternal great-grandfather, Abram Hannibal, was an Ethiopian prince taken hostage by Turkish forces and sold to the Russian ambassador in Constantinople in 1706. He became a favorite of Peter the Great and had a very successful career.

[45] "The large grey structure" on Liteiny Prospekt, very near to the Writers' Union building (which subsequently burned down), was the headquarters of the Leningrad KGB. In this notorious building hundreds, if not thousands, of people were summarily executed.

[46] The legendary love between Blok and Liubov' Dmitrevna (with Andrey Bely also vying for her attentions) finds its sublime, mystical-Symbolist expression in one of Blok's most famous cycles, "Poems to A Beautiful Lady."

[47] The same building alluded to in the footnote above.

[48] This great and not well enough known Soviet painter (1883-1941) died instead of starvation during the Siege of Leningrad. He was perhaps Soviet Russia's *most patriotic* painter (at his death he forbade the sale of any of his paintings abroad).

[49] The title of the book, as well as the quotes from it, are close to the source text but not exactly the same.

[50] Vladimir Gregorievich Chertkov (1854-1936) became Tolstoy's closest friend – and enemy of Tolstoy's wife – in the last decades of Tolstoy's life.

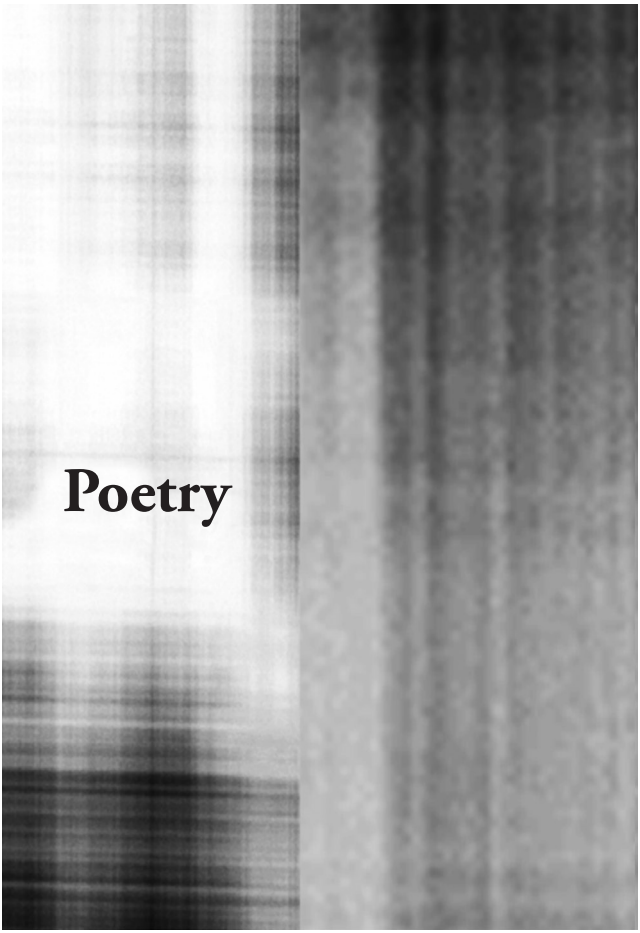
[51] Sofia Andreevna Tolstaia (née Behers, 1844-1919): Tolstoy's muse, wife, torment, a diarist of note in her own right.

[52] The Remington Room was indeed named for the brand of typewriter prominently displayed in the room.

[53] Carlo Rossi, Francesco Rastrelli, Giacomo Quarenghi, three Italian architects instrumental in the creation of Petersburg.

[54] Nikolai Leskov (1831-1895) is indeed the author of this children's Christmas story.

[55] While it is customary for Russians to clink glasses in toast, the custom is *not* to clink glasses when toasting to the memory of a dead person. The fact that Grigory and Ivan never clink glasses suggests the superficial and dysfunctional nature of their "friendship."


Poetry

The Wires

Marina Tsvetaeva
Translated by Angela Livingstone

Des Herzens Woge schäumte nicht so schön empor, und würde Geist, wenn nicht der alte stumme Fels, das Schicksal, ihr entgegenstände.

"The wave of the heart would not foam up so beautifully and become spirit, were it not obstructed by the old mute cliff of fate."

– Hölderlin, *Hyperion*

I

Along palings of sounding poles
that hold aloft the empyrean
I send you my earthly dole
of dust.
Through an avenue
of sighs – by wire to post –
I telegraph: "Ló-óve . . ."

Imploring (not on those forms –
no room! – the wires are simpler!) . . .
Onto these pillars Atlas
lowered the heaven-dwellers'
race-course . . .
Along pillars
I telegraph: "Góod-býe! . . ."

You hear? It's the last rend
of a riven throat: "Forgí-ive! . . ."
These are riggings above a sea
of fields, quiet Atlas-path,
higher and higher – to blend
with Ariadne's "Oh return!"

"Turn round!" – the mournful call
from free hospitals:
"I won't leave!" Farewells
along steel wires are Hades'
voices – fading
into distance, pleading
with the distance: "Pity . . ."

"Pity us!" Do you discern
this one among the choir?

In death-cries of thwarted
passions, Eurydice's
sighing is wafted
over ditches and ridges . . .
Eurydice's cry, "Alá-ás!

Don't dis- . . ."

II

To tell you everything – not cramped
in rhymes and lines – the heart's too wide!
All Shakespeare, all Racine, I fear, won't be
enough to hold this whole calamity.

"All others wept, so if *your* blood aches . . .
All wept, so if snakes are in the roses . . ."
But Ariadne grieved for *one*
Theseus! Phaedra – *one* Hippolytus!

No shores, no landmarks! Only pain!
Yes, I've lost count, yet I declare:
in you I lose all those who never
existed – ever or anywhere!

What can be hoped for, now the air's
so used to you, so drenched with you!
And my own bones are Naxos now!
My blood under the skin – the Styx!

Futility! Inside me! Close
my eyes – it's everywhere! It's dark!
Calendars lie . . .
As you are – Rift,
I'm not Ariadne . . . I am – Loss!

Oh, in what seas, what cities, shall I
Seek you? Blind, I seek the unseeable.
Letting the wires do all the seeing-off,
I press my head on a telegraph pole – and weep.

III ["Paths"]

I've checked, rejected, everything
(most certainly the signal-post!),
and now, the wildest of all schools'
and vernal thaws' discordances

(that come in supportive choruses!)
waving sleeves like pennants ("shameless!") –
lyrical wires of the high power
pulling me have begun to hum.

Telegraph pole! There's nothing quicker . . .
For as long as the sky exists,
it's feelings' infallible transmitter,
messages felt direct from lips.

Know, that while the sky's vault
lasts, and dawns reach to its edge,
I bind you with a bond no less
pervasive, lasting, manifest.

Above the disaster of our age,
the high embankments of its lies,
my passion storms, from mast to mast,
with all the sighs I have not sighed.

Beyond the telegrams (their vows
stamped "sent express" or "standard class"):
in Spring, along the long and flowing
gutters and the wires of spaces.

IV

Self-governing shire!
The telegraph wire!

My great craving's cry
leaves womb, climbs winds!
My heart – magnetic
spark – rips the metre.

"And measure?" The fourth
dimension avenges.
Speed past dead-metric
false-witness, fast whistle!

Yet suppose if, with labored
brow, you conclude
that these difficult words
(are poles and wires everywhere?)

are only the wail
of a strayed nightingale
("the world's void without him!")
who's fallen in love with

the Lyre of your hands,
and the Leila of your lips.

V

No, not black magic! My sharpened vision
comes from the distant Don's white book!
Wherever you are, I'll overtake you,
win you by suffering – and bring you back.

Here, from the height of my pride, that tall cedar,
I view the entire world: vessels sail,
dawns probe . . I'll upturn the ocean's
bowels – to fetch you back from the deep!

Endure me, suffer me! I am everywhere:
sunrise and mineral, bread and breath,
I am now, ever shall be, and shall gain your
lips the way God will gain our soul:

through breathing. In your hour of hoarseness,
I'll climb through hedges of archangelic
law! Bloodying my mouth with thorns,
from your very deathbed I'll bring you back!

Yield! This isn't a fairy-story!
Yield! – Be an arrow that flies in a circle . . .
Yield! – For nobody ever evaded
pursuit by someone who used no hands.

Through breathing . . . (Now the breast has risen,
eyelids are blind, at the mouth – a gleam . . .)
Just as the clairvoyante raised up Samuel,
I shall raise *you* – and return alone:

for another woman is with you, and Judgment
Day brooks no battling . . . I writhe and abide.

I am now, ever shall be, and I shall gain your
soul – in the same way that lips are gained

by the Consoler of Lips . . .

VI

The hour when, in the heavens, kings
and holy gifts move toward each other
(the hour I come down from the mountain):
mountains begin to know.

Plots have gathered into a ring.
Lives are meeting: keep the secret!

(The hour I cannot see my hands):
souls begin to see.

VII

At the hour when my dear brother
passed beyond the last elm
(wavings drawn up in a line)
there were tears larger than eyes.

At the hour when my dear friend
went around the final headland
(sighs inside my mind: come back!)
there were wavings wider than arms.

Arms – pursuing – as if reft from shoulders!
Lips – pursuing – to cast a spell!
Speech lost its very sounds,
knuckles tore from backs of hands.

At the hour when my dear guest . . .
– Cast, oh Lord! a glance at us! –
there were tears larger than human
eyes, larger than Atlantic
stars . . .

VIII

Patiently – like beating gravel,
patiently – like awaiting death,
patiently – like ripening news,
patiently – like harbouring vengeance –

I shall wait for you (clenched hands –
as a consort waits for his Queen)
patiently – like waiting for rhymes,
patiently – like gnawing at fingers –

I shall wait for you (stare at the ground,
teeth into lips . . . stupor . . . cobbles).
Patiently – like prolonging bliss,
Patiently – like threading beads.

Creak of sledge, the answering creak
of door: roar of *taigá* winds.
A command has come from high above –
a new tsar, grandee's return.

Going home:
unearthly home –
my own.

IX

Spring brings sleep: we'll go to sleep.
Separately, but rightly: sleep
can take away all separateness.
Perhaps we'll meet within a dream.

Sleep, the all-seeing, knows whose palm
is clasping whose, who is with whom,
to whom I shall entrust my sorrow,
whom I shall tell of my eternal

sorrow (it's a child that knows
no father, nor has any sense of
endings). Oh, the sorrow of those
who weep without a shoulder there!

Weep for what falls from a finger
as memory, as pebble from a bridge . . .
Weep because our place was taken,
because our hearts are hired to serve

for ever – no escape – to live
lifelong with never a deep delight!
Oh – scarce awake, first light! – consigned
alive to archives, cripples' Elysium.

Because we're quieter, you and I,
than ore, misfortune, water, grass . . .
And all the seamstress will have sewn
is slaves – slaves – slaves – slaves.

X

With others – into rosy heaps
of bosoms, into the dubious patter
of weeks and weeks . . .
But I shall be
your treasure-trove of likenesses

picked up by chance from sand, from stones,
or overheard in the wind, on railways,
wherever in our youth we roamed
bleak suburbs in a time of hunger.

A shawl: you recognize it? Tied
against a chill, or else – untied –
hotter than hell . . .
Know this: the womb's
wonder, the hidden living child

is song! With this my firstborn (more
than all the firstborns, all the Rachels)
I'll overpower the most substantial
depths of flesh with things imagined!

Notes for "The Wires"

Marina Tsvetaeva (1892-1941) left Russia in 1922 and lived 17 years in emigration. Boris Pasternak had stayed in Moscow; she and he wrote each other letters, and through letters they were, for a time, in love. In 1923 she was living in Prague when Pasternak, after visiting his parents in Berlin, went back to Russia without meeting her; her sorrow about their non-meeting was the impulse for the ten poems of "The Wires."

Poem I

The *extended word* "ló-óve," while suggesting its lengthening as it goes along the telephone wire, fits helpfully into the poem's metre, "ló-óve," becoming two stressed syllables.

Atlas: the Titan punished by having to hold up the heavens on his shoulders. Russian for "Atlas" is "Atlant."

Ariadne: king Minos's daughter, who enabled Theseus to find his way into and out of the labyrinth; there he killed the Minotaur; he subsequently abandoned Ariadne on the island of Naxos.

Eurydice: wife of Orpheus who went down to Hades to fetch her back from the dead, failing to do so only because, on the path back, he turned round to look at her. Tsvetaeva makes Ariadne's cry to Theseus – "return!" – evolve into "turn round!" ("вернись" – "обернись"), thus becoming a cry from Eurydice who, according to Tsvetaeva in another poem of 1923, wanted Orpheus to leave her in Hades.

The *incomplete last phrase* of the poem probably suggests "don't dis[appear]."

Poem II

St. 2 – I read *the first two lines* as the poet's inner voice advising her to do as others have done: express her grief in weeping. In lines 3 and 4 she counters this by pointing out that those others – exemplified by Phaedra and Ariadne – had each only one lost lover to weep for, whereas

she – as is explained in the following stanza – considers she has also lost the many lovers she never had, Pasternak being one of many never possessed but nonetheless lost. (In her diary she speaks of preferring "non-meetings" to meetings.)

Naxos: see note to poem I. *Styx*: river encircling Hades.

Rift: Tsvetaeva had recently read Pasternak's just-published cycle of poems entitled The Rift ('Разрыв'). Here she seems to identify him not merely with the lover in that cycle who laments the break-up with a loved woman, but with the break-up itself; she considers what word would similarly describe herself.

Poem IV

Until 1824 "*shire*" could mean country, region or district (OED).

Leila (three syllables): Pushkin uses this name as that of a beautiful Oriental girl.

Poem V

St 2: '*Don*': in the Russian civil war of 1918-1921 the Whites fought the Reds in the region of the river Don; Tsvetaeva's husband served in the White Army.

St 4: *Samuel* – reference to the Old Testament story [I. Samuel, 28] in which King Saul gets a clairvoyante to raise up the spirit of the prophet Samuel (who then predicted Saul's defeat in battle).

Poem VI

The *last line* of this poem has been used by Korkina and Shevelenko as subtitle to their publication of Tsvetaeva's 1922-1936 correspondence with Pasternak. The loved person being absent, so that one's eyes are unable do any significant seeing, souls themselves become able to see.

Poem VII

Rows of elms and headlands, as well as the reaching out of arms, lips and speech, may recall the rows of telegraph poles and the length of the wires in Poem I.

Poem VIII

taigá: densely pine-forested area in North of Russia.

St 4: lines 3 and 4 – a change of tsar would usually be followed by the return of previously exiled persons.

And go home: Tsvetaeva may mean that, should there come a change of government, she could go back to Russia, though there other ways of understanding these three very short lines, for instance that she will go back into her world (home) of poetry.

Poem IX

'quieter … than grass – a well-known Russian idiom speaks of living "lower than grass, quieter than water."

Poem X

"*Rachel*" – In the Old Testament [Genesis, 29] Jacob had to marry Leah, with whom he had several children, before he could marry the beautiful Rachel – who became mother of Joseph and Benjamin.

[The thought, in the last lines, that creating works of the imagination is greater than living the life of the flesh and of domesticity calls to my mind lines from Wallace Stevens's poem, "Another Weeping Woman": "The magnificent cause of being, /The imagination, the one reality /In this imagined world."]

Marina Tsvetaeva, trans. by Angela Livingstone

From a Review of Anna Akhmatova's *Rosary*

Leonid Kannegiesser

Translated from Russian by James Manteith

For you, for the last time, it may be,
I've found fresh motion in my pen –
I see no more to agitate me
in your sweet form, my Harlequin!

I gifted you with hours, gave years,
my powers at full flower, my peak,
but melancholy is my nature –
I only plagued you with ennui.

I prayed, and now my wits are settled,
Because the Maker heard my plea:
breaking off passions, ending battle,
I'll live in wisdom, finally.

On Review

Leonid Kannegiesser
Translated from Russian by James Manteith

In sunlight, with bayonets gleaming –
foot-soldiers. Beyond, in the deep –
Don Cossacks. In front of the legions –
Kerensky upon a white steed.

His weary eyelids are lifted.
He's making a speech. No one stirs.
O voice! To remember for ages:
Russia. Liberty. War.

Then hearts become fire and iron,
the spirit – an oak green with life,
and the *Marseillaise* eagle comes flying,
ascending from silvery pipes.

To battle! – we'll beat back the devils,
and through the dark pall of the sky,
Archangels will gaze down, jealous
to see us rejoice as we die.

And if, staggering, aching,
I fall upon you, mother earth,
to lie in a field, forsaken,
with a bullet hole near my heart,

on the verge of the blessed gateway,
in my jubilant dying dream,
I'll recall it – Russia, Liberty,
Kerensky upon a white steed.

June 27, 1917, Pavlovsk

February

Eduard Bagritsky

Translated from the Russian by Roman Turovsky

Here I am back again in this land.
I pass by
Again under the young planetrees,
Again, children run amid the parkbenches,
Again, the sea lies covered in the smoke of ships…
Here I am, a volunteer, in epaulets,
Edged in colored piping –
Here I am, a warrior, the hero of Stokhod,
The strongman of the Ìàzovian mires, morosely
Plodding along in my crooked boots,
And my half-fallen cap…
I am on furlough, so that my every muscle,
My every cell could take in the movement of the
wind tangled up in foliage,
Pigeonlike warmth of breath
Of tanned youths, the sun playing tag
In the sand, the sea's salty caress…
I'm used to anything: the world
From which I broke free
was burnt through by the shells,
Pierced by bayonets, tightly wound in
Barbed wire, obnoxiously
Reeked of sweat and sour bread…

I now must find a corner in this world,
Where a clean towel hangs on its nail,
Where it smells of mother, the soap – by the faucet,
And the Sun, running through the window,
Doesn't burn my face like embers…
Here I am again on the boulevard.

Again

Pansies are in bloom on all the lawns,
A man in a naval cap is reading
A crimson-covered book;
A girl, her skirt cut just above the knee
Plays diabolo; on some balcony
A parrot screams in his silver cage.
And I am now like an equal among all these,
When I want – I sit, when I want – I stroll,
When I want (if no officer in sight) –
I smoke, observing how a graceful
Leaf floats over the benches, how fly the
Wrens past the townhall's clock…
The most important would
Occur at four.
From behind the kiosk
There will appear a cloaked girl –
Swinging her striped rucksack,
She'd be flung open, like breath,
To the cool sea, sunbeams and birds,
In her green dress made of weightless
wool, she swims, into a dance –
Into a vortex of leaves and heaves of
Flowers and butterflies above the lawn.
She's walking home from school…
Along with her – From a forgotten world,
In circles, fly school-bells,

Girlfriends' whispers, a notebook angel
And teachers' clatter in the corridors.
The planetrees sing before her, and the sea,
Hoarsely, walks her along…
I never loved according to the rules…
A small Judean boy –
I, perhaps, the only one in town
Was to shiver nightly from the steppe's winds.
I, like a somnambulist, plodded along the railroad
Toward quiet summer cottages, where in thistles,
Gooseberries or wild rowan
Murmur hedgehogs and vipers hiss,
Ànd in the thick, where it's the most impassable,
Darts the red-headed birdie
Whose song is hairpin thin,
It is known as "Oxeye"…
How I, born to a Jew, and
Circumcised on the seventh day,
Became a birdcatcher – I don't know!
Harder that Ìayne-Reid I loved Alfred Brem!
My hands shook from passion,
When blindly I opened the book…
And from its pages birds flew at me
Birds, like strange letters,
Sabers and horns, spheres and diamonds.
It seems the constellation of Sagittarius got
Stuck over the blackness of my abode,
Over a despiccable Jewish babe,
Goose-schmalz, over the rote
Of tedious prayers, over the beards
On family daguerrotypes…
I didn't peep, like others,
Through the bathhouse cracks.
I didn't ever try
To furtively pinch a classmate…

Timidity and dizziness
Plagued me.
I made myself run sideways
Across the garden, where
Girls in uniforms sang choruses…
Only having lost my vigilance, oblivious to
myself, could I give in to
Bluntly ogling a maiden's
Naked calves.
Up on a chair,
She wiped the panes with a rag…
Suddenly the glass whistled like a bird –
And before me flew forth
Yellowhammers, dry leaves,
Murky puddles full of forget-me-nots,
Women's shoulders and birds' wings,
Whistle of flight, murmur of skirts,
Nightingales' clicks, the song of a
Young neighbor from across the street –
And finally, more clearly, more cleanly,
In the world of habits, customs,
Under the streetlamp near my hovel –
Nightingale's eye in a maiden's face…
Just like now, looking under the bonnet,
In the weak shadow I saw eyes.
They were full of a nightingale's tremble,
They, rocking, floated by
To the rhythm of her heels, over them hung
A lock of hair, golden against the skin…
Along the alley, past the lawn,
Walked the liceum dress,
And a hundred paces behind, like an assasin,
Stumbling over benches and bumping into
People and trees, whispering curses,
I walked in my tall boots, a greasy

Olive tunic, hair closely
Cropped as befits a military man,
Still not without an old habit of haunching –
The platoon's sharp, a little jewboy…
She peered into vitrines,
And there, amid transparent silks and jars
Mysterious, unhuman,
Was reflected her watery face…
She paused by flowergirls,
And her fingers chose a rose, that
Was swimming in an enameled pot,
Like a little terrycloth fish.
The colonial shop
Smelled of burnt coffee, cinnamon,
And in that odor, mixed with the wet rose,
Over heaps of leaves in baskets,
She seemed a wonderbird
Escaped from Brem's compendium…
I now did my best to get out of active duty.
How many banknotes flew
Into the hands of the platoon scrivener!
I plied my captains with the best of vodkas,
Brought them tobacco and cured sides of pork…
Like a nomad,
Coughing in asthmatic throes,
I wandered between the districts.
I huffed and puffed,
Spat into bottles, drank my medication,
I stood naked, skinny and anshaved,
Under the stetoscopes of medical committees…
And when I succeeded, with
Merit or without – who shall remember this? –
To obtain another furlough pass,
I shined my boots to gleam,
Straightened my tunic – and sprightly

Marched to the boulevard, where among the planetrees
An oriole sang in terracotta voice,
And the familiar dress greened
Over the alley's sand,
Curving, like smoke…
Again I stalked her, melting,
Cursing, stumbling into benches…
She went into the cinema,
Into the chattering darkness, into the tremble
Of a green light in the square frame,
Where a woman wrung her alabaster hands
Over an extinguished fireplace
And a man in a granite plastron
Shot out of a mute revolver…
I knew her friends by face,
I knew their habits, smiles, gestures.
Their slow pace, when one deliberately tries
With his chest, thigh, hand
To feel through the fragile cloth
Òhe alarmed softness of maiden's skin…
I knew it all…
Birds flew away…
Grass withered…
Stars perished…
The maiden walked across the light,
Picking flowers, her eyelashes lowered…
Autumn…
The air is soaked with rain,
Autumn…
Grieve, perish and lament!
I'll approach her today.
I will stand
Before her.
I will not let her veer off.
No empty bustle.

Take all courage!
Get hold of yourself.
No slacking off!
The kiosk is boarded up…
By the townhall clock
The pigeons teem.
Soon – four.
She was an hour early –
Bonnet in her hand…
Reddish hair,
Transparent with the heatless sun,
Sways by her cheeks…
Silence.
And the voice of
A titmouse, lost in this world…
I must approach her.
I must
Approach her without fail.
I must
Approach her by all means necessary.
Don't think,
Shake up – into pursuit.
Enough horsefeathers!..
But my feet wouldn't move,
As if they were made of stone.
And the torso
Feels chained to the parkbench.
Getting up – impossible…
A lout! A fool!
The girl by now was in the middle of the square,
And in the dark-gray circle of museums
Her dress, borne by the wind,
Seemed finer and greener still…
I rose with such effort,
As if I were permanently bolted

To the bench.
Now I tear myself off – without looking back
I run after the girl into the square.
All I have nightly read about,
Sick, hungry, and halfclad –
About birds with strange un-Russian names,
About people from an unknown planet,
A world, in which inhabitants play tennis,
Drink orangeade, kiss women –
All this moved before me,
Dressed in a woolen dress,
Aflame with red curls,
Swinging a striped rucksack,
Mincing heels…
On her shoulder I'd put my hand:
"Look at me!
I am your grief!
I sentence you to the unheard
Torment of nightingales' passion!
Stay!"
Around the corner –
In twenty paces her green dress.
In a moment I'd overtake her.
A bit more
effort – we would walk abreast…
I give her an officer's salute,
What shall I say? My tongue
Mutters some nonesense:
- Allow me…
Don't run away… Say, may I
Walk with you? I was in trenches!..
She is silent.
She wouldn't blink
An eye.
She speeds

Her pace.
Beggarlike I run along,
Politely bent.
I wasn't meant
To be her equal!..
Like an imbecile
I mutter more daft words…
Then: sudden halt…
She silently
Turns her head – I see
Red hair, a blue-green
Eye and a purple vein
On her temple, atremble from tension…
"Leave, right away" – and points
Her hand at the intersection…
Here he is –
Installed as a protector of tranquility –
He stand at crossroads, like a regnum of
Belts, shined badges, medals,
Thrust into his boots, and above –
Covered by a regulation cap,
Around which pigeons circle in a halo,
Yellow and inbearable like a torture,
Pigeons out of the Holy Scripture
And clouds, twisted snaillike…
Potbellied, shiny, in greasy sweat –
A gendarme.
Since morning to the rim
Pumped up with vodka, stuffed with lard…

* * *

Students' blue caps;
Soldiers' hats, porkpies, peaked caps;
Steam, escaping frozen throats;

Tobacco smoke, traveling in columns…
Turmoil of furcoats, peacoats,
Trenchcoats, reeking of sour bread,
And on the pulpit, by a large decanter –
Completely unexpected in this smoke –
An excited man in unlined
Sheepskin, worn over a torn blouse,
Screams in a voice broken from tension,
And with a free upswing
Opens his embrace…
Large doors
Fling open.
Out of a February night
Men enter, grimacing from the light,
They stomp, shake the frost
From their coats – now they are with us,
They speak, yell, raise their arms,
Curse and cry.
Snore, cough,
Òurmoil.
In the choir the banisters are cracking
Under the tide of shoulders.
And, ascending,
High-fives covered in dirt and clotted blood
Rise, like soiled heavenly bodies…
That night we went to take the Headquarters…
I, a comrade-student, and the third –
Redhaired privat-docent from the "SR".
The blood of manliness fills the body,
The wind of manliness inflates the shirt.
My youth is over…
Maturity begins…
Bang the gunstock on the stone! Cap off!
The face of the world has changed.
Earlier this morning

The planetrees hummed goodneturedly.
The sea
Resided in the bay.
In quiet cottages
Girls sang in circles.
In the book
Doctor Brem was resting, having leaned his staff
Against the boulder.
Ìy parental house was aglow
With candles' tongues and biblical cuisine…
The face of the world is changing…
Tonight
The trees will be iced over,
Their knots poke at my eyes, as if alive.

The sea
Spilled over the emptied boulevard.
The hoarse steamers shriek,
Cottages are
Boarded up.
On empty stoops
Rats dance.
And Brem, having escaped the book,
Raises his rifle at me with menace…
The thieves have emptied my parental house.

The cat
On the cold stove lifts her legs…
Today my youth is over… The repose is distant…
Feet plod in water.
Curse!
Now, raise the collar, cover the shoulders!
Well, then! I must go on!
Grieve not, my friend!
Rain!

Bustling reparte
Of crows in the acacias.
Rain.
From an abyss
Motorcyclists roll
Aglow in acetylene.
And, again, black
Tunnels – no beginning, no end.
Wind,
Blowing in unknown direction.
Along the puddles –
Marching patrols.
And again –
Rain.
We are alone – in this soaked world.
Bumping into planters in the alleyways,
Stumbling over each other,
Falling to the pavement, by midnight
We reached the Headquarters…
Here it is,
The iron box, locked with a hundred
Rusty chains and leaden hooks –
The box, filled to the rim with
Fevers, typhoid chills, delirium
tremens, muttering prayers and songs…
Cherubs, in Turkish pants,
Stood watch at the front gate,
Like mustachioed teakettles,
One fatter, redder than the other…
Out of nowhere, from an abyss,
Hissing with rain, broke out a round
Horseneigh and an eerie,
Keening, rooster's call…
The doorman
Cracked open a passage.

Then again
Thundered the locks, barring the exit.
We walked along the corridors that resembled
Dreams.
Crooked lamps
Swung over us.
Crooked shadows
Ran up in tangles and spirals
Along the walls, above,
Leading to the sagging ceiling.
On long benches,
he gendarmes
Snored, resting their chins on sabers' hilts…
And this labyrinth came together
At the oak gates, on which
Hung the square plaque: "Inspector"!!.
<ink, with azure sideburns,
That a slightest wind could
Rouse into flight,
Like a notebook angel,
He fleeted above the scribal desk,
The penholder made of shrapnel casing,
He smiled, melted with abandon,
From hospitality, kindness, and bliss
Of meeting with us, Committee members…
And we stood there,
Shifting weight
From foot to foot,
Leaving dirty footprints
On the exotic horses, parrots,
Embroidered on the rug…
We had no time for courtesies.
Enough…
The keys are handed over – off to the devil!
All talk is done.

Good bye…
We took over the affairs.
We sniffed
out all the nooks.
In one room
In the corner, piled like potatoes
Brownings and revolvers in a mound.
We counted up our take.
In the morning,
Half-awake, dizzy from the worknight,
Besmudged in warehouse dust,
We fetched a prisoner's kettle,
Beaten up and rusty, and drank
With burned and smacking lips,
Our first tea of Liberty…
Blue rains washed the earth,
And in the night there was already starting
The clandestine and manly blooming
Of chestnut trees.
The land was drying…
The coast was blowing
Its heated salt…
In the bandshell
Lost amid the planetrees' –
Marseillaise, held aloft by bows,
Dispersed among the leaves and streetlamps.
Our street, washed sparkling-clean
With summer showers, flew down to the bay,
The planetrees' formations stood like a fence,
Wondrous and green.
Above all that, in the curlicues of foam
The battleship "Sinop"
Swayed ever-so-lightly,
And in the steel-gray cloud
Slithered the fireworm, its banner.

Acàcias molted.
Invisible
Fragrance of rotting flowers seeped into the sea,
And the sailors danced away
With the buxom wenches from the outskirts
In their arms.
Beyond the fishermen's fires, on the slopes
Overgrown with mottled mint,
Under broken sloops, by half-demolished
Bathhouses, desperados –
Deserters in loose insignia –
Played poker, whist, or pinochle,
And in the cave, calflike,
Snored the moonshiner's still.
I remained in the district…
I went to work
As a deputy commissioner…
Early on
I whiled my nights away in dank armories,
Observing the passing world, the passerbys,
Strange to me, like manifestations of foreign nature.
From slanted lampposts, from the thick smoke,
Emerged the freaks not ever seen before…
I practiced omnipresence…
In a cart
Along the country lanes I chased
Horsethieves.
Late at night
I would take a cutter
Into the bay, black like a horn,
Amid the crags and dunes.
I broke into thieves' lairs
That stunk of overfried fish.
I would appear, like the Angel of Death,
With a flashlight and a pistol, surrounded

By four sailors from the battleship…
(They were young. Still pink with happiness.
Just underslept a bit, a mere hour.
Caps – sideways, peacoats – open.
Carbines on the arm. And eyes- against the wind.)
My Judean pride sang,
Like a string stretched to its limit…
I would pay a lot, so my ancestor
In a long robe and a foxfur hat,
From under which gray
Sidelocks spiral down and a flurry of dead skin
Ascends over his square beard…
I would pay a lot
So this ancestor could discern an heir
In this towering hulk
That rules over the headlights, the bayonets,
The engine that scuttles the midnight hour…
I shuddered.
A ringing phone
Screeches by the ear…
"The comissar? 'Tis he. What do you want?"
The voice, hidden in the tube,
Told me that in the Richelieu street,
In the teahouse of the general's widow Clemenz,
Will gather Simon Rabinovich,
Pete the Flounder and Monya the Dimondcutter,
The scourge of railroads,
Cinematographic heroes –
Bandits with suitcases, containing
Diamond drills and saws,
A soporific opium fag for an unsuspecting neighbor…
They flew along the pullman roofs
In storm-blown cloaks,
Revolvers hidden in tuxedo sleeves,
A 100 rouble wench in tow,

Tonight at the teahouse – They'd be done with.
Basta!
At the barracks the battleship boys
Drank tea, amid the game of checkers.
Their striped shirts
Wrinkled along their musculature…
Their faces were pink with the pinkness of a child,
Largehanded, with blue eyes,
They moved the pawns
With exaltation between the squares,
Blinked, moved their lips,
Thoughtfully, without a grin
Hummed, stomped their heels…
We boarded the cart,
Holding onto each other's shoulders,
And the angular nag
Dragged us off into the warm darkness…
It took a revolver's barrel
Thrust into the cracked gate
To rouse the concierge,
Who, yawning and holding up his pants,
Did finally let us in.
In silence
Up we went
Along the crimson carpet
That lined the staircase.
Alone
I approach the door.
The lads, holding the carbines
Tightly between their knees,
Were flat against the wall.
All – like in a decent house…
A lamp topped with a deep-blue shade
Over the family table.
Gardines,

Chairs plushly upholstered.
An upright piano,
A bookcase, on it – Tolstoy, a plaster bust.
Kindness and comfort
In the warm air.
Steam
Over the samovar.
The cozy of woven wool
is on the kettle, perfect order..,
We enter like a storm, like breath
Of blackened streets, our boots unwiped,
Not taking off the peacoats.
A madam, bewigged and
white with powder,
Rings on nervous fingers,
Rolled forth to greet us,
Bowing, wringing her hands.
Fat, with drooping cheeks…
"Antonina Clemenz!"
Are you her? – A warrant" –
I said, flinging open the doors.
A conversation was taking place
Around the table.
Three gentlemen
In land-hussar uniforms,
Damsels, laughing politely.
Sweets and pastries – on the table.
I stood in awe…
Damn it! Must be a wrong address!
This is no teahouse!
Some friends, together for tea.
Who am I to interfere?..
I should be sitting in this comfort,
Talking of Gumilev,
Instead of beating about the night, like a detective,

Breaking up quiet families
In search of some unknown bandits…
One of my sailors
Approached the table,
And blurted in gloomy bass:
"I know these three.
Hands up!
Take 'em, boys!"
Where is the fourth? Ladies, aside!.
All hell
Broke loose.
From the luxurious landhussars we took
Revolvers in the holsters.
Of course, they were
The ones that we were after…
We locked them in the pantry.
Locked up –
And left a sailor on watch.
We pushed open the doors.
We entered
The rooms filled with rabble…
The air was stained with choking powder,
Human seed and sweet
Liqueurous stupor.
Through the mass
Of this blue fog
The barely visible
Streetlamps' puddled reflection
Was limply breaking through…
In beds, narrow bodies
Moved like fish under the blankets…
A man's head rises
Out of the circular foam of pillows…
We check the paperwork,
We close the door, apologize,

We go further.
Again sweet
Tidal wave of fragrance.
Again
Heads rise from pillows
And dive again into the silken spray…
The third room. We're met by
A lad in blue longjohns.
He stands, with firmly planted feet,
His torso rocking slowly
And swinging, like a glove,
A Browning… He winks at us:
"Îh! The whole fleet is here! This cannon
Couldn't take you all. So I surrender…"
Behind him, a blanket thrown aside,
Barelegged, a nightgown
Sliding from the shoulder, in her teeth a fag,
Halfawake, silently sat
She, the one, my torment,
A nightingale's glance and flight
Of shoes on slippery asphalt…
"Go back! – I told the sailors… –
The search is done! Take the lad away!
I'll stay with her!"
The awkward gunstocks
Clinked, my boys
Squeezed into the doors.
I remained.
In stuffy twilight, in hot dozing
The girl was seated on the bed…
"-Recognize me?" – she didn't say a word,
Her weightless hands over
Her ashen face.
"Now, do you recognize me?"
Silence.

Then in ire I blurt:
"What price a session?"
And softly,
Barely having moved her lips, she said:
"Take pity! Money isn't needed…"
I threw the wad at her.
And forth I went,
Not taking off my boots, not taking of the holster,
Not unbuttoning my tunic,
Straight into the down eddy, on the blanket,
Under which shook and panted
All my predecessors – into that dark,
Illegible torrent of phantoms,
Shrieks, unbound motions,
Darkness and unstoppable light…
I am taking you, for the reticence
Of my age, for my timidity,
The shame of my ancestral vagrants,
The chirping of a random bird!
I am taking you, as my retribution to the world
That I could not shake off!
Take me into your vacant innards,
That couldn't grow grass –
Maybe, my nocturnal seed
Will fertilize your desert.
There will be showers, a southern wind,
And calls of swans in love.

1933-34 (pub. 1936)

"Low-set house with the pale blue shutters"

Sergey Yesenin

Translated from the Russian
by Max Thompson

Low-set house with the pale blue shutters,
You'll forever remain in my thoughts.
The years that fell silent at twilight
Were too recent for me to forget.

But I still dream even today
Of our field, our meadows and woods,
Half-obscured in the chintzy gray
Of these northern, impoverished skies.

I no longer know how to feel rapture,
And don't want to fade out in the sticks,
But suppose that I will forever
Have a Russian soul's sad tenderness.

I've fallen in love with the cranes
That call out to the merger skyline,
For in the expanse of these fields
They have not come across filling grain.

They have only seen birches and flowers
And the common broom, leafless and bent,
And heard the whistles of robbers
That could easily strike a man dead.

As much as I want not to love it,
All the same, I can't figure out how,
And under this second-rate chintz,
Native land, you are sweet to me now.

This is why recent days that have passed
Don't feel like the years of my youth.
Low-set house with the pale blue shutters,
You'll forever remain in my thoughts.

1924

Returning to My Birthplace

Sergey Yesenin

Translated from the Russian
by Max Thompson

I'm visiting my native land of birth,
The village
Where I lived, a little boy,
Where, like a watchtower made all of birch,
The belfry, with no cross, stretched to the sky.

How much has changed here in the poor
Unprepossessing life of theirs.
What a lot of new discoveries
Have followed swiftly at my heels.

I cannot recognize
My father's home.
The oak no longer waves beyond the windowsill,
And my mother isn't on the porch
Feeding chicks with porridge made of meal.

She must, I suppose, have gotten
On in years.
I sadly take a look around.
As before, the mountain stands alone,
White, and by it is
A tall, gray stone.

There's a graveyard here!
The rotten crosses
Are like dead men, who, fighting hand-to-hand,
Were frozen with their arms thrown wide.

An old man leaning on a walking stick
Sweeps dust from the trail's wild grass.
"Hey, passer-by!
Tell me, will you, friend,
Where does Tatyana Yesenin abide?"
"Tatyana? Hm.
She lives past that there hut.
And who are you?
A relative
Or fallen son?

"I am.
But what's the matter now, old man?
Tell me,
Why does sorrow fill your eyes?"

"It's well, my boy,
That you not recognize your grandpa!"
"Oh, grandpa, is that really you?"
And a doleful conversation flows
Onto the dusty flowers in warm tears.
… … … … … … … … … …
"You'll be thirty shortly, I believe.
I'm ninety now –
I'll soon be in my grave.
You should have come back years ago,"
He says to me and wrinkles up his brow.
"Yes. It's time…
Are you a communist, then?"
"No."

"Well, your sisters joined the Communist Youth.
It makes you want to choke! What awful filth!
The other day they swept the icons from the shelf;
The commissar took down the church's cross.
Now there's nowhere left to pray to God.
I've started slipping off into the wood
To say prayers to the aspens…
Just in case.

Let's go home –
You can see it for yourself."
And so we walk the furrow, trampling corncockles.
I smile at the woods and fresh-plowed fields,
While Grandpa looks with anguish at the belfry.
… … … … … … … … … … …
… … … … … … … … … … …
"Hello there, mother dear! Hello!"
Again I raise my kerchief to my eyes.
Here even a cow would burst right into tears,
Looking at this indigent homestead.

A calendar of Lenin's on the wall.
Here is my sisters' life –
Their life, not mine,
But all the same I have to take a knee,
Having seen you, land of birth, again.

Some neighbors came…
A woman with a baby.
Now no one has an inkling who I am.
Our dog, like in a poem by Lord Byron,
Barking, ran to greet me by the gate.

Oh, lovely land!
You're not the same;

You're not.
And I, as well, am different from before.
As our grandparents grow more distraught,
My sister's mouth laughs gaily all the more.

Lenin's not, of course, to me an icon;
I know the world
And love my kith and kin.
But for some reason, still I take a bow
As I sit down on the wooden bench.

"Well, let's hear it, sister!"
So my sister grabs
A fat Das Kapital, her Bible, and she talks
Of Marx,
Of Engels…
There's not any wise
In which, of course, I've looked at books like these.

And it's funny
How a nimble little girl
Finds so much in me to castigate.
… … … … … … … … … … …
… … … … … … … … … … …
Our dog, like in a poem by Lord Byron,
Barking, ran to greet me by the gate.

June 1, 1924

Memory of Marie A.

Bertolt Brecht

Translated from the German
by Zachary Murphy King

On that day in the blue month of September
In silence under one young cherry tree
I held her there, my silent, pale love
And in my arms she was a cherished dream,
And over us in deepest summer sky
There was a cloud I watched a while.
It was so white, and huge, and high,
And as I looked again, no wisp remained.

And since that day so many, many months
Have passed in silence, gone unseen on,
The cherry trees are maybe only stumps
And then you ask about my love.
So I tell you: I don't think I remember
And yet, of course, I know well what you mean.
Her face: that too I couldn't really say.
I only know: I kissed it that gone day.

And that kiss too I would have long forgotten
If it wasn't for the cloud that wondered there.
I know it still and will know it forever.
It was so white and came from high above.
Perhaps the cherry trees still bloom, and will,

And she perhaps has had her seventh son,
But that white cloud bloomed only for a minute
And looking up I saw: dispersed and gone.

1920

"It was my mother taught me walking"

Arseny Tarkovsky

Translated from the Russian
by Zachary Murphy King

It was my mother taught me walking.
I clung tightly to her hem.
Not knowing which foot's for starting,
I chose one and I went.

I walked the garden up and down
When I was two or so,
That I was growing like the lawn,
I really didn't know.

It's not that I was small,
It's just that everything
Was growing, indeed the city
Sprawled, spinning like a ring.

Clouds trickled in toward us,
Trees and trees and homes,
A market suburb all in dust,
Train station, prairie loam.

I crossed my little Liliputia,
Trampling unshod
Over sabers of the meadow folk,
And wandered on and on.

While walking though the needle grass
And sprouts, I came to see
That the earth's very axis
Passes right through me.

1956

Three Poems

Volha Hapeyeva

Translated from the Belarusian
by Volha Hapeyeva with Forrest Gander

* * *

their bodies I examined with my lips
forgetting all others I'd tasted
forgetting I had to breathe and eat
that I'm not them
that I belong to other feelings
and only when their names began to swirl together
did I fully open
the taps,
the windows,
dictionaries,
the files with doc. extensions

I even called the embassies
just to hear that everything is as it was and that the everythings are in their places

in our relation there was no sense of sight
only hearing only form
touch and figure weight rhythm and gestures
the stress of rough kisses embraceable tones
and intonation's improv on a lonely rail station platform

from which they all departed
leaving lipstick loops on my cheeks

for a long time the smile will go on clinging to my mouth
maybe this is how the clown feels when the audience goes

sometimes it's not easy to believe the wind is only difference in pressure
sometimes a word-combination is more than a combination of words

* * *

* * *

if I lived in 1908
I'd be Emmeline Pankhurst
I'd go to demonstrations
and I might come to catch something
shaped like a tumor –
sort of yellow and bronze –
in my chest,
and some man, unfolding a newspaper the next day
would think:
she just walked into the wrong place
at the wrong time.

with a naïve hope I'd be reborn as Sonya
copying out the novels of my genius husband for days on end
rearranging his words for harmony
and the words would love me, pity me, and think
she was in the wrong place
at the wrong time

having been born here and now
I put on a skirt or pants
or sometimes an elation
but most often I put on my conviction
that what matters isn't the time or place
but that man with the newspaper, that reporter and his editor,
pity and words and tumors and novels
and geniuses
and maybe even a tight-fitting wine cork

once you asked:
if I had the chance to choose,
where would I be born and as whom

I like to choose an answer to please and
surprise you, but there's nothing to think about
For me there is no choice
I can tell you the truth

to be a Chinese peasant in the twelfth century
herding cattle, on the look-out for hazards
wishing only for a bowl of hot noodles

unlike you with your new york turn of the century jazz

choice
is never time nor place
but something more trivial
a kind of multiple of my existence
say – some existence of yours

* * *

* * *

believing in miracles on Christmas is no longer
tolerable
not because I'm of age
but because behind every miracle there's someone's big job
it's kind of embarrassing and shameful to want someone to do something
in your stead only because you want a miracle
so this year I decided – no more
miracle
and there wasn't one
and somebody finally may have met the right person
or calmed down or been granted the day off
coming back from the job of loving someone you don't anymore,
piles of postcards don't help
no matter how hard you stick them like mustard plasters to the body
which can't understand why nobody embraces it anymore
and can't make sense of this absence.
I am lost
and the body trembles
it can't fathom how the word
could take you from me
in a recurrent hope I'm pressing the "home" key
but I don't get home

* * *

Kalendar

Dzvinia Orlowsky

sichen' – to slash

Wind, do you use a scalpel
so precise,

it cleaves
life-death's infinitesimal point,

the soul released
for its journey?

~

liutyi – fierce one

And what, then, of the body?

If only it, too,
could fly away, never to return.

The dead would stop worrying
about coming back,

sadly surprised to find

hearts in puddles,
faces in grass.

~

berezen' – birch tree

Migratory birds
carry God's blessings.

But eyes watch other eyes
for proof of love.

~

kviten' – blossoming of flowers

Tsvetaeva was right –
the body only gets in the way,

Flowers rise as blood!

~

traven' – greening of grass

Blade of grass, cut our lips –

Tight between our thumbs
we try to make you sing.

~

cherven' – larvae

Earth line of black skeletal trees,

what else besides gnawing
have you forgotten?

~

lypen' – flowering linden tree

A thousand years and still
your music –

praise of the lyre
or thud of drum

naked
or prank

~

serpen' – sickle harvests grain

Smooth or serrated, tangled
or burgeoning, dreams

offer their undecipherable
clusters of grains.

~

veresen' – ferns

Our wooded
back acre is fluent
in fern
No silence,
just phrases that can't be heard.

~

zhovten' – yellowing of trees

Press upon our lungs
to exhale –

until fear streams
out of our spines, arteries,

until we turn toward the color
of one destiny.

~

lystopad – dropping of leaves

Rain, the nervous wreck,
always tongues the always dark.

~

hruden' – frozen lumps of earth

Spring will terrify,
erupt from everything dead.

Apologetic
for lack of mountain-range,

frozen lumps of snow and earth
no longer hold:

snih (snow) to
trava (grass)
lybov (love)

Ivan the Fly Eater

Dzvinia Orlowsky

We could count on his appetite
for frantic

unexpected flights
or for accurate,

futile landings.
He caught flies the way some people

catch harsh words –
when least expected –

a slice of a lost argument,
the occasional punctuation mark filled with blood.

Rumors circulated that he also fed them to his cat –
unkind gossip

rampant as ugly old women.
Apologies fulfilled no purpose –

remorse was for rotting tree stumps.
We could count on Ivan

to lie complacently in the sun
near the wattle fence,

his face a welcome blank plate.
Besides, we had other things to worry about:

prystrit!, the evil eye, glaring solemn
curses at every turn:

May you choke on a bone!
May your son-in-law's legs shrivel!

Despite our gracious hearts,
sooner or later, we all suffered

under its weight.

Russia and Europe

Tatiana Shcherbina
Translated from the Russian by J. Kates

Europe is forever forty,
and Russia sixteen,
a girl with a ribbon in her hair, eager to please,
cursing in the household, a difficult childhood,
grandparents imprisoned and shot
defending their native land,
but not defending it now.
The servant-girl and lady-in-waiting
in their own century before last
knew how they continued the line
by becoming the great-grandmothers
of the parents of the girl with the ribbon in her hair,
done out of the hard cash
they had worked for, those parents
of Europe, conquerors,
and *here it was dropped by armfuls*
slick-slick thick-thick,
some with diamonds, others with cabbage,
in spite of revolutionary mutation.
Vodka alone brings the nation together.
The little girl in ribbons
wants heaven in diamonds.

"An old maid at forty might as well be a hundred,"
Europe was told a century ago, all of forty,

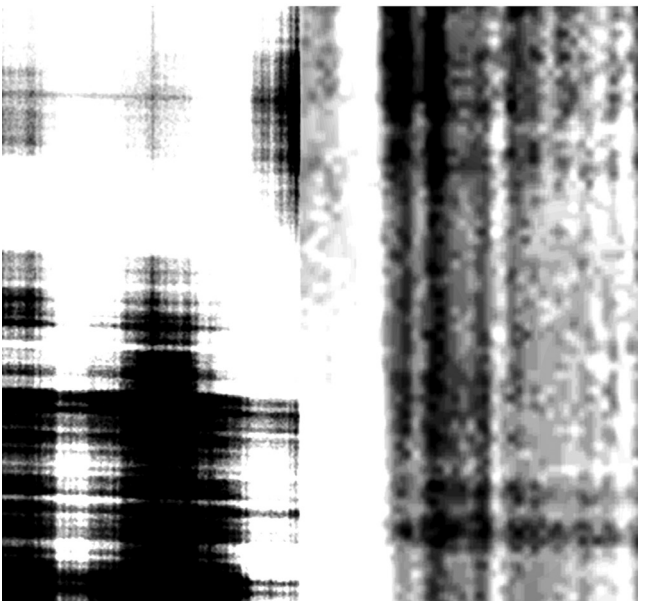
maybe sixty, but forty by stretching,
Russia at a stretch sixteen,
a lost boy in a juvenile home,
hoisted the schoolmistress, snapped it on his cell
for his egghead-parents
to wring and wring their hands: our son a moron
who will drive us to the grave.
Boy Russia of his own free will
chooses a candidate to call
his ancestor, the young guy's grandfathers,
once all swung from the same branch,
eurouncle will ask him once again, save me!
an old lothario, still beautiful in his little beret,
his imam – um, here he'll require scum
with the skills of a SWAT team.
The old lecher is happy to hear out the boy,
but for now more than gas he still wants
a girl – better, so much better!

Jerusalem

Tatiana Shcherbina
Translated from the Russian by J. Kates

Bougainvillea, too scarlet, too pink,
stones the color of hummus, half-circles of hills.
Thick trunks of olive trees stand on the ramparts of Gethsemane,
leaves quivering like sensors.
In the maze of the bazaar bright colors and cries
as if parrots had flocked here for breakfast.
Mea Shearim is an anthill of officious bustling,
identical black hats and black bodies
weighted down with tonnes of packages:
a conveyor-belt for children – of food, clothing , toys,
and soon enough books, although it's always the same Book .
The stalls of religious objects are empty, elegant,
like expensive European boutiques –
mezuzot , spinning tops, tallit and silver candlesticks
something for everyone, but we can't afford fur hats.
Jaffa, David HaMeleh – ordinary streets,
only the houses are the color of hummus – Jerusalem stone
in its old age it is young, like tawny fudge.
In the Muslim Quarter of the Old City,
a row of shops – this is the Via Dolorosa,
in the concentrated circles of Jerusalem
there is no room to pursue life like the belle of the ball,
There is no gate marked "exit,"
and the gate marked "entrance" is bricked up.
Here life is the expectation of a miracle, and the miracle is
that life is possible.

The Art of Translation



Evgeny Baratynsky's "Feasts" (1820)

Peter France

In his "Epistle to the Censor" of 1822, Pushkin calls his friend Evgeny Baratynsky the "singer of Feasts". Two years later in the introduction to Tatyana's letter in Book 3 of *Evgeny Onegin,* this has become "singer of Feasts and melancholy". Melancholy is readily associated with Baratynsky's name, feasts perhaps rather less so, but one of his first substantial works was the poem with that title, written during his first year of military service in Finland in 1820. He was just twenty years old, and had recently emerged from the suicidal depression caused by his shameful expulsion from the School of Pages to become a member of a congenial circle of young Petersburg poets – Pushkin, Delvig, Küchelbecker and others. For them, from his Finnish exile, he wrote this mostly light-hearted long poem, which was published the following year in a journal, then in 1826 in a separate edition with his verse tale "Eda" – in both cases the censor made cuts, notably in the passage where champagne (Ay) is compared to the spirit of freedom bursting its shackles.

In the 1826 edition, Baratynsky gave his poem an epigraph from Sterne which retranslates into English as: "Imagination illuminated the dark windows of Cervantes' prison". He added a brief note on the poem: "This poem was written in Finland. It is a kind of joke, which like musical fantasies is not subject to strict critical examination. The author wrote it in a merry mood, we hope it will not be judged too fiercely." But it is not all a joke; halfway through it modulates to a praise of friendship tinged with the elegiac melancholy that readers of Baratynsky know so well.

It seemed to me that this lively and attractive early poem called for an English translation (I have not been able to find any

previous versions in English). The original is rhymed in a variety of patterns; I have not reproduced this rhyming at all closely, but have tried above all to find a tone and rhythm like those of the Russian.

Feasts

I've seen society, my friends,
measured it all with a keen eye.
My soul was once a slave to care,
I drifted on the common tide...
But I've paid my debt to madness,
and now my sight has cleared again;
yet, unlike wise King Solomon,
I don't say: All is vanity.
Not everything in life betrayed me:
my foolish heart sometimes deceived me,
at other times, reason misled me,
but on the other hand, good friends,
my stomach never let me down.

There's one thing we must all confess,
all of us, lovers, warriors, poets –
only the carefree epicure
deserves the name of wise. All praise
and honour to his way of thinking!
He finds the good things he desires
spread generously over the earth.
Maybe at times, dear friends, my hero
may feel a bit unwell, who knows,
but never sad, his daily round
of pleasures has no truck with sorrow.
Feeling no spiritual needs,
he feels no spiritual torments.

Concocting brews of words and rhymes,
poets live on the brink of tears;
it has been know for ladies fair
to make fools of their humble suitors;
and some bold warriors, creeping home
disfigured from the field of battle,
suspect they may be idiots too;
God of the table, gentle Comus,
your pleasures hide no bitter taste!
It's fine to string your lyre and win
a great name in men's memory;
to serve Venus is better still;
it's fun to fight, my friends, but hey!
dinner is far less dangerous.

How could we fail to love our city? –
but not the seat imperial,
the multitude of golden domes,
the cheerful song of bells, the chatter
of winged and whispered gossip. No,
none of these holds my wayward mind.
What I love are the merry people,
I love the spacious luxury
of their long-drawn-out meals, I love
the hospitality of wealth
and rank, the subtle art of cooks.
The table talk is bright and cheerful,
the host a man of dignity,
the dinners ceremonious,
the table rich and tempting. Now,
all laid, it groans beneath the burden
of countless dishes, and the guests
with not a care between them stand
in patient piety. Quietly
they wait the signal to be seated,

and every guest all round the table
with open honest joy drinks in
the luxury of expectation –
and through the thin transparent steam
the tasty dishes gleam, the heaps
of golden fruits, of rich desserts.
(Why is my pen too weak to paint it? –
but so in spring the Scythian barrows,
as heaven wakes to life, shine out
in the sun's purple rays, beneath
the drifting smoke of morning mists.)
The guests are seated, Count and Prince,
all of them keen trenchermen,
not idle, draining to the lees
their wide-brimmed champagne glasses. These
pour happiness into all hearts
and bridle up harsh words; my friends,
wherever guests are drinking, there
speeches are full of wit, not malice.
Now is the time of miracles:
the voices flow swiftly together,
the diners raise a muffled din,
each boldly boasting of his dogs,
his friends, the hunters and the heroes.
Wine bathes their hearts in tenderness
and even stimulates their minds.
Then all stand ceremoniously
and like so many prudent husbands
go to the drawing-room to learn
what seemed so funny over dinner.

But are the festive cups reserved
for those with pots of money? No,
your little unpretentious parties
are worth as much as rich men's feasts.

In a tree-shaded garden retreat
in a corner of Peter's city,
do you remember it, dear friends,
the house where your true-hearted band
shook off dull tedium at the door,
gathering in a rowdy crowd,
rank set aside, to share the joys
of leisure with the red-cheeked god?
The wine flowed freely, the wine glowed,
the air flashed with sparks of wit,
and the heart lived through centuries
in just a few bright-burning hours.
A simple cloth covered the table,
we had no need to marvel at
the precious porcelain of China
or rarest crystal ornaments;
and meanwhile to the sons of mirth
Bacchus poured foaming, brimming cups
of his beloved Ay; my friends,
its starry moisture gives new life
to every eye, and in its depths
courage comes gaily bubbling up,
a true embodiment of freedom;
like daring wit it breaks the shackles,
its energy thrusts corks aside,
and joyful foam comes gushing out,
the emblem of young life. And we
drowned all our cares in it, and full
of our enthusiastic dreams
we cried: 'This is the poets' feast!
Down on your knees, blind philistines!'
Blind love had filled my heart, but I
was strong enough to crush its madness
and boldly took my part with you
in the loud joys of conversation.

'Why sink beneath your doleful dreams?'
you shouted. 'Dare to drink with us;
cheer up, dear comrade, live for now,
and drive her from your thoughts!' I sighed,
then did as I was told, uncaring;
with an indifferent smile, I drank,
and my dark dreams were flushed with light,
my sorrows fled away in droves,
lips trembling, half inaudibly,
I dared to mutter: 'Let her go!'

And where is love the traitor now?
Alas, the grief it brings enchants me!
What would I give once more to feel
its old familiar heartache now?
And where are you, my merry friends,
who breathed such life into my soul?
A stern fate drove us different ways,
and each of us sighed gloomily
and shook his brothers' hands and went
wandering off on his own road.
And in our silent grief perhaps
we all dream idly of the days
that now have fled so far from us –
and at a stranger's table still
live in the memory of our feasts.
O, if with ardent prayers I could
disarm the wrath of destiny
and leave these foreign rocks behind
and fly back to my native land!
(The poet's licence is to dream.)
By those familiar streams, my friends,
who now are scattered through the world,
I'd gather you together. There
my house, witness of centuries,

beneath the shade of the dark oaks
that once my fathers' fathers knew,
wearily bows its modest head.
Many long years before our time
passionately they loved their friends
and feasted them tumultuously...
We, in a new age, still the same
at heart, will form a happy band
beneath a quiet monastic roof:
you, faithful Delvig, you who have been
my brother in poetry and in play,
you, our beloved Pushkin, who
can sing of heroes or of wine,
and in the passion of wild youth
can with your playful wit both shine
a light on the heart's inner depths
and be the best of drinking friends.
You, all of you, who shared with me
the pleasures and the dreams, make haste,
come to my little house and share
the sweet feast of reunion.

From birth forgotten by the blind
sovereign of cares, what shall I find,
a hermit in my lowly cell,
to feast my guests? Not cordon bleu,
but simple fare. And joyfully,
my friends, we'll dine together there.
I know that since we said farewell,
as days and years went past, we learned
to puzzle out the mysteries
of human life. Whatever once
bewitched our minds or seized our hearts,
as a dream melts at morning light,
has played us false, has fled from sight.

Alas! our memory will ring
with songs to Bacchus that still bear
the memory of our young days,
those playful sallies all ablaze
with the rich life of youthful souls,
fruits of our unreflecting joy,
in which the poet gives a shape
to his most vivid dreams. What now
can we put in their place? In what
can we now place our trust?
In feasts!
In these bleak years of lifelessness,
the frozen soul is warmed again
by their consoling vigour. What
if youth has gone for ever, friends?
Be merry, feast! The chink of cups
will maybe lure forgotten joys
to visit us in our retreat.

Reading the Meter: Translating Two Lyric Poems by Pushkin

Antony Wood

We often hear from "sudyey reshitel'nykh i strogikh" that in verse translation the original meter should be kept, for it bears layers of significance in genre identification and links to literary tradition: an ode is an ode, a madrigal is a madrigal, a classical hexameter is just that, etc. In translation of lyric verse, however, I've always taken my leading precept from Herder: "In lyric poetry form clasps content as closely as a lover his beloved," taking "form" to refer to the target language as well as the original. Everyone today is conscious of the difference between a richly polysyllabic language like Russian and the monosyllabic ratio of English, and in translating, like many others, I have taken this as license for metrical freedom.

But recently I have been less prompt in shortening Russian meters in translation to suit shorter English words, and given more thought, even in the exciting endeavour to produce a new poem, to the mood, stylistic level and genre of what I'm translating. Some time ago I did a version of Pushkin's elegy "Bezumnykh let ugassheye vesel'ye" in tetrameter in my usual metrically procrustean way:

> The madcap years now gone to waste
> Hang on me like a drunken haze.
> But in me, sadness from the past
> Strengthens, like wine, with lengthening days.
> My way is bleak. Adversity
> Haunts the future's heavy sea.

I have no wish, my friends, to die;
I wish to live, to suffer, think;
Griefs and cares will come to me –
But pleasures life will also bring:
I shall drink in sweet harmony,
The fruits of fancy will still wring
Tears from me – on my sad decline
Perhaps love's farewell smile will shine.

Although I was always fairly satisfied with this, I felt it somehow didn't really hit the note. Then Michael Wachtel's *Commentary to Pushkin's Lyric Poetry, 1826–1836* (2011) alerted me to the implications of Pushkin's meter, the pentameter. Writing this poem in 1830, Pushkin was deliberately using an outmoded genre, which he had mocked in Lensky's last Romantic effusion; it is a serious elegy, and far from self-mocking; and he chooses a heavier meter than his usual tetrameter. I realized that the tetrameter didn't get the most out of the elegy genre. In English, it is prominent in the controlled, impersonal, intellectual 17th-century "line of wit" from Donne to Marvell, and this is an association that has to be shaken off in reading any verse in the meter today. I decided to go back to Pushkin's pentameter:

The madcap years have long since gone to waste;
They hang upon me like a drunken haze,
And deep inside me, sadness from the past
Grows in strength, like wine, with lengthening days.
The course that I must take will offer me
Toils and troubles, and a restless sea.

But I have no desire, dear friends, to die;
I wish to live, to suffer, and to think;
I know that griefs and cares will burden me –
But pleasures also life will surely bring:
I shall again drink in sweet harmony,
The powers of fancy will not cease to wring

Warm tears from me – and on my sad decline
One day perhaps, love's farewell smile will shine.

This more expansive metre is surely more in keeping with Pushkin's personal purpose in his Elegy. Its slower, more varying gait allows pauses, asides, emphases, and insertions that suddenly arise in a personal train of thought but get squeezed out in the tighter tetrameter. The less insistent rhythm and rhyme allow a spontaneous, less predictable overall movement more apt to meditation.

I then went back to another of my longstanding Pushkin translations, of "Ya vas lyubil," which I had again done in tetrameter for Pushkin's pentameter:

I loved you: in my heart, perhaps,
Love may not be extinguished yet;
But I will weary you no more,
Nor cause you sadness or regret.
I loved you not in words, or hope,
But shyly, and in jealous torture;
My love was tender, it was true,
Love may God grant you from another.

Despite the aims of focusing on key words, natural speech register, and balance by reducing Pushkin's pentameter to tetrameter, feeling the scrutiny of the judges resolute and strict I wondered if it might be possible to get in more of Pushkin's emotional intensity by going back to the pentameter again. So I loosened my version, trying to make it more spontaneous and less lapidary, by adding syllables to make a pentameter. Maybe it would have been better to reconceive the translation as a whole rather than tinker with syllables. Anyway, I thought the new pentameter at least coherent, and it was certainly loosened:

I loved you, and it might be, even now
Love is not extinguished in my heart;

But I have caused you weariness enough,
I would not wish you sadness or regret.
I loved you hopelessly and wordlessly,
In shyness, then in jealousy and torture;
My love for you was tender, it was true,
Such love may God now grant you from another.

But on closer consideration, I feel *dissipated* would be a better word. In the first line, "and it might be, even now" is labored for "perhaps" in the shorter version. In the third, "caused you weariness enough" sounds too formal for what might be taken as speech register. In the fifth line my addition of the interposing "and" takes away from the force of the two adverbs, which Pushkin has smack side by side, made even more forceful by the soundless comma between them. In the sixth line I have made Pushkin's powerful pair of emphasised words, "robost'yu" and "revnost'yu," less powerfully into three – "shyness," "jealousy," and "torture"; in my tetrameter, although there are also three words here, "jealous torture" reads more like a composite single entity balancing "shyly," preserving Pushkin's structural pair. The last line, beginning "Such love," sounds stilted compared with the shorter version (where either of the first two words might be stressed in reading), and "now grant" introduces an unwanted element of immediacy absent in the original; it actually replaces my first revision here, "may God vouchsafe you," which is surely too formal.

So the revised pentameter version of "Ya vas lyubil" in my estimation loses from the metrical change and offers an instance against Brodsky's "iron meter" rule, while the confirmatory opposite case makes this translator wary of rules, except one recognizing that different meters may have the same effect in different languages but not necessarily so.

Mikhail Lermontov's French Epigram

Yefim Somin

War and Peace, perhaps the most significant Russian novel of the 19th century, begins with a paragraph of conversation in French. Much longer stretches in that language are sprinkled throughout its several volumes. This is not surprising, given that the Russian high aristocracy of the early 19th century was not just fluent in French, but, in many cases, regarded it as their primary language. Some of the greatest Russian poets of the Golden Age were no exception.

I had my first encounter with this phenomenon when I took part in a voiceover project on librivox.com, to record the collected works of Evgeniy Baratynsky. Baratynsky wrote a couple of original poems in French, but also translated quite a bit of his Russian verse into French, presumably to make it accessible to French speakers. (He rendered the poems into prose, in a very freewheeling way.) Alexander Pushkin and Mikhail Lermontov also wrote poetry in French. The former produced a few playful pieces starting in his Lyceum years, while the latter wrote several romantically moody lyrics. The most prolific Francophone poet among the Golden Age Russians, however, was Fyodor Tyutchev. His oeuvre contains 18 French-language poems. They have a clear philosophical bent, whether dealing with love, art, or society. Thus, while writing in a different language, each poet stayed in his element (though it should be noted that Pushkin wrote all of his French verse by the age of 22, after which more somber tones started to enter his Russian work).

Here is a small gem by Lermontov, which, like his other poems in French, was not published in the poet's lifetime. The poems served as private missives to some of the ladies in Lermontov's circle. This piece was found in the papers of Alexandra Mikhailovna Vereshchagina (1810-1873), a friend and relative of the poet, to whom it had likely

been dedicated in 1832. It was first published in 1882 in the historical and literary journal *Russkaya Starina* (*Russian Antiquities*). Another even shorter humorous ditty addressed to Vereshchagina is also known.

If I can trust my hope is true,
I'll wait to see a better day.
In memories I'll stay with you,
In spite of being far away.

While wandering on a distant shore,
I'll track your steps, though far from view.
But if a fearsome storm should roar,
Just call to me – I'll rush to you.

* * *

Non, si j'en crois mon espérance
J'attends un meilleur avenir.
Je serai malgré la distance
Près de vous par le souvenir.

Errant sur un autre rivage,
De loin je vous suivrai,
Et sur vous si grondait l'orage,
Rappelez-moi, je reviendrai.

Four Poems by Uvaysiy

Donald Rayfield

Uvaysiy is the pseudonym, the *tallaxus* customary for Uzbek poets, of Jahon-otin (1780-1845). She was the daughter of a poet in Marghilon, Uzbekistan; her brother was a well-known *hafiz*, a Qu'ranic scholar. Her pen-name Uvaysiy derives from Uwais al-Karani, a contemporary and follower of Mohammed, who never, however, met the Prophet, and yet is considered the first *sufi*. Among the *sufi* the name Uwais/Uvaysiy took on the meaning of 'directly inspired, without instruction'. Uvaysiy-Jahon was an *otin*, a woman highly regarded in Uzbekistan for her knowledge of poetry, prayers, the Qu'ran and languages, much in demand at women's festivities, lay and religious, and often a peripatetic teacher of children. Uvaysiy had an unhappy marriage and was either divorced or widowed; her son was conscripted as a soldier in Kashgar, her daughter died in childbirth, leaving her with a grandchild to bring up.

She left for Kokand, where she became a close friend of the poet Nodira (the pseudonym of Mohlar-oyim), who was the Khan Umar of Kokand's senior wife. (The Khan himself, known as Omariy, was also a well-regarded poet.) With the court, Uvaysiy travelled all over today's Uzbekistan. When in 1842 the Emir of Bukhara captured Kokand and executed the Khan's family, Uvaysiy escaped back home to Marghilon.

Her lyrical poems, including about 270 ghazals and 29 five-stanza lyrics (muxammas), have been collected in her *Devon* or are to be found in a collection called *Ko'ngil gulzori (The Soul's Flowerbed)*. Her two long poems, one on the Imams Hasan and Huseyn, the other (unfinished) a life of Muhammad-Ali, the dissolute and unfortunate young heir to Khan Umar and Nodira, are still unpublished, only available in manuscript.

While a pious believer, Uvaysiy was a typically Central Asian Hanafi Muslim, influenced by *sufi* thought: 18th- and 19th-century

Uzbek clerics often accepted the power of sexual passion, tolerated alcohol and maintained pre-Islamic Turkic traditions.

Uvaysiy's poetry is far more direct than those of her contemporaries and friends: its sexuality is less disguised behind images of jewels, heavenly bodies, and fruits, her feelings of despair and resignation are expressed without the usual clichés of Farsi poetry. Her poetry is many-layered: it speaks to God, as well as to faithless lovers and to herself and friends; like other *sufi*, Uvaysiy seeks to understand God and fate through paradoxes, symbols and extreme emotional states.

Uzbek, basically a Turkic language, heir to the Chaghatai Turkic which dominated Central Asia since the 13th century AD, is heavily enriched by Farsi and, through Farsi, by Qu'ranic Arabic. Uvaysiy knew all three languages perfectly, just as she knew well the seven-century-old traditions of Turkic and Farsi poetry that, until the Russian and British empires broke the links, stretched over Asia from the Caspian Sea to Delhi. Uvaysiy, however, is more restrained than others of her time in letting her Turkic slide into Persian idioms and thus more easily understood. Uzbek, however, when it was written in Arabic script was often ambiguous, since the absence of vowel signs makes many words homonyms; and Uzbek itself is full of homophones, which frequently force the reader and translator to choose between meanings – "face" or "a hundred"; "garden" or "bouquet." Uvaysiy's work has yet to be published in a scholarly edition (the problem with Uzbek is that it has been through four different alphabets since Uvaysiy's time, and transliteration is a hazardous process). Little of her work has been translated with accuracy or flair into other languages, so that these versions must be seen as preliminary pioneering work.

I first encounted lines by Uvaysiy (and by the even greater 20th-century poet Cho'lpon [1897-1938]) last year, when translating Hamid Ismailov's novel *Devils' Dance,* which deals with the tragic fates of Uzbek poets under the Emirs and Khans and a century later under Stalin. I owe Hamid much for his help in understanding many allusions; his wife Razia Sultanova's translations of one poem into French and another into English have saved me from falling into a number of traps.

* * *

You have come from Kokand city, my boot is missing, have you got it?
You who know the state of my soul, my boot is missing, have you got it?

The day we came from Khojent city my heart was reasonably content:
At Uratepa, "Magi's Mount," my boot was missing, have you got it?

Its body is stained tulip-red, it's worth more than a myriad gardens,
An excursion to Mount Ko'hak: my boot is missing, have you got it?

In this misery I get no support: I'm destitute, tears flood my eyes,
Granny Greengrass is my life-line, my boot is missing, have you got it?

Lift me up, my tender one, on the way to the Magi I blistered my foot,
My lady friend, be aware, my boot is missing, have you got it?

Just one boot is not worth having; I can't afford one silver coin,
Granny Shodmon, dearer than life, my boot is missing, have you got it?

Hot-breathed Mr Reed, my boot is missing, have you got it?
You repaired my son's old shoe, you put a new sole on one shoe.

My heart is grieving for my boot, and what's more I have no money.
Oh my dearest Lady Luck, my boot is missing, have you got it?

If you, my lady, pity paupers, my pair is now without a boot,
Listen to me, Kazakh lady, my boot is missing, have you got it?

I am a body, you are my soul; I leave, abandoned to my yearning.
Hear my plea, o God my judge, my boot is missing, have you got it?

Should this message reach the Prince, a cry will come down from
nine heavens,
Erring Uvaysiy, say a prayer: my boot is missing, have you got it?

* * *

* * *

It's good that you have, o beauty, been loyal to victims of suffering,
It's good that you found herbs to heal those in thrall to love.

Oh hunter, show mercy for a heart struck by arrows,
Taking aim at the target, it is good that you wounded me.

If I should possibly meet you, at the cost of my life,
It is good if you promptly part my soul from my body.

You have deprived me of your big fine eyes, oh buyer,
It is good that you valued my ignorance cheaply.

Not for long did you know this world's beauties, oh heart,
It's good that you faded away, in a corner of the wine-house.

Today, faced by your beloved, Uvaysiy, give up noise and scandal,
The best time to start a row is when God is the Judge.

* * *

* * *

If I ask lovers the signal for a tryst, they'll kill me: if I don't ask, I'll die.
If I open a love shop for sufferers, they'll kill me; if I don't, I'll die.

Don't fan jealousy's torment, o death, if the beloved chats with a stranger,
If by his palace I bark like a dog, he'll kill me; if I don't, I'll die.

I have no choice except patience, if I want just him both day and night,
If I wander through the streets, I'll be killed; if I don't, I'll die.

When I languished, far away, my beloved had told me to keep away:
If I go to see his flower-face today, I'll be killed; if I don't, I'll die.

He avoids me, he treats me scornfully, my spirit fades from this
vain world,
Lonely Uvaysiy, if I stay so wan-faced, I'll be killed; if I don't, I'll die…

* * *

* * *

For clever people among fools it is better to be insane,
Just as it is best to stop at a mountain inn when the mob is mad.

In the Karbala of love, should one be a martyr to passion,
It is likewise good to turn red a brave man's white shirt.

It is bad for your glory that, being parted, half my soul should die,
My Messiah, better for you to ask after my transformed state.

When heading, o light of my eyes, towards this abode of mine,
[It is better you wait a day*] before stepping out in blanched
expectation …

Water, o hermit, the pupil of my eye with an ocean of love,
For the River Oxus's tears are good in the house of people of beauty.

I said: "Give me a chalice, o cup-bearer, as my suffering heart is full of
blood."
He said: "If lips thirst for passion, it is good that all your innards bleed."

So, Uvaisiy, if you experience a myriad of love's torments,
Better until death to let Allah on high give you satisfaction.

* * *

**Devon*, p 244. gap in original: the missing words at end of line, *kutar kun beh*, which fit the internal rhyme and sense, were suggested by Hamid Ismailov

Sterligov in the Blockade

Ainsley Morse

Before I encountered these poems I knew Vladimir Sterligov (1904-1973) only as a painter, moreover a very particular painter with big strange theories: in later, 1960s-70s Leningrad, Sterligov and his wife (the painter Tatiana Glebova, also a survivor of the siege) had a studio and disciples interested in Sterligov's "cupola theory" of shape and color in painting. In translating these blockade poems, I couldn't shake the sense that I was translating translations – that Sterligov was working with words and literary figures as substitutes for the geometric shapes, lines and colors of his paintings, and that the resulting poems were already mediated versions of the "originals."

Sterligov had the misfortune of living through the first, devastating winter of the Siege of Leningrad; most of the poems were written immediately afterward, some of them in situ. A number of the young "siege poets" were bound by ties of friendship and aesthetic influence to OBERIU poets like Alexander Vvedensky, Nikolai Zabolotsky and Daniil Kharms. Sterligov's poems certainly reflect his connection with them – one of the strongest pieces in this selection is his eulogy to Kharms. But the echoes of OBERIU poetics are fainter in his work than in that of other "young OBERIU" poets like Gennady Gor or Pavel Zaltsman. The terrible linguistic fragmentation of Gor's poems, for instance, encourage a different, frankly more frightening reading and understanding of the disjointed and jumbled diction and syntax of the OBERIU poets. Sterligov's "Feast of Kings" does recall a certain farcical "monarchical" strain in Vvedensky and Kharms, as well as the heavy tread, grotesque decadence and exaggeratedly ceremonious quality of some of Zabolotsky's long poems. But the poem's vivid imagery and ceaseless movement direct our attention away from the strangeness of the words, the poverty of the rhymes and so on.

Most of Sterligov's poems demonstrate this rich and varied – at times even baroque – vocabulary and imagery. Thus a poem like "Feast of Kings" contrasts strikingly with the short poems "Death" and "Snowdrifts, snow, the frigid wind," perhaps his most "typical" blockade poems in their meagre and direct simplicity. The fragmentary quality of this verse, meanwhile, seems to have as much to do with Sterligov's painterly practice as with the devastating effect blockade conditions had on words and people's capacity to do things with them. But regardless of his orientation toward the visual and even impressionistic, translating these poems required tremendous precision in word choice: the loosely connected lines of the longer poems are often held together by a single word or image which, if replaced rather than replicated, might reroute the direction of the whole poem. The aforementioned poor rhymes are just as troubling in Sterligov as in the other OBERIU poets. Often seeming to have been selected at random, the rhyming word ends up being an uneasy bearer of trembling but profound meaning.

Alexander Vvedensky once proposed a thought experiment: imagine a mouse running across a stone and count its every step, only forget the words "step" and "every":

> Then, since your ability to perceive a series of movements as something whole has rightfully disappeared, that which you wrongly called a step (you had confused movement and time with space, you falsely transposed one over the other), that movement will begin to break apart, it will approach zero. The shimmering will begin. [1]

For me, the process of translating Sterligov's blockade poems recalls this gradual splintering and flickering of word and meaning. The verses' often dreadful beauty shimmers coldly, refusing to be fixed in place. It seems appropriate to ask readers of these translations to allow for the "rightful disappearance of their ability to perceive a series of movements as something whole."

[1] Alexander Vvedensky, *The Gray Notebook*, trans. Matvei Yankelevich (NY, 2010), 12.

(On the death of D.I. Kharms)

Daniil Ivanovich! You took a pipe
A yellow reed with squares of holes
A birchbark hornlet, a little fife
(O tender name of the fife)
And tapping at the holes with fingers
(Then the Russian morning wakes)
And the Russian morning woke
In bast shoes of dew a sackcloth peasant
Flashed forth like a cold pearl
(Like a people's rainbow of stones
And along the churches)
Along the blue temples of the spruce grove
Youth gleams on the spruces
And the sunshine with its bared foot
Already strode into the dust of road
So that it would warm by noon
The drops of dew dry up
The midnight cool swept aside
A loud cow is coming
Followed by frolicking sheep
Clicking and snapping their bells
The herd approaches the creek.

February 1942. (Notebook 4, p. 63).
Words crossed out are given in parentheses

* * *

Death

Raised a spoon to your lips – death,
Stretched out your hand to hello – death,
Saw a little goldfinch – death,
On the branch a little leaf – death,
On a walk with your friends – death,
Looked at the cabbage on the plate – death,
Seeing your friends off, two of them – death,
Happened to glance to the side – death.

* * *

Snowdrifts, snow, the frigid wind,
Square ice forms in the depths of glasses.
Today the third of them died quietly,
That family of shriveled idols.
Tomorrow morn to building's depth
Will crawl the foot of soundless death.

May 1942 (Notebook 4, p. 31)

* * *

Feast of Kings

Struck tambourine. The day deceased,
Wrought on the sky of night the throne,
She mounted and above her ceaseless
A rocking wreath of thousand crowns.

Struck tambourine. The hall in fracas,
Beat down by ranks of portly horns,
While all night long at table feasted
A gang of lavish-living kings.

One flung away his ringing crown,
Exclaimed with joy: "I am an idol!"
Then harking close to steely chimes,
He says: "Thus dominates the organ".

A second thrust knife in airy pie,
And worked a miracle unhindered:
The airy pie was roused, revived,
And swam, the ark of night, toward heaven.

The king then, gazing at the fortress,
(It stood blue-still outside the window)
Did reason: All the world is nonsense,
As long as I, the king, am feasting.

The fourth king ate, his spoons awhirl,
The fourth king drank, his bottles clinking,
Crumbs from the food flew all around,
While o'er the table forks fought like rapiers.

And the kings cried: we are aces,
Magnificent are we and gross,
We listen as the wild storm's chorus
Resounds in trumpets bellicose.

Wherefore rains down the square cards' flow?
Immured the lovely ghost, death – ace of spades,
And ace of diamonds watches hateful,
As past him passionate take to wing
The enemy suits of clubs and hearts!

But what's it to us? We don't mind!
We love the night! The trident moon!
We drink our hot and bubbling wine
And pluck out trite and lyrical tunes!

But what's it to us? We love the night!
She is our sister! Raise high the glasses!
Hear how, o daughter of the leading light,
we sing for you, we fine smartasses!

Your crown it is the gleam of swords!
Your face – the lance of fierce commotion,
A million candles burn in your eyes,
Without a single fatal motion!

Your stride is secret, your step is mute,
So stalk the cats along the moldings,
And in your hands the light of truths –
The raiment slipping down your shoulders!

We, rulers all, will raise on high
From storm of lamps the twisted candelabra!
We give the sign and thunder fine
That in your glory booms forth a salvo!

And when homage to midnight cup's all paid,
They, drunken, sing hosannas to the day.

That playful boy – au naturel
He runs along the sandy shoal,
Plays bright broadswords just as well
as beats the kettledrum; but chance
Caught foot against the dark-blue forest,
His heels flashed once: day evanesced!

Oh playful boy, you are a dunce!
You run along so recklessly
And fail to look down at your feet!
But sometimes even gods misread!

While, goblets raised, we here alone
Must drink your sorrow and our own!..

1940

* * *

Ainsley Morse

Feast of Kings (continuation, May 1942)

(1)

Both day and night, brother sister,
Heavy is the gait of days.
At troubled undetected gates
Each and every minute passes,

But we with glasses in our hands
Approach them, age-old ancient,
With wreaths of rye upon our heads
And open-hearted speeches.

The loud of voice, the cheerful chorus,
Their gullets cloaked in gold.
So strides forth the sovereign court
Into both battlefield and world.

(2)

What for us largesse, what greed,
We don't know about such things.
Should we grow deaf to groaning!
We are simple men, though kings.

Look now how we hurl our glass
To unshod feet of poor and lame,
How it will flash its crystal base,
But for ourselves we'll find no fame.

(3)

The clothes of day, attire of night
To some they seem of little matter
And this is why we reinforce
These gleaming cassocks made of tatters.

But just because in these fine robes
Torn from the one Christ's shoulders
We had good reason to be attired,
We rulers of the fatherland.

Alexander Veytsman

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, and Boris Slutsky. The 2016 competition was dedicated to the poetry of Bella Akhmadulina (1937-2010), who belonged to the Thaw generation of Russian poets that gained prominence during the 1950s, in the aftermath of Stalin's death. She was famous for appearing at packed stadiums and auditoriums, together with other poets of her generation, Yevgeny Yevtushenko (her first husband), Andrei Voznesensky, and Robert Rozhdestvensky. These poetry recitals represented an act of freedom, a breath of fresh air for thousands of Akhmadulina's contemporaries.

Among her well-known poetry collections were *The String* (1962), *Music Lessons* (1970), and *Dreams of Georgia* (1977). The main themes of Akhmadulina's poetry are friendship and love, and her verse relies heavily on rhymed quatrains. While not known for political poetry, she was in fact an informal sympathizer of the dissident movement, having

assisted in the creation of the scandalous *Metropol Almanac* in 1979 and voiced support for Andrei Sakharov.

According to *The New York Times*, Akhmadulina was "always recognized as one of the Soviet Union's literary treasures and a classic poet in the long line extending from Lermontov and Pushkin."

Alexander Veytsman,
Compass Competition Director

Bella Akhmadulina (2016)

First Prize: Paul Hopper (Washington, D.C.)

New Notebook

I lean abashed and timid over the leaf
of clean white paper,
like a pilgrim standing
at the temple door;
the way, for a maiden's face,
a seasoned devotee will drop his eyes.
As if I were a schoolchild, I look over
the new notebook greedily and with love,
so that later my pen can tear it to bits,
soiling it for the sake of any old thought.
The sweet undertaking of penmanship
doesn't last long. The page is turned.
Injury is inflicted on the blank paper;
my letters commit outrages and are shamed.
So into the notebook's depths, like the depths of woods,
I disappear forever, recklessly,
solitary among shining leaves,
carrying my exultant punishment.

Second Prize: Glen Worthey (Mountain View, CA)

Behold the man, whose race was first begun
So long ago, when light first lit creation;
One cannot count the centuries he's run:
Run high, run far, toward some consecration,

Some blessed goal. What triumph might it be
That beckons him to run, to conquer distance?
Behold the man – oh, look at him! and see
Through fogs of time his face's fine persistence.

Egyptian deserts held him as a slave,
A swarthy outcast, breathless in his fleeing,
Whom death awaited if he ceased to crave
To win this race: the essence of his being.

Around him all is motionless and dead.
But he: alive with passion, flexed emotion,
His golden muscles' movements all embed
Humanity's own most perfected motion.

Oh, runner, run! Run, brother; run, my friend!
By force of will your final lap completed,
You run one more, your victory to extend,
To nobly face a future undefeated.

Oh, runner, run!

Third Prize: Sasha Palmer (Baltimore, MD)

To Boris Messerer

I later would recall: I was alive,
and it was winter, snowing, and my heart,
consumed with burning, ached, I was in love –
with whom? with what?
In Povarskaya street
(the name has changed) there was a house… The live-
long day, the whole night through I was in love –
with whom? with what?
The house in that old street,
the space that's called a studio in which
an artist works.
Work lured the artist out
into the cold. Alone, I would await
his steps. Framed by the window, night drew on.
I later would recall: I looked upon
that waiting labor as my being's aim,
but even then I could not help but pair
the urgency of tender hours that fleet –
with future woes… The house in that old street –
with the unheard-of day approaching fast,
when I'd recall that house, left in the past…

Fourth Prize: Peter Oram (Germany)

Anna Akhmatova

How I envy her! – So young
and slender, like a galley slave, a
slave-girl in the harem's throng,
eyes flashing gold that never waver
as if a double sunrise hung
above the waters of the Neva.

And what about that name she chose
to break down boundaries, to chase
with sudden, oriental power
out of our southern lands the sour
celandine, thrust in its place
the fragrant Persian lilac flower!

The way her name and mine both share
a common occult origin –
just once she flashed a knowing glare
my way – I felt it freeze my skin!
But how can I feel guilty for
the name that I was given then?

How I envy her! – so young
that I could sink my head into
my hands and weep – yet envy too
her grey old age when she stayed true
to that old Neva rendezvous
where once that double sunrise hung.

Yes, like a great a great bell, swollen, round,
she resonates in sympathy
with every voice or tone or sound
which rays out from some galaxy
till that great larynx fills, resounds
with other-wordly harmony.

I envy her, among the roots
in heaven's light or hellish blaze!
If only I could bear such fruits!
What use are my remaining days? –
Without a grief profound and great
as hers, how can I share her fate!

AUTHORS

Eduard Bagritsky (1895-1934) was an important Soviet Jewish poet. He was born Eduard Dzyubin in Odessa and began his career alongside a number of other Odessan writers who did much to shape early Soviet literature, including Isaac Babel, Yury Olesha, Valentin Katayev, Vera Inber, Ilya Ilf, and Yevgeny Petrov.

Evgeny Baratynsky (1800-1844), who was largely forgotten after his death, came into his own as a major Russian poet in the 20th century, being celebrated by such poets as Mandelstam and Brodsky. He was a contemporary and close friend of Aleksandr Pushkin, who said of him: 'He is an exception among us, for he thinks'. His work is mainly lyric poetry, notably the collection *Half-light* (1842, published in English translation by Arc Publishers in 2015).

Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956) was a German poet, playwright, and dramaturg, whose socially and ideologically engaged drama left a lasting impact on theatre.

Thomas Epstein is a writer, translator, and professor at Boston College. He is preparing a volume of English translations of the prose and poetry of Elena Shvarts. Entitled *After Paradise*, it will be published in 2018.

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.

Peter France lives in Edinburgh, where he was professor of French until 2000. He has published widely on French and Russian literature and on literary translation. His translations include prose works by Diderot and Rousseau, and Russian poetry by Baratynsky, Batyushkov, Lermontov, Annensky, Mandelstam, Mayakovsky, and Gennady Aygi. His work on Batyushkov is to be published by Columbia University Press in November 2017 as *Writings from the Golden Age of Russian Poetry*.

Forrest Gander is a poet, translator, novelist, and essayist, who was born in Barstow, California, and grew up in Virginia. He has degrees in geology and English literature. A United States Artists Rockefeller Fellow, Gander is the recipient of fellowships from the NEA, the Guggenheim, Howard, and Whiting foundations. He is the Adele Kellenberg Seaver Professor of Literary Arts and Comparative Literature at Brown University.

Volha Hapeyeva is a Belarusian poet, writer, translator, and linguist, who was born in Minsk in 1982.

Viktor Ivaniv was born in 1977 in Novosibirsk. He is the author of three books of prose and of one volume of poetry. His writing was short-listed for the Debut Prize (poetry category) in 2002 and the Andrei Belyi Prize (prose category) in 2009. Ivaniv currently lives and works in Novosibirsk as a librarian at the State Public Scientific Library.

Leonid Kannegiesser (1896-1918) was a poet and military cadet, and an active participant in the literary and political bohemia of Silver Age St. Petersburg. An advocate of socialist democracy and an admirer of Alexander Kerensky, the head of the Provisional Government, he sided with anti-Bolsheviks after the October Revolution and carried out the revenge killing of the local head of the state security police, Moisei Uritsky (1873-1918), an act that helped unleash the Red Terror and Civil War. A decade after Kannegiesser's execution, émigré writer Mark Aldanov published a collection of the poet's surviving body of work (Paris, 1928).

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) and *The Flight* (2016), and is the editor and principal translator of the Penguin anthology *Russian Émigré Short Stories from Bunin to Yanovsky* (2017).

J. Kates is a poet and literary translator who lives in Fitzwilliam, New Hampshire.

Zachary Murphy King is a poet, translator and doctoral student in Russian literature at the University of Chicago.

Mikhail Lermontov (1814-1841) is considered, along with Pushkin, a foundational figure in the development of Russian literature, both poetry and prose.

Angela Livingstone studied Russian and German at Cambridge and taught literature (chiefly Russian) at Essex from 1966 to 1997. Her publications include *Lou Andreas-Salomé: Her Life and Writings*; four books on Boris Pasternak; and three books of translation of Marina Tsvetaeva, with commentaries.

James Manteith is a translator, writer, and musician, who also serves as a contributing editor for Russian-American cultural magazine *Apraksin Blues*. His translations have appeared in *International Poetry Review*, *St. Petersburg Review*, *convolvulus*, and other journals, and his book-length translation publications include contemporary Russian poetry and literary prose, as well as anthologies on Soviet science. He first encountered Leonid Kannegiesser's poetry through translation for a research and writing project by physicist-historian M. Shifman.

Ainsley Morse translates and teaches Russian/Soviet and Yugoslav literature. Published translations include *I Live I See:*

Selected Poems by Vsevolod Nekrasov (Ugly Duckling Presse, 2013), with Bela Shayevich, *Anatomical Theater* by Andrey Sen-Senkov (Zephyr, 2014), with Peter Golub, and *Kholin 66* (Ugly Duckling Presse, 2017), with Bela Shayevich.

Dzvinia Orlowsky is an award-winning poet and translator. Her sixth poetry collection, *Bad Havest*, will be published by Carnegie Mellon University Press in fall of 2018.

Alexander Pushkin (1799-1837) is widely regarded as Russia's greatest poet.

Donald Rayfield was born in 1942, and spent much of his life as Professor of Russian and Georgian at Queen Mary University of London. He has translated Russian and Georgian poets and novelists, but his main work has been a series of monographs about Russian and Georgian literature and history.

Raisa Shapiro is a Slavic Studies PhD student at the University of Illinois Chicago, and a translator from Russian.

Tatiana Shcherbina, born in 1954 in Moscow, is the author of many books of poetry and prose (one in French). In the 1990s, she worked in Germany and France, then returned to Moscow. One novel (*Multiple Personalities*) and three books of her poems have appeared in English translation: *The Score of the Game* (Zephyr Press, 2002), *Life Without* (Bloodaxe, 2003), and *An Offshoot of Sense* (Cold Hub, 2011). She is represented in the anthologies *Third Wave: The New Russian Poetry* (University of Michigan Press, 1992), *Lives in Transit* (Ardis, 1995), *In the Grip of Strange Thoughts: Russian Poetry in a New Era* (Zephyr, 1999), and *Crossing Centuries* (Talisman, 2000).

Elena Shvarts (1948-2010) was a Russian poet and prose writer, and one of the leading figures in Leningrad's "unofficial culture" in the 1970s and 1980s.

Yefim Somin, originally from St. Petersburg, divides his time between studying languages, translating poetry, and acting on screen and stage. He has been living in America since 1979, and in Boston since 1980.

Vladimir Sterligov (1904-1973) was a Russian avant-garde painter and poet, who studied with Kazimir Malevich but soon transcended Suprematism.

Arseny Tarkovsky (1907-1989), born in Ukraine, was a an important poet, translator, and journalist, who lived most of his life in Moscow. He is the father of the filmmaker Andrey Tarkovsky.

Max Thompson is a 2015 graduate of the University of Arkansas's MFA program in creative writing and translation and a former Sturgis Fellow at the Maxim Gorky Literary Institute. His translations have appeared in the *Alchemy Journal of Translation*, *Unsplendid*, *World Literature Today*, *The Oklahoma Review*, the *Columbia Journal Online*, and *Mantis*, and his book-length translation of Chingiz Aitmatov's *The White Steamship* is forthcoming with Academic Studies Press.

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.

Roman Turovsky (born in Kiev, Ukraine in 1961) is a multimedia artist, lutenist-composer, and translator, resident in New York City since 1979. He studied Art and Music at the New School/ Parsons School of Design. He translates from Russian and Ukrainian, into English and Italian.

Uvaysiy is the pseudonym, the *tallaxus* customary for Uzbek poets, of Jahon-otin (1780-1845). Her lyrical poems have been collected in her

Devon or are to be found in a collection called *Ko'ngil gulzori* (*The Soul's Flowerbed*). Her two long poems are still unpublished, only available in manuscript.

Antony Wood is a publisher and a translator from Russian and German. His independent imprint Angel Classics is devoted to new translations of 19th-century and Early Modern literature. Among his own translations of Pushkin, *Mozart and Salieri* was produced on Radio 3 with Paul Scofield and Simon Callow on publication in 1982; his versions of Pushkin lyrics were read by Ralph Fiennes at the Swan Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon, in 1999; his translation of the uncensored 1825 version of *Boris Godunov* was used in a reconstruction of Meyerhold's unrealised production of 1936 with incidental music by Prokofiev at the Berlind Theatre, Princeton, in 2007. He was awarded a Pushkin Medal by the Russian government in 1999, the bicentenary year of Pushkin's birth. His wide-ranging selection of Pushkin's lyric and narrative verse is to be published by Penguin Classics in 2018.

Sergey Yesenin (1895-1925) is one of Russia's most beloved lyric poets, who wrote of life in Russia's vanishing villages and in Moscow's taverns. He lived a difficult life and hanged himself in the Angleterre hotel in Saint Petersburg on December 28, 1925.

Valery Zalotukha (1954-2015) wrote short stories, novels, and screenplays. He earned the Nika National Cinema Prize in 1995. His novel *The Candle* (*Svechka*), on which he had worked for over 12 years, appeared in 2014 and was awarded second prize in the Big Book competition. "My Father, the Miner" is Zalotukha's first short story.

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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